How Transracial Adoptees Use Memoirs to Change Adoption Narratives

By

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B.A. Lincoln Christian University, 2018

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Communication Studies and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date Defended: 15 December 2022

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Abstract

Transracial adoptees are a salient population in the United States. Social scientific researchers have looked at communicative barriers and social stigma this group may face when navigating their complex intersectional identity. However, rhetorical scholars have not given this group the same attention. Previous rhetorical research indicates that autobiography can be a beneficial tool to advocate for social justice. Transracial adoptee memoirs provide rich experiential narratives that rhetorical scholars should attend to. To consider how transracial adoptees rhetorically construct identity through memoir authorship and how memoirs can shift problematic conversations about transracial adoption in the United States, this study examines two texts: *Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption* by Susan Devan Harness and *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir* by Nicole Chung. Utilizing Critical Race Theory, and branch theories Tribal Critical Race Theory and Asian Critical Race Theory, rhetorical analysis of the texts uncovered themes pertinent to how the authors design their texts as counterstories. These counterstories are a stage in which the authors reclaim and nuance their identities, as well as resist harmful narratives and structures surrounding transracial adoption. The texts function to constrain audience members from promulgating essentializing discourses about transracial adoptees with impunity. The findings amplify the importance for transracial adoptee voices to be centered within social and legal spheres to challenge problematic ideologies on family and race and change policy within the United States.

Acknowledgements

I would like to first and foremost acknowledge that this research was done on the traditional homelands of the Kansa/Kaw Peoples, Shawnee Peoples, and Osage Peoples. As I consider ways to work toward overcoming oppressive systems and enacting justice through research, I solemnly remember the damage done throughout the colonial history of the United States of America and the way coloniality has been and continues to be perpetuated in its academic system.

Embarking on this journey of higher education in the midst of a global pandemic may not have been the best timing, but despite its numerous challenges, it has been so rewarding. However, it is not a feat I could have accomplished on my own. An enormous thank you to my colleagues and mentors at the University of Kansas. The culture of support and encouragement that you work to promote here has brought me so many "ups" and sustained me through the inevitable "downs." Big shout out to Matt Kay for being a top-notch writing buddy and pushing me to cross that elusive finish line. To Dr. Gist-Mackey, you have taught me how to pair academia with compassion, how to use this privilege to call out harmful structures and systems, and how to put feet to my research. Thank you for showing me a path of learning that does not end in an ivory tower, but rather in a community of equity and justice. As I continue my education, I strive to follow your example. To Dr. Mapes, I cannot thank you enough for constantly being there for me. The way that you imbue your approach to pedagogy not only with your passion for education, but also with genuine care, is sorely lacking in higher education. Academia has a harsh side, and I am a soft person, but how fortunate I am to have you in my corner to both fight for me and teach me how to fight for myself. To Dr. Zhang, I still remember when you told me my first semester "If we thought you didn't belong here, or that you couldn't do it, we wouldn't have brought you here." Those words have sustained me through all of my

bouts with imposter syndrome. Your intelligence is matched only by your kindness, and I am so grateful to collaborate with you despite our methodological differences. Last, but far from least, to Dr. Innocenti. I cannot say enough about your wisdom and grace. All of the times I fell short of my goals, you met me with understanding and flexibility, and each time I presented you with an uncut rock of a chapter, your suggestions for revision—without fail—turned it into a polished gem. When I started this program, feeling very eager to learn, but very aimless as a researcher, I truly was not prepared for how quickly the ball has to get rolling for the thesis. But you were a magnificent guide through a daunting process, and somehow you got me here, which speaks less to my capabilities and far more to yours. Thank you, so very much.

I also want to thank my Undergraduate Advisor, Dr. Peter Verkruyse for introducing me to the power of rhetoric and being the catalyst for this path I am on. Without him and Debbie Verkryuse, I would not have continued academic pursuit. I owe them so much. I also extend my deepest gratitude to my biggest supporters, my family, Ray, Annette, Josh, Joy, Miranda, Tad, and Kenny, who have been a constant source of affection and encouragement—throughout my whole life—but especially on the days when I called home, ready to give up on this degree. To my roommate Maddie (and our sweet companions, Kitty and October), I cannot express how vital a role you played in getting me through each day. You helped keep me grounded when things were overwhelming and you picked up the pieces whenever I fell apart. I could not have done this without you. And in all, to Christ. In Whom I live, and move, and have my being.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Adoptive families are constructed through law and language" (Galvin 293). But when legal structures and patterns of discourse are shaped by histories of discrimination and power, the building blocks for construction must be scrutinized. In *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics,* prominent author, scholar, and activist bell hooks writes: "Within white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cultures of domination children do not have rights" (73). These structures impact issues of transracial and intercountry adoption, as unethical practices can lead to mirroring colonialism by centering Western parenting norms and commodifying children. The child welfare system has been criticized as discriminating against people of color with "racialized structures" acting as a driving factor behind private and intercountry adoption efforts (Quiroz 18-19, 25-26). Structures of injustice as well as contemporary "post-racial" mindsets have left children of color adopted by white[1] families feeling internal and external tension when developing a sense of their racial identity. Establishing racial and ethnic identity is a common element of development for children of color within the United States (Rivas-Drake et al. 41). However, transracial adoptees have reported discomfort discussing race with their white adoptive parents due to parental avoidance on the topic or feeling that their experiences surrounding racism would be ignored or invalidated (Docan-Morgan, "They Don't Know" 349-350). Korean American transracial adoptee author Nicole Chung urges that social conversations must "complicate the stories and notions around transracial adoption: what adoptees go through and

[1] There is an ongoing conversation within and outside of academia on the grammatical choices utilized when speaking on race, particularly when to use capitalization. Throughout the present study, terms that denote identity labels for racial and cultural groups will be informed by literature from authors identifying with that group and will be capitalized, such as "Black," "Indigenous," and "Asian American." There is debate on whether to capitalize "white," as it arguably does not represent a tangible cultural identity in the way other terms do (Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" 1244), primarily existing as a colonial construct "employed almost solely as a negation of others" (Dumas 13). Because the current study deals directly with ways that whiteness has and still dominates the political and social structures of adoption, I have chosen to not capitalize the word in acknowledgement of those harms.

how we are allowed to feel about our experiences, how race is relevant to our lives" (Chung, "Stories"). Her solution for overcoming narratives that are dismissive and harmful to adoptees is simple in theory but can be difficult to engage: "We must listen to transracial adoptees and make room for their perspectives, including the ones that make some uncomfortable" (Chung, "Stories"). In light of the significant number of United States families formed through transracial adoption (Vandivere et al.; "Transracial Adoption from Foster Care in the U.S."; Marr), current discourse on racial injustice (Lee et al.; Hockin-Boyers and Clifford-Astbury; Sharrow et al.), and the ever-evolving understanding of how to better approach communicating issues of race and identity within transracial adoption based on past experiences—both the positive and negative—of adoptees, it remains relevant to engage the topic and take further steps to center the voices of transracial adoptees. A recent trend in relevant literature across disciplines, including articles in mainstream media, is moving toward centering the voices of transracial adoptees. However, more work needs to be done to normalize the acceptance of their whole story: not just the positive aspects, but also the negative realities individuals have faced as a result of their adoption.

Systemic Concerns in Historic Adoption Practices

The history of the United States has roots that run deep into colonialism and racism. It is little surprise that these roots serve as systemic ties that fetter transracial adoption to white supremacy and nationalism (Bashir 16). The historic commodification of children through adoption gave preference to the adoptive parents (the "customer") over the child or birth parents (Seymore 908-910) and, due to systemic racial and economic disparities, typified the ideal adoptive parent as white and middle class. United States adoption practices in the early twentieth century favored the "biological" model of adoption, where agencies would attempt to match a child with an adoptive family that was as similar as possible to the child's biological family in all areas, with

an emphasis on racial matching (Carp 163-164). The application process for prospective adoptive parents in many agencies was biased toward white applicants more than applicants of color, leading to white children becoming in higher demand and diminishing placements of children of color (Carp 166). While Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights act made it illegal for federally funded adoption agencies to discriminate against individuals based on their race, an exception remained for using race as a factor in placing children (Perez 217).

In the mid twentieth century, fewer white babies were available for adoption and transracial adoption as a practice gained momentum within the United States (Liem). Transracial adoption rose to previously unreached numbers in 1971, with 2,574 placements (Carp 15). However, this trend did not come without criticism. In 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers released a statement against transracial adoption, considering it a form of cultural genocide, and called attention to how systemic racism played a dual role of separating children of color from their birth families while overlooking prospective adoptive parents of color to favor white families ("Position Statement on Trans-Racial Adoptions"). The debate wore on, with 1994 heralding the landmark Multiethnic Placement Act prohibiting states from denying or delaying placements for foster care or adoption due to race or ethnicity of the child or potential guardian ("The Multiethnic Placement Act" 1). Reasoning behind this legislation was that transracial placements was an act of racial discrimination which went against the U.S. Constitution (Berrick 76).

A criticism of the Multiethnic Placement Act and surrounding legal issues is that it did not address the effects of systemic racism and ultimately "elevated the rights of white adoptive parents over those of birth parents and their children" with the rhetoric surrounding related issues

seeming "to be consistent with the notions and values of a color-blind society" (Quiroz 4)[2]. The systems in place still privilege white middle-class adoptive parents and the messaging surrounding transracial and intercountry adoption frequently incorporates and encourages mindsets of saviorism, color-evasive attitudes, and "colonial philanthropy" (Malott and Schmidt 386-387; Zhang et al. 203). In particular, the color-evasive ideology has been a pervasive mindset in the United States as a popular antidote to racism; the logic is straightforward—those who do not see race cannot possibly discriminate based on it (Orbe 94). However, this logic is situated in a mindset where whiteness is the norm and the struggles of minority groups are attributed only or primarily to economic or personal failure, rather than recognizing and acknowledging effects of deeply rooted systems of injustice (Bonilla-Silva 3). For this reason, color-evasive mindsets have been criticized as ignorant at best, and often indicative of underlying racist assumptions (Tran and Paterson 341). Proponents of color-evasiveness often take up the mantle of love when speaking of transracial adoption, as is seen in the 1981 St. Paul Dispatch article titled "Adoptive Parents Find Love Has No Race or Color" emphasizing "the power of love over racial difference" (Park Nelson 7). But the assertion that love must be enough invalidates and forcefully silences valuable and crucial conversations about racial and familial identity that should be allowed and encouraged (Myers 187).

Adult adoptees of color raised by white parents have reported experiences of being raised to believe race did not matter, to the detriment of their emotional well-being (Demby and Meraji), while others felt compelled to embrace white culture (Bashir 17). Because identity construction is contextual, adopted children should be given space to explore the complexity of

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[2] Throughout the study, unless in quotations, I will employ the term "color-evasiveness" to indicate the ideology typically referred to as "color-blindness." This is an attempt to acknowledge and counteract the ableist trope of decrying social problems by utilizing "dis/ability as a metaphor for undesired" as well as to better describe the active avoidance of systemic issues surrounding race by those who embrace the ideology (Annamma et al. 153, 156).

their multi-faceted identity—including national, ethnic, and/or racial contexts (Tan and Liu 375-377). Furthermore, unique forms of discrimination are faced by individuals with intersecting marginalized identities (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection" 140); an intersectional perspective considers how power relations surrounding facets of social identity impact people in unique ways (Collins and Bilge 14). Downplaying the impact racism has on a transracially adopted person's experience discounts how race and adopted status are weaponized to craft specific stigmatizing messages. If downplayed, these intersectional identities can lead to inner turmoil, as adoptees of color raised in white homes may "feel white" and have conflicting feelings about how to balance identifying with their ethnicity and the whiteness they were raised in (Blair and Liu 353).

Current Matters in Transracial Adoption

Transracial adoption in the United States continues to be a significant topic. The United States Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) reported in 2020 that from "2017-2019, 28 percent of all foster care adoptions were transracial. Ninety percent of transracial adoptions involved children of color adopted by parents of a different race" ("The Multiethnic Placement Act" 1). Data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System about public adoptions from all 50 states and Washington D.C. indicates that over 49,000 transracial adoptions were recorded between 2017 and 2019, and, while "half of all adoptions in the U.S. from 2017-2019 were of non-White children, half of these adoptions were transracial adoptions. Only 6% of White children were transracial adoptions" ("Transracial Adoption from Foster Care in the US" 4-5). This indicates that there is a continuing trend of transracial adoption primarily impacting children of color and the topic remains a salient focus of study.

Recent findings suggest that perspectives of adoptive parents may be shifting, particularly about issues of racism, personal bias, and the rich heritage of cultures outside of the one they

grew up in (Nelson and Colaner 58-59). Research also reflects that parental openness and support for their child, identifying similarities, not ignoring differences, and emphasizing belonging, had an impact on the child to help develop their sense of identity (Boivin and Hassan 1098). However, Anderson et al. note that there is still a need to improve the way that families formed by transracial adoption communicate about race, especially before the child enters late adolescence (303). Because of the historical concerns previously mentioned and the continued salience of issues of transracial adoption policies and practices, it is important to pay close attention to what transracial adoptees of color are saying about their experiences and center their voices when moving forward in research and policy creation surrounding transracial adoption.

Literature Review

Within this section, I survey extant research surrounding issues of adoptee communication and the social barriers adoptees face. I also consider the role memoirs can play within social advocacy and examine current work adjacent to the research I engage. Throughout the review I indicate gaps in the literature and how the present study builds on existing research.

Communicative and Social Barriers Adoptees Face

Researchers have investigated how adoptees manage their identity in local, interpersonal contexts. Social scientific research methods are commonly used to consider how adoptees/transracial adoptees develop, understand, and communicate about the complexities of their lived experience (Boivin and Hassan; Malott and Schmidt). Because biological families are seen as the normative family structure in the United States, adoptees can be the target of social stigma (Wegar 363). Transracial adoptees face additional racially motivated stigma because of their intersecting identities (White et al. 1318). Adoptees may decide to keep their adoptive identity private in certain circumstances to avoid this stigmatization (Horstman et al. 297);

maintaining privacy may be more salient, but also more difficult, for transracial adoptees where physical differences from the adoptive family are present. Maintaining privacy can also be difficult because parents function as "proxy owners" of their child's information, in tandem with the child playing a role in the parent's own story; this leads to unclear boundaries when disclosing personal information, further complicated by the phenomenon within adoption that the child has a history prior to the adoptive parent's involvement—in some cases, this information is known to the adoptive parent but not the child (Loftus et al. 16-17).

The third party in the adoption triad, the birth family, also has a stake in information ownership. Some adoptees choose to seek out members from their first family and may initiate reunion; in this process they must navigate accompanying communicative complexities (Scharp and Steuber 516). Adoptees may draw from both families to understand personal identity, but relational gaps between families (Colaner et al. 486), as well as social pressure to identify which parents are the "real" parents (Baden 1), may cause tension and cause adoptees to employ communication strategies—such as using labels other than "mom" and "dad"—to discursively construct relationships and mitigate sentiments of "disloyalty" to either party (Docan-Morgan, "Korean Adoptees" 544). This unusual balance of privacy management, story "ownership," and the precarious relationship between familial and racial identity provides a barrier for transracial adoptees if they wish to tell their story publicly. Adoptees also receive social pressure to keep negative feelings about their adoption or negative facts about their adoptive family to themselves to avoid breaking with the socially acceptable master narrative of the happy adoptive family offering a child a better life (Horstman et al. 302). The popular concept of the "adoptee poster child" requires nothing short of exceptionalism from adopted children; furthermore, the promulgation of inspirational narratives of the child who overcame tribulation because of their

adoption ignores the individual's ability to achieve in any other context (Kim 7). Speaking in opposition to these norms may attract stigma, but stigmatizing messages can be managed and shifted through discursive means (Meisenbach 285). My research will build on this material by considering how adoptees overcome these barriers and construct public messages designed to shift broader public discussions.

Advocacy Through Autobiography

Memoirs may provide a deeper understanding of an individual's lived experience. While a single memoir cannot be wholly representative of a group, it can communicate truths that can be used as an anchor point for ingroup members to echo when developing their own voice, as well as help outgroup members understand an issue from a new vantage point. Stories reported on by outsiders risk incorporating stigmatizing messaging (Kline et al. 67), but personally penning a memoir allows the writer to bring forth their life story and guide readers on a journey by the paths they create. Writing publicly about one's own life in a way that diverges from socially expected scripts can uncomfortable, or even unsafe. Authors may be faced with barriers due to their relationships to shareholders, such as publishing companies, and audiences may be skeptical of authors' memory of scenes from childhood and may opt to avoid autobiographies unless they feel the writer's personal merits make them worthy of attention (Douglas 21, 68). Despite these barriers, authors still utilize autobiography as a tool to advocate for social justice. This can be seen in the works of various groups writing from the margins. African American prison memoirs invent narratives of redemption to combat racist ideologies that led to mass-incarceration of Black individuals (Coogan 310). Aboriginal Australians remediate national memory through memoirs to highlight the historical reality of exploitation and engage in social activism regarding Aboriginal land rights (Fordham 49). Multi-ethnic Latina/o-white authors use

the performance of memoir writing to move past the either/or mindset and resist dominant messaging about their own bodies (Moreman 364-365). Rhetoricians have examined autobiographical narratives and have drawn rich rhetorical and social significance from analyzing the intentions of the writer and the impact of the artifact on its audience. However, attention to memoirs written by transracial adoptees is lacking; researchers should move to include works from this group.

Adoptees may face unique constraints when drafting an autobiography, because an accurate account of their origin is not always available to them. Adoptive parents often craft the first version of the adoption story that an adoptee hears; adoptive parents discursively negotiate "creation narratives" of how the child entered the family, disclose or withhold any available information about the birth family, and account for the physical differences between child and adoptive family (Galvin 242). Personally narrating that experience can be a beneficial practice for adoptees to claim ownership of their story, engage in sensemaking in regard to identity, and participate in social advocacy (Baxter et al. 266; Seethaler 156). Autobiographical narratives also help authors resituate their personal internalization of their past (Norrick 195) and envision how those realities are working to shape their future stories (Ballard and Ballard 80). Researchers should examine the rhetorical choices transracial adoptee autobiographical authors make about expressing their experiences and constituting their identities, as well as what strategies they employ to overcome ideologies of racism, nationalism, classism, and patriarchy.

Researchers have recently recognized the need to analyze public literature by transracial adoptees. Jenny Wills, a scholar in English studies, focuses on "literary representations of transnational, transracial Asian adoption in contemporary American and Canadian literature" and how "recent Asian adoption literature revises the adoptee archetype established in earlier literary

and cultural narratives" (i). Also in English studies, Wendy Owens engages "contemporary literary scholarship to look to authentic adoptee-written texts as those representing adoptee narratives" as opposed to allowing fictional tropes about adoption to dominate mindsets surrounding adoption (3). Within Communication studies, Jana Hockersmith considers "how adult transracial adoptees narrate their experiences with adoption as racial and ethnic minorities," analyzing narratives written by transracial adoptees with Anzaldúa's borderlands and nepantla theories (ii). While these academic works emphasize the rich understandings uncovered by analyzing the writings of adoptees, I believe they still leave a gap in the literature for engaging in rhetorical analyses of book-length autobiographies through a Communication-specific lens. It is of note that Hockersmith's selection of texts includes an article authored by Nicole Chung, who authors one of the texts I analyze within this study. However, the article in question is a short excerpt from the beginning of Chung's memoir, and a limitation of Hockersmith's research is that articles and excerpts cannot fully capture the functionality memoir provides to transracial adoptees in negotiating their own familial and racial identity, as well as the clarity that rhetorical analysis provides when considering how memoir authors utilize persona to assert their voices within broader public discourses that attempt to constrain them to sanitized narratives.

Theory and Methodology

In this section I briefly explain Critical Race Theory and its tie to rhetoric through the concept of counterstories. I then explain how the connection between memoir and counterstory informs my approach to the texts.

Rhetorical Applications of Critical Race Theory

Developed by legal scholars of color, Critical Race Theory (CRT) coalesced in the latter part of the 20th century to trouble the overlooked ways that white supremacy persisted in established social and legal structures and to move toward tangible change (Crenshaw et al. xiii). Race is not

a fixed biological reality, but rather takes shape socially, manipulating perceptions of personhood to form ingroups and outgroups (Delgado and Stefancic 9). CRT holds that racism is the status quo of United States society and, although racism is a constant, it will always be important to fight against it. Although CRT started within the legal realm, its significance has been taken up by other disciplines to resist racism within the social sphere and challenge the racist structures that founded academia which persist in subtle and overt ways. CRT theorists understand that there is power in stories and persuasion (Delgado and Stefancic 7, 45); stories told by the majority may become "elevated to the status of theory" while other narratives are seen as less seminal within academia (Martinez, *Counterstory* 1-2).

The focus on stories and persuasion has led rhetorical scholars to conceptualize CRT as a rhetorical construct (Orbe 92). Acts of communication construct race and the "rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices" sustains racism (Martinez, "Core-Coursing Counterstory" 405); therefore, a counter rhetoric in resistance to racism can be employed to reshape what is considered "normal" (Olmsted 324). Hasian and Delgado developed the concept of "racialized critical rhetorical theorizing (RCRT)" to challenge the standard ways that "histories, cultural memories, narratives, myths, and other discursive units" are understood, imploring rhetoricians to stop neglecting the ways that "public and legal notions of race" impact such artifacts (247). This ties in well with the CRT development of "counterstories," a method where marginalized voices resist the "master narratives" that ignore or criticize their experiential wisdom (Martinez, "Core-Coursing Counterstory" 404-405). These counterstories function to name discrimination, deconstruct harmful systems, and "begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity" (Delgado and Stefancic 51). It is important to note that, although

counterstories are told by those described as "in the margins" as a way to indicate how structural injustices devalue those perceived as outside of the societal norm, Dr. Aja Martinez rightly asserts that people of color have "never been marginal. We've been here all along and have always practiced our rhetorics" (Martinez, *Counterstory* 72). When I refer to "marginalized people groups" throughout the study, I do not intend to diminish their identities, but rather to call attention to the ways they have been forcefully quieted by harmful dominant structures and discourses.

Memoir as Counterstory

The literary device of memoir is by no means a new phenomenon. There is a rich and complicated history that has led to autobiographical work becoming a modern fascination; as scholar Ben Yagoda notes, "Memoir has become the central form of the culture: not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged" (28). The rhetorical significance comes to bear when one considers how the narrative is designed to function and identifies the impact the author intends to have on the audience (Freeman 290). Autobiographers may write with a variety of rationales and goals in mind, but a common theme is to reveal injustice, recount tribulation, or issue a rally cry to a significant cause (Yagoda 243). Scholar Michael Sheringham notes that memoir "is a process where the aim is not so much to represent the past as to interrogate it" (6). In interrogating their past, writers also interrogate the systems that shaped their past. Authors from marginalized groups often write to make visible the limits that have been placed on their agency, and challenge societal discrimination by expressing the desire to enact their choices in spite of those limits (Goldzwig and Sullivan 271). Narratives that deal with complex cultural identities allow space for exploration of one's own positionality and serve to

educate, broadening the reader's comprehension of diverse experiences (McPherron and McIntosh 197). When marginalized authors share their personal stories, they challenge the idea that any demographic is a monolith and constrain audiences from treating the group as such. This truth is particularly salient in the diverse group formed by transracial adoption practices in the United States. Inasmuch as each adoptee's life story is unique, so the feelings surrounding those events and descriptive words selected are distinct. Rhetorical scholars Dr. Letizia Guglielmo and Dr. Sergio Figueiredo note that the counterstories of marginalized or underrepresented people groups disrupt "public and academic conversations in varied and complex ways that resist stereotypes, . . . unsettle mandates for fixed identities, and extend our definitions" (6). While this resistance need not be accomplished through autobiographical work, memoirs provide a comprehensive space for one's entire story, with enough flexibility to allow each author to emphasize their counterstory to societally imposed stereotypes and shape their identity strategically; for these reasons, memoir became the genre of interest for this study.

Memoir authors develop their identity within their writing and exhibit their personhood to their audiences through the rhetorical strategy of persona. Autobiographers construct personas as they narrate their various roles within pieces of their own history relevant to the assembly of the memoir. This process of self-reflection requires the peculiar process of the present-self considering the identity of the past-self as it relates to the overarching narrative. This process is further obscured for transracial adoptees, as they face unique limitations that come with displacement from birth family and culture. Furthermore, transracial adoptees of color with white parents experience a cultural paradox where the culture they are raised in does not align with the culture they are assumed to be part of, putting them in a double bind in regard to their identity, obtaining an "honorary" white status while lacking instilled knowledge needed to function as a

"real" member of their birth culture (Lee 711; Baden et al. 389). Examining how the rhetor develops persona reveals their understanding of self and the strategic expression of that self to advocate for audiences to perceive the narrative from the perspective the author chooses, rather than one placed upon them. In this sense, the text is a stage through which the writer intentionally develops their identity and role in the narrative (Campbell and Burkholder 21). This should not be misconstrued as a practice of constructing falsehoods. Deception and fictitious accounts are not foreign to the world of "autobiographical" publications, and there are valid concerns about the limitations of memory when recounting past events (Yagoda 23, 109). However, I argue these concerns are functionally different than rhetorically situating one's past self to call out oppressive structures and public discourses. The fraud of the few should not prevent researchers from studying the power memoir writing has for legitimate authors who seek to make sense of their experience and put forth a counterstory in hopes to combat dominant narratives and enact change in the mindsets and actions of their readers.

Goal of Study

I engage this course of study with two research questions in mind: how do transracial adoptees rhetorically construct identity through memoir authorship and how can memoirs shift the conversation about transracial adoption in the United States? I have selected two texts to serve as exemplars for this subset of literature: *Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption* by Susan Devan Harness and *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir* by Nicole Chung. Criteria chosen to narrow text selection was that the genre of the artifact should be categorized as memoir and it should be recently authored by a transracial adult of color adopted by white parents within the United States. The rationale behind these criteria was to center the voices of authors with intersecting identities historically and currently marginalized within United States' political and social structures to highlight their perspectives on identity and critiques of current

dominant public discourses. The aforementioned texts met all criteria and stood out as memoirs of special interest as both authors engage in advocacy not only within their writing, but also in the public sphere. In addition to being culturally relevant, both texts contain material that speaks to questions of what strategies transracial adoptee authors use to design personas and negotiate their identities, and how these strategies are designed to shift public discourses about adoption.

The focus of my research is on persona development within memoir because how the authors strategically situate themselves within the text serves to answer my first line of inquiry, and how they expect those strategies to work to shape audiences speaks to my second. I will analyze these texts through the theoretical lens of CRT. I have demonstrated that the CRT conceptualization of counterstory illuminates the rhetorical significance of memoir authorship by people with intersectional marginalized identities. Additionally, by centering a theory developed by scholars of color, I hope to resist imposing norms of whiteness found within academia and inherent in my own positionality: a white woman, raised within my biological family, on lands belonging to Indigenous nations, stolen by the United States government.

Moving forward, the next two chapters will lay out the findings of my analysis of Harness and Chung's texts, respectively. In the final chapter I will provide concluding thoughts, limitations, and considerations for future research.

Chapter 2: Rhetorical Analysis of Susan Devan Harness' *Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption*

My father takes the shovel that he has brought with him and places the blade into the rocky earth… uprooting the plant with its papery petals, lifting it from its home… 'This flower is the bitterroot," he adds by way of explanation. 'For the Salish, the tribe you belong to, it is sacred. It has important meaning'…its most impressive characteristic is the fact that it can withstand drought for several years, during which time it doesn't bloom. But when the rains come, these delicate, long, pink petals shoot up and out, producing the floral display that resides in my heart. Oh, so many metaphors. (Harness 278-279)

Published in 2018 by University of Nebraska Press, *Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption* is Susan Devan Harness' personal account of her life after being removed from her tribe and adopted by white parents at the age of two. She details her search for answers about her heritage as she maneuvers familial deception, racism at every turn, and the complexities of reunion with her biological family. Throughout her memoir, she wrestles with the way race and adoption impact her experiences of family, home, belonging, and self-acceptance. Reviewers of *Bitterroot* praise Harness for her vulnerability when wrestling with the raw truths of colonialism, revealing the flaws of the American melting pot "utopia" ideology and illuminating another way of "being native" (Barcio; Meland). A member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Harness has researched outcomes of the Indian Adoption Project and has spoken through several platforms on the complex intersection of racial justice and adoption. In addition to engagement in interviews with Colorado Public Radio and Montana Public Radio, among others, her 2019 TEDTalk "Adopting a child of a different race? Let's talk" has received over 38,000 views. Harness' positionality as an Indigenous woman carries significance due to the "liminal" nature of American Indians' racial and legal/political identities (Brayboy 433) and

the complex history of adoption policies and laws within the United States unique to First Nations (Gaines-Stoner et al.). Her publication is timely, as those laws continue to be debated among public opinion and challenged within courts (Goodwyn; Mabie).

In this chapter, I begin to examine the ways transracial adoptees utilize memoir authorship to design personas at the intersections of familial and racial identity, assert their counterstory to resist harmful dominant narratives, and influence audiences to shift societal mindsets and discourses surrounding transracial adoption and, in Harness' case, tribal belonging. Harness' writing serves as a relevant artifact of study to further understand how adult adoptees view their past transracial adoption experiences and work to shape the future of adoption policy. My rhetorical analysis of *Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption* addresses the following questions: how does Harness design *Bitterroot* to constitute her own racial and familial identity and how does she expect her message to shape the way readers think and talk about Indigenous peoples and adoptees? To address these questions, I argue that Harness develops dual personas within the text—the burden-bearer and the burden-lifter—that rhetorically function to narrate her personal journey to self-acceptance and to illuminate constraints that societal discourses place upon those marginalized at the intersection of adoption and indigeneity. She highlights the significance of the personas as they relate to three themes salient within the discussion: liminality, trauma, and belonging. These personas narratively lead the reader to her concluding call to action of shifting burdens. She argues that these stigmatizing messages are not the responsibility of the adoptees, but rather the societies that construct them. She designs the memoir to challenge audiences to shift the burdens away from adoptees and onto those who uphold structures that marginalize transracial Indigenous adoptees.

It should be noted that several terms have been used throughout United States history to refer to the Nations indigenous to the land. It is important to understand that Indigenous Peoples are not a monolith and, as such, each tribe or individual may have a different preference as to identity labels (Yellow Bird 2). Because this study deals with United States laws, Harness' text, and scholarship surrounding the issue, various identity labels found within titles or direct quotes represent original text usage. Outside of quotes and titles, I utilize the identity label "American Indian." This selection is based off Harness' dominant use of "American Indian" (used over 70 times within the text) as well as the label's prominence in Brayboy's article *Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education* (used 67 times); I will also mirror Brayboy's use of the identity label "Indigenous" as an adjective for nouns such as "people/students/communities/etc." (used 69 times in the text). American Indian tribal members historically faced marginalization within United States legal policies and education structures designed to erase their diverse cultures and force assimilation (Berger 617; Huff 4; Brayboy 436). The policies surrounding child welfare were no exception, championing Western structures of family and further stacking the deck against already-ravaged tribal communities (Red Horse et al. 17). For Harness, this in-between reality led to significant amounts of racism and exclusion from white and Indigenous groups. Situating this research at the intersection of Harness' marginalized identities as an Indigenous woman and an adoptee of color displaced from her birth culture and raised in a predominantly white community gives deeper insight into the challenges she recounts, the discrimination she faces, and the burdens she wrestles with throughout the text.

To contextualize my research, I survey key historical aspects of adoption in the United States in relation to American Indians. I then set the foundation for my analysis by examining how storytelling through memoir writing allows authors to move audiences toward a more

nuanced understanding of personhood. I also briefly examine the utility the book structure serves for Harness' purposes toward the audience. Then, with tenants from Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy) as a guiding measure, I analyze the ways Harness utilizes persona within the text, examining how she narratively moves from burden-bearer to burden-shifter within each theme, and how she expects her work to impact her readers to shift burdens and shape public discourse.

The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978

"People don't even think about losing their kids to the social worker. But every Indian family in the history of time has worried about losing their kids to the social worker." This insight led [Evelyn Stevenson, a lawyer for the Salish Kootenai tribes,] to not only become a lawyer but, after listening to testimony in Washington DC from tribal people whose families had been shattered, begin crafting what would become the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978. (Harness 332)

Born in the late 1960's and adopted two years later, Harness' story begins near the tail end of a period of rampant removal of Indigenous children from tribal care with the colonial goal of assimilation in mind (Hilleary). A deeper understanding of policies of the time and the historic U.S. governmental mishandling of issues surrounding American Indian adoption helps to further contextualize her experiences. Colonialism is an inescapable reality of United States history and, subsequently, policies and practices of transracial adoption are systemically entrenched in nationalism and racism (Bashir 16). These historic structures have long deferred to family ideals that center whiteness and economic privilege (Jennings 573, 577-579). In 1958, the Child Welfare League of America initiated the Indian Adoption Act with the intention to care for the "forgotten child" within social welfare—the American Indian child ("Adoption History"). It has been estimated that the Indian Adoption Project led to over 12,000 adoptions between 1961 and 1976 (Palmiste 5). Arnold Lyslo, the project's director, stated, "The Indian Adoption Project

deals with the end result of many complex social problems" and framed it as a benefit to unwed Indigenous mothers, providing them with an additional choice that was previously inaccessible (Lyslo 5). Despite the advocated viewpoint that this was a step in a positive direction for the children as well as ameliorating national prejudices, it inherently centered color-evasiveness—an ideology which ignores systemic racial injustice and the ripple impacts it has, viewing minority hardship as the result of personal shortcoming (Bonilla-Silva 3)—championing assimilation and white saviorism (Jacobs 143).

A sordid historical record of colonization, lies, and theft of the U.S. Government toward the First Nations led to the "complex social problems" Lyslo cites, and the color-evasive approach of the Indian Adoption Project entirely ignored the systemic conditions that worked to break down Indigenous social systems as well as emphasized Eurocentric norms of family as ideal for children (Red Horse et al. 17). Poverty was a key reason for removal of children, as well as the belief that a nuclear family of strangers was more beneficial than extended family or tribal community efforts to raise children (Palmiste 7; Jacobs 147). Removal of children was often enacted without providing sufficient counsel or interpreters to parents, leading to reliance on social workers, whose preference toward Western concepts of parenting made them inadequate advocates for tribal members (Gaines-Stoner et al. 4). Opponents of the project saw it as a form of cultural genocide, and the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA) was established to mitigate the rapid rates of child removal from Indigenous Nations and re-center tribal political sovereignty ("Adoption History"; Jacobs 154).

The ICWA indicates that Congress' intent behind initiating the policy was to "protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families," acknowledging the "unique values of Indian culture" and shifting to help children

through "providing assistance to Indian Tribes in the operation of child and family service programs" ("Indian Child Welfare Act" §1902). Moving the focal point of American Indian child welfare back onto Indigenous ways of community was a needed step toward acknowledging the political relationship between the U.S. Government and American Indian tribes and affirming tribal sovereignty (Red Horse et al. 19; Gaines-Stoner et al. 21; Fletcher et al. 13). It is significant to highlight that this is a relationship between nations, as the political identity of American Indian tribes is frequently overlooked in favor of racial identity (Brayboy 433). The constitutionality of the ICWA has been called into question, in part, due to arguments that it illegally discriminates based on race (United States, District Court 3). However, the nationhood of tribes places citizenship over ethnic identity, emphasizing tribal self-government, not race, as the guiding force, making adoption to non-tribal members a type of international adoption (United States, Court of Appeals 107; "Adoption History").

Cultural identities are not intrinsic, but communal (Atwood 46), and removing a child from their cultural community has life-long effects (Locust; Landers et al.); while some transracial Indigenous adoptees express feeling fortunate for their "bicultural" identity, others feel like they have been deprived of connections to those who could have taught them about their heritage (Atwood 51-53). In 2010, the state of California issued a bill establishing Tribal Customary Adoption, where a child's adoption can be processed in accordance with tribal laws without requiring the termination of parental rights; this practice seeks to diversify outcomes for Indigenous adoptees that are in further alignment with traditional tribal practices ("Tribal Customary Adoption" California Courts; "Tribal Customary Adoption" National Child Welfare Resource Center for Tribes). Harness recounts Judge William Thorne explaining, "'If a child needs new parents, we can replace their parents, but that doesn't mean we have to replace aunts

and uncles, cousins, or their siblings.' As soon as I heard his argument," she says, "I knew this was the kind of adoption I wanted to advocate for" (Harness 332). This approach speaks to transracial Indigenous adoptee Sandra White Hawk's criticisms of adoption of American Indian children to non-tribal members:

> As Indian people, we were denied the security of our families. Our communities are still recovering from the devastating effects of this era….What is the solution? We need to come together to strengthen families. We need to find ways to keep families intact during crisis. And most importantly, states must recognize the Indian Child Welfare Act as a federally mandated policy and work with the tribes, following their lead in matters affecting child welfare. (300-301)

Gaines-Stoner et al. urge that the ICWA be applied with "cultural humility" (vii)—the act of orienting oneself to another's cultural background, providing them with respect, and rejecting superiority of one's own cultural experiences (Hook et al. 353)—to help to protect the children it impacts. Additionally, acknowledging the political autonomy of American Indian tribes and centering the voices of Indigenous adoptees can help adoption advocates become better informed to champion policies and outcomes that will better represent the needs of children (Atwood 315).

Nuancing Personhood through Storytelling

If we close our eyes and listen to the stories and think about the hues and textures of a lived life, we grow to know the perspectives of others, which leads us to understand and, eventually, accept ourselves. (Harness xi)

Storytelling has long been a vibrant means of sharing meaning and outlining paths of belonging in numerous cultural traditions; within many Indigenous cultures, oral tradition provides rich history and knowledge, and stories unify and strengthen the community (Brayboy 439). Because stories are pivotal to Indigenous ways of knowing, Tribal Critical Race Theory

(TribalCrit)—an adaptation of Critical Race Theory that provides a more suitable framework for the unique ways colonization affects American Indians—emphasizes the importance of viewing story as a source of data with as much legitimacy as Western research practices (Brayboy 426). This deep respect for story makes TribalCrit a valuable theoretical companion for approaching the selected text, particularly as many of the key tenants of TribalCrit align with several lines of thought Harness incorporates throughout her narrative. These tenants inform Harness' journey of understanding her Indigenous heritage but are imbued with further meaning as her identity as a transracial adoptee adds a layer of nuance to her personhood.

Harness starts out with the vague jumble of truth and falsehood her adoptive parents presented her as a child. This, in tandem with closed adoption records, meant that much of her beginnings were—and still are—unclear to her. The book takes readers through the journey of finding her origins, while defending the right adoptees should have to the entirety of their own stories. She explains that people "with their full lives, genealogies, and unquestioned documentation, don't understand that my life book begins on chapter 3. Chapters 1 and 2 are located in various bureau drawers and file cabinets, three-ring binders, and other people's memories" (Harness 322). As the audience follows Harness in her search for her starting chapters, they are exposed to the harmful messages she received throughout her life which became deeply embedded in her self-conceptualization. She develops her persona within the narrative, revealing her process of lifting these burdens, moving toward self-identification. TribalCrit understands self-identification as "the ability and legitimacy for groups to define themselves and to create what it means to be Indian…or that which signifies what a 'real Indian' is or looks like" (Brayboy 434). For Harness, storytelling provides a formative means of self-acceptance as she establishes her autonomy outside of stereotypes and stigmatizing messages and

embraces the fact that her way of "being Indian" may look different but is still valid. Presenting her persona within her personal journey is only one function of Harness' rhetoric; memoir often not only serves a personal goal, but transcends the self to support communities and change culture (Larson). As Harness leads readers through the defining relationships and moments of her life, the vivid descriptions of her thoughts and feelings lead her readers to deconstruct their preconceived notions of how Harness, and the transracial adoptee community, *should* feel about their circumstances. Harness then works to leverage what she has established through persona to highlight the necessity for her audience to abandon problematic messages common in adoption discourse. She argues that society must listen to the stories of adoptees as well as engage in dismantling harmful oppressive structures.

Bitterroot is arranged semi-chronologically; the beginning of each chapter moves the reader through Harness' life, emphasizing stories that give insight into her experiences and the significance they carry. However, each chapter is not within itself purely sequential. She occasionally imposes future insight or recounts past memories as she sees fit. This writing style works well for Harness' purposes as the larger chronological pattern mirrors the structure of Harness' movement from burden-bearer to burden-lifter, leaving readers to move forward to shift burdens. Yet, the departure from strictly linear events within each chapter show readers that adoption is not a one-time event, nor is there a straightforward way to talk about it. It impacts people in myriad ways that may be impossible to present in a neat bow—nor would it be most beneficial to do so. By developing the text in this way, Harness keeps audiences from essentializing any one part of her identity, prompting readers to recognize the full personhood of American Indians and transracial adoptees. Harness herself works through what it is to recognize someone's full personhood in the text when she describes meeting her birth mother for the first

time: "Once I walk across that clearing, I think, I will no longer be able to merely imagine her… She will become flesh and blood and all that goes with that" (Harness 150). Harness parallels this within her story by showing readers that the experiences and emotions of transracial adoptees are real and significant. She and others like her should not be constrained to imagined master narratives of gratitude and better lives. Instead, her counterstory requires audiences to acknowledge that adoptees are "flesh and blood and all that goes with that" (Harness 150).

Burden-Bearer: The personal significance of Harness' work

Throughout *Bitterroot,* Harness prioritizes her emotional journey as the guide to understand her experiential journey. Her experiences incorporate elements of her identity as an Indigenous woman as well as her identity as a transracial adoptee. At times, these identities present themselves as distinctly salient within the text, but the driving narrative centers how her experiences are unique to either group in the areas they overlap. As she works toward self-identification, Harness sorts through the demands placed on her due to her intersecting identities. Within this sensemaking process, she uncovers three main burdens that she bears due to expectations and prejudices from all sides. Through exploring the burdens of liminality, trauma, and belonging, Harness situates her initial persona as burden-bearer. This persona is designed to hold readers accountable for recognizing the nature and severity of the harms she experiences.

The Burden of Liminality

The pain of existing in between: sister and not sister, daughter and not daughter, self and not self. This space of between, of being nothing and both, has created a dilemma in my consciousness… How much of a daughter do I have to be to feel justified in…asking to be remembered within this family, this tribe? What right of claim do I have to anything? (Harness 301)

TribalCrit explains that Indigenous tribes exist in a sort of liminality—an "in-between"-ness, to mirror Harness' words; their existence as nations predating the United States delineates a legal and political status by which they are perceived, yet that status is not always acknowledged or respected, and their identities are often racialized—this liminal space illustrates the experiences of American Indians that differ from other minority groups in the United States (Brayboy 433). This principle of liminality is transferrable to the familial space that adoptees inhabit. This can be seen in discussions of *real* vs. *not real* in regard to family ties—particularly if adoptees seek out their first family or engage in reunion. Harness recounts a conversation she had as a teenager with her father about her first family. His answer denied her space to wonder what had happened to her biological parents; "'We are your real parents. We raised you; we clothed you; we fed you; we educated you. You have a roof over your head because of us. Never forget that,' he says, drilling the words home, quiet and measured. 'We are your real parents'" (Harness 6). For a transracial adoptee, there is the additional liminal space of race and culture. The burden of being in-between may functionally exclude the person from either identity. Harness was advised by a social worker to avoid returning to her tribe, saying, "You can't go home…Kids who have done that, who have been raised in this society and try to go back, can't…the cultures are so different; the expectations are too high. It's heartbreaking to watch" (Harness 129-130). Harness describes a sense of not fitting in with the white culture in which she was raised, oftentimes finding herself as the target of racism or having well-meaning friends bestowing honorary whiteness on her. Yet as an American Indian, she remained an outsider, excluded from her tribal heritage, unable to find a way to be invited in—and when she finally does reconnect with her birth culture, she still feels "too white." While liminality is not inherently a burden, the sense of existing "in-between" can be very isolating, and the liminal

individual or group may face additional societal pressure to justify their liminal identity or conform to one aspect of their identity, abandoning the others.

The Burden of Trauma

Adoption, by the very act itself, is defined by tragedy: death, the inability to be a parent (as in the case of my birth mother), and, in my case, the inability to be a whole and complete child. People typically don't want to discuss tragedy, including my mom… "You're too young to ask questions like that," or, "You don't need to hear about the bad things that happen to people. You should hear only about happy things." These statements coded my mind to see adoption as a subject to be avoided. (Harness 10-11)

Society is often presented with a sanitized version of adoption. Preference is given to adoptee exceptionalism—narratives that uphold gratitude and credit adoption as the inspirational reason for the individual's achievements (Kim 7). While some adoptees may feel gratitude for being adopted and perceive their adoption as the preferred outcome, this is not the case for all adoptees. When reflecting on a conversation with her biological brother about the difficult path his life took because he was *not* adopted, Harness writes, "Vern's statement raises an interesting question that our society assumes about adoption—that to be rescued from a chaotic family and adopted is always better than not being rescued. And to hear his stories, it's hard to argue with that. But I have my own stories to tell" (Harness 261). Allowing a child to remain in their situation may not be the optimal path in certain situations, but ignoring the reality that all adoption begins with the separation of child from parent places a heavy burden on adoptees to internalize the impacts of this traumatizing event, and silencing uncomfortable adoption narratives in favor of idyllic ones can obscure abuse of adoptees (Harness 234). Harness provides windows into the trauma of her childhood—in addition to being separated from her birth family and culture, her adoptive father was abusive, and her living situation precarious. As an adult,

Harness begins to acknowledge and identify the complex pains the burden of trauma brings. When she meets her birth mother for the first time, she writes, "I know we share the same pain, she and I. It's just called different names. Hers is a shame of relinquishment; mine is the hurt of abandonment. Both are two sides of the same adoption coin" (Harness 157). The burden of trauma is one that may take many forms, but all forms bring a severe weight that cannot long be ignored—nor should adoptees be expected to do so for the comfort of those around them.

The Burden of Belonging

As one adoptee said, "Us Native American adoptees really long to belong…if the tribes were to say, 'Let us tell you our stories and our traditions,' so I can get the password to belonging. I don't think I've gotten it, whatever it is. I want to feel [like I] belong . . . when I open my mouth, they're like, 'Oh, you're one of those!' 'One of those' is an American Indian trying to pass as white, thereby betraying our race." (Harness 235)

The desire to belong lies deep within human nature, yet the temptation to create that belonging through exclusion rides in on its coattails. Ethnocentrism is one factor in the development of in-groups and antagonism of out-groups (Tajfel and Turner), and ethnocentrism, when faced with a liminal ethnic identity, recoils at the unexpected violation of adherence to an assumed social script. Harness experienced this at a young age when her adoptive father painted a little garden statue girl blonde as he wistfully longed for a little blonde daughter of his own. Although she was legally his daughter and was enculturated in whiteness, her appearance did not allow her to play the part. She describes the weight this encounter placed on her heart, "No matter how hard I try I will never look like this statue; I will never see that adoring gaze focused on me. And then my throat closes, and I can't swallow, and the world blurs in front of my eyes, and I realize how much I hate him. What's worse, I realize I am beginning to hate myself" (Harness 17). She continues, elaborating on how racism marked her as a problematic outlier in

her family and community, "My entire life I've been surrounded by people represented by that statue, people with blond hair, brown hair, red hair with flecks of gold, people with blue eyes, green eyes, brown eyes, but none of them have the same brown skin I do. I realize now what my brown skin represents to some in this town. It flags my difference and makes some people (far more than I feel comfortable admitting) see me as stupid or lazy. Dangerous" (Harness 16-17).

On the flip side, one can look the part, but as soon as it is clear that certain culturally defined interactions are not within one's repertoire, suspicion of identity and motive comes into play. Harness recounts her college days, attempting to connect with other American Indian students, but missing the cultural tools to become an insider. On one instance, she remembers one student asking "'What are you?...Are you Indian?'…Their questions are rude, but I want to belong…"Naw…she's an apple.'…'What's an apple?' I ask. 'Red on the outside, white on the inside.'" She describes the experience as hitting the outside of the boundary delineating what it means to be an American Indian with a "thud" (Harness 106-107). Adoptees also experience exclusion from belonging in the family sphere. Harness tells of her birth mother's funeral—when she and her other siblings who had been removed from their home at young ages went to the funeral, they sat in the area reserved for family. The family members who had lived with the deceased moved places, thus effectively shifting the marker for what constituted family ties out of their reach. The burden of belonging is complex because requirements for belonging are often dictated by others, and things inherent in one's identity can easily establish them as a permanent outsider.

Burden-Lifter: The significance of Harness' work for marginalized people

The next step in Harness' journey is finding self-acceptance by alleviating herself of the responsibility for her burdens, giving space for other transracial Indigenous adoptees to do the same through her scholarship within the field of Anthropology, researching outcomes of the

Indian Adoption Project. She refers back to the interviews she held with transracial Indigenous adoptees as part of her research, recounting how "painful anger seared the edges of adoptees' souls and was made visible in the stories they told me, the stories that were carefully hidden, guarded until someone asked" (Harness 230). Her research and advocacy efforts helped her realize that she was not alone in regard to these burdens that had weighed her down and, throughout her memoir, her stories direct readers to notice her growing persona of burden-lifter. Harness talks about the difficult task of relieving herself from outside constraints and her increased desire to lift these burdens from others like her. This persona functions to establish Harness' process of self-identification, reclaiming her identity from those who insisted on fracturing it, and provide a pathway to encourage marginalized readers to do the same.

Accepting Liminality

"I am who I am," I tell her. I explain, "I was adopted by a white couple, but I look Indian—so in the big scheme of things, I'm too Indian to be white, and I'm too white to be Indian. I am who I am." By now my smile is gone. I realize I'm tired. I'm tired of justifying the paradox of my existence. (Harness 189)

A key complexity of having a liminal identity is that internal or external pressure may push toward selecting one identity or the other to ameliorate cognitive or social dissonance caused by straddling in-between the two. Throughout her life, Harness experienced competing persuasive forces voicing which familial and cultural identity she should embrace—or is allowed to embody—and which she should shun. She recalls a letter to the editor she read in a tribal paper accusing Indigenous people who had assimilated into white culture of seeking the benefits of being a tribal member while allegedly sidestepping discrimination against American Indians. Harness rejects this assumption of her motives because of her situation; "What this man was saying was because I walk in a white world, I was supposed have no knowledge of what it means

to ‘be Indian’? That my experiences are somehow less than his? My hands shake as I realize this man and the words he spews echo the attitudes I’d heard from the Native community…of not being Indian enough, of being an apple, a wannabe, a pretender. I feel like I can’t breathe” (Harness 139). Encounters with others were often marked by people attempting to put a label on what her identity was. She recounts a college classroom, where her professor singled her out because her last name did not align with his assumptions about her skin color; “in my set-apart role, I refuse to tell him I’m Indian. And I refuse to say I’m adopted. I refuse to explain my in-between status, because I can’t explain it” (Harness 111). New Zealand Māori cross-cultural adoptees echo this paradoxical feeling, one study participant describing the feeling as “walking between worlds;” uneasy in each, but necessarily engaging both (Haenga-Collins and Gibbs 71). Harness’ statement “I am who I am” refuses to pander to reductionistic understandings of her liminal identity, accepting that the paradox need not be resolved, it just is—and that is who she is.

Allowing Trauma to be Uncomfortable

No one, not one person, ever asked if I was ever made to feel uncomfortable with my adoption, but I was not supposed to make anyone else feel uncomfortable with my presence? My questions? (Harness 270)

In writing her memoir, Harness incorporates details about her past that are heavy and uncomfortable to read. In deciding to do so, she asserts her right to acknowledge that the traumatic parts of her past are real and valid, asking questions and following lines of query that often lack resolution or happy outcome. But Harness does not offer comfort for the sake of comfort—she allows herself to be uncomfortable with her past, leaving off the polished veneer that might make her life more palatable to others. There is a sense of dissonance that develops in the mind of the reader as they look for neat bows at the end of tangled stories. Her writing allows

the reader glimpses of her inner despair during difficult points in her life, like when her mother suddenly left her to live alone when Harness was in high school. "At my worst times I wind up the music boxes. Because if I don't…the thoughts, the doubts, the uneasiness, the queasiness comes, and the 'what ifs' start. *What if Mom doesn't return? What if someone at school finds out that I have no parents living with me? What if someone calls social services because my parents have abandoned me? Like my 'real' family"* (Harness 71). Harness talks about the good front she put up, maintaining secrecy about her trauma to avoid charitable pity or further disruption to her connection to family. She also speaks to the secrecy surrounding her adoption, challenging the approach which ignores the child's life prior to adoption, sealing it tightly alongside private adoption records; "there's an assumption that somehow the child's previous life was 'dirty.' And this is where my confusion comes in. Why can't the child's life be just the experience of living instead of pretending it never happened at all?" (Harness 222). She laments the loss of her true origin story and criticizes those who expect children to pretend their pain does not exist. The burdens brought by trauma may never be fully lifted, but the societal burden of secrecy can be. Her personal quest for the hidden information from the beginning chapters of her life and her raw presentation of the rest indicates that Harness no longer strives to make others comfortable at the expense of her wellbeing, and in doing so, lifts the burden on marginalized groups to sanitize their trauma.

To Whom Does the Burden of (non)Belonging Belong?

I'm tired of carrying this burden of nonbelonging. It's not really mine to carry. It belongs to my birth family, who opted not to do what was required to keep us out of the system. It belongs to child-placement policy experts, who think removing children…and then placing them in the midst of a society whose history promotes a barely veiled hatred toward indigenous people will produce healthy, happy, and stable children. It belongs to my adoptive father, who didn't

question the racism that surrounded me and didn't protect me when it entered our home in his alcohol-driven tirades… It belongs to American Indians who see us as people seeking our birthright because we are trying to get something for nothing… But that burden should be heavily carried by white America, who can now pretend that, because we are being raised in a white, middle-class family, everything will be okay. (Harness 236)

Harness' story is marked by the ever-looming, persistent reality of nonbelonging. Throughout the work, she frequently describes her unease in her surroundings to highlight how her embodied existence is foreign to each space. She describes nonbelonging as a "deeply embedded pain" that adoptees experience (Harness 296). Eventually, Harness stops blaming herself for not fitting in, emphasizing the ways that those who had withheld belonging from her were the ones responsible for this burden. When she freed herself of this guilt, she strode toward a new mindset: "I no longer accepted my placement in the societal space to be determined by others" (Harness 333). However, determining one's own placement and removing the burden of belonging still leaves an emptiness; even in her newly constructed persona of burden-lifter, Harness shows that there will still be loss. She explains that unspoken scripts are often culturally defined; and while she holds the tools for interpersonal interactions in the white world, things are different when she visits her tribe. "I can't read these faces; I can't read their body language. I can't interpret their responses or lack of responses. I can't read between the lines of what is being said because I've never been taught how to" (Harness 324). Shelley Ann Hepler explains that the difficulty of nonbelonging comes when individuals are given "contingent" membership, leaving them in an instable existence on the periphery of the group "without the security and identification that often comes with bona fide group membership" (148). Because one cannot bestow genuine membership on oneself, as long as others refuse Harness, and other transracial

adoptees, in-group membership, the pain of nonbelonging will ever loom. Harness recounts poignant wisdom from Salish elder Joe Pablo that speaks to the next step to community for marginalized individuals: "People mistake tradition with culture…Tradition is what we do. Culture is who we are." He says to her, "you may not know our traditions, but you are most definitely of our Salish and Kootenai culture" (Harness 298). In this declaration of acceptance, Mr. Pablo meets Harness where the limitations of her agency have left her, shifting the burden onto himself and doing what he can to bring her into belonging.

Shifting Burdens: The social significance of Harness' work

While her memoir centers on her personal experiences as narrated through the movement from the burden-bearer persona to the burden-lifter persona, all the stories point to a critical overarching purpose—one exemplified in the heartfelt initiative of Mr. Pablo. Harness designed the text to work toward tangible change; change in the perception of her readers, in the cultural milieu, and in the child welfare laws of the United States. Harness makes it clear that the discrimination she faced was endemic to larger systems of oppression perpetuated throughout generations. She argues that "social memory is what ties all these perceptions together, allowing them to be regifted from one generation to the next. I was not responsible for not fitting in. Society holds that responsibility" (Harness 333). Because the onus for the burdens she and other transracial adoptees face rests on society, the solution must be enacted by society. It is not the responsibility of the adoptee to fit a society that ostracizes them, it is the responsibility of society to listen to the stories of the adoptees, accept them as valid ways of knowing and being, and move to construct better discourse and policy. She emphasizes that it is "important for child-placement policy makers who made, and will make, these arrangements to hear us" (Harness 230). "Burden-shifter" is not a persona that Harness uses to situate herself to her readers, but rather she presents the action of shifting burdens as a challenge to her audience, a plea that we

stop placing burdens on the shoulders of the marginalized and shift them back to ourselves, taking responsibility for the wrongs of the past and working toward a better future.

Protect the Rights of the Liminal

Within a few months of my adoption, Mom was contacted by a Bureau of Indian Affairs representative and asked if she wanted to sign away my Indian rights, meaning my tribal membership. The 1950s was an era of aggressive assimilation efforts…[including] the placement of American Indian children into white families, far away from their tribes and their reservations. … In 1961 Mom understood the consequences of the representative's request. "Those aren't my rights to sign away," … Bless her. I've been Indian ever since. (Harness 187-188)

Based on historical precedent, TribalCrit rightly identifies that "U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain" (Brayboy 431). This puts the rights of American Indians in precarity when the U.S. Government becomes involved in Tribal affairs. One of the areas this is impacted by is child welfare and adoption. Harness mentions the loss that other Indigenous transracial adoptees she had interviewed experienced, "there were so many stories, of shame, of heartbreak, of pragmatism, of survival, and of resistance. Many of the stories pivoted around the issue of tribal enrollment. The ones who weren't enrolled told me they were placed before the birth parent could enroll them…or the Bureau of Indian Affairs was successfully able to get adoptive parents to sign away the child's American Indian birthrights, thus revoking the adoptee's tribal membership" (Harness 228). As children, these individuals had no say in the status of their tribal membership, but it remains a salient piece in their identity and lived experience into their adult lives, indicating how crucial it is that this right be respected in matters of transracial Indigenous adoption. As earlier delineated, the Indian Child Welfare Act has recently been under review for

constitutionality, but Tribal members advocate for its continuance to maintain higher levels of autonomy to make decisions about community welfare (Barnes; Brayboy 433). Broader structures of adoption in the United States have marginalized minority communities, making the rights of the liminal adoptee precarious as well (Quiroz 18-19, 25-26). It is imperative for adoption advocates and policy makers who come from a space of privilege to educate themselves on how racism has negatively shaped historical approaches to adoption. While holding to the color-evasive motif may be more comfortable, we cannot ignore the harm it has brought to transracial adoptees. "When race isn't an issue in your daily world, I think it's hard to believe it's an issue in anyone else's" (Harness 251). It is critical that child welfare and adoption practices be assessed with a critical lens to cut any ties that bind it to systems of injustice.

Remove "Lucky" as a Descriptor for Trauma

How I should feel, brought about by cultural pressure from the society in which I was raised, is typically stated in these ways: "Everything happens for a reason" or "There's always two sides to adoption; you can't just look at the negative."… It was devastating to be a child alone and isolated in a world that saw little if any value in me as a human being because of the color of my skin. But it may well have been just as devastating to live here in this family…No, I don't feel lucky. I feel cheated. (Harness 211-212)

Societal norms of comfort would hasten to exclude scripts such as "Your child died for a reason" or "There's always two sides to cancer; you can't just look at the negative" because it is understood that such statements would exacerbate grief rather than ameliorate it. Yet, when it comes to adoption, established societal norms tend toward championing the positive spin on the situation, normalizing microaggressions toward adoptees and expecting them to embrace this mindset when answering questions about their lives. Positioning adoption in this framework makes audience members comfortable, giving them assurance that things turned out as they

should have. Harness explains, "for our whole lives so many of us were made to believe that we were wrong to be angry, resentful, bitter at our placement in a world that despised us or within families who didn't do anything to protect us" (Harness 234-235). When we exclude adoptees' pain from the conversation on adoption, we impose a silent violence upon them, invalidating their experiences because they do not fit a certain script. Harness' story shows that sometimes there is no idyllic option, and either way, loss is not easily remedied. She shows that overly positive descriptors such as "lucky" have no place in a nuanced discussion about the multifaceted impacts of adoption. Those not affected by adoption should allow adoptees to set the parameters of communication about their trauma to avoid placing stigma and burden.

Understand the Consequences of Colonization on Belonging

Then I begin to talk about my adoption experience, with all its beauty and all its ugliness. I tell the audience about how I grew up, of finding my family, and of still feeling ungrounded. And I tell them why: I carry the burden of colonization. I don't belong; I find myself on the outside looking in, no matter where I am… I tell them that transracial adoptees carry a lot of baggage, and I want people to understand how much that burden weighs. I want people to understand how their words, their actions, have far-reaching consequences. (Harness 334)

TribalCrit emphasizes that "colonization is endemic to society" and works to erase Indigenous ways of being (Brayboy 430). As Harness writes, "colonization has done a hack job on indigenous people. We've had our culture ripped out from under our legs, our traditions and knowledge replaced, our wealth of horses replaced by paper money that means only what someone in Washington says it means. We've had our land stolen, our children stolen, our pride stolen" (Harness 252). She considers the historic mass removal of tribal children through adoption one of the several means of assimilation, a tactic of colonization against American Indians (Harness 298). Growing up, her heritage was constantly demeaned by her adoptive

father's racism; "'I heard you had an uncle…But he was a drunk, no-good bum… He and his family would leech off of you…' Dad's description of Indians hangs in the air between us. He's not the only one who thinks this way. This perspective is held by so many people I know that it permeates my psyche: *that's how Indians are; everyone knows that*" (Harness 8). Mainstream child development psychological theories minimize the "significance of cultural attachment" and thus overlook Indigenous concepts of culture like "kinship networks" (Red Horse et al. 19). Harness argues to her audience that the value of cultural kinship should not be undermined in the adoption conversation. "We have lost our entire family, entire tribes, who could have helped us navigate the dangerous waters we crossed, in ways our adoptive families could not. We needed them in our lives" (Harness 333). Transracial adoptees may work to explore their ethnic heritage, and this exploration can help them resolve tensions in their ambiguous identity, but this resolution is not complete or fully attainable, rather it is described as a continuum that the adoptee travels on (Brocious). This suggests that the impacts of colonization on adoption can never be completely overturned or overcome, which is why it is of utmost import to decentralize whiteness and Western norms within adoption practices.

Conclusion

The weight of adoptees' stories is heavy, reminding me of the responsibility I have to share them… What I am hoping is that my sharing them will change adoption policies and protocol. (Harness 290)

The adoption of American Indian children to non-tribal U.S. citizens has a problematic historic past rooted in colonial notions of Western ideals of family and assimilation policies. As courts work to interpret laws such as the ICWA and navigate adoption protocol, great care should be taken to dismantle color-evasive approaches to transracial adoption and the false sense of equality that they provide. The complex liminality in regard to family identity, racial identity,

and political identity of Indigenous transracial adoptees—indeed, all categories of adoptees—should be respected, and non-adoptees should take care to listen to their lived experiences through the stories they tell, be it positive or negative. If we allow adoptees to speak their truth to power, the trauma inherent to adoption can be better understood, and conversations surrounding adoption may become more nuanced, leading to a better assessment of the harms and benefits of adoption on child welfare. In doing this, we may shift the burden of belonging off of those who do not fit into set social groups and make space in society for valuing and destigmatizing those with intersecting identities.

One way adoptees make their voices heard is through authoring memoirs. The process of penning an autobiography gives adoptees a space to understand their intersecting identities and means of constituting their personhood through persona, making it nuanced through the stories they choose to tell. Finally, it provides a platform for issuing counterstories to challenge stigmatizing public discourses and work toward better outcomes for adoptees. Harness accomplishes each of these within *Bitterroot* by narrating her journey from burden-bearer to burden-lifter and advocating for society to shift the burdens accompanying liminality, trauma, and belonging back onto themselves and work toward change. She confronts problematic audience perspectives on American Indians and adoption and champions the voice of the adoptee to inform the change she calls for.

"Never stop telling people what has happened to us, what's been done to us" Mr. Pablo told Harness, "They need to know. Please promise you won't stop telling this story" (Harness 298). This is why Harness writes—this is why we must listen.

Chapter 3: Rhetorical Analysis of Nicole Chung's *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir*

This may be all you can ever know, I was told. It wasn't a joyful story through and through, but it was [my adoptive parents'] story, and mine, too. The only thing we had ever shared. And as my adoptive parents saw it, the story could have ended no other way. (Chung, *All* 4)

All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir is an autobiographical work by Nicole Chung published in 2018 by Catapult. The memoir details Chung's upbringing as a transracial adoptee of Korean heritage in a white community with no connection to her first family, and her experiences with racism, color-evasiveness, and navigating racial and familial identity throughout her life. She provides an account of her journey to reach past the simplistic story she was given as a child, and to uncover the truth of her origin, narrating to the reader her feelings through it all: the good, the bad, and the complicated. Chung's memoir has had a growing impact within the United States since its publishing in 2018. She has appeared on The Daily Show with Trevor Noah and has spoken on several episodes of the NPR Code Switch podcast, among other interviews. At the time of this research, WorldCat estimates over 1,000 libraries carry *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir,* and the memoir has over 21,000 ratings and 2,679 reviews by users on Goodreads, a social media-like site used to track personal reading progress. Her work is significant due to the prominence of transracial adoptees within the United States (Vandivere et al.) as well as the cultural importance of studying texts written by and centering Asian and Asian American voices; a need made increasingly salient due to the reported influx of racially motivated hate crimes against those of Asian heritage alongside the COVID-19 pandemic (Ruiz et al.; Yellow Horse et al.). In the wake of the murder of eight Atlanta women (six of whom were Asian women) in March, 2021, TIME magazine released the article "A Reading List to Celebrate Asian Authors" on their website which included a commendation for Chung's book. Contributor Naina Bajekal writes, "While I'm not an adoptee and will never know the experience of not

being seen fully by your own family, this memoir is such an urgent meditation on race, motherhood and the search for identity that I have gone back to it countless times for comfort" (Bajekal et al.).

This chapter continues my examination of how rhetorical methods illuminate the functionality memoir provides to transracial adoptees in negotiating their own familial and racial identity, in addition to how CRT—and, more specifically, Asian Critical Race Theory (Museus)—provides a theoretical framework to understanding the ways that counterstories are employed to combat broader public discourses that attempt to constrain adoptees to sanitized narratives. By engaging *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir* through rhetorical analysis, I address the questions: how does Chung design *All You Can Ever Know* to constitute her own racial and familial identity, and how does she expect her message to shape the way readers think and talk about Asian Americans and adoptees? I argue that Chung uses her autobiography as means of story reclamation that performs three key functions. One function is constructing self, where Chung uses narrative to navigate the complex intersections of her familial personas (adopted daughter, sister, and mother) and racial persona (Korean American). The second is connecting with community, where she strategically develops shared identity with readers who can empathize with her story because they have lived their own version of it, then situates herself and, by proxy, her community, into the literary role they are often excluded from: that of the hero. Finally, Chung calls out problematic messaging concerning transracial adoptees to constrain her audience from voicing those messages with impunity. Specifically, her writing serves as a counterstory against three harmful narrative tropes: Meant to Be; The Grateful Adoptee; and Love Sees No Color. With these functions, Chung situates her lived experience in a manner that aims to steer audiences away from essentializing adoptees and the ways they are

portrayed. For adopted readers, her story works to provide connection and encouragement to center themselves in their own stories, while non-adopted readers are constrained from imposing a set narrative onto her and, ultimately, other adoptees.

Throughout this study I use terms such as "Asian," "Asian American," "Korean," and "Korean American." The conceptualization of "Asian" and "Asian American" as identity markers within the United States have a complicated history and have been frequently employed to essentialize and homogenize the diverse ethnic and national groups subsumed by the terms (Lowe; Espiritu). However, the terms have been reclaimed and utilized by people from that community to acknowledge connection within transnational contexts and the various cultural influences that may shape one's identity within the United States (Park; Museus). This can be seen in the way Chung speaks about her own identity within her memoir. She recalls watching figure-skater Kristi Yamaguchi on TV when she was a child and, although Yamaguchi is a third-generation Japanese American, Chung still felt a connection to her because of their shared Asian American identity ("Kristi Yamaguchi"; Chung, *All* 18). However, Chung only uses the term "Asian American" four times within the text. She uses "Asian" thirty-two times in the text, often to indicate her longing to be among people who looked like her, yet other times used when referring to racist sentiments directed toward her. While "Asian" as a broader identity played a role in Chung's life, she more frequently grapples with what it means to be "Korean," using the term 108 times in the text. "Korean American" is only used four times, but as a person born and adopted within the United States, Chung is not challenged on her American identity with the same frequency and intensity as her Korean identity.

Moving forward, I present a truncated history of how Korean adoption surged in the United States in order to better understand how broader institutions and societal norms shape

Chung's story and the messages she seeks to constrain others from voicing. Next, I examine how memoir authorship provides an important means to reclaim one's own story, with a brief overview of how Chung arranges her book and the ways this strengthens the impact of her counternarrative. In light of these factors, I employ Asian Critical Race Theory (Museus) to analyze how Chung works within her text to establish persona, develop community, and constrain harmful messages.

Problems within Transracial and Intercountry Adoption

Many parents are not provided with the guidance or resources they need to bring up children of color in white families, white communities, a white supremacist society... we were and are representative of so many transracial and transcultural adoptions from that era. (Chung, *All* 29)

Transracial adoption within the United States has had a complex history and has raised several concerns about ethics and legitimacy, particularly when children from marginalized groups are adopted *en masse* by a majority group. Transracial adoption discourses and practices have been impacted by "large-scale national traumas" that informed understandings of citizenship and belonging, frequently excluding or othering racial and ethnic minorities (Jerng xii). Significant increases of intercountry adoption were seen in the wake of World War II and the Korean war, and "Korean children became the largest group of foreign adoptees within the United States" during that era (Carp 14), with over 38,000 adoptions of Korean children within America taking place between 1953 and 1981 (Silverman 104). Intercountry adoption was framed by the press as a way to rescue the innocent, young victims of war and "reinforced a narrative of American moral and economic superiority" (Park Nelson 3), allowing prospective adoptive parents to embody patriotic values through the act of adoption. Chung's adoption was not directly part of this phenomenon, as she was born later in the United States and adopted within the United States. However, she indicates in her book that her parents' migration to the

United States from South Korea meant that barriers such as language and economic resources made their situation more precarious, contributing to her adoption (Chung, *All* 27). Asian American experiences are transnationally contextualized because the conditions of their communities have been historically—and continue to be—shaped by war, economy, and migration (Museus 24). The way these factors have played a role in shaping transracial and intercountry adoption should not be overlooked (Patton-Imani).

Transracial adoption has been popularly viewed as a successful means of dismantling racism, but this ignores the ways the child welfare system discriminates against people of color and the ways "racialized structures" drive private and intercountry adoption efforts (Quiroz 18-19, 25-26). Additionally, profit gained through facilitating adoptions incentivizes unethical practices—particularly in intercountry adoptions. Although protections and boundaries, such as the Hague Convention, have been set into place to mitigate unethical intercountry adoptions ("Intercountry Adoption – Adoption Process"), there is concern that these protections do not go far enough to combat all problematic facets of the privatized adoption arena (Masson 164). The Hague Convention has also been criticized for promulgating Western notions of family and doing nothing to reduce the stigma placed upon birth families and the nations that children are adopted out of (Willing et al. 473). Movement toward celebrating a transracially adopted child's heritage is gaining momentum but is still not a comprehensive solution to the dissonance of feeling disconnected to one's culture and the disparities inherent in the system (Chung, *All* 29). Transracial adoptees of color are at an intersection of historical marginalization within the United States because of the way structural racism and patriarchy have impacted systems of adoption in a way that disproportionately displace children of color from their heritage and place them in environments that may be hostile to or overlook that part of their identity. To improve

outcomes for children, we must center the voices of transracial adoptees to better identify the hidden or overlooked downfalls of historic and current systems of intercountry and transracial adoption, then work together toward change.

Autobiographical Storytelling as Reclamation

I encourage adopted people to tell their stories, our stories, and let no one else define these experiences for us. (Chung, *All* 20)

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that storytelling can be a useful tool for developing a more nuanced expression of personhood and the intersecting identities that comprise a person's experience. This is an important method of asserting knowledge and engaging in persuasion. However, it is a tool that can be employed by rhetors in the sharing of any story. I argue that there is a tandem function that centers the significance of autobiographical development of counterstories—reclamation. Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), which branches from Critical Race Theory (CRT) in a way that centers Asian and Asian American experiences, provides a framework that lends understanding to what reclamation is and how it serves those who are marginalized and constrained by dominant narratives. It has been used to conceptualize the diverse parenting methods of Chinese immigrants and resist racist and essentializing discourses about "tiger" parenting and model minority (Qin et al.) and it proved salient in a look at how "asianization" came into play against Chinese international students during COVID-19 (Saito and Li). AsianCrit-infomed counterstories of school segregation have been employed to teach about race (An). Communication scholars have utilized AsianCrit to explain how racism and patriarchy impact the approach to language and cultural identity by multicultural families in Korea (Han and Price). As seen with CRT and TribalCrit, three of AsianCrit's seven tenants highlight social justice as a key goal, understand that identities are intersectional, and conceptualize stories as central to, not separate from, theory and praxis. The

remaining four tenants (asianization, transnational contexts, (re)constructive history, and (anti)essentialism) give significant insight into how Asian Americans experience racism and work to overcome it. For these reasons, I use it as a theoretical companion to my analysis of how Chung engages in reclamation of her own story to issue it as a counterstory.

Engaging the process of reclamation within memoir writing is not a straightforward process. It begins as an exercise in reconstructing one's own history, which serves a two-fold purpose. On a structural level, reconstruction works to bring the untold stories of historically marginalized perspectives to the foreground. (Re)Constructing history is a tenant of AsianCrit which speaks to the way that Asians and Asian Americans have been left out of or misrepresented in dominant historical narratives; the tenant urges that erroneous views of history need to be reconstructed to highlight the struggles and contributions of Asian Americans, solidifying Asian American identity and community (Museus 25). In her autobiography, Chung challenges the problematic ways the community she grew up in viewed Asian Americans, as well as the problematic ways they viewed adoptees. On a personal level, reconstruction situates the text as a stage "for a transaction with oneself, where different versions, different possible selves—including how we imagine others see us—are in play" (Sheringham 3). This allows authors to decide which parts of their identity and experience are central to their self-perception as well as to the narrative they present to the audience. Societal understandings of what constitutes the self may complicate this process; for example, dominant discourses value "biologically grounded notions of personhood" as a means for establishing historical identity, an unhelpful framework for adoptees whose connection to information on their biological lineage has been disrupted (Jerng xxviii). For authors such as Chung, who wrestle between identities imposed on them and identities removed from them through events outside their control, the text

becomes a "crucial [site] for negotiating" one's history and developing counterstory (Jerng xxviii).

A key reason why reconstruction is the first step toward reclamation in autobiography is because dismantling and rebuilding the narrative of one's own life journey gives the author more autonomy in foregrounding what experiences are salient and useful for countering constraining systems. Parents are the first tellers of a child's story, crafting a narrative which they, in time, explain to the child, illuminating what occurred in the beginning of their life before their memory took hold. Because of the legal and social complexities of adoption, a child who is removed from their first family may have unknown or unclear information about their origins, either due to adoptive parents withholding what they know, adoption records being sealed, or a paucity of recorded details. Adoptive parents may develop "creation narratives" to fill this gap (Galvin 242). These narratives may include as much information as is available but may also augment or reconstruct the known with additional details intended to resituate the child's place in the current family or attempt to soothe with platitudes. As they grow older, adopted children also face strong social norms where they are expected to adhere to images of thankfulness and excellence. Because of these factors, narratives surrounding adoption and depictions of adoptees may lead to essentializing adoptees and centering adoptive parents (or receiving countries) as heroic saviors (Chung, "Stories").

Readers may become uncomfortable if a story does not align with their notions of how an author should act or feel. Because of the trend toward adoptive parent/family-centric perspectives on adoption stories, some critique transracial adoptee memoirs for not meeting social expectations of gratitude, condemning authors for perceived self-victimization. Various one-star reviews of Chung's memoir on Goodreads mirror this disparaging sentiment: one user

writes, “Non-stop whining about being adopted...I feel sorry for her adoptive parents” (M); another echoes, “Whiny... Why couldn’t Nicole have written a memoir on a positive note – being thankful that her white parents adopted a premature baby, gave her opportunities and love?” (Pelc). When an adoptee asserts their perspective, it may be met with resistance if it is perceived as interfering with other narratives that are more common and comfortable; but adoptees continue to “reclaim experiences that have been silenced or marginalized by the attention paid to the dilemmas and positions of adoptive parents” and in doing so, they develop counterstories that function to persuade audiences to resist harmful discourse and work toward justice concerning adoption practices (Jerng 170).

Constructing Self: The personal significance of Chung’s work

Chung begins to reclaim her story by developing a sense of her identity and the ways it intersects in the text. The persona roles that Chung assumes flow naturally from the nature of the narrative. She reveals her internal struggle of defining her identity as she grew from child to adult and explains her complicated relationship with adoption and race. As each vignette unfolds, Chung’s perception of her past is illuminated by her positionality as an adopted daughter, a new mother, a biological sister, and a Korean American. These identities, while each adding a distinct layer to Chung’s self-conceptualization, build on each other to illuminate the ways that competing narratives may constrain her. Intersectionality, as discussed in Chapter one, is a salient factor in broader conversations about transracial adoption. It is an integral concept to the structuring of AsianCrit and a beneficial means to see how Chung’s varying personas within the book function to exemplify the complexity of adoption and develop a counterstory with which to constrain her audience from speaking about her adoption, and adoption in general, in simplistic terms.

Familial Persona

Reunion has taught me that there is no way to remake your history or your family in the image you want. But there can be more, if you are willing to look for those stories that were lost—you might just find someone new to forgive, to love, to grow with. (Chung, *All* 205)

The persona of adopted daughter is of key significance as it informs all other personas within the book. Chung describes her adoption as having given her much, with much being taken away as well (*All* 63). As a child, although she had no memories of her first family, she still felt the loss keenly, and could not shake the sense that she did not belong in the life she lived (*All* 35). As the excerpt above notes, the facts of one's history cannot be remade, but Chung reconstructs what aspects of her history are foregrounded. As her story unfolds, Chung's perspective of her identity as an adopted person shifts from feeling responsible to uphold an idyllic story of being rescued, to acknowledging her complex feelings and uncovering the truths she had been asked to ignore. When Chung reconstructs her historical narrative and reclaims what it means to be an adoptee, audiences may still be hesitant to understand how her experience can inform broader structural issues, but they cannot deny such issues exist by the validity of her own lived reality.

The ways Chung's adoption informed her experience as an expectant mother led to the decision to seek out her first family: "I couldn't shake the overwhelming feeling that our baby was destined to inherit a half-empty family tree" (Chung, *All* 72). Chung uses the motherly persona as a sense-making tool to process the actions of her biological and adoptive mothers. The first abandoned her, the second laid claim to her, and both left her feeling insecurities about her own belonging and identity. With the birth of her daughter, Chung voices a realization that she had been unable to see within her own life until this point: a child possesses agency within themselves: "I knew that I would do anything for my child...this was less because she was *mine,*

and more because she was her own, already" (Chung, *All* 149). This realization about agency is a key foundational concept to viewing adoption as Chung now does, and it allowed Chung to lessen her concern about what others thought her story should look like and freed her to follow paths previously suppressed.

One such path led her to discovering the truth surrounding her origins. As she begins to contact different members of her first family, she simultaneously experiences the unfamiliar demands of pregnancy—Chung uses the approaching identity as mother to explain why she sought out those long-severed connections, but turns to the persona of sister to narrate how she maintained the connection after it was made. Throughout the book, there are occasional vignettes from the perspective of who Chung would come to know as her full biological sister, Cindy. These parallel journeys, along with their eventual union, rhetorically function to exemplify the intricacies of adoption. Chung sorts through the competing ideas of family being born or family being made, wrestling with the realization that it, at times, may be both. While Chung's story is her own, it is adjacent to numerous other complex stories. For Chung, reuniting with her biological sister became a watershed experience through which she was able to discover deeper truths about those stories, while finally not feeling so alone in her search.

Racial Persona

"Mama, am I a real Korean?" [my daughter] was five years and a few days old… "Because I don't think I am." …Why had I been unprepared for this moment? How many times had I said the exact same thing to myself? (Chung, *All* 214)

Chung's connection with her sister also gave her new perspective on her identity as a Korean American. Chung often uses persona as Korean American within the book to highlight instances of racism she experienced as well as to amplify what she lost in being removed from her heritage: "I had missed out on growing up in a place...where people like me were

commonplace, not a wonder" (Chung, *All* 40). But as much as her Korean appearance and heritage affected her experience in her white family and white community, her lack of Korean upbringing created an absence within her understanding of her racial identity, leaving Chung to wonder if she was "Korean enough," especially when meeting her biological father: "[My father] and I came from different generations, different cultures, different traumas. I was not the person I would have been if he had raised me" (Chung, *All* 184). This ongoing tension of her cultural and racial identity also shows how adoption can impact subsequent generations, as the final section of her book speaks to how Chung navigates motherhood as her daughters grow and begin to ask questions about their own identity and family heritage. It was through the prompting of her daughter that she was able to give herself permission to embrace her Korean heritage: "I carefully wrote my Korean name on a fresh piece of paper... I had never claimed my birth name... it was strange to do so... but I felt like less of an imposter than I expected to" (Chung, *All* 220).

The interplay between racial and familial identity sets a foundation for Chung to highlight the need for community at that intersection and to resist those that seek to remove conversations of racial equity and social justice from adoption discourses. She reveals within her autobiography that the catalyst of her adoption was part of a complex web of immigration leading to a lack of resources and support systems for her birth mother to feel equipped to manage the health needs that Chung was born with (*All* 27). As Chung wrestles with what it means to reclaim the Korean heritage that adoption separated her from, her counterstory urges audiences to view the structural issues that led to that separation in the first place. Seeing the role of racial injustice in child welfare structures in the United States is crucial to better understanding the stories of adoptees and working toward justice.

Connecting with Community: The significance of Chung's work for marginalized people

Cues from within the text indicate two kinds of potential audience members: those who could never fully understand Chung's experience, and those who have a shared connection. It is significant to understand the nuance of these groups in order to grasp how her rhetoric is designed to work. By reclaiming her narrative and presenting it as a counterstory, one way Chung's text works is to develop community. She does this through a strategy that AsianCrit calls strategic (anti)essentialism. This tenant pushes against essentialism by illuminating the diversity of Asian American backgrounds while reclaiming essentialism from racist discourses to identify how Asian Americans can work together in community to resist harmful structures (Museus 26). The intentional utilization of both sides of the essentialist coin is a key step in working toward reclaiming narratives, building counterstories, and seeking better outcomes. An example of this can be seen in the movement #StopAAPIHate, whose rallying call was to create a coalition of Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders from all backgrounds to protect and empower each other against the harmful racist ideologies and essentializing that led to an increase in anti-Chinese rhetoric and overall anti-Asian sentiment surrounding the genesis of the COVID-19 pandemic ("About"). Discourse about adoptee identities often includes essentializing language (Kim). Yet, adoptee experiences are varied and diverse, and cannot be surmised in broad, sweeping statements. Chung's text engages in anti-essentialism by centering herself, and all of the intricacies that come with her. However, for individuals who can relate to cultural discrimination and familial disconnection, Chung's account provides representation, camaraderie, and encouragement.

A Story Where She is the Hero

I lived through adventures pored over at the big wooden table behind the card catalog, through characters I considered friends... but as much as I loved these spunky literary heroines, they too

were all white, and I couldn't see how I would ever find my way into lives like theirs. (Chung, *All* 36)

Chung draws from the common ground of fairy tales to highlight the isolation brought by growing up as one of the few Asian people in her community and how she struggled to process the racism she was experiencing. Within storytelling, the main character of the narrative tends to be the most unique and interesting. Throughout their journey, the readers come to know their individual thoughts, see the choices they make, and are shown their fears, interests, trials, and dreams. In contrast to heroes, supporting characters commonly end up being depicted as one-dimensional and behave according to stereotypes and tropes. The fairy tales and stories in Chung's childhood held up whiteness as normal, desirable, and necessary to attain self-actualization—to be a hero, you had to be white. These whitewashed tales give a stark, powerful window into Chung's inner turmoil as a young girl and her relationship with race. She used to imagine being in her own tale where a fairy godmother would give her wishes. "I would ask for peaches-and-cream skin, eyes like deep blue pools, hair like spun gold instead of blackest ink...;" in the midst of racially motivated bullying at school she recalls believing that "if you were pretty, if you were normal, if you were *white*" then her peers would have been able to see the goodness in her (Chung, *All* 17). In addition to feeling isolated in her racial identity, she reflects on the fact that "in most published stories, adoptees still aren't adults, the ones with power or agency or desires that matter... We are wanted, found, or saved, but never grown, never entirely our own" (Chung, *All* 41). For young Chung, being adopted and Asian were things that needed magical intervention in order to escape being essentialized and become a nuanced person with agency.

Throughout her memoir, Chung tells of the various stories she wrote in different stages of her life. As a young child, she imagined stories that she was not a part of, unable to envision

someone like her as the heroine, always giving the role to a white character. As she grew older and caught glimpses of life outside of the predominantly white town she grew up in, her stories became a way for her to conceptualize Asian Americans and adoptees like herself claiming a life without outside forces imposing decisions upon them. In reclaiming her story, Chung resists those who would essentialize her into a trope. Now, in penning her memoir, Chung provides her story to those who may see themselves in her, inspiring them to locate themselves as the main character and forge ahead in a life of their own making.

Shared Identity

To this day, it's always a welcome relief to find myself in the company of other adopted people, because only we can understand what it means to grow up adopted... [to] build an identity from what has been lost and found. (Chung, *All* 205)

For Chung, adoption is not a clear-cut story, but a tangle of lives impacting each other in ways that are beautiful and devastating and everything in between. For those who can relate to her experiences, this book is Chung's permission for them to construct their own narrative, an invitation for them to put their authentic voice into the conversation, for their own sake and no one else's. She recalls a conversation with a friend who shared her experience of growing up adopted and giving birth to her own children, reflecting on the deep gratitude and awe at the ability to tell her children their birth stories; a feeling that Chung so deeply understood, yet something that many would take for granted (Chung, *All* 139). However, moments of shared identity developed throughout the book are not limited to those whose identity mirrors Chung's. She notes that she has found connection with those who could relate to estranged relationships with parents and the difficulties of attempting reunion (Chung, *All* 203). When Chung made contact with her birth mother, she was reminded that the rote story about the circumstances of her adoption that she had grown up with was a falsehood. Although she received the affirmation

of "I never wanted to give you away" that she had long hoped for, Chung felt that, for her mother, "I had been a complication in an existing tangle of misery; a problem to be solved" (Chung, *All* 144). By voicing the complexities and the sorrows that come from discrimination and separation from heritage, Chung reaches out to readers like herself, offering connection with hopes of mitigating feelings of isolation. When Chung develops shared identity in this way, she reclaims essentializing discourses and repurposes them to build a support system for those previously overlooked.

Constraining Others: The social significance of Chung's work

As previously mentioned, the other type of audience member implied in the work are those who cannot relate to Chung's story. These readers find themselves throughout the story in the strangers who asked her parents how much it cost to get her, in the hopeful couple who wanted Chung's affirmation that adoption would be a force of good for expanding their family; but also in her adoptive mother who wanted their family to be enough for Chung, and Chung's husband who had known what it was like to grow up with his siblings. One does not have to be a bigot to fit into this category, nor even a stranger. The only requirement is to be unable to relate to the loss of being separated from a core part of one's heritage. For these audience members, Chung's rhetoric serves to inform, but requires them to set aside their preconceived notions of adoption to be open to a story that may make them uncomfortable.

Another tenant of AsianCrit is the idea of "asianization," which pinpoints how Asian Americans are frequently viewed as a monolith and experience racist behavior centering around harmful stereotypes such as the model minority myth, perpetual foreigners, and "yellow perils" (Museus 23). The insidious nature of asianization is that such tropes can present themselves in ways that seem rational or harmless to those who perpetuate them. Sometimes, reification of damaging narratives comes from the mouths of well-intentioned people. Asianization is a

symptom of a broader issue—discourses that function to homogenize and separate groups from normalized majority narratives are rampant. Adoptees also experience stereotyping and have others impose expectations upon them based upon these preconceived notions. Within Chung's text, she identifies harmful messages that she received and that are common in adoption discourse. She troubles these mindsets, showing the ways that they are damaging to adoptees and function to negate adoptee experiences that diverge from the accepted script. In the past, when Chung would speak to people with these mindsets, she felt an obligation to say what they wanted to hear. Her memoir serves as a departure from that, taking the onus off her to fit their preferred narrative, placing it on them to listen. She designs her text to constrain her audience, no matter how well-intentioned, from speaking about adoption in simplistic terms with impunity, thereby empowering a more diverse conversation on a topic that has long needed it.

Meant to Be

They thought adoption was the best thing for you. *Above all, it was a legend formed and told and told again because my parents wanted me to believe that my birth family had loved me from the start; that my parents, in turn, were meant to adopt me; and that the story unfolded as it should have.* (Chung, *All* 5, emphasis in original)

Once as a young girl, Chung recalls asking her father if he had ever wondered how she came to be adopted by them, when she could have ended up in any number of different situations. "God planned it" was his reply (Chung, *All* 45). Chung frequently describes those around her as alluding to adoption using religious imagery. She recounts numerous references to God's plan or some form of divine intervention. Even from the start, her parents felt that "they were meant to be this little girl's parents" (Chung, *All* 25). Throughout the narrative Chung balks at the tendency to see adoption as a miracle, as it reduces the adoption story to something inevitable and good, rather than allowing space for complexity. "Today I can understand why the

idea of a providential adoption appealed to my parents," she admits, noting that the idea of the family formation as being predestined must have been a comforting concept when things were difficult, giving hope that the family bond they had forged would not break (Chung, *All* 47). But she challenges any deterministic mindset that champions the adoptive parents over the birth parents. Even when communicating with her sister Cindy for the first time, Cindy mentions that the adoption was likely "for the best," but even if it was possible to fully know that was true, Chung felt that the mindset is reductionistic and ultimately overlooks the complexities of the situation: "I've heard such sentiments echoed by adoptive parents over the years… if adopting a certain child is fated, ordained, it is easier to gloss over real loss and inequity, to justify the separation of a parent and a child" (Chung, *All* 46-47). Regardless of one's religious beliefs, notions of fate, or understanding of the situation, Chung implores her audience to avoid fatalistic terminology when speaking about adoption and challenges them to be considerate of all parties implied in the adoption triad.

The Grateful Adoptee

It was time to lay down the burden of being "the good adoptee," the grateful little girl who'd been lost and then found. (Chung, *All* 79)

Chung uses her memoir as a way to break free from apologizing for her existence and dismantle the legend of her birth that was based in conjecture and soothing platitudes. As a child, she clung tightly to the "heartwarming happy" adoption story because she knew that is the one people were expecting—even into her twenties, straying from the belief that adoption was an "unqualified good, a benefit to every adoptee," felt like she was betraying her family's love for her (Chung, *All* 20, 74). Within the text she wrestles with the dissonance of her adoption being a gain, while simultaneously a "deep loss" (Chung, *All* 210). One Goodreads user resonates with this, noting that she, like Chung, is also a transracial adoptee of South Korean heritage adopted

by a white Oregon family. She appreciated Chung's willingness to wrestle with the complexity of her personal story and writes: "I do hope that people read this to learn more, and try and understand the complications on all sides... I've heard a quote before- 'adoption is the only trauma that the victim is meant to be grateful for'" (Joi). To limit an adoptee to a narrative that only expresses gratitude and positive feelings is to cut them off from the full spectrum of emotions that are afforded to others. In an article, Chung compares this pressure to sanitize her feelings as an adoptee to the pressure placed on her and other people of color to mitigate feelings of anger, discontent, and sorrow in regard to structures of injustice: "We need to complicate the stories and notions around transracial adoption: what adoptees go through and how we are allowed to feel about our experiences, how race is relevant to our lives" (Chung, "Stories").

Love Sees No Color

What did the child's color matter, in the end, when they had so much love to give? It would be unseemly, ungrateful to focus on a thing like race in the face of such a gift. It wouldn't have mattered to us if you were black, white, or purple with polka dots, they would tell [me] over and over... Odd as that declaration would sound to me, every time, I would always believe them. (Chung, *All* 24)

Chung was aware from a young age the relevance race played in her life; from slurs hurled by bullies at school, to being regarded with suspicion by classmates who saw her as too different from them, to feeling disconnected from the way she felt and the way she looked. When she was ten, Chung recalls visiting an Asian supermarket during a trip to Seattle: "Never before had I been entirely surrounded by Asians" (Chung, *All* 37). She recounts that after that trip, she began to realize the losses she had incurred by growing up separated from her culture, but did not truly grapple with her color-evasive beliefs toward transracial adoption until her twenties (Chung, *All* 18, 40). This prominent mindset influenced her parents' strongly held belief that the

racial identities within their family were irrelevant in the face of their love: “To [my parents], I was not *their Korean child,* I was *their child*, their chosen gift from God” (Chung, *All* 35).

The color-evasive mindset may lead a parent to think that being adopted transracially lessens the significance of race in the child’s life, when in reality it may amplify the child's feelings of difference or otherness due to race (Samuels 82). Although Chung kept her insecurities about race to herself as a child, she now refuses to remain silent in the face of injustice for the sake of her daughters. She admits that she feels like she must be her white family’s “Asian ambassador,” there to remind them that people of color experience discrimination and that thoughtless comments are not harmless. “Every time I do this, I am breaching the sacred pact of our family, our once-shared belief that my race is irrelevant in the presence of their love” (Chung, *All* 208). Chung’s story challenges color-evasive mindsets and reveals the harm that can come from ignoring the role that racism often plays in the life of a transracially adopted child.

Conclusion

If families like mine were better understood, if more people knew that adoption was far more complicated than common media portrayals might suggest, maybe fewer adopted kids would have to answer the kinds of questions I had gotten, or feel pressured to uphold sunny narratives even they might not necessarily believe in. (Chung, *All* 61)

Chung’s willingness to assert her story within this genre provides further nuance to the conversation of race and adoption, particularly giving valuable insight into racism directed toward Asians and Asian Americans in the United States as well as beginning motherhood and developing sisterhood as an adult. Reviewer Georgina Quach comments, by “rewriting race into her own adoption story, Chung's decade-long journey expands our language for exploring the

disorderly margins of familial legacies" (24-25). Through her development of familial and racial persona, Chung provides layers of depth to the conversation surrounding transracial adoption, enriching the mindsets and vocabulary relied upon to shape the future of adoption in the United States. Her work also carries significance as it increases representation of transracial adoptees within literature. As transracial adoption has shaped, and continues to shape, the lives of a significant number of people living in the United States, increased representation in media is of great importance. Finally, her rhetorical choices constrain readers from voicing with impunity three specific harmful messages about transracial adoptees: Meant To Be; The Grateful Adoptee; Love Sees No Color. Through writing her autobiography, Chung reclaims her narrative and, as illuminated by tenants of Asian Critical Race Theory, asserts her experience as a counterstory against dominant narratives about Asian Americans and adoption. Chung writes, "Today, when I'm asked, I often say that I no longer consider adoption—individual adoptions, or adoption as a practice—in terms of right or wrong. I urge people to go into it with their eyes open, recognizing how complex it truly is" (Chung, *All* 19-20). Adoption will always be complicated, as it originates in trauma and separation. While there will never be a one-size-fits-all answer to heal all wounds, policies and public opinion should look to adopted individuals and let their stories inform how to truly keep the child's best interests at the forefront of concern.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Summary

Chapter one considered how transracial adoption within the United States is a complex topic rooted in historical systemic disparities that intersected in ways that made children of color particularly vulnerable for exploitation. Thus, the discussion of race within systems of foster care, adoption, and the formation of the adoptive family dynamic remains salient. The color-evasive ideology has been a common tactic to avoid these conversations, but research and experiential wisdom indicate that this approach is ineffective and ultimately harmful. While there has been a shift in adoptive parent attitudes toward connecting children to their birth culture, this still does not correct the larger issue of persisting structural inequities. Furthermore, larger public discourses still frame adoption in essentializing and ultimately harmful ways. A review of the literature showed that social scientific researchers have examined the communicative and social barriers faced by transracial adoptees. Moreover, rhetorical scholars have considered how autobiography has been used by historically and currently marginalized groups to establish intersecting identities and engage in advocacy. However, there is a lack of rhetorical research on autobiographical works written by transracial adoptees. This gap in the literature led to my first research question: how do transracial adoptees rhetorically construct identity through memoir authorship? Additionally, I argued that CRT has rhetorical applications and is useful for theorizing how experiential wisdom is a valuable and legitimate means of deconstructing systems and discourses that disempower social groups. Scholars utilizing CRT identified that people from historically and currently marginalized groups develop counterstories through sharing their experience to resist oppressive narratives. One avenue of asserting counterstory is through memoir. The conceptualization of memoirs as counterstories led to my second research question: how can memoirs shift the conversation about transracial adoption in the United

States? To answer my two research questions, I moved into an analysis of the rhetoric of Susan Devan Harness' *Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption* and Nicole Chung's *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir.*

Harness' positionality as an Indigenous transracial adoptee informed my choice of TribalCrit as the theoretical lens for considering the ways she uses her memoir to situate her identity and disrupt problematic attitudes surrounding adoption and indigeneity. A key function of storytelling is that it allows the rhetor to nuance understandings of personhood. Harness does this in her text by examining her identity first through the persona of burden-bearer, then burden-lifter. Harness' narrative reveals three burdens that were significant to her experiences: liminality, trauma, and belonging. As she takes her readers through her process of lifting the responsibility of these burdens from her own shoulders, she urges audiences to shift the locus of such burdens off of adoptees and on to those who, whether actively or through complacency, perpetuate structures of transracial adoption rooted in colonialism.

Chung's positionality as an Asian American transracial adoptee with a South Korean heritage informed my choice of AsianCrit as the theoretical lens for examining how she navigates the complex ways her identity unfolds as well as how she challenges dominant stereotypes of Asians and common platitudes used to constrain adoptees. Memoirs are a unique form of storytelling that provide a space for authors to reclaim their story. For Chung, this process of reclamation occurs in three parts. On a personal level, she develops racial and familial personas to construct a holistic understanding of self. She engages in (anti)essentialism to resist dominant stories about racial and familial norms and center individual stories of transracial adoptees, but also to show how the transracial adoptee community can band together in shared identity. Finally, she calls out three harmful dominant narratives ("Meant to Be," "The Grateful

Adoptee," and "Love Sees No Color"), challenging readers to see transracial adoption in all of its uncomfortable complexity and engage in personal and societal mindset change.

Implications

This study advances the research on memoir authorship by authors with intersecting marginalized identities by inhabiting the gap in the research on works by transracial adoptees. It also further develops the limited body of literature that utilizes CRT and its branching theories for rhetorical analysis, verifying the utility of CRT when approaching memoirs, specifically showing how the design of TribalCrit and AsianCrit lends to a critical analysis of counterstories. My analyses of Harness and Chung map key tenants from TribalCrit and AsianCrit, respectively, onto the texts, further confirming the experiential validity of the tenants for communities the theories were adapted to represent. Through examining these texts, I have shown that transracial adoptees may use memoirs to enact change concerning adoption narratives by constraining audience members from promulgating essentializing discourses about transracial adoptees with impunity. Findings also revealed that transracial adoptees rhetorically construct identity through memoir authorship by developing personas that explicate their nuanced but salient intersecting identities, thus reclaiming those identities from harmful dominant narratives that misrepresent those identities. Ultimately, my research confirms that memoirs may function as a tool for authors to develop counterstories that resist and constrain harmful dominant narratives and guide audiences toward more nuanced understandings of personhood, challenging them to discursively join in that resistance.

My research amplifies the call to improve structural and communicative practices surrounding transracial adoption (Anderson et al.; Boivin and Hassan; Kim; Loftus et al.; Malott and Schmidt; Nelson and Colaner; White et al.). A prime way of avoiding polished solutions or

facile answers is to listen to the lived experiences of people who were adopted transracially. As Kim Park Nelson asserts in her book *Invisible Asians:*

> Today, largely because adoptees, including scholars, activists, and artists, have inserted their critiques, life experiences, and perspectives into public debates about adoption, public views on transnational and transracial adoption have slowly shifted to allow much more nuanced understandings of the problems that cause adoptions, and of the complicated consequences of adoption for those in adoption triads. (190)

By centering the experiences of transracial adoptees, more of the map is uncovered by which to navigate the nuances of transracial adoption. Well-intentioned efforts in the realms of parenting, researching, and activism will always lack potency if they ignore the range of experiences—both easy to listen to, and difficult to hear—of those being implicated. bell hooks posits in *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* that "the future of diversity lies in creating greater awareness and greater critical consciousness about the importance of ending domination, of challenging and changing white supremacy" (28). This truth is potent in all domains of life, perhaps all the more so in the home.

As adoption practices in the United States continue, it is of utmost importance to center voices of transracial adoptees to inform the language and direction of these discussions. My research answers calls to better understand phenomenon of transracial adoption, the personal and societal impacts it enacts, and the unique way it connects to race relations within the United States (Blair and Liu; Docan-Morgan, "They Don't Know"; Myers; Park Nelson; Quiroz; Tan and Liu). My research also amplifies call-outs of the color-evasive ideology and addresses calls for critical considerations of racial justice (Annamma et al.; Bonilla-Silva; Orbe; Park Nelson; Quiroz; Tran and Paterson). I engage in this research with hopes that policies surrounding

matters at the intersection of race and adoption can become progressively ethical and informed by the experiences and advocacy of transracial adoptees. The voices of transracial adoptees should be increasingly centered, research findings must be applied to the benefit of the children—as well as any other marginalized parties in the situation—and it is on the shoulders of those in influential positions to dismantle harmful cultural ideologies that shape the way people communicate about fellow human beings.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A key limitation of the study is that it only focuses on the narratives of two transracial adoptees. I do not anticipate that an individual story can be fully representative of a group, but examining Harness' and Chung's rhetoric and how they intend their texts to function can help broaden understanding of adoptee perspectives and highlight the need for further engagement within this identity group. Furthermore, I examined texts to understand how these authors aim to shift public discourses, but the longitudinal impacts of memoirs or other forms of advocacy engagement on public opinion and discussion were not within the purview of this study. Another limitation lies in my own positionality as a white woman, raised with my biological family. As a researcher with this positionality, it is my hope to continually educate myself to better understand, respect, and elevate voices from the transracial adoptee community. This study is a personal attempt to take up Harness' challenge and shift the burden of dismantling colonization ideologies surrounding adoption onto myself and speak out against practices that commodify children instead of center their holistic well-being.

Future research should analyze a broader overview of adoptee memoirs as a sub-category, foregrounding additional identity factors such as gender, class, sexuality, and ability. Longitudinal studies can investigate if rhetorical purposes shift based on time of publication and collect audience response data, conducting a thorough analysis of reviews and opinions of

readers, to see if adoptee memoirs are enacting attitude change in those who promulgate problematic messaging about family and race against adoptees. Not all transracial adoptees have the desire to author memoirs, but that does not make their story any less potent or meaningful. There is a rich and increasing movement of adoptee visibility and advocacy through use of social media platforms, such as Twitter and TikTok. These short-form, quickly consumable modes of content are proving to be powerful means for adoptees to speak out about their own experiences and the injustices woven into the fabric of adoption policy in the United States. Further study on how these modes of communication give rise to a more representative sampling and richer set of experiences and dissemination of information to varied audiences, as well as creating space for adoptee community, would be beneficial and compelling.

Concluding Thoughts

The end of 2022 saw the *Brackeen v. Haaland* case, which challenges the constitutionality of the ICWA, ascend to the deliberations of the Supreme Court of the United States (Totenberg). In 2023, Nicole Chung will release her second memoir *A Living Remedy*, delving deeper into her ongoing life story. Additionally, “Critical Race Theory” (as a term, though not always clearly conceptualized) has entered the mainstream vernacular as debates on its role in U.S. education become heated (Walsh; Wong). The matters addressed within this study are far from resolved. Adoption will continue to impact peoples’ lives in complex ways; it is critical that the policies that shape adoption practices in the United States are informed by adoptee experiences. We must pay attention to the counterstories posed by adoptees and work to shift the ways adoption, especially adoption at the intersection of race, is discussed in the United States.

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