A Coming-of-Age Story: An Auto-Ethnographic Analysis of Becoming and Belonging as an International Adoptee in Southern California

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology

By

Vikram Kiran Johnson

May 2021
The thesis of Vikram Kiran Johnson is approved:

________________________________________           ______________________
Dr. Kimberly Kirner

________________________________________            ______________________
Dr. Suzanne Scheld

________________________________________
Dr. Christina von Mayrhauser, Chair

California State University, Northridge
Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my committee chair Dr. Christina von Mayrhauser, for her dedicated hours of guidance and support. Not only was your perspective of being an adoptive parent crucial, but your willingness to listen, discuss, and consult when needed helped shed new light on the matter. Many of the topics we discussed, I highlight below. To my other committee members, our department chair, Dr. Suzanne Scheld, and Dr. Kimberly Kirner, I appreciate your constructive criticism during the editing process. Your comments not only helped make this thesis stronger, but also helped me cement my voice.
Dedication

To the woman who raised me and gave me a loving home, and the opportunity for a better life: I love you with all my heart. Thank you for everything you have done and guiding me through the toughest of challenges. I am the person today because of your dedication and support. Love you, Mom.
Ethical Considerations About Using Auto-ethnography .................................................. 28

Methods and Procedures Used in Study ............................................................................. 31

Part 2: Data and Analysis ..................................................................................................... 36

Precursor: Vikram’s Years in the Orphanage (1995-1997) .................................................. 36

The Early Years (1997-2013) .............................................................................................. 37

“Homeward Bound” ............................................................................................................. 38

Narrative .............................................................................................................................. 38

Commentary ......................................................................................................................... 42

Summary ............................................................................................................................... 46

Getting in Touch With my Roots ........................................................................................ 48

Narrative .............................................................................................................................. 48

Commentary ......................................................................................................................... 51

Summary ............................................................................................................................... 54

The Identity Crisis Begins (Late 2016-2019) ...................................................................... 56

Age of Self-Policing ............................................................................................................. 57

Narrative .............................................................................................................................. 57

Commentary ......................................................................................................................... 62

Summary ............................................................................................................................... 65

Recovery (Late 2019-Present) .............................................................................................. 67

Country-boy Living .............................................................................................................. 68

Narrative .............................................................................................................................. 68
Commentary........................................................................................................................................72

Summary ...........................................................................................................................................73

Part 3: Concluding Thoughts ........................................................................................................... 75

Answers to the Central Research Questions-Key Takeaways......................................................... 75

Future Research .................................................................................................................................... 78

References ........................................................................................................................................... 81
List of Tables

Table 1: The United States Department of State, Adoptions by Year,
https://arcg.is/1LWKDK0(accessed February 23, 2021) .................................................. 9
List of Figures

Figure 1: Schematic ecological representation of Transracial Identity Model from Ung. et al. (2012), fig. 1 ................................. 18

Figure 2: The Cultural-Racial Identity Model from Baden and Steward (2007), fig. 7.3 .......... 19

Figure 3: Vikram’s Timeline Plot Points, Vikram Johnson (2021)................................................. 33

Figure 4: National flag of India and the United States merging ......................................................... 49
Abstract

A Coming-of-Age Story: An Auto-Ethnographic Analysis of Becoming and Belonging as an International Adoptee in Southern California

By

Vikram Kiran Johnson

Master of Arts in Anthropology

To understand the processes of belonging and identity as an international adoptee I ask:
1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? 2) As adoptees navigate their identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood?

Through an exploratory approach, I begin to consider these questions, focusing on the life reflections of Vikram Johnson (myself), one of the thousands of individuals who have experienced childhood international adoption. The circumstances of the pandemic of 2019-2021 precluded a broader study, but it provided me with an opportunity to take an approach known in anthropology as auto-ethnography. In this thesis I have tried to share personal vignettes and
examples from my experience of growing up adopted, and then see them through a theoretical set
of lenses drawn from cultural anthropology, my main field of study, as well as from
psychological studies of international adoptee identity (Kim 1981; Baden and Steward 2007;
Ung et al. 2012) and social identity (Jenkins 1996; Jenkins 2000; Stets and Burke 2000)

By engaging an autoethnographic vantage point with anthropological and psychological
theories, my intention is to use the theories to make sense of my story, and to use my story to
demonstrate the usefulness (and in some cases, the limits) of the theories. This process of
intersecting my own auto-ethnographic narrative with theoretical frameworks has produced
several initial insights that could form the basis for future research: 1) The relationship between
international adoption and identity is context-specific; 2) Participation within cultural affinity
groups might encourage self-agentic explorations of one’s birth culture; 3) Identity building for
adoptees is an additive process; and 4) Cultural anthropology’s traditional use of “fictive kin” to
describe any relationship of adoptees to their new adopted family is problematic because it
disregards the “realness” of family that an individual adoptee feels. I conclude my thesis by
suggesting how these takeaway insights could inform future research, particularly ethnographic
research that examines the varied experiences of adult international adoptees, an understudied
population.
Part 1: Introduction and Background to Study

Aim of Study and Central Research Questions

The broader aim of this thesis is to understand the relationships between international adoption, identity, and belonging. More specifically, this thesis strives to address the following two questions: (1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? (2) As adoptees navigate their identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood?

Through an exploratory approach, I begin to consider these questions, focusing on the life reflections of Vikram Johnson (myself), one of the thousands of individuals who have experienced childhood international adoption. The circumstances of the pandemic of 2019-2021 precluded a broader study, but it provided me with an opportunity to take an approach known in anthropology as auto-ethnography. In this thesis I have tried to share personal vignettes and examples from my experience of growing up adopted, and then see them through a theoretical set of lenses drawn from cultural anthropology, my main field of study, as well as from psychological studies of international adoptee identity (Kim 1981; Baden and Steward 2007; Ung et al. 2012) and social identity (Jenkins 1996; Jenkins 2000; Stets and Burke 2000)

By engaging an autoethnographic vantage point with anthropological and psychological theories, my intention is to use the theories to make sense of my story, and to use my story to demonstrate the usefulness (and in some cases, the limits) of the theories. This process of
intersecting my own auto-ethnographic narrative with theoretical frameworks has produced several initial insights that could form the basis for future research: 1) The relationship between international adoption and identity is context-specific; 2) Participation within cultural affinity groups might encourage self-agentic explorations of one’s birth culture; 3) Identity building for adoptees is an additive process; and 4) Cultural anthropology’s traditional use of “fictive kin” to describe any relationship of adoptees to their new adopted family is problematic because it disregards the “realness” of family that an individual adoptee feels. I conclude my thesis by suggesting how these takeaway insights could inform future research, particularly ethnographic research that examines the varied experiences of adult international adoptees, an understudied population.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Understanding identity formation processes has been of interest to anthropologists since the development of Erik Erikson’s identity formation theory (1950). Influenced by Erikson’s theoretical framework, well-known cultural anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1928) and Ruth Benedict ([1934]2005, [1946]2005) produced research which focused on socialization processes and identity. The themes of socialization (becoming a member of and belonging to a society) and identity (coming to know a self over time) are present in the thesis that follows and continues this long-standing tradition of inquiry within anthropology.

How does one grow to understand who one is? One’s identity development over the life course is affected by numerous factors and contexts. Being internationally adopted adds another layer that an individual international adoptee navigates. This added layer of an “adoption status” presents itself along the developmental trajectory of an individual adoptee in varying ways and
varying situations. By understanding how an international adoptee engages various social factors, anthropologists might be better informed on the reflexive personal experience of socialization identity formation processes and belonging from these vantage points that have been foundationally lacking in the anthropological literature on adoption and identity. This thesis provides the vehicle to contribute such a personal perspective to the discussions within anthropology.

Thesis Overview

This thesis is divided into three parts. Part 1 is “Introduction and Background to Study”; Part 2 is “Data and Analysis”; and Part 3 is “Concluding Thoughts.”

In Part 1, “Introduction and Background to Study”, I first focus on the study’s aim and central research questions, then discuss some conceptual, theoretical, and topical considerations as well as provide background information about international adoption. Here I reference relevant anthropological discussions on kinship, kinship terminology, and adoption (Modell 1994; Howell 2006; Howell 2009) and discuss theoretical models thought to be helpful for analyzing the international adoption experience (Baden and Steward 2007; Ung et al. 2012; Baden et al. 2012). These models will be useful in aiding and analyzing the personal narratives discussed later in the thesis. I then move on to discuss methodological considerations before identifying specific methodologies used within this thesis project.

In Part 2, “Data and Analysis,” I tell my story as an international adoptee, using a set of “anchor points” (Huber et al. 2017) that I have “dropped” metaphorically speaking, into various key moments of my retrospective narrative. These anchor points have specific time frames and I tell stories from these times.
For example, “The Early Years (1997-2013)” consists of “Homeward Bound” and “Getting in Touch with my Roots.” The first story, “Homeward Bound” describes my initial arrival to the United States and the socialization processes that shaped my kinship relations to my family. I then pair these stories with anthropological theories on adoption and kinship (Modell 1994; Howell 2006; Howell 2009; Yngvesson 2010) in order both to make sense of this first part of my story, and to critique anthropology’s traditional views on adoptive relations.

The second story within first anchored time frame, “Getting in Touch with my Roots”, describes how my participation in a cultural affinity group (the American-Born Confused Desi Club) in high school provided me with a mode by which cultural socialization can occur, as well as encouraged me as an international adoptee to explore my birth culture on my own volition. I pair this story with psychological theories on identity formation (Delale-O’Connor 2009; Baden et al. 2012; Pinderhughes et al. 2016) in order to reflect on how other similarly situated children can initiate such a process.

I “drop” the second anchor at a second period of my life that is bookended by 2016 and 2019. I label this anchored time frame as “The Identity Crisis Begins (2016-2019).” Here I concentrate on one main story from that time frame: “The Age of Self- Policing.” I pair this story with individual identity (Stets and Burke 2000) and social identity (Jenkins 1996; Jenkins 2000) theories, as well as with Foucault’s ([1975]2012) idea of a panopticon. In this section, I use these theories, as well as models of identity formation (Baden and Steward 2007, Ung et al. 2012), to try to make sense of this time period (my late teenage years) when I felt acutely that I no longer belonged to my community. The blend of theoretical perspectives I draw on in this section suggests explanations for how I may have “internalized” at that time what I perceived to be other
people’s negative views of myself as an outsider, and how I came to “police” myself so that I could pre-emptively make sure I did not stand out in contrast to my neighbors and peers.

My third anchor drops the reader into the most recent period of my life: 2019 to 2021. I label this anchored time frame “Recovery (2019-Present)”. To illustrate this time frame, I tell a story that I call “Country-boy Living”. “Country-boy Living” is a story in which I try to share a process that I went through where I actively chose to “reclaim” my identity which for me, ironically to some, was what I consider to be a “country-boy” persona. In this section I explain what a country-boy means to me, and how it relates to my adoptive mother’s rural Texas roots and dialect, as well as explain how I found a new confidence of sorts by “donning a character” (the “country-boy” persona) that I felt helped me to “code switch” enough to fit in (and then, unexpectedly, thrive.) I pair this section of my story with the self-determination theories of Deci and Ryan (2012).

Part 3, “Concluding Thoughts,” revisits the questions asked at the beginning of the thesis and identifies how my pairing of story with theory has answered these questions (or at least begun to address them). Here I also reflect on how my story serves as a useful vehicle for discussing international adoption, identity, and belonging, and conclude that integrating a personal narrative perspective into anthropological discussions on adoption, identity and belonging would improve anthropology’s theoretical grasp of these issues. I close by imagining future research that elicits lived experiences and memories of a wide range of adults internationally adopted as children, a group whose perspectives on adoption could inform anthropological theory and practice.
Conceptual/ Theoretical/ Topical Considerations

International Adoption Basics

The literature offers many ways to define “adoption.” The process of international adoption has several keywords associated with this -- international adoption, transracial adoption, and inter-country adoption concerning foreign-born children and adoption – although they may not mean the same thing to everyone and may be used at different times to denote different facets of the process.

Adopting, taking in a child who is not biologically related to oneself and raising it as one’s own, has been going on for millennia. Leinaweaver (2018) cites documented instances of this phenomenon occurring in Ancient Rome, and numerous instances likely occurred in other world regions and other time periods. While there are many reasons why adoption of unrelated children (Howell 2009) can arise, frequently cited reasons are needing an heir and needing care, longing to have a family, and a longing to be part of a family (Leinaweaver 2018). Today, the motivations to adopt are as diverse as the adoption experiences themselves.

At a minimum, three individuals (and often several more) form the core of adoption: the child, the birth mother, and the adoptive parent. Others (other members of the biological and adoptive families, institutional/government administrators, healthcare providers, social workers, etc.) are also present, but the core is formed by the child and the biological mother as well as the adoptive parent. Researchers often depict this three-part core relationship as an adoption “triad” or “triangle.”

Leinaweaver (2018) discusses the practice and concept of adoption. She begins by critiquing how anthropologists have studied adoption with kinship and kinning. Kinning is where
individuals are brought up into permanent relations described with kin idioms (Howell 2006:8). By highlighting others’ views and research regarding adoption, Leinaweaver (2018) provides a broader definition of adoption as “the purposeful taking on of a kinship role, responsibility, or duty vis-à-vis another person” (Leinaweaver 2018, 4). She utilizes this definition to explore possible motivations behind adoption, such as finding an heir and fostering.

Like other forms of child-rearing, international adoption has provided an avenue in which family building can occur. The international adoption process is a life-changing decision for parents and children. Self-help type books (Davenport 2006) and links found on adoption agency websites (such as “Bal Jagat World Inc.”) emphasize the complexity of this life-changing decision and attempt to help prospective parents envision what the process entails. For example, Davenport (2006) lists several stages or components to international adoption: deciding on an agency, home study, paperwork, a medical evaluation, meeting your child, then arrival to the adopted home (Davenport 2006). Other self-help or adoption agency guides may identify additional or different components; additionally, guidance and advice can vary depending on the era in which adoption is taking place, the locations of the child and prospective parents, and laws/regulations in both host and home countries.

International adoption sometimes involves creating blended or multi-ethnic families, in cases where the ethnicity or heritage, or “racial” category assigned to an adoptive parent, may differ from the ethnicity/heritage/”race” of the child being adopted. For example, according to Pinderhughes (2016, 167), 73 percent of parents adopting internationally from the United States would be categorized as “White” (a catch-all term commonly implying individuals of European descent). In contrast, many of the children they adopt might not be of the same heritage/ethnicity. Citing statistics provided by Lee (2003) and the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2009), Pinderhughes notes further that the most common international adoption scenario is for a child born in Asia to be adopted by a European-descended parent living in the United States or Europe (Ibid.). This process results in a blended family where an adopted child starts a life-long journey of growing up and coming to belong.

The *Adoptees for Justice* website notes that since international adoption first became a formalized, legal practice in the United States in 1948, over 500,000 individuals have been internationally adopted. Over time, the number of international adoptions has fluctuated because of globalization, in part because of the 1993 Hague Convention, and in part because of geopolitical relations between sending and receiving countries (Pfund1994; Silberman 1994; King 2019). It is the ratification of the Hague Convention parameters from both receiving and sending countries along with the geopolitical climate and nature that provides an increasingly clear set of ethical operating standards (Bartholet 1993;Pfund 1994). According to the United States Department of State-Bureau of Consular Affairs website, under the tab “Intercountry Adoption,” over the last twenty years, 278,745 individuals were adopted internationally. In 2019, a total of 2,971 adoptions occurred in the United States.
As Table 1 shows, inter-country adoptions between the United States and other countries have been on a downward trend.

Table 1: The United States Department of State, Adoptions by Year, https://arcg.is/1LWKDK0(acccessed February 23, 2021)

Though numbers do fluctuate, it appears from this data that the number of children born outside the United States who have been adopted by individuals residing within the United States has decreased over the past twenty years. How the decrease is affected by within-country policies is not clear. For example, within the United States, comprehensive legislation ensuring equality and justice for all individuals affected by international adoption is still ongoing; and in 2000, Congress passed legislation that international adoptees who were not yet 18 were guaranteed citizenship. It is unknown how many international adoptees living in the U.S. in 2000 were over
the age of eighteen and whether their citizenship status was affected by the legislation. Advocacy
groups such as “Adoptees for Justice” are working to clarify the situation and lobby for reforms
to the 2000 legislation through the potential creation of a new ‘Adoptee Citizenship Act’

Anthropology of Adoption and Kinship Studies

Judith Modell (1994), Signe Howell (2006, 2009), and Barbara Yngvesson (2010) research
adoption and kinship from an anthropological perspective, focusing on what all three
call the “kinning” of children from different countries (Howell 2006). The concept of kinning
stretches the idea of “kinship” -- a word used more frequently in anthropology to denote a
standing relationship or perceived relatedness between people -- into more of an active process.
Modell, Howell and Yngvesson all use the kinning concept to describe the active process by
which an existing family helps a child who was previously not “of their kin” transition into a
new status of “kin”, or family member. Kinning experiences vary, as ethnographic research
conducted by these three researchers demonstrates, but a commonality seems to be that in all
cases, a family involved in the process of “kinning” a non-kin and bringing them into the family
fold, so to speak, requires significant effort and time.

Anthropologists researching adoption appear to prefer the active term of “kinning” to the
more static term of “kinship” for a second reason: kinning helps serve as a counterweight to the
unfortunate term “fictive kin”, which earlier generations of anthropologists were trained to use in
cases where relatives were only “imagined” to be kin, but in fact only fictitiously so (Terrell and
Earlier kinship studies portrayed biologically related children of parents as having a real or actual
parent-child relationship, while relegating any non-biological children raised by parents to a kind of fake or fictitious status (Modell 1994). The concept “kinning” of adopted children implies the process by which relatedness becomes “real,” to both child and parent(s), and to family members, regardless of biological relatedness.

The common usage of the relatively new “kinning” concept does not preclude researchers from focusing on different aspects of the process, and on the many circumstances that can surround those families and children who are actively engaged in kinning. For example, Howell (2009) studies the kinning of international adoptees into European countries and the United States and focuses on how the laws and regulations (such as the Hague Convention adoption agreement) impact the kinning process as the children transfer into European and American homes from abroad. Terrell and Modell (1994), in contrast, study intra-family kinning processes rather than extra-familial factors and explore how perceptions of the “natural link” (Modell 1994, 158) now perceived to connect adoptive children to parents may not be as readily perceived by other relatives.

Adoption researchers have therefore produced new insights for anthropologists working on kinship-related topics, by offering the concept of “kinning” as an active process by which non genetically related children become real, permanent family members. Clearly there is more work to be done as future researchers study relationship-building processes within blended families. The subjective, internal experiences of kinning also need to be addressed more fully, as the next section will demonstrate.
Shaping of an Adoptive Identity

The previous description of adoption research provides a small window onto how kinning can occur in different ways (due to outside factors such as regulation), and how kinning can result in different degrees of acceptance within a family of the new kin bonds as real and permanent. It is important to note that kinning as a concept only takes us part of the way: it provides a mechanism for studying how relationships between individuals are created. What about the internal, subjective experience of kinning? As much as it is important to look at external factors shaping the kinning process, and intrafamilial variation in normalizing the newly-kinned relationships, attention must also be paid to how children navigate their own internal, subjective experience of being “kinned.” The kinning process does not happen overnight, whether in terms of the social bonds, or in terms of the internal process of coming to perceive oneself as now having a new identity (not to mention a new family, society, etc.) The following paragraphs will provide another (rather cursory) look at how the fields of anthropology and psychology respectively have approached the ideas of “self” and “identity” in cases involving adoption.

Socio-Cultural Anthropological Understanding of Identity and Self

Anthropology has had a long-standing tradition of researching identity and over the years, the conceptualization of identity has changed. For example, early anthropologists such as Mead, Benedict, Sapir and other students of Boas studied the mutually shaping relationship of culture and personality. For this set of scholars, “identity” was not unique to an individual within a society, but rather shared collectively, to the extent that one person’s experience would be similar to the group’s experience (van Meijl 2008). A few contemporary anthropologists such as
Martin Sökofeld (1999) and Zagorka Golubović (2010) carry forward a modified version of the collective aspects of identity popularized by the earlier culture and personality theorists. Golubović (2010, 28), for example, asserts that identity is a “socio-culturally impregnated expression of both individual/ personal and collective ways of existence that is always a matter of choice”. The relatively new concept of socio-culturally-mediated choice characterizes these later approaches and ties in well to other contemporary ideas of agency and praxis.

Anthropologist Richard Jenkins offers yet another model for how we might account for both internal experiences and external experiences associated with identity-building: we need to account how we identify ourselves (self-image), how others identify us (public image), and what the nature of the interplay is between these. For Jenkins, the interplay that occurs produces two modes of identity: “self/group identification,” which is internally oriented, and “categorization,” which is externally oriented (Jenkins 1996, 2000). Another anthropologist, Heewon Chang (2008), builds on Jenkins’ ideas as well as previous identity models. For Chang, identity gets created through symbiotic interaction that occurs between “culture” and “self”. Culture is outside and objective of the self, but culture also residing inside every individual and is therefore subjective and exists “inside people’s minds, verses outside” (2008, 21-23).

While the foregoing examples of anthropologists concepts of self, identity, and culture do not specifically deal with adoption, they hold potential significance for studying international adoption kinning processes, particularly because an international adoption process requires a multi-faceted model that can attend both to the experience being “kinned” while also growing into one’s identity in a new cultural and social landscape. I will return to these concepts later in the thesis and use them to inquire into how adoption impacts my sense of self and my sense of who I am in relation to others as I encounter new social and cultural worlds.
Psychological Theories of Identity Among Adoptees

Vygotsky’s (1978) conceptualization of child development and the impacts of proximal and distal zones of development, as well as Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) and Palacio’s (2009) depictions of child development existing within mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems, are three theoretical models that can be useful in the analysis of children’s (including adopted children’s) lived experiences.

Stets and Burke (2000) provide complementary ideas to those of Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, and Palacios, focusing on social identity and individual identity theory. According to Stets and Burke (2000), social identity theory proposes that social identity is “a person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a certain social category or group” (Stets and Burke 2000, 225). This kind of social identity further materializes through self-categorization and social comparisons (Stets and Burke 2000). Social identity theory focuses on what role one occupies and the expectations that one activates through the said role (Burke and Tully 1977; Thoits 1986; Stets and Burke 2000). Stets and Burke’s (2000) ideas will be used later in this thesis when I discuss social and role identities in “The Age of Self-Policing” and “Country-boy-Living” stories.

Deci and Ryan (2012) provide an understanding of three basic psychological needs as part of what they call a theory of self-determination. These three basic needs are universal to all individuals and include: 1) a sense of autonomy, 2) relatedness and 3) competence. As with the theories of Stets and Burke (2012), I will return to Deci and Ryan’s theory of self-determination when discussing themes of well-being and psychological needs with my “Country-boy Living” story. Well-being and satisfaction of these basic psychological needs are discussed further in
“Country-boy Living” within the graduate school context and family contexts as factors that catalyzed me to reclaim my sense of self and belonging.

Another theory that I will use later to make sense of my autobiographical narrative is the idea of a “panopticon” developed by Michel Foucault ([1975]2012) based on earlier ideas of philosopher Jeremy Bentham. In working with the panopticon idea, Foucault identified a process by which people can come to police themselves after first enduring scrutiny by others. This theory will be applied later in the analysis to make sense of my experience of self-policing that I did after first experiencing being scrutinized as an outsider due to my international adoption status.

A more recent theorist, psychologist Jennifer Eberhardt (2020), offers a complementary theory to Foucault’s panopticon. While Foucault focused more on the self-internalization process, Eberhardt’s work centers on the concept of implicit bias and illuminate how one’s understanding of “race” influences how one experiences the world, as well as how stereotypes shape one’s views of others. As with Foucault, I will circle back to the work of Eberhardt later in the thesis, as I make sense of my own life experiences of often being categorized differently in terms of “race” than many others around me.

A useful partner for Foucault and Eberhardt’s theories is offered by Edward Said (1978), who identified and critiqued a stance he called “orientalism”. Though the origin of the term lies in the ways in which Western Europeans viewed neighboring regions to their east (geographically the “orient” compared to their “occident”), Said added a new meaning to the term. “Orientalism” for him meant a kind of a stance or approach in which people of the “western” world viewed people of the “eastern” world as mysterious, exotic, and completely unlike themselves. Said tied this stance to colonialism and how members of colonizing Western
societies simultaneously desired to know these unknowable, mysterious people and sought to control them. Said’s orientalism idea also will figure later in my thesis as I discuss parts of my story that involve an inescapable feeling that I was seen as just that, perhaps because I am originally from India: a mysterious “other.”

Seen together, the concept of the panopticon and orientalism will be discussed further in “The Age of Self-Policing”. A way in which a panoptic structure is informed is through implicit biases as discussed by Eberhardt and views on the “Oriental” by Said. These ideas and concepts are important to understand and analyze my experience because they first illustrate that internalization, but then inform and explain my behaviors and actions afterward in relation to “othering.” In my case, in high school, I may have just been perceived as being a “foreign exchange student” living with a host (who was my adoptive mother), but Said’s theories as well as those of Eberhardt and Foucault, do hold resonance for me.

Contextualizing Identity and Intersectionality in Adoptees’ Lives
There are other theoretical concepts that also are helpful to bring together with those that I have reviewed previously (of Foucault, Eberhardt, and Said, as well as the adoption/kinship theorists in anthropology, social identity theorists such as Jenkins) to form a kind of compound lens that can also have specific resonance for Asian-heritage individuals such as myself who have been adopted into White European-American heritage families.

For example, The Asian American Identity Model developed by Jean Kim (1981) is an example of a theory can could add exactly that kind of theoretical specificity. Kim’s model includes five elements: ethnic awareness, white identification, awakening to social and political consciousness, redirection to an Asian American consciousness, and incorporation (Kim 1981).
Ethnic awareness is the knowledge and awareness of one’s ethnic origin through ethnic socialization type activities. White identification has to do with an internalization of values, beliefs and customs of European Americans, to the extent that one comes to see oneself as a European American would (in theory) view an Asian American. The element of the model that is referred to as “awakening to social and political consciousness” involves Asian Americans coming to see themselves as “a minority in their society” (Kim 1981), but that, through political action, are able to “shed previously held values and reassess the merits of White values and standards” (Kim 1981). It is through this political consciousness that encourages the individual to acquire a more positive self-conceptualization of Asian American identity and “relate to lots of different groups of people, without losing their own identity as Asian American” (Kim 1981). This model is useful for understanding my adoption experience. Kim’s model will reappear later in my thesis when I reflect on the stages I have gone through, from being adopted internationally as a child through to my adult self.

Other models have attempted to illustrate the diverse and varied international adoption experience (Lee 2003; Baden and Steward 2007; Mohanty and Newhill 2008; Von Korff and Grotevant 2011; Ung et a. 2012). These models illustrate that when shaping an adoptive identity with the goal of understanding who one is and where one belongs, they take into account situational and environmental factors.

Lee (2003) provides a counseling psychological perspective on the impacts of adoptees and their families’ socialization. He provides a brief overview of transracial adoption’s historical occurrences before researching the article’s central issue. He then discusses transracial adoption research within three categories: outcome studies, racial/ethnic identity studies, and cultural socialization outcome studies. In each section, he highlights studies and empirical data
surrounding these topics. In his opinion, cultural socialization studies incorporate the last two categories discussed. It incorporates the building of the racial/ethnic identity and the overall outcome of the adoptees and their families’ psychological well-being. These interactions between adoptee and parents facilitate in some cases what he terms the Transracial Adoption Paradox.

Ung et al. (2012), utilizing Harris O’Connor’s (1999) designation of five key factors (see Figure 1) that an international adoptee must consider, situate these within an ecological framework. They showcase how the social, political, and cultural environment makes the transitions and additions of these factors challenging in creating a racial identity.
Linked to these frameworks and understanding is the idea of intersectionality. Postmodernism and feminist scholars have used intersectionality to help understand individuals’ phenomenological experiences influenced by gender, race, and sexual orientation. Amanda Baden and colleagues (2007, 2012) provide frameworks in an added layer in which international adoptees contemplate understanding themselves and their identities. Baden et al. (2012) discuss in their view a new term, reculturation. According to Baden et al., reculturation is how transracially and internationally adopted children reclaim their birth culture (2012). Baden and Steward (2007) theorize a new model (see Figure 2) by which one can understand the international adoption experience.

![Figure 2: The Cultural-Racial Identity Model from Baden and Steward (2007), fig. 7.3](image-url)
Pinderhughes et al. (2016) discuss the social influences and integrations that internationally transracial adoptees must negotiate to have a positive self-identity. Using ecological systems theory, Palacios (2009) and Bronfenbrenner (2005), these contextual frameworks allow us to see the complex nature of “growing up adopted.” These contextual frameworks occur on the microsystem, mesosystem exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem includes but is not limited to areas around the comprehension of adoption, parent(s) race, and communication between parent and adoptee (Pinderhughes et al. 2016: 160). The macrosystem is situating international adoption within the broader picture of society—focusing on the history of adoption, adoption policies, and its influences on the process. Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Palacios (2009) provide the localized contexts—the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem in particular—that provide a framework to illustrate and analyze in my story these interactions within the community I lived. For me, the mesosystem will be represented through the family context (“Homeward Bound”), and the school context (“Getting in Touch with my Roots,” and “Country-boy Living) focuses on the exosystem and macrosystem between interactions with the mesosystem are illustrated and analyzed in “The Age of Self-Policing” and “Country-boy Living”.

All the models discussed thus far Lee 2003, Ung et al. 2012, Baden and Steward 2007, Pinderhughes et al. 2016 have similar influencing factors. They all agree that alongside the individual adoptee, there is some exterior influence that impacts an individual’s identity, whether that be the parent in Baden and Steward’s model (2007) or the combination of individual, family, community, and society as theorized within the Ung et al. model (2012).

The model proposed by Ung and colleagues (2012) is helpful for understanding the interrelationships between these factors and illuminates with clarity how a shift in one category,
say for example, at the societal level, could dictate changes in the remaining four categories. Ung’s model would fit within Pinderhughes et al.’s (2016) utilization of Palacios (2009) of the mesosystem—the individual, family, and community—and the macrosystem—the society. The mesosystem of Pinderhughes et al. (2016) informs how one identifies based on parental and communal socialization within the Baden and Steward (2007) model.

Through these socialization practices, the Transracial Adoption Paradox causes inadequacy and a search for a sense of self. Since individuals, whom white parents adopt, grow up as “honorary white” when in reality society sees only their ethnic identity minority status, Lee (2003) argues that understanding this paradox is important for psychologists and counselors alike because, in doing so, they can provide better resources, services, and views on how to cope with it. One such buffer to issues in identity could be participation in a culturally specific affinity group focused on an international adoptee’s birth culture.

Delale-O’Connor (2009) discusses the role in which adoptee culture camps teach and inform adoptees about their birth cultures. Focusing on two culture camps, Hands Around the Globe and IKids, two groups located in the Midwestern United States, in her findings, she found that while these two camps were structurally different in their organization, the outcomes of participation within these camps by adoptees were similar. The results were that parents and children saw this as compartmental knowledge that was only necessary during their camp participation.

The discipline-specific and theoretical models on adoptee belonging and identity discussed in the preceding section provide analytical tools and mechanisms to understand the processes of belonging and identity as an international adoptee from a person-centered vantage point. These discussions provide critical knowledge to help answer both central research
questions: 1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? 2) As adoptees navigate their identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood?

These models will re-appear later in my thesis when I strive to analyze stories I have shared with readers about my growing up adopted. I believe that by applying these models and adopting a compound theoretical lens, I will be able to illustrate the interconnectivity of the factors that the different models focus on. Within these adoptive identity models, the added layer of participating in a cultural camp (Delale-O’Connor 2009), or cultural affinity group, will be discussed later in the thesis, specifically in the “Getting in Touch with my Roots” story. In my pairing up of the adoptive identity models with that story, I hope to illustrate how international adoptees (using myself as a case study) can further explore their own birth cultures, creating a scaffold for the potential for deeper connections to be created. These connections could promote an international adoptee to begin the process of creating a bicultural identity.

Where these models will truly be showcased is during “The Age of Self-Policing” narrative analysis. Within this narrative, a trickle-down approach to behavior and belonging was influenced by the time’s political and societal norms and perceived to be a barrier by myself. Of these models discussed, Ung et al. (2012) and Baden and Steward (2007) are better situated and framed to understand this multi-layered additive and accumulative process adoptees may face in times of identity crisis. Helpful to Ung et al. (2012) model is knowing what other factors could be impacted within each.
Methodological Considerations

Previous investigations utilized various types of data, methods, and analysis to explore the relationship between international adoption, belonging, and identity. These include but are not limited to surveys, questionnaires, discourse analysis, and interviews. I begin this section by highlighting how other researchers have utilized these methods to research this topic from published articles and other thesis and dissertations. Then, highlighting autobiographical works categorized as auto-ethnographic provides the basis to go into what auto-ethnography is (with a focus on its benefits and limitations) and the ethical considerations an auto-ethnographer has to consider when choosing this methodology.

The impacts and effects that international adoption bring to belonging and identity have been of concern to countless researchers. Previous studies discuss the importance of ethnic socialization (Mohanty et al. 2006, Mohanty 2013) or the psychological trauma brought on by abandonment, isolation, and alienation (Sorosky et al. 1975).

Though many factors shape an adoptee’s sense of identity and belonging, one area of interest for researchers is the influence that ethnic socialization has on any resulting identity issues. Ethnic socialization may provide tools for managing a dual identity and having a strong ethnic identity may help alleviate the pressures that adoptees may experience when navigating more than one identity (Mohanty et al. 2006, Mohanty 2013). Mohanty (2006) surveyed eighty-two international adoptees to understand parental socialization’s role on adoptees’ self-esteem. In a follow-up study from 2013, Mohanty (2013) surveyed 100 international adoptees concerning family socialization and its impacts on self-esteem and identity. Both studies indicate that encouraging international adoptees to explore their birth culture through family cultural
socialization allows adoptees to feel less marginalized and have higher self-esteem (Lee et al. 2006).

Inquiries by other graduates and Ph.D. candidates (four are referenced here) have focused on adoptees and identity, and it is instructive to consider the methodologies used: Heath (2012) used a combination of survey instruments, questionnaires, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with sixteen participants to understand the relationship between identity and adoption. Williamson (2017) interviewed four international adoptees to explore how adoptees identify in college. Rachor (2017) analyzed online comments made within two Facebook groups of Korean American Adoptees. Knight (2012) interviewed twelve Korean adoptees (2012). This present thesis will add to this small but growing collection by offering a different perspective made possible through auto-ethnography.

Personal narratives through autobiographies by international adoptees who have focused on their lived experiences are also available (Kim 2000; Wall 2008; Malhorta 2013; Goode 2020; Frette 2020). Malhorta (2013), for example, provides a glimpse into her life journey of reconciling her adoption. Highlighting critical moments in time along the journey, she allows us to understand her realizations from her perspective and those around her. Using such data as multiple site visits, journal entries, and interviews with interlocutors, she reflects on what she has learned throughout her journey of understanding her adoption experience. Her experience highlights that even international and domestic adoption within the same country by parents of one’s ethnic group requires navigating identity and belonging issues. Other examples also exist in this sub-genre of literature: Frette (2020) describes her experience as an Asian adoptee, while Wall (2008) provides a parent’s view on the adoption experience. Goode (2020) provides an analysis of the adoption experience using a mix of storytelling and analysis. I will return to
Goode’s work shortly when I explain how my attempts at telling my story are intermixed with analysis. These autobiographical narratives highlighted provide a scaffold into conducting an auto-ethnographic inquiry.

**Auto-ethnography as a Qualitative Method of Inquiry**

Auto-ethnography is an approach that allows the researcher/informant to analyze their personal experiences to inform and illuminate cultural experiences, and have the resulting production of a story, or narrative, simultaneously be a process and a product (Ellis et al. 2011). Being both a process and a narrative product has led scholars to debate the efficacy and usefulness of auto-ethnography (Delamont 2007; Weir and Clarke 2018). After first giving a brief historical background of the use of auto-ethnography in anthropology, I will return to this debate.

Auto-ethnography was first introduced by anthropologist Karl Heider (1975), where he directly reported research participants’ views without editorial comments to let the research participants comment on their own lives and self-understandings directly. Anthropologist David Hayano (1979) operationalized the auto-ethnography term and methodology, providing a model for subsequent anthropological studies to use. Hayano, a member of a poker-playing community, drew on his insider perspectives and those of his fellow poker players to convey the ethnographic narrative. He then reflects on the efficacy of using auto-ethnography as both a means and an end (i.e., a process and a product.) For Hayano, auto-ethnography is analogous to what current anthropologists might call “insider-ethnography,” in which anthropologists include themselves as social agents. Other anthropologists have since utilized this idea of including oneself as a social agent in an ethnographic narrative, and this present thesis also uses this strategy.
The work of Stanley Brandes (1979) further operationalizes the concept. Brandes defines ethnographic autobiography as “first-person narratives which claim to be told in the actual words of some real personage, who has purposefully related the story of his or her life” (Brandes 1979: 2). Brandes illustrates and comments on the process and product of conducting an ethnographic autobiography, highlighting how one’s research questions and data collection and analysis process are shaped by whom one chooses as informant and interviewee.

Utilizing autoethnography allows the researcher and reader to become what anthropologist Ruth Behar calls a “vulnerable observer” (Behar 1996, 14). From Behar’s vantage point, emotive and personal narrative writings within ethnographic accounts, the vulnerable observer emerges when “the self who is also spectator takes us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to” (Behar 1996, 14). Readers can then imagine themselves as this person, and in doing so, glean new insights. The creative process is then heightened. Chang (2008, 33-34) echoes Behar’s point about the vulnerable observer: self-narrative writing allows “readers to compare and contrast themselves with others in the cultural texts they read and study” (Chang 2008, 33-34). Anthropologist Robert Murphy’s auto-ethnography *The Body Silent* (1990) exemplifies what Behar and Chang are referring to. In this text, Murphy provides a personal account of how his journey towards quadriplegia impacts how he is treated and seen in the world around him. Murphy shares intimate details about his time on the neurology floor of his hospital, and in so doing, paints a vivid picture of how an individual with a grave condition such as paraplegia can come to be categorized and socially stigmatized as disabled.

With auto-ethnography being a relatively recent methodological approach, debates over its function and efficacy (Delamont 2007; Weir and Clarke 2018) have occurred. Debates, in part, have to do with how auto-ethnography has been conceptualized and whether it is used to
illuminate the thought processes of one’s research participants or to try to acknowledge their lived experiences better. Anthropologists (Heider 1975, Hayano 1979, Murphy 1990, Wolcott 2004, and others), sociologists, and communications researchers (Ellis et al. 2011, Holman et al. 2013) have all used this method in slightly different ways. Auto-ethnography approaches also vary in terms of how the “self” is emphasized (Chang 2008, 48) as well as relative emphasis on what Ellis and Bochner (2000, 740) identify as “research process (graphy) … culture (ethno) and … self (auto)”.

Chang (2008) also notes that there are both advantages and disadvantages in using auto-ethnography as a method. On the one hand, auto-ethnography is advantageous in that it “offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers … enhances cultural understanding between self and others … [and] has the potential to transform self and others toward cross-cultural coalition building” (Ibid.) On the other hand, auto-ethnography can be disadvantageous, if in telling their personal stories, auto-ethnographers only view the exercise as a personal journaling experience, rather than attempting to make connections between personal experience and broader cultural or social contexts. This focus on personal journaling could result in “elaborate narratives with underdeveloped cultural analysis” (Chang 2008, 55). Chang also notes the danger of relying too heavily on personal memory. In Chang’s view, personal narrative data must be triangulated with multiple other sources of data to ensure its validity to counterbalance personal memory. An additional drawback noted by Chang is the potential for a researcher failing to identify the type of auto-ethnography used adequately. Finally, Chang notes the one final possible disadvantage to using auto-ethnography: the possibility that specific ethical issues will not be adequately considered. The following section will take up this matter of ethics.
Ethical Considerations About Using Auto-ethnography

As auto-ethnographic data narratives have become more prevalent in the anthropological literature, increased ethical considerations, especially ones that pertain to the researcher’s positionality, have become more apparent. How can one be both an informant and a researcher? What ethical concerns could arise unknowingly? Ethical concerns around confirmation bias and biases in studying one’s own culture have also been raised (Hayano 1979, Delamont 2007). As with any research endeavor, understanding the ethical issues in specific methodologies is crucial, in large part because all research subjects (including those studying themselves) require adequate protection from potential “harms” of research.

Sociologist Sara Delamont (2007) critiques the use of auto-ethnography as data. From Delmont’s point of view, auto-ethnography might cause one to lose objectivity because the first-hand familiarity with a topic could potentially make one less able to get enough distance on a topic to analyze it objectively. An auto-ethnography cannot be analyzed sufficiently because it fundamentally reports on an individual’s subjective experience. Delamont even questions the ethics of publishing auto-ethnographic narratives since they routinely reveal information about others who may not have permitted to be featured in the story. Chang (2013) echoes Delamont’s last point, asserting that an auto-ethnographic narrative privileges only one perspective.

Weir and Clarke (2018) counter the ideas of Delamont to some extent in stating that autoethnography can provide insights if it is analyzed rigorously with clearly defined theoretical lenses. Even so, Weir and Clarke do see potential analytical pitfalls: if one makes something familiar into something unfamiliar through the application of theory, will the original insight be drowned out by the theoretical constructs that get superimposed on the narrative? This process of making familiar, taken-for-granted assumptions “strange” is not necessarily a problem, as
anthropologist Harry Wolcott (2004) noted. Anthropologists often rely on the shift in thinking that can occur when one takes a fresh look at taken-for-granted everyday assumptions. Furthermore, as Chang states, “[auto-ethnography can be] an excellent vehicle through which researchers come to understand themselves and others” (2008, 52). Applying theoretical lenses can help catalyze comprehension.

Within auto-ethnography, one of the primary ethical considerations one must contend with is “relational ethics”. Relational ethics (Slattery and Rapp 2003, Ellis 2007) has to do with a researcher’s positionality to the topics studied and the researcher’s community. The relational ethics tying an auto-ethnographer to other stakeholders need to be considered. Even in auto-ethnography, the stories one share reveals information about the researcher/individual and the other social agents, and the other social actors, involved. Chang (2008), whose work is mentioned above, notes with specific reference to relational ethics that an auto-ethnographer cannot claim sole ownership of a story because it implicates others relative to that person. In that regard, auto-ethnographers must consider confidentiality and protections to the subjects featured in their narratives. Linked to this idea of relational ethics, the researcher needs to be reflexive.

Reflexivity is an anthropological method of inquiry that involves the researchers reflecting meta-cognitively on how they engage with research. That meta-cognitive exercise provides insights into how their power and positionality might shape their data analysis and interpretations. There are benefits and pitfalls to using reflexivity within anthropological research. Reflexivity is essential because as Rosaldo (1989) states, “… ‘position’… structural and experiential, determines what we can know, and a step to greater knowledge must come, not from reflexivity, but from a shift in position, [which is in effect] a ‘reposition’”. Pinderhughes et al. (2016, 155) reinforce the importance of reflexivity when they state:
Many of us have intersecting identities that incorporate different status levels. For example, the three authors share the benefits associated with being well educated and also share the less privileged status of being female... As we incorporate these intersecting identities with different statuses, we must manage not only how we view these identities but also our interactions with others who may view our identities differently.

In the case of auto-ethnography, a researcher takes a “reflexive” approach in which the researcher describes and then strives to make sense of the researcher’s own lived experience against the backdrop of the researcher’s own life and situates this narrative in socio-cultural context.

The preceding section above has described methodological and ethical considerations tied to the use of auto-ethnography. These considerations informed my choices regarding how to proceed in my auto-ethnographic study, as the next section will illustrate.
Methods and Procedures Used in Study

I’ll start first by describing the initial research proposal and how I came to adopt auto-ethnography as a viable alternative to conducting qualitative research during the pandemic. I subsequently discuss the procedural operations of collecting and presenting the data and analysis.

The initial research protocol submitted and approved by the CSUN’S Institutional Review Board called for a survey study of adult adoptees and a nested subsample to be selected from these survey respondents for in-depth semi-structured interviews be conducted via Zoom. Based on this approval, I worked with Bal Jagat Children’s World (the same person who facilitated my adoption process more than two decades ago) located in Southern California to advertise my study on Bal Jagat’s website and social media accounts. Despite our repeated attempts to engage fellow adult adoptees who had been adopted through Bal Jagat, no one responded to my advertisements over three months. By this point in time, California and most of the United States were under stay-at-home orders due to the pandemic, and I concluded that another approach to data collection would be needed in this “new normal” of the pandemic.

After carefully considering a range of approaches to collecting data for my thesis project during the pandemic, I identified the “auto-ethnographic” approach as a viable alternative. As discussed in the previous section, an auto-ethnographic approach used in anthropology is analogous to an autobiographical approach. Taking an auto-ethnographic approach involves intentionally making oneself the subject of an ethnographic inquiry, with ethnography being the phrase commonly used in cultural anthropology to mean the writing down or description of the culture(s) and social lives of living people (Hayano 1979; Murphy 1990; Wolcott 2004; St-Denis and Walsh 2016; Goode 2020; Frette 2020,). I resolved that, at least in this exploratory stage of what could eventually become a broader study of adult international adoptees, I could commit to
doing an auto-ethnography in such a way that mitigated against the concerns about the method raised in the previous section (such as concerns about privacy for individuals mentioned collaterally in an auto-ethnographic narrative), while also heeding important insights from previous researchers (such as the idea that an auto-ethnography should be analyzed rigorously so that is more than a personal journal.) Auto-ethnography also fits the reality of the pandemic.

Once I committed to change to an auto-ethnographic approach (while also hoping that the work done for the IRB approval would apply to a future study), I reviewed the auto-ethnography literature and decided how I would proceed. After considering a range of options, I decided to modify the approach taken by Goode (2020), who presented auto-ethnographic experiences of adoption, first providing vignettes/experiences and then following up each vignette with analysis. I modified Goode’s approach slightly by infusing an idea taken from the work of St-Denis and Walsh (2016), who categorizes significant milestones in an auto-ethnography under a single heading that captured the central theme of that moment in time discussed. The narrative I share later in this thesis shows a combination of these approaches and shares short vignettes/experiences, followed by analysis. Within each vignette, I describe what my life was like at a particular moment in time, and I share (as a vulnerable observer, following Behar) how I felt as an individual growing up (and growing up internationally adopted.)

I began my auto-ethnography data collection by first “brain dumping” key moments in my life on paper to visualize my story’s trajectory and then, from there, construct a kind of a timeline. There was no initial connection or “storyline,” yet as I documented within these points what my life was like growing up as an international adoptee, I became more cognizant that recalling stories of these life events helped me “anchor” myself to moments and time. Huber et al. (2019) refer to situating oneself on a timeline as a kind of “anchor point” dropping (Huber et
al. 2019). Using their anchor point concept as guidance, I also added a time frame by which these events occurred. This exercise then helped me recall my age and where I was emotionally and mentally, similar to the seniors studied by Huber and colleagues. The anchor points then functioned like bookends holding up books on a shelf.

Figure 3 shows a rudimentary timeline, with associated time frames, that I developed during this auto-ethnographic inquiry process.

![Figure 3: Vikram's Timeline Plot Points, Vikram Johnson (2021)](image)

I subsequently used Figure 3 as the basic structure or scaffold for “self-eliciting” narratives about each moment in time. The same anchor points (Huber et al. 2019) seen on this figure characterize the narrative titles found later in the thesis, where I combine the models of Goode (2020) and St-Denis and Walsh (2016) to integrate story and analysis.

In analyzing the auto-ethnography portion, I used a quasi-coding apparatus. As I read my story, I had different color pens—black, blue, green, and grey(pencil)—to associate with different theories/concepts. The color black was associated with kinship, blue was associated
with the Asian-American identity model, green was associated with social identity, grey was associated with the panopticon concept, and so forth. This color-coding method allowed me to distance myself from the data and see how different theories apply to analyze a moment or multiple moments. Through this coding method, I dissected myself better and mitigated the concern raised by earlier auto-ethnography critiques by being sure to view my narrative through a compound theoretical lens as rigorously as possible, given the inherent limitations of self-analysis.

After I completed the initial thematic analysis using the colored crayons, I moved to a subsequent stage of analysis in which I considered how the narrative component spoke to/related to theories I had earlier identified as potentially relevant. I then went back and added more contextual detail because the theoretical lenses I was using would at times beg for more data content in order to be able to be seriously considered; then, with more auto-ethnographic richness added, I repeated this iterative process of reflective inquiry, and again engaged the theories in a substantive way. In so doing, I accomplished a kind of “hermeneutic” (Geertz 1973) analysis that spiraled successively deeper, allowing me to grasp (or at least try to grasp) the underlying significance of what was salient about the narrative from the dual vantage point of anthropological researcher and research subject.

In the narrative portions of my story, I document key interactions I had with others. To protect their privacy, any names or persons referenced within this story that are not my own are given a pseudonym. This ensures the privacy and confidentiality of friends, acquaintances, family members, and anyone that my stories referenced collaterally. Any references to age, ethnicity, or race are generalized as well.
With the topical, theoretical, and methodological considerations that went into constructing my research project and resulting thesis now concluded, I turn now to my story as an international adoptee and pair this narrative with periodic analytical commentaries. In so doing, I take the reader from the moment I was adopted up to the present day. Following that narration (interspersed with analytical commentary), I will conclude the thesis by reflecting on lessons that the iterative, hermeneutic process that I undertook holds for my two central research questions: 1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? 2) As adoptees navigate their identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood?
Part 2: Data and Analysis

Precursor: Vikram’s Years in the Orphanage (1995-1997)

A child in an orphanage unknowingly waits for a home, not knowing that he will be off to the United States of America to his forever home in two years. A single mother with two adopted children from India feels an emptiness that needs acknowledging. Longing for a third child, her last, to feel complete. A blue light special, her child. That child is me. The way I describe my international adoption experience functions much like a preface in a book. The preface introduces you to the story of how I became an orphan and later an international adoptee by sharing with you a summary of my story. It shapes what you are about to read. It is everything that leads up to the “true story.” Yes, I lived in an orphanage for the first 27 months of my life—until I got adopted. Misdiagnosed with Cerebral palsy, but later re-evaluated after I started walking as having cranial stenosis. These are the constants in my life. I cannot change anything about them. Who I am is not defined by this preface, but everything after. Yes, when someone asks me, “tell me about you,” the first thing I say is “I was adopted from India,” not as a defining feature, but to indicate that is where my story starts but not where it ends. Moreover, the reality I know and am conscious of is becoming Vikram Kiran Johnson. Seeing it any other way, while possible, disturbs me because, in my mind, I came home on September 7th, 1997.
The Early Years (1997-2013)

To understand the processes of belonging and identity as an international adoptee I ask:
1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? 2) As adoptees navigate their identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood?

This section of the story and thesis concern the early years, “Homeward Bound” and “Getting in Touch With my Roots”, from early childhood to young adulthood, ages 2-17. In “Homeward Bound”, I explore my arrival and subsequent ways of family and community building. In “Getting in Touch with my Roots”, I discuss my participation in a culturally specific affinity group. “Homeward Bound” further asks: What role does the family play in shaping and solidifying kinship terms—mother, brother, and sister—among international adoptees? This question utilizes key theories and discussions made by Modell (1994), Terrell and Modell (1994), Howell (2006, 2009), and Yngvesson (2010). “Homeward Bound” provides commentary to the first central research question with a focus on how adoptees grow to understand “who they are” in relation to family and community specifically. “Getting in Touch with my Roots”, contends: what role does participation and identification within a culturally specific group aid in further education of ethnic socialization amongst adoptees? “Getting in Touch with my Roots” provides commentary to both central research questions with regards to emphasizing how one grows to understand who they “are” and when being adopted becomes salient.
“Homeward Bound”¹

Narrative

As babies, we never fully remember the moment of our birth, or when we first see the world—one day, we are here, and life begins. This same sentiment is felt in that I do not remember my time in the orphanage, though I have access to VHS tapes of me there. I am told I was considered the “king of the orphanage,” especially when it came to bedtime. Having a name synonymous with India’s history, where a great King Vikram unified the country because I would go to bed at the same time the older care-workers would, not when the other children did as one might expect. I, bound for greatness, like the previous King, if given a chance, and just needing the right family.

The year was 1997, the date September 7th. Just three more years until a new millennium would start. An ordinary day for some, but for my new family, a very special day. This was the day I would be arriving in the United States. My forever family was a bit bigger then, with a mom (Sheila), a brother (Charlie), a sister (Heather), an uncle (Michael Jr.), and a grandfather (Michael Sr.), though only my adopted mother and siblings met me at the airport.

Sheila, Charlie, and Heather met me at the airport. As my mother tells me, the head of the orphanage, Loretta, in which I came from in Kanjirrapaly, India, was my companion who came along with me on my long journey to the United States to ensure that a peaceful transfer would occur. The moment we all met, I instantly went to my brother Charlie. I am sure that a sigh of relief was felt between my mother, Sheila, and the orphanage head, Loretta. For my mother, a

¹ (Simon 1966)
feeling that this child is hers and will fit nicely in her family. Loretta was probably thinking to herself, it is all going to be okay for dear Vikram. Before leaving the airport as a new family, my mother recalls that Loretta took me aside and had a private talk with me in my native language, Malayalam, before leaving to head back to India. I knew only a few words in this language, “butta”—meaning cat, and “am’ma”—meaning mother. As we exited the airport, my mother relays to me that I was very interested in the many cars that passed us by and would sporadically scream “Ka-Ka-Ka-Tay” in joyous pitch. Being a happy child and always smiling, then and now, continues to be a defining characteristic.

After finally getting home, so began my integration and familiarity with my new surroundings. Trips to the local park, the community pool, and how I loved to have a cup of crushed ice—no liquid, just ice. Frequenting shops, stores, and restaurants provided exposure to the community. As people associated me with Sheila, later growing up, in times when she was not with me, workers would still make that connection and ask, “Where is your mom?” and I would respond, “She is in the car, or she isn’t feeling well today.” Access to the community pool exposed me to the subdivision in which I lived. We frequented it enough as a family that here too, social relationships were formed with others. We go to know the lifeguard, David, who would referee swimming competitions between my mom, sister, and friends if they decided to join.

Growing up, both my brother and sister were heavy into team sports. I can recall weekends where we had to travel for games, in particular for my sister. Having older siblings is a great thing because I learned by observing what to do and not to make mom happy. I spent time with each of my siblings and their friends. It would be these bonding experiences outside the family and within that cemented my relationships with the family.
The adoption triad, as noted above, consists of the adoptee, the birth parent(s), and the adoptive parent(s). When it comes to my adoption details, very minimal information is known about my birth mother, and nothing is known about my birth father. While growing up, I did not have contact with or know my birth mother. The only known information is a name and a rough age at which she had me. I feel I imprinted on Sheila because of my young age. I have always known I was adopted—how can you not when your mom is as white as snow and you as brown as coffee. In-class activities, when we had to construct a family tree, I never considered my other half—the Asian Indian—during construction. It was always “The Johnson family tree.” In doing these types of projects, I would label all the known relatives within my family—Sheila, Charlie, Heather, Michael Jr., Michael Sr. and others. In conversations, I never associated using the term “adopted” in front of these relative relationships (i.e., adoptive mom, adoptive grandfather). They were just relatives, part of the family. I felt more closely related and knowledgeable about whom my mother was descended from and the “Johnson” name than I was my own.

My mom—the person I associate with the word is a white woman from the South—was and has always been very open with all our adoptions, and, in part, I think that has helped me come to terms with it more quickly than others might. I was never preoccupied with my adoption either. It never influenced or played a part in my misgiving as a child. Having a place to call my home meant more to me than anything and being around neighbors who accepted me and valued my help, was invaluable. In my honest opinion, I have always been a Johnson and always will be until the day I die. Recently, my mom and I talked about the steps she took to make myself and my siblings more comfortable and accepting of our “adoption status.” For instance, the adoption agency in which I came through would host events for adopted families who also had children.
from abroad. She hoped to instill in us that there were other kids like us—adopted abroad, who constituted a family as well.

My mom has a close bond with each of her children. Between her and me, though, we have this almost telepathic connection. In many ways, I am the product of my mother. We all have her sense of humor, wicked as it is. She and I both enjoy similar styles of music and fictional reading material, at least when it is murder mysteries and thrillers. Nevertheless, being the baby of the family, I tended to spend most of my time with her. I was glued to her hip when out in public: if you got her, I was not far behind. She nurtured me into the person I am today. While yes, I have my own opinions on things, much of the way I view the world is shaped by her.

Retrospectively speaking, my acceptance within the community and society never was questioned. On the most micro levels, within the cul-de-sac, my mom had already adopted my two siblings, my brother, and sister, from India. I am the youngest of the bunch, with Charlie and Heather about ten years older than me. The cul-de-sac in which I would call my forever home was already very accepting and welcoming from a perceived retrospective notion.

Though I am a sensitive person, as a child, I didn’t have much or any psychological trauma regarding my adoption and never lashed out towards my family. There were bouts of separation anxiety, not because of my adoption, or I would not attribute it as an explanation towards these occurrences but the want to assure myself and need of contact for that moment, and then being fine afterward. Growing up, I never really liked using my name on takeout orders for food. Having to take the time to have to spell “V-i-k-r-a-m” felt daunting, so in many instances, I would either use my mom’s or my brother’s name since they were common names easily spelled and known. On top of it, I tended to go by nicknames as a child like “Vik” because
too frequently, people would mispronounce my name, and I wouldn’t find the courage to tell them differently. To me, if it was close enough, and I knew that you wanted to talk to me in particular, I would happily respond.

Schooling did not seem to be much of a challenge regarding adjustments, bullying, or academic issues. Sure I needed a little extra reassurance and guidance on most assignments, but how independent can you be when you are six and seven years old? I was never a problem child in the classroom, and all my teachers and Kinder Club aides loved me. My mom, already being an established teacher and educator in the district, gave me my in; The teachers and staff all knew I was Sheila’s kid. I spent my first two years of elementary school at the same school my mom worked at before transferring and completing second through fifth at a different elementary school where my mom was working at the time. When I moved on to middle school and later high school, the protection that I felt from my mother became my responsibility to an extent.

Commentary

Within anthropology, studies on adoption subverted and theorized new ways of understanding kinship. Kinship studies have been a foundational concept and central topic issue within anthropology since its inception. While my thesis only briefly touches on kinship, anthropology and its approaches allow for the exploration and holistic tendency that provides as clear a snapshot of this topic as possible. In understanding these experiences from an anthropological lens, we can reconsider such cultural structures as the nuclear family, identity, and community.

Chapter Six of Modell’s (1994) book, “The Chosen Child-Growing Up Adopted,” focuses on the adoptee’s experience, highlighting how openness, belonging, and searching affect the adoptee’s sense of self and belonging. At the start of the chapter, she claims that by being
adopted, adoptees viewed the adoption process as a burden and, while chosen, [they] could have been unchosen (1994, 115). While based on her research, this characterization might have been accurate then, but based on my experience, I do not view it as a burden at all. This sentiment I emulate when I say, “I was never preoccupied with my adoption, or why I was adopted in the first place. I think having a place to call my home meant more to me than anything and being around neighbors who accepted me and valued my help.” Being a burden, in my opinion, arises when a lack of connection to the family and community at large is not present. I think, too, since being adopted at such a young age, the lack of memories from my time in the orphanage allowed me to better transition from one foci to the next.

As Modell aptly put, to me, being adopted for myself is a “fact of life” (1994, 118). Nevertheless, stating that, “Adoptees who were content with the way they were told tended to feel good about everything in the family” (1994, 118). This point goes to the heart of why adoption policy has shifted towards an “open adoption” sentiment. Kinship at its heart shapes the family dynamic. In support of Modell’s claim that kinship does allow us to reconsider the kinship ties we make in a family, I believe my story is the exception to the rule. While yes, I agree with her that adoption most certainly impacts the understandings of kinship, the major takeaway from my story is to me; these labels are meaningless. The blood that distinguishes us as “fictive” does not account for the bond that holds my family together. My mother will always be my mother, my brother, and my sister in the same vein. To the above statement, I am afraid I have to disagree with Modell when she states the terms “mother” and “father” are problematic and “float freely of their conventional attachment and natural link with the child” (1994, 125). Like any mother, my own would do the same for biological children as she would for us. To me, this “natural link” that Modell speaks of is still there for myself and my siblings and will remain.
The process by which this “natural link” and these kinship terminologies are fostered is through the “Kinning of Foreigners” (Howell 2006). According to Howell (2006), Kinning of Foreigners occurs through three main avenues: 1) nature, 2) nurture, and 3) law. Like its European counterpart, the United States falls along this spectrum when it comes to international adoption. The inherent process by which to kin foreigners occurs by “a previously unconnected person who is brought into significant and permanent relationships with people that is expressed in a kin idiom” (Howell 2006, 63). This sentiment is illustrated when I characterize my mother as: “The person I associate with the word is a white woman from the South.” When someone talks about their mother, introspectively, the person I visualize to see how my relationship is similar or different is with a 65+ old woman.” As a respondent so aptly put it from Darnell et al. 2017:

I view my parents as my parents, you know. They’re, you know ... I don’t view them any differently; that’s one of the big reasons why I’m really not concerned about finding my bio-logical parents because to be honest, I mean, right now I don’t feel any attachment towards them, you know. Obviously I feel a great attachment towards my mom, dad, and my sister and my grandma (159).

This feeling may be in part due to the age at which a child is adopted. When someone talks about their mother introspectively, I visualize how my relationship is similar or different to a 65+ woman. She has been that figure for me since I was 27 months. Some are not as lucky as me and others, but as social beings, we have internalized images of “who is a mother.” Moreover, nowadays, how one defines that question is just as diverse. A mother could be a grandparent, a godparent, a single dad, two moms, two dads, or in my case, a single mom. However, one defines the “person who raised me” as a key role model and influencer on personhood. This reinforces the ideas to me of the “natural link” as discussed by Modell.
Having a solid family structure allowed me to adjust and grow. This “natural link” with my adoptive mom and the process of “kinning” provided the mechanism by which assimilation occurred. At its core, the nuclear family provided the first proximal context by which identity building and formation occurred. Through observational learning from my older siblings and friends growing up, I became accustomed to more Western communication modes, coping mechanisms, and responses towards stress. The environment in which I grew up allowed for a safe place by which development could occur. This is emulated in the second stage of The Asian Identity Model, “white identification.” While I did not knowingly choose to do this because of ethnic awareness, as Kim illustrated with her informants, for international adoptees who are adopted at a young age, like I was, it is the mode of socialization that is most achievable given the context of the family and the community at large.

I agree with Modell, Howell, and Yngvesson that international adoption does beg to question these terminological systems. As anthropology has progressed and evolved, both synchronically and diachronically, these terms, “consanguineal” and “fictive,” regarding a Western notion of family, have not changed as much, if at all. Due to this lack of progression, I argue that these foundational terms within the study of kinship require re-evaluation, in turn, benefitting Anthropology and the Anthropology of Adoption from such a change. To me, and as my story demonstrates, my mother is my mother. My brother is my brother. My sister is my sister. Though blood does not tie us together, we are like any other family.

Furthermore, knowing that the only term that genuinely defines these relationships is “fictive” kin connotes negatively. It illustrates to me a similar sentiment, wherein literature we describe something as “fiction.” Even when constructing a kinship chart, similar to a family tree, but with shapes (a circle is female, a triangle is male, solid line to show blood descendants, etc.),
for adoptive relations, this is shown as a dotted line. A dotted line represents to me a broken connection rather than an unrelated connection. Through interactions with adoptive children, knowing that this is how their relationship to their adoptive parents is represented is undermining their own views on how they view these relationships.

To me, these relationships are as real as gravity. It is there; one knows it is there and does not think twice about it. I am only speaking on behalf of myself in this thesis; though my opinion may or may not be unique based on my experience, my thought process has never begun with, “Why should I care about these people? At the end of the day, I do not have true biological ties to any of them.” For me, biological relatedness between family members does not determine relational connections. Further, on terminology, a revitalization of research within Anthropology on adoption could be the missing catalyst by which a new defining term that, through interactions with other adoptees, could allow for more inclusiveness.

Summary
Recalling what was discussed in this narrative, essentially growing up as an international adoptee within a family already shaped prior by international adoption, I return to the original research aim: What is the relationship between international adoption and identity? Specifically I expand upon the first central research question: 1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? In this narrative it is argued that family dynamics is one way in which an identity is shaped by international adoption. The age at which, at least, I was adopted cemented these labels more readily. Because I was adopted earlier in life, the memories that I
recall are those that began in California. In this case, the age at which I was adopted, 27 months, aided in these formations and solidifications of kinship terms.

Once the imprint of that relationship was established and nurtured, I never saw the world as different. Yes, while we are not biological siblings to each other, nor biological children to our mother, I think a strong sense of familial bonds transcends the idea of fictiveness. I do believe that the age of adoption plays a big role in identity formation and perception of kinship. While our family dynamic is unconventional and untraditional, we will always be the Johnsons.
Getting in Touch With my Roots

Narrative

Indian food is a love that all my family members have. Some have a higher spice tolerance than others, but we frequent Indian restaurants regularly for lunch or dinner. Lunch buffets are probably my favorite because of the ability to keep going back for more. I especially enjoy any kind of curry with meat, Saag Paneer (cooked spinach with cubes of cheese), and pistachio Kulfi (India’s version of pistachio ice cream), Naan (regular and garlic—similar to Pita bread), and India’s staple drink Chai (a mix of spices, black tea, and milk). All to say that I have been connected to my Indian past in some way, but in high school is when another aspect would be learned.

When I started high school, I was thirteen years old—an age at which impressions mean everything, similar to that found in middle school. Due to scheduling, it was better to start anew at my local high school. Moving schools is challenging for any person to go through, but it turned out for the better, and as previously noted, I had changed schools twice already, so it was nothing drastically new for me. Being introverted has always been a challenge in making friends, harder still when I knew no one at my new high school where cliques were already formed. How to break the ice? An outsider looking to find my place, then one day, a place presented itself. Through this place, an ethnic Indian club in high school, I became more aware and cognizant of my “Indianness.”

While having lunch one day with a friend who was white and a person I had lunch with daily, an individual who “looked like me”: had dark skin, black hair, brown eyes, came up to me and asked me, if I was Indian. I responded, “yes,” and he proceeded to say, “great, have you
heard of the American Born Confused Desi (ABCD) Club? We are looking for new members to join. We are having a club meeting right now”. I said, “no, and further asked if it was okay if my friend could tag along with me; he said “Sure” and he took me to where the club meeting was held. Upon arriving, I instantly saw others, which again “looked like me” and kindly welcomed me to the club, which consisted of a group of sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Over that initial year, I would learn Bollywood dancing, perform at school pep-rallies, buy Indian apparel for these performances, and be for that moment “Indian.” After that, for the next three years in high school, I actively embraced my “Indianness” through the ABCD Club in its pep rallies performances.

At that time I had a Facebook account also and many of the members would later become “Facebook Friends”, and at that time having a “banner image” was a newer feature for every profile. I recall that once becoming a member of this club, it encouraged me to be appreciative to be both Indian and American. And for the rest of my time in high school my banner image was a half India and half United States nation flag, that blended in the middle, or merge (below):

![National flag of India and the United States merging](image-url)
To me, it represented how I felt. I was not just Vikram Johnson, an ordinary guy, but Vikram Johnson with a strong sense that I was not just an “American” but that there was an added layer that was a part of me that felt actualized. It was the blending of two cultures coming together in a way that felt “right.”

Differences in cultural values and customs began to present themselves as time went on when meeting at homes and dress rehearsals. I realized my first difference in being raised on “American” values and norms when around dogs in this same Indian group. I realized that none of the Indian households that we practiced at owned dogs. With this group of individuals, I remember a moment where a school administrator’s dog came wagging up to me; I bent down and petted it only to turn to see questionable looks underlying in somewhat hesitant fear. I would later learn from my mother that dogs in India were mainly used for guarding purposes and, because of this, feared. This use is starkly different from how I grew up with dogs in my family and neighborhood—having frequently taken care of neighborhood pets and viewing dogs as an integral and essential part of the family and for emotional well-being. Since I had arrived in 1997 up until eighth grade, my family had a dog. Once she passed, the need for a dog was satisfied by helping my neighbors take care of their dogs. So too, within their households’ shoes were taken off after entering the house. While seen as a respectful gesture, it also provided a functional aspect when practicing the dances, for all dances were done barefoot.

In my first year’s performance, I had to buy my first Indian outfit. One weekend, my mom and I went down to Artesia, “Little India.” We had previously gone down for my sister in prior years, so we knew where to go. My mom had told me previously the magic in which shop
owners could “take one look at you and know exactly what size you were.” We visited a few stores before I found a color and style I liked. A bold red top, with sequencing around the collar, not too flashy, but just enough. That outfit lasted me two years before which I had to get a new one because of a growth spurt.

The night before performance days we would have dress rehearsals at the school gymnasium. It was required that we come with our outfits. This was not only to see how it would feel but so too to see if outfit colors needed to be changed. Too many people wearing red would blend and not be defined, seeing the variations in the types of designs and colors worn, some more intricate than others and bolder in color.

The following day would be the big day, my first performance with the ABCD Club. I would skip the required period of class and head over to the gymnasium, where we would do another quick run-through and any final necessary changes. By this time, I had become friends with my classmates in my freshman year. They knew I was in this group and were anticipated seeing their friend perform. The ABCD club was always everyone’s favorite when we performed at the rallies. Nerves were getting to me, thinking, “I hope I don’t embarrass myself in front of the whole school.” Luckily the performance went off without a hitch and was a major success. Afterward, before heading back to class, as a group, we decided to take group pictures in our outfits. Outfits were only worn during the performance, and once we were done, we changed back into our everyday clothes, T-shirts, jeans, shoes.

Commentary

My time in the ABCD Club is a blip within my story. At this time, I would say because of the common thread of confusion in who we were as individuals allowed the group to “behave in
concert within a group they identify” because “individuals who use the group label to describe themselves are more likely than not to participate in the group’s culture” (Ullah 1987; Ethier and Deaux 1994). After my first performance in the school rally that year, Winter 2009, I became a functional and integrated member of the ABCD Club. That was part of my identity throughout the rest of high school and allowed for “the increase in self-worth that accompanies a group-based identity” (Ellison 1993). This group’s inherent power, and groups we associate ourselves with, is the safest way to do such exploration. That chance interaction between a member of the club at lunch and me lead to quite a lot of growth and belonging.

The ABCD club itself was a cultural affinity group. Over the four years, I was a part of this group, the keystone of the group identity was for it to be for a certain group of people, and only that, to maintain a strong collective. New members satisfied all of these categories: had dark skin, or a shade of brown, black hair, brown eyes- in other words, a Desi. A person who might be defined as “Desi” is “a person who is of Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi descent who lives abroad.” Though I was one of a few people who were adopted from India, in the coming years of my membership, I was the only member whose mother was white and had the equivalent to the last name “Patel” in India, in the United States.

Considering Delale-O’Connor (2009), though not an adoptee culture camp per se, similar outcomes were facilitated by participation in this club, because like the culture camps, this club provided “exposure to other like them” and, in turn, “build self-esteem” (2009, 204). Through this participation, I learned about certain aspects of my birth culture, a cornerstone to the culture camp’s purpose according to Delale-O’Connor. Like the camps discussed in her work, the ABCD club exposed me to clothing, song, and dance in particular (Delale-O’Connor 2009, 214). Regarding the clothing and dance in the performances we did, similar to the closing ceremonies
hosted by the culture camps, reflecting, once the performance was done and we had to go back to
class, we too assumed “these outfits are only for this particular event.” By changing, as noted by
Delale-O’Connor, we were enacting this “compartamentalization of culture performativity”
Recall that reculturation is the process by which transracially and internationally adopted persons
reclaim their birth culture. Though, in my instance, this reclaiming was more in line and similar
to the processes of acculturation, for these four years, it was part of my identity, one in which I
chose to accept, under my own volition, and one that I was proud to accept because, through my
Facebook banner image, I was identifying myself to my “Facebook friends” that I was a proud
Asian-Indian American.

This identification of a proud Asian-Indian American illustrates the first stage of identity
development being addressed, according to Kim (1981). For international adoptees, ethnic
awareness is a stage in which might come later on in development. As previously stated, I
believe that international adoptees who are adopted at a young age potentially begin this identity
development process beginning at stage two, “white-identification and through family and
communal contexts learn about . “ethnic awareness,” stage one.

Cultural affinity groups have the inherent power to bring individuals within a specific
community or ethnicity together. These social groups, through gatherings and activities, instill in
their participants a sense of belonging. Through transnationalism byways of coming to this
country, its citizens are introduced to different cultures. Even as spectacles, they acculturate
those around them and reculturate those members within (Baden et al. 2012). These imagined
communities (Anderson [1983] 2006) are, in essence, how international adoptees relate to their
social identity.
The ABCD Club was a local group specific to my high school and community. Having this group within the majority-white school and community created the context by which an identity and the building blocks of a relationship to India to be created and further acknowledged. This kind of group is unique to the school because compared to when my brother Charlie was in school, no such group existed for him to join and be a part of. While the identity was context-specific to the high school, in particular, it transcended to specific member’s homes when practicing for performances. It was because of the interaction with others who were also “confused” that bridged both the United States and India that made realize that I did not necessarily have to be adopted in order to feel “out of place.”

Summary
To understand the processes of belonging and identity as an international adoptee I ask: 1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? 2) As adoptees navigate their identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood?

Understanding how culture-specific groups introduce modes of ethnic socialization relates to both the first and second central research questions. Specifically, the high school context in which the ABCD club finds itself is one mechanism by which I grew to both understand who I was and how being internationally adopted mattered. Through participation, as was seen in the banner image used on my Facebook profile, being internationally adopted
presented itself. High school is a tough four years in trying to fit in, become an independent individual, and discover who you are, but I will say though the club provided me a place for stability and for exploration.

Further, such ethnic socialization happened through the ABCD club regarding social interactions, performances, and “becoming Indian” through wearing traditional and formal clothing. In the performances themselves at the school rallies, the preparation to which took months created a club culture and a window into what Asian-Indians enjoyed. It was my first introduction to the world of Bollywood and Bollywood dancing. The absence of such groups, such as the American Born Confused Desai group, would make a difference in an international adoptee’s life when understanding belonging and identity.
The Identity Crisis Begins (Late 2016-2019)

This portion of the story reflects my juxtaposition of being an American and Asian Indian international adoptee, illustrating the ebbs and flows of my identity crisis. This identity crisis resulted in assuming new behaviors, ways of thinking, and personal actions I took to both subvert and amplify my own understating of being a minority. “The Age of Self-Policing,” which follows, reflects that.

To understand the processes of belonging and identity as an international adoptee, I ask: 1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? 2) As adoptees navigate their identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood? Discussions of implicit biases (Eberhardt 2020), a panopticon (Foucault [1975]2012), and social identities (Stets and Burke 2000) and social identity (Jenkins 1996, 2000) will be included. Specifically, the story that follows aids in answering the second central research question in that during this time, being adopted became very salient.

For international adoptees and identity, anthropological discussions on othering, social structures, belonging are illuminated during times of crisis. As previously discussed, othering influences theories of identity, in particular social identity theory and social identity.
Age of Self-Policing

Narrative

I started college right out of the gate after high school at 18—another fresh start, one a bit more important for my future. At the time, I was looking for something that felt like home, secluded, and had a “small-town vibe,” and found what I was looking for. The school demographics were very similar to what I had already experienced previously, being a minority in a majority white school, breaking away from the past life that I experienced in high school, and venturing out to be a new version of me.

For the first two years of my undergraduate career, I was content. I took classes in my major, Anthropology when I was able to and had a solid friend group that I would meet within the game room when I was on break. There was always someone there I could “pass the time away” with before my next class or leaving for the day. Reflecting on this now, I would describe these friends as ones you make frequenting a coffee shop or grocery store. We would say hi, ask: “How are you doing today?”, usual interpersonal, small talk, never genuinely engaging or getting to know one another on a deeper level. In conversations, I began to realize I had nothing I could relate to with these individuals. The topics we discussed were shallow, in my opinion, and not worth engaging in further. I was thinking to myself, “Do I know these people?” “Can I trust them?”

After the initial two years of being around this group and never feeling truly connected with any of them, I realized that this group did not give me what I was looking for, a place to be seen and appreciated. A ghost, wanting interaction, silently screaming for help, or just a simple hello, and receiving nothing. I was just as silent at home, suppressing these feelings and putting on a “fake smile” so that it would look like nothing was wrong. Thinking every morning and
asking myself: “Why does it all matter?”, “What am I doing this for?”, getting up because I had to and because school awaited. I was wasting away, slowly in the recesses of my mind, looking for a connection that went straight to the heart and soul of the person.

I define this time as my “Lone Wolf Years,” meaning that I waywardly traveled along on my journey, with no true purpose at this time, but managing to come together when it was truly needed. Lone wolves, to me, do not show weakness and only allow what plagues them to fester inside, “sweeping it under the rug,” as it were. I decided to leave this friend group and, for a solid year, was a lone wolf, eating alone, spending my time alone, and just rolling with the punches. Not knowing who I was anymore. What was it that I was looking for? Though not related to my being an international adoptee, I wanted to feel a connection to my school, someone to motivate me to keep going, lift me in this specific school. I would later find a new friend group within my own major to enjoy this feeling of belonging, appreciation, and security. This friend group would also help me in 2016. Luckily, in 2016, I had school and my friends to keep my mind occupied from the disaster that would be my new normal at home. Because of my socialization within the American culture being the only identity I knew, it was out into crisis because I no longer felt American, but nor did I see myself as Indian—a place of liminality, searching for belonging, longing to fit back in somewhere.

After graduating from my undergraduate career in 2017, I decided that I needed a break. While very necessary concerning needing a mental break from the rigors that the final semester put me through, a time, too, for the thoughts I suppressed while being busy with school post-2016 election to come to bear and consume me. Though I found a love for reading in this time, I too noticed a shift in the way I interacted with people; a stain of being a “black dot on a white wall” truly began to fester.
As nationalism became heightened and policies reflected isolationism through immigration and economics, shifts occurred within socially, culturally, and politically acceptable norms, behaviors, and values resulting in a divisive reality. Where I live, the community is a majority white—eighty-seven percent—and a suburban town that is sheltered from high instances of crime, though we have been in the news more recently. Where continuous hate speech towards black and brown and other minorities more visible and in public view showcasing just how nativist some Americans felt, not realizing that we were all immigrants to this country at some point or another. Because of this, I only felt safe frequenting places with someone else, family members, or friends, so if questioned, I could say, “I am with (‘Name’ or my mother or whomever). It felt like being out in public, and I needed permission or a reason. Otherwise, I would be at home passing the time away in a good book.

While my interactions within the family and close friends were as they had always been, there was a gradual change in myself as time went outside this bubble. Due to this constant self-policing of myself in whom I interacted with, where I was welcomed, and where I felt I belonged, I, in many ways, had cocooned myself from reality. Being “different” was at the time what made me, me in my fearful mind. I could no longer assimilate and be one with the other people. I stood out, I was noticeable, I was seen not for who I was as a person, but who I was not. That shift in the mental state became my new normal. I felt constantly judged because people only saw me on the surface and not the real me. I felt like I was walking on eggshells outside this bubble. Doing everything I could to fly under everyone’s radar and not be detected. I slowly lost hope for my future—a marked difference from what I had grown to know until now and not consider.
Privileges I thought were “safe places” became questioned. I felt helpless. Knowing that I am a citizen of this country, just like any other, but feeling like at any moment that this life that I have had could potentially be taken away from me. Years later, in 2020, it would become required for people to have a Real ID to travel nationwide. A mark of a golden bear with a star on the ID indicated that you showed the Department of Motor Vehicles sufficient and appropriate documents to receive this card. Getting that and having it in my wallet felt like a relief. My safeguard to say to someone if questioned, “I do belong here, and I have a right to be here.”

Within the broader community and city where I lived over time, I started to notice and become aware of a shift towards gentrification, an exclusionary act to keep only those who can afford to live here as “welcomed.” While in my neighborhood, going to help my neighbors felt different. Whereas before, it felt like just me being helpful, doing a good deed, a satisfying feeling, after 2016, it began to feel like work to keep up an image—an image of lesser value. Similar to a sour taste one gets in their mouths, it was in my best interest to just swallow my pride and “do what needed to be done and move on.” Going into these tasks internally, I would think, “I am better than this; doing this simple task is not getting me anywhere.”

In 2019, I began dog walking. After a while, and after people started recognizing me in the role of “dogwalker,” a new routine was created. For the most part, interactions with people were very jovial and friendly. On occasion, though, there were instances where through their tone of voice, the persons made me feel like I was the problem, though kindly to some, I took it as a threat. They would say, “Do you mind not having your dogs pee on my yard? The park is right over there,” or yelled at me, “PEE IN YOUR OWN DAMN YARD.” When it came to poohing in someone’s yard, it was like they watched me like a hawk to make sure I picked it up.
I remember when a lady was sitting at her window, “keeping an eye on her street,” then here I come with two dogs, on their route home. Out of all the yards, they chose the yard with the women at the window. I find it fascinating how important a person’s yard is when they live within feet of a public park, where sightings of coyotes, raccoons, possums, and other wildlife are present. Moreover, I think to myself, “there are loads of animals around here that potentially poop in a person’s yard, and one gets uppity over a dog doing the same?” Nevertheless, as the dogs are doing their business in this women’s yard, I hear this knocking sound on a window. I look around to see where it is coming from, and it is the women just standing there, looking at me, watching me, and just pointing down at the dog pooh that I had every intention of picking up. If she saw that I was opening a doggy bag to do that, maybe she would not have been so off-putting. Interactions like these with strangers dictated which routes I was “safe” to take when dog-walking because, for a stent, I would avoid these kinds of houses or down streets where negative interactions occurred until I thought okay, now it has been long enough to where I feel “safe” to return down that path.

Instances of othering, though minor, occurred out in public as well. While at lunch with my mom and an elderly friend, we talked and waited for our food to arrive. The restaurant we were at was a popular place for the 65 and over crowd, so I stuck out on that day. A group of ladies was just finishing up and getting up to leave. As an individual, I like to scan the room and take note of my surroundings, and as I was scanning, I locked eyes with one of the women and smiled and moved on. As I was scanning back, I saw she was still looking at me, so I got a bit uncomfortable. That lady decided to come over and greeted us. I had longer hair then, so she commented on how “lovely” my hair was, a compliment I am accustomed to, as my mom would say, “great hair wasted on a guy.” Though understandable, her next question kind of threw me.
She asked, “So, are you a foreign exchange student?” I sat a bit baffled and responded with, “Uhh no.” My mom comes into the conversation and says, “No, he is my son. I adopted him from India; can’t you see the resemblance?” That got me thinking; I wonder if that is how people think of me when they see me with my mom out in public. Indeed, at her age, she has been misidentified as my grandmother, or maybe people think I am her “caregiver” helping her do her weekly tasks.

Commentary

I see myself as an American who happens to be from India, “like coconuts: brown on the outside, white on the inside” (Howell 2009, 160). That is me in a nutshell and how I identify myself: I may look Indian, but I am American to my core.

Harkening back to Lee’s Transracial Adoption Paradox (2003) theoretical framework, this new age of feeling out of place because I no longer was considered American, and simultaneously not seeing myself as Indian, is a paradoxical issue for me. I began to feel that to fit in and be less noticed, and I needed to tread lightly and only go where I felt safe, belonged, and felt welcomed became my new normal. Using Vygotsky’s term, the distal zone of the political unrest and divisive partisan politics shaped my relationship to the proximal zones, that of myself and others (outside of the family context). Because the community in which I live is very sheltered from crimes, daily police activity, and major societal issues of food insecurity, homelessness, etc. not truly an everyday occurrence, it is because of this distal influence rather than a proximal influence within my community that shaped my identity during this time.

Further, per Kim (1981), this feeling of neither/or is part of the Asian American Identity Model. This feeling represents the third stage of identity development, “awareness of
social and political consciousness” (Kim 1981). In Kim’s view, it would have been more the social rather than the political consciousness that became present for me. That is not to say that the political influences and rhetoric of the time had none; instead, I internalized these feelings that were being continuously seen, heard, and televised, impacting my behavior. Moreover, for Kim, it is more political action within the political climate shaping the identity, and on that front, I am not a very politically active individual.

While what I face as a minoritized individual is relatively minuscule compared to what others face, even more so for illegal immigrants, I can imagine more concretely what it feels like. Barbara Yngvesson (2010) highlights these same sentiments of Kinning of Foreigners (Howell 2009) regarding Ethiopian adoptees in Sweden and how these sentiments towards foreigners influence personhood and wholeness. These marked categories, as Yngevsson indicates of “immigrant” versus “adoptee,” serve as “marker of true Swedish-ness of his or her parents and of what it means to stand outside of civil society…hint at the dependence of full Swedish-ness by people who are not too much like me, even as it reveals that [she] too is a kind of “immigrant” (2010, 127). I think this juxtaposition between insider and outsider cemented itself once the mode I was living, as “American first and Asian Indian second” was brought into question. Once coming to that realization and understanding that I stood out caused me to internalize self-policing antics such as feeling “constantly judged, in the sense that people only saw me on the surface, and not the real me.”

Foucault ([1975]2012) when discussing the panopticon, highlighted that it is the internalization factor of “othering” that results in self-policing oneself. This self-policing act is emulated when I illustrated earlier on page 59 how this internalized structure influenced where I felt welcomed and belonged. What this illustrates the “self-verification” notion of identity theory
where “the person behaves as to maintain consistency with the identity standard—in this case, the other through the act of keeping “perceptions of themselves in the situation consistent with their identity standard by taking action to modify the situation, so the perceptions of the self are consistent with the standard” (Burke and Stets 1999).

Social identity theory played a crucial part in this time for me. These processes of inclusion and exclusion are lifelong and ever-changing because “most aspects of adoption do not concern things that the person has chosen, the task of identity involves ‘coming to terms with oneself in the context of the family and culture into which one has been adopted” (Grotevant 1997). Using the ideas of social identity theory, I identify as white because of my upbringing, and consider that being “white” my “in-group,” whereas “Asian-Indian” as the “out-group.”

Considering the model discussed in the preceding theoretical section (see Figure 2) by Baden and Steward (2007), I would have fallen under the “Culturally Undifferentiated” portion of the figure because this category is defined by “not being affiliated with either their own ethnic group or that of their parents” (Baden and Steward 2007:18). Though part of their model is partially accurate, my experience seems to indicate they are missing a category having to do with the effect internally of coming to police oneself as a result of scrutiny based on “othering.” In this case, the missing piece discussed before could be addressed by the Ung et al. (2012) model referenced in the theoretical section (see Figure 1).

Compared to the Baden and Steward model (2007), Ung et al. (2012) encompasses the interrelationship between international adoption and identity and illustrates the international adoption experience’s complexities. Ung et al. (2012) model address the importance of the family culture as a foundation by which mitigation of self-policing actions occur—in my experience, having a solid family foundation resulted in reduced instances of self-policing. The
friends made within the Anthropology department created a second family, which further mitigated these feelings. Understanding that the environment in its complexities as understood by Ung et al. (2012) concerning adoptees shapes and influences these feelings of racial stigmas can aid in alleviating a sense of not belonging.

Returning to Jenkins discussion on social identity (1996, 2000), since the interaction between internal identification and external identification through categorization further internalized as Jenkins (2000) iterates, the narrative truly showcases the interaction between the self-image and public image, shaping how I understood myself and how others saw me. It also illuminates that “categorization by others is always moot” (Jenkins 2000, 8). Though moot, I felt that the need to do everything in my ability to reduce the perceived target on my back required I only consider my “public image.” Instances of this categorization being moot were especially poignant when I interacted with the lady in the restaurant. Her assumption of me being an exchange student threw me off, but my mother interjected with protection against self-policing when she states on page 62, I am her son.

Summary
To understand the processes of belonging and identity as an international adoptee, I investigated two research questions. The second of these was: “As adoptees navigate their identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood?” With that question in mind, I think the identity crises I faced in my early years were common to most people from childhood to young adulthood. Belonging to a community or a society is a human universal, but the internalization of a panoptic structure through perceived implicit biases
and exotification can impede and halt the cultivation of such a feeling. Throughout this portion of my story, this internalization affects my sense of belonging and identity and how it was questioned. This questioning was then discussed in relation to the theoretical models discussed earlier (Kim 1981; Baden and Steward 2007; Ung et al. 2012). It is through these identity models that one was able to navigate with me along this journey of “in-between.”
Recovery (Late 2019-Present)

To understand the processes of belonging and identity as an international adoptee, I ask:
1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? 2) As adoptees navigate their identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood?

This section illustrates the process in which I overwent to re-establish myself as an autonomous individual. Within this section, my “Country-boy Living” story narrates this transformation. As a way to demonstrate that the reclamation process considers both central research questions guiding this thesis, “Country-boy Living” asks: What are the necessary steps and self-determining factors needed to recover from an identity crisis? To analyze this anchor point, I revisit theories and theorists such as Stets and Burke (2000) as well as Baden and Steward (2007) to discuss the first driving research question.

Anthropologists continue to be concerned with belonging and community, especially understanding the necessary ingredients for a sense of belonging and community to occur and how belonging and community interact with one another encourages a collaborative effort to ensure the transition to a positive sense of self.
**Country-boy Living**

Narrative

I would find myself gravitating towards India throughout my higher education career when confronted with topical research papers on a culture. Papers done on the sacredness of cattle and Indian archaeology were done. The readings in classes that discussed Indian customs and beliefs were the most fascinating to me. So it is not to say, I have severed all ties to my Indian past, but that my academic interests in connections to India are both personal and academic. Personal and academic because I am doing it to learn about a culture I know little about, and academic because it differs from the cultural values I have.

How does one define what a “country-boy” is? To me, this has been a lifelong admiration and began since I can remember ever wanting a pair of cowboy boots. Yes, you heard that correctly. As oxymoronic as it sounds, I am most at home when I talk in a southern drawl and wear my cowboy boots. All I need now is a good ole cowboy hat, and my ensemble will be complete. I have also had this burning desire to work on a farm, be around animals, work from dusk until dawn. That way of life has always been something I have longed for because my biological rhythm seems to gel well with such a routine. I have always been an early bird, I like to say I get up with the coyotes, and I value getting the job done well and done right.

To top it off, I am the biggest fan of Golden Country music from the 1950s to 1970s. This love had not cemented itself until I got my cowboy boots. Some of my favorite artists are Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, George Strait, Don Williams, and Kenny Rogers. I am drawn to this music because of my upbringing, and those songs during this era were emotive, and I could connect with them. This country-boy persona was primarily influenced by my mother, Sheila because she spent most of her formative years down South. She instilled in me many similar
values and morals of helping a friend in need, respecting elders, and always do the right thing. On occasion, Sheila and I continue to talk in a southern drawl, and after a while, it is like she never left the South. As for me, the accent is something that is easily turned off, though I will say a “thank ya kindly,” “mornin,” and “howdy” have become a part of my everyday vernacular, and it feels like home when I do.

To me, “country-boy” connotes a feeling of likeability. Compared to an actual country boy (one who lives in a small town, one stoplight, one grocery store, and the like), when I think of a “country boy,” it is more the persona and values I identify with. In these types of towns, it more of a collective feeling; everyone is not out for themselves but lends a helping hand when someone in the community needs it. This sentiment is felt within my cul-de-sac especially. Though never showing this side towards others, and only a very few knowing of this love before, it became a “character” I would lean on in my second year of graduate school.

When I started graduate school in the Fall of 2018, I was twenty-two; many of these feelings and thoughts discussed in “The Age of Self-Policing” went along with me to my classes. I never felt good enough to participate, to succeed, to matter. Starting over yet again with building new relationships with professors and friendships became, yet again, an added challenge. I lived this way for a year and came to my breaking point and had to tell someone. While not shown in the timeline of anchor points (see Figure 3), that moment catalyzed me towards an upward trend in confidence and stability. This moment led me back to my “Country-boy” persona.

A country-boy to me is just part of my many identities that I hold. Being a country-boy presented itself as a helpful tool when I was practicing for a presentation with a friend. In my normal state of presenting, I was a jumbled mess. Being this way was typical of previous
presentations. The inner critic would always take hold and be in the driver’s seat in my mind. Countless times, I recall that after giving a presentation, friends would tell me, “You did a great job,” and I would think internally, “Did we see the same presentation?” After many run-throughs of stopping and starting again, he advised that I “dawn on a character I knew I could be.” The only character I knew best was just that, a country-boy, a southern accented, down-home individual. By down-home, I mean someone easy-going, a no-nonsense type of person. Since growing up raised by a southern woman, this was and always has been a part of who I am and someone I could easily be.

With that, during the practice runs, I was more confident, I stumbled less, and I was clear and concise—all the things I wanted to be and lacked during previous presentation attempts and previous presentations in general. This character would become my crutch during future presentations. Before presentations, I would kindly say, “now, if you start hearing me talk in a southern accent, that is just my way of calming my brain down.”

After three years of implicitly and covertly self-policing myself, there came a time when I just said to myself, “enough is enough, Vikram.” That following Fall, I found a home within the Anthropology department through a solid friend group with my classmates, which cut down. This friend group mirrored my siblings by age, and I connected to them more because of our similar familial structures and experiences within that family structure. So too, they made me feel like I mattered, I was valued, and I got to know them on a deeper level. Because of our similar family structures and experiences, my old soul personality found a place as well, never truly finding one before unless the person was sixty-five and older. For so long, I felt out of place because of my music tastes and ways of thinking.
Incrementally, through the help of my friends and guidance from professors, I became a whole individual. I was willing to take risks, apply to be an ISA (Instructional Student Assistant) in the department, and all things my former self would only dream of being and becoming.

Growing up with what people these days might call “white privilege,” or the privilege associated with being an unmarked member of a majority demographic group, I never saw myself as different from anyone around me. To me, having white privilege means being able to go about living my daily life without concern that I would be shot, arrested, or worse. While my skin color defined a difference, it was not the difference that made people treat me less during this time than previously discussed. Realizing within my cul-de-sac that what I was looking for was right in front of me, I started to become a happier person about country-boy living. When someone needs help with something electronically, I am always the first person called before any experts. My dog-walking job requires me to be up by 6:15 am every morning, even on the weekends. Through my dog-walking, I have started to socialize with people more as they start to recognize me. I passed by the same houses day in and day out, waving and saying hi to people as they pass, a gesture of friendliness. All the things I used to do freely returned to me. The color of my skin not a worrying factor to them, just another friendly face. Friendlier still because the dogs that were with me wanted to say hi.

I was beginning to feel a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness again found to be crucial basic psychological needs for overall well-being in self-determination theory. Over the previous year up until now, a shift in my mindset began. I was becoming adventurous, getting my name out there, participating in professional societies, applying myself in new ventures. This feeling became my new normal, a new normal I have been enjoying. This became more noticeable when in the Fall of 2020, as I was reading a newsletter, I homed in on the
advertisement that they were looking for a “Webmaster.” Now, I will be the first to tell you, at that point, I had only a little experience in building a website, let alone maintaining it, but all to say with that experience, I took it upon myself to email the contact in charge and took on this task.

Commentary

As an international adoptee, especially, I feel like having a place and space that is uniquely yours, where all the layers can be peeled back, is crucial. I think for myself, since the Age of Self-Policing, too many walls were created and built on top of. Those walls were what was preventing me from making meaningful connections with people and with myself. Belonging and altruistic actions towards others can help create and maintain life-long friendships and bonds.

Similar to many, my family is my greatest support system. At its core is an impenetrable fortress of love, care, and motivation. It is this foundation that makes me feel whole and seen. Who I am with them is the person I wish I could be all the time. I am witty, sarcastic, and loyal. They see me for me, accept me, and make me a better person.

Similarly, each satisfies that need to belong in my group of friends, be seen, and be appreciated. While these same feelings are undoubtedly found in my family, my family motivations affect what I cherish and strive for in my friends and other social relationships. When I am with my friends, knowing that they accept me for me, I can be that “Small Town Southern Man” (Alan Jackson), loyal to a tee, caring, the jokester. When I am with my friends, the world around me ceases to exist. It is about them and me, living in the moment.
Nevertheless, they, too, help me cope when times get tough, as friends typically do. To me, my friendships foster trust and respect. How I treat others and see others has all been shaped by my matriarch. I always joke to people that if you saw my mother and me together, you would be like, “Ah, it all makes sense.”

Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 2012) informs the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Since, over these years, in particular, 2019-present, re-establishment of these core psychological needs allowed me to break away and step out of that panoptic structure as well. In essence, through relatedness with peers and the department of Anthropology, I felt I belonged, and I mattered; This relatedness, in turn, encouraged a growing sense of competence, that I was capable of doing a task, I had untapped potential in my skills and as a person; Further the combination of the former, encouraged me to venture outwards away from my comfort zone. Understanding that I had the agentic ability and volition to do what I wanted and that no one could dictate that for me. Using Kim’s model (1981), stages four and five, Asian American Identity and incorporation were satisfied within this node together. Giving me a place and space to feel I mattered and made significant contributions to the overall school experience by creating friendships and social connections provided the factors that have allowed me to come out of this hole as a whole individual.

Summary
To understand the processes of belonging and identity as an international adoptee, I ask: 1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? 2) As adoptees navigate their
identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood?

Reclamation of self is a multi-step process, and it takes a leap of courage to take that first step. It begins with understanding that we are looking to satisfy three basic psychological needs within everything: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These, in turn, increase an individual’s sense of well-being and understanding of who they “are.” On-campus, these needs were met when I formed a core friend group at school, and from this group, I was able to venture out of my comfort zone. The reclamation process of the self for international adoptees encompasses both a reimagining of self while also reconfiguring those pieces to form a new self and grow within the process. The final straw breaks, the light at the end of the tunnel is visible. Considering my adoption status and all discussed in the previous narrative portions, I am more prepared for other crises.
Part 3: Concluding Thoughts

Answers to the Central Research Questions-Key Takeaways

I am who I am because of this once-in-a-lifetime chance, a hope for a better future. This decision catalyzed me into a new world: that of being an international adoptee. This hallmark, the experiences, the education I have received, and the lifelong friendships I have fostered and maintained are all because of the hope and chance my birth mother wanted for her only son.

By understanding the international adoption experience and reflecting on those experiences from an individual adult adoptee perspective, cultural anthropologists can begin to enrich their understandings of socialization, identity, and belonging. As was highlighted by Foucault ([1975]2012), Baden et al. (2012), Stets and Burke (2000), and Jenkins (1996, 2000), there are many considerations by which an international adoptee has to understand his or her status as an international adoptee in relation to the broader society.

The four previous personal narratives helped provide context to understand the processes of belonging and identity as an international adoptee. I ask: 1) How do individuals who have been adopted internationally as children, now adults, reflect on their experiences of growing up? How do they come to understand who they “are” as individuals, and in relation to their families, social networks, and communities? 2) As adoptees navigate their identities during various phases of their lives, in what ways does being adopted internationally become salient and shape one’s identity and sense of belonging at different stages of growing up and adulthood?

First, the relationship between international adoption, belonging, and identity is context-specific. Context can be time as well as location. This thesis focused on a retrospective look
through time spent in high school, graduate school, and life at home. Using this as a mode of understanding identity and belonging for international adoptees may experience a heightened awareness of their adopted status in one case and not in the other. Ung et al. (2012) provided a model by which these context-specific frames influence racial identity. Linked to the context-specific nature of this relationship, so too does the socio-political culture of the time affect how one interacts with him/herself and others. For me, the distal influences of the political climate of the time shaped my proximal and mesosystem—within the community—relations to self and others.

Second, when international adoptees have culturally specific affinity groups they can join and participate in, similar to the ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) Club in my case, could be a mode by which cultural socialization can occur. This group introduced me to the culture that I had not been able to partake in before. Having access to a group like that could facilitate or encourage one to explore one’s birth culture if they chose to. This is qualitatively different from having a parent encourage it; it uses one’s agency to explore it. Participation in such groups must be during high school years in my mind, which is the most crucial in identity building. High school is a time in which individuals are growing into young adults and more independent in solidifying and figuring out who they “are” in relation to themselves and to others. So too, by participating in these cultural camp-type groups (Delale-O’Connor 2009), the individual adoptee is surrounded by experientially similar individuals, those shaped by adoption as well. In doing so, having peers who can empathize more readily than your parent(s) could encourage further exploration as well.

Third, for international adoptees, this process of identity formation is an additive and accumulative process. For myself, I would say I have a reasonably thick wall to crack before you
genuinely get to feel the magic of the blue light special. For example, each moment in time, I became more aware or learned something different about myself, another layer of the onion. Moreover, I have always taken a piece of that moment with me into the next chapter of my life. I reflect on what I learned from it, usually boiling down to one or two key learning moments or gems of wisdom, awareness, and mindfulness, which would transfer to the next part of my journey. This accumulative and additive process solidified along the journey what it was that I wanted and what I was looking for in the explorations as an adopted individual. For me, it was essential to see how it affected me first, so then, I would be able to help other people’s journey be more comfortable to go through.

Through this addictive and accumulative process, international adoptees produce multiple social identities and categories (Jenkins 1999, 2000), such as an individual identity, a family identity, a cultural identity, and a reclaimed identity. By analyzing moments in time, these types of identities were showcased within my moments. Homeward bound illustrated a family identity, Getting in Touch with my Roots a cultural identity, The Age of Self-Policing a social identity, and Country-boy living a reclaimed identity.

Fourth, labeling kinship terms in anthropology is an issue that needs addressing. They have been used so long that it has a certain kind of connotation to it. Though there are plenty of occurrences of dissent between adoptees and adoptive parents, where the focus of genetic relatedness “by blood” could be a factor, domestic and international adoptees face scrutiny under “fictive kin.” Kinship studies in anthropology need to take subjective reality into account and stop using ‘fictive kin’ to describe the adoptive relationship. My family and those shaped by adoption are just like any other family at the end of the day.
Furthermore, delineating something as fictive takes away the significance of any established relationship that an adoptee has within their families. It is like taking the one last good thing that the adopted person might have away from him or her. Among parent-children relations, relationships among adopted kids and adopted parents are genuine. It is not “fictive kinship”; a parent is a parent; a parent’s child is their child. We have all the makings of a traditional family: bouts of fights, dinners together, family time. It is family, period.

Through conducting this research, collecting the data, and analyzing the data, considerable contributions were made within the topic, theory, and methodology. As a topic, it helps fill in the gap of adoption research within anthropology that is decades old on socialization and identity processes by providing a person-centered retrospective reflection on how individual international adoptees experience socialization and identity. It further contributes to the long-standing research regarding identity and the self.

**Future Research**

While cultural anthropology provided the basis by which only a small lens illuminated itself, the secondary addition of psychology provided the avenue by which to understand the individual experience more concretely. Using this thesis as a vehicle for future research, I encourage those also interested in the relationship between international adoption, identity, and belonging to incorporate these two disciplines in their research. By working together with psychologists, cultural anthropologists will be able to ground “thick descriptive” experiences (Geertz 1973) and add another layer of analysis to their studies. This added layer, a psychological perspective, will provide to the research a frame of mind on how these intricacies of social, political, economic, and cultural structures shape individuals on a personal level.
This process of intersecting my auto-ethnographic narrative with theoretical frameworks has produced several initial insights that could form the basis for future research: 1) The relationship between international adoption and identity is context-specific; 2) Participation within cultural affinity groups might encourage self-agentic explorations of one’s birth culture; 3) Identity building for adoptees is an additive process; and 4) Cultural anthropology’s traditional use of “fictive kin” to describe any relationship of adoptees to their new adopted family is problematic because it disregards the “realness” of the family that an individual adoptee feels, the relationship between international adoption and identity is multifaceted and encompasses minor and significant milestones, and now I can provide some answers to these research questions.

Incorporating other international adoptees’ voices continues to be essential, and while the pandemic continues to be on people’s minds, with “normalcy” still a work in progress, incorporation of these voices must take into account further precautions. Typically, in inductive studies, hypotheses tend not to be proven or disproven; instead, insights accumulate and become working explanations. Perhaps with more research, the working explanations I have built from my research here about the relationship between identity, belonging, and international adoption could provide working hypotheses for future researchers to explore. For future research, these hypotheses might include:

1. International adoptees who live in a racially homogenous community are more likely to face issues of identity in regard to belonging
2. A sense of belonging through participation in social groups and functions will act as a buffer to encourage a sense of self and agency
3. The age at which an individual is adopted will impact their need or desire for a bicultural identity
Further research can incorporate this two-pronged approach found within this thesis. An additional question asked to compare and contrast adult adoptees’ experience in their “growing up years” is to see how these experiences vary and in what ways do they do so? This question is another added layer in which one could contribute literature to understanding the personal experiences of socialization and identity within cultural anthropology. Also, one might ask how specific contexts (within the family, neighborhood, school, and country) impact how an international adoptee understands who they are and in what way being adopted becomes salient to them.

The use of child developmental models such as Vygotsky’s (1978) and Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) concerning the adoption experience could, in future research, be used to contextualize and connect the impacts and influences of the proximal and distal spheres. These spheres of influence can be further contextualized within the Asian American Identity Model proposed by Kim (1981). In so doing, concrete answers to the above hypotheses and takeaways could be extrapolated not only for other Asian American adoptees but for all adoptees in further studies. Future studies focusing especially on adult adoptees who have a lifetime of experience to share could also be done for the purpose of filling a still-extant gap in the field of anthropological adoption studies. In conclusion, in this thesis, I have shared and analyzed my auto-ethnographic account of the internal and external processes involved with growing up as an international adoptee, in the hope that that my initial reflexive exploration of the topic will spark more inquiry.
References


Chang, Heewon. 2008. *Autoethnography as Method.* Walnut Creek; Left Coast Press.


