‘HOW DO WE PRONOUNCE OUR SKIN IN ENGLISH’: RECORDS OF TRANSRACIAL, TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR ARCHIVAL WORK

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Abstract

In the last decade, archival scholars have begun to deeply reflect upon the experiences of individuals and communities as they interact with administrative and bureaucratic records. What they have found is that there is a significant gap between the emotional experiences of records activators and the experiences that archival repositories are prepared to address. Emerging from these realizations is a call for archivists to better understand the experiences of the personal-in-the-bureaucratic and to take up reparative, caring, and rights-based frameworks in order to respond to these previously unaddressed needs. This thesis builds of existing case studies and concepts within community, personal, and reparative archival spaces and explores the records experiences of a community that has not yet been significantly studied within the discipline: adoptees. Through semi-structured interviews that utilize oral history and object elicitation techniques, this thesis maps out connections between transracial, transnational adoptee experiences of their records and scholarship from the field of adoption studies that examine strategies for constructing identity and a sense of belonging and seeks to connect it to archival concepts of the relational, the silent, and the imaginary. Ultimately, in addition to acting as a space for participants to share their stories—which directly demonstrate the ability of records to both create and collapse space for unanswerable questions—this thesis seeks to take up existing calls to archivists and recordkeepers to consider the impact of the bureaucratic on the personal and how addressing personal-within-the-institutional experiences of records is an urgent and necessary facet for consideration as we move forward into more caring practice.

Lay Summary

In this thesis, I spoke with twelve transracial, transnational adoptees in order to try and understand their experiences of interacting with records that document their adoption. Through connecting these conversations to existing scholarship in the archival studies field, a scholarly area which is concerned with the making and keeping of records, I argue that the emotional responses that adoptees have to records and the disappointments that they often encounter when looking for information about their pasts are an important area of study for archivists.

Preface

This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author, M.X. Ballin. The fieldwork reported in Chapters 2- 4 was covered by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate number H21-03122.

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This project would also not have been completed without my being able to learn both in person and from a distance on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people. I am immensely aware of my privilege to conduct research on this land, and to have also completed some of the work while living on the land where I grew up, which is the unceded, ancestral homeland of the Tamyen and Ramaytush Ohlone peoples. Indigenous communities around the world have been greatly affected and often traumatised by transracial adoption practices. While this is not a topic covered in this thesis, it is a fact that was never far from my mind. I am grateful to the Indigenous scholars and adoptees who have contributed to the body of scholarship that I drew from for this work and hope that this thesis, though not centring their voices, will add to the larger body of scholarship that elevates experiences of adoptees and highlights the need for more emotionally sensitive and culturally competent post-adoption services.

I am immensely grateful for the support of my supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Douglas. Without her patience and shaping, this project would not be half of what it is today. I am constantly inspired by her desire to centre care, friendship, and compassion in her research and know that my work has been made infinitely better as a result of her guidance and mentorship. Jennifer, being able to work with you for the past two years has been an incredible joy in a rather gloomy time. Thank you for your encouragement and feedback as I have attempted to find my voice.

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Although in some ways a solo effort, a thesis is not completed in a vacuum. To Amelia E., Sasha, Allison, and Y Vy, thank you for your listening ears, your celebrations of tiny milestones, and for helping me feel connected even when I was writing alone.

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For my mother, Arleen.

Without you, I would not be me.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"How do we pronounce our skin in English,
turn our silences inside out like a fox fur stole.
The Korean fox with nine tails is a demon,
always a woman, her heart thick with dreams."[1]

In the fall of 2019, in my first term of my archival studies program, I was asked to practice arranging and describing records by analysing my own fonds.[2] "Brainstorm your fonds!" my class notes read, and what follows is a list with the heading 'Activities that result in records.' "Work, music performance, studying," I jotted down, and at the end I added: "being adopted." This record of my initial thoughts about my own fonds' arrangement interests me for several reasons. The first is that while all of the other activities are things that I actively choose to do in my life, this last 'activity' is something that I am 'being,' something that I am. And yet I've also worded it as a state, the state of having been adopted rather than being 'an adoptee.' This distinction is notable for my thinking and this work because the term 'adoptee' has been on my mind a lot recently. As part of my research, I have been engaging more with people who view 'adoptee' as their preferred term of identification. Rather than being someone who 'was adopted,' who had something happen to them or someone who experienced something in the past, many in the adoptee community see 'adoptee' as a term they identify with because it offers the opportunity to 'be' rather than 'experience' a state of being adopted. 'Being' an 'adoptee' signifies a recognition that adoption is a continued experience and not just of the past. It places adoptees' experiences in the present at the same time as it signifies something of their past. This perspective is not without pushback or disagreement, even from within the adoptee community.

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[1] Sun Yung Shin, *granted to a foreign citizen* (Vancouver: ArtSpeak, 2020), 15.
[2] For the uninitiated, in archives-speak, my 'fonds' essentially would refer to all of the records that I have about me, that document my existence, that I have kept as part of going about my daily life.

In their introduction to the anthology *Outsiders Within*: *Writing on Transracial Adoption*, editors Julia Chinyere Oparah, Sun Yung Shin, and Jane Jeong Trenka offer the note: "We recognize that the word 'adoptee' is problematic. 'Adoptee' is a derivative from the verb 'to adopt.' The term negates any agency for the one who is the object of the adopter—the only one assumed to act. In this book, we seek to reclaim this term and boldly declare our agency and self-determination."[3] With this reclamatory purpose in mind, I choose to use the word 'adoptee' in the majority of this work to celebrate this spirit and in recognition of those for whom this term holds that particular power. In instances where discomfort or a lack of identification with the term has been expressed, other preferred terms are employed.

While I still personally float in an in-between space – seeing my adoption as somewhat more of a past event and also identifying it as something that *I am* to the point of saying 'I am an adoptee' – I do agree that being adopted is something that greatly affects how I view the world. For me, seeing myself choose the phrasing 'being adopted,' is almost a bridge between the two options. I was adopted in the past but being a person with that history affects how I view the world and, more specifically for the purpose of this research, how records by and about me have been created since. Adoption, although a singular event that occurs at a particular point in time, continues to have a great effect not only on how the world perceives adoptees, but also on how we must submit ourselves to scrutiny in social and bureaucratic contexts.[4] Adoptees often

[3] Julia Chinyere Oparah, Sun Yung Shin, and Jane Jeong Trenka, "Introduction," in *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, ed. Trenka, Oparah, and Shin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 15.

[4] See amongst others Amanda L. Baden, "'Do You Know Your *Real* Parents?' and Other Adoption Microaggressions," *Adoption Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2016): 1-25; Sara Docan-Morgan, "Korean Adoptees' Retrospective Reports of Intrusive Interactions: Exploring Boundary Management in Adoptive Families," *Journal of Family Communication* 10, no. 3 (2010): 137-157.

experience interrogation of their belonging to a wide variety of groups with which they hold kinship, as this kinship is less often an intrinsic connection of biological belonging or generational identity, but one that is substantiated by socialisation and ultimately often confirmed or made 'truth' through the creation of records. What these records mean and what they signify for adoptees is at the heart of what this research begins to explore. While it is possible to look at the myriad of documents created through the process of adoption and view them as documentation of a past action—something that has happened and is over, a connection made and legalised—when adoptees continually have to recount their adoption stories or show this paperwork to those who doubt their validity, are documents and stories truly of the past?

To return to the inclusion of 'being adopted' as an 'activity' that contributes to my fonds, much of the impetus for this project comes from my experiences thinking about adoption as a record-producing activity and the ways my experience of being adopted has (and hasn't) been captured in those documents. I have certainly heard stories about and seen documentation of my adoption in the past, but now that I have a new vocabulary with which to consider how these documents were created, and how they relate to my life, I am finding that interacting with and thinking about these records brings new perspective both to how I understand archives and how I understand (my) adoption. This project stems from an interest in bridging existing archival scholarship and adoptee experience of records. Through exploring the experiences of other transracial, transnational adoptees in relation to their records and considering how these experiences align and differ from existing explorations of the use and meaning of records to other displaced and/or diasporic peoples as well as individuals or communities who have experienced a form of loss, I hope to identify areas in which the specific experiences of adoptees can contribute to existing discussions and considerations of archival practice. I also hope to make

this a validating project for transracial adoptees, offering a new perspective through which collective experiences and emotions can be expressed and identified as academically valid and, looking forward into the future, be practically supported by a professional community should that be an avenue of interest.

1.1 Research questions

In order to begin to make a connection between adoptee lived experiences and archival scholarship, my research was inspired by the following questions:

1. What are some of the ways that the records of transracial Chinese and Korean adoptees fit into how they construct their adoption narratives or the narratives that might have been constructed for them as children?

2. In what ways do transracial Chinese and Korean adoptees interact with these records—either physically or metaphorically—when they construct and perform their personal identities later in life?

Ultimately, through the work that follows, I hope to explore the ways both existing and imagined records appear in or are absent from adoption narratives as well as examine how their presence/absence may hold space for and influence an individual's construction of their identity and their personal story.

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 A place to begin: establishing the landscape of archival studies and archival science

Archival scholarship as a whole involves a variety of highly specific terminology with highly specific definitions for how it is used. These definitions and understandings have emerged from a European bureaucratic recordkeeping tradition,[5] and generally conceive of an archival

[5] Particularly influential works include Samuel Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives,* 2nd ed., trans. Arthur H. Leavitt (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), which was first published in 1898; and Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual for Archive Administration*, 2nd ed. (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co., 1937).

collection as the body of documents that have been "officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials, in so far as these documents were intended to remain in the custody of that body or that official." [6] Whether or not something is understood to be a 'record' in this context is determined based on a theoretical rubric that assesses its participation in this official business and several other 'qualities' that a record, it has been determined, should have.[7] Within this traditional context, the purpose of the record is primarily centred on the actions of the institution that created them from their own perspective and, as is mentioned in early and influential archival manuals, the expectation is that these records were not intended for distribution outside of their creating institutions. As Terry Eastwood suggests, a body of institutional records "[stands] as residue and evidence of the transaction of affairs, and provides the means to account for them."[8] This ability for records to account for actions makes them of use to individuals and organizations outside of their original context; nevertheless, to be traditionally defined as records they must not be created with external audiences and uses inherently in mind.

Where initially archival theory intentionally excluded bodies of documents that were personal in nature, the discipline and its scholarship have come to consider the definitions, existence, uses, and experiences of records in a wide variety of recordkeeping contexts, including those instigated by and for individuals or communities in what have been labelled as personal and community archives respectively. Within the last decade, as personal archives have become an increasingly widely-accepted realm of archives, there has been an emerging focus on the

[6] Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, 13.
[7] See, amongst others, Terry Eastwood, "What Is Archival Theory and Why Is It Important?," *Archivaria* 37 (1994): 122-30.
[8] Eastwood, "What is Archival Theory," 126.

personal experience of the traditional archival focus of institutionally created, institutionally focused records, or what is often referred to 'bureaucratic records.' Through both autoethnography and qualitative research, archival scholars have begun to trace the myriad of ways in which records created by institutions for procedural use cannot be viewed in isolation from the lives that they document. Where traditional archival conceptions of records might view these documents as belonging and relevant only to the institutions that created them, the importance of these documents to the individuals and communities that are documented within them and the ways they have been drawn upon for a variety of purposes, this area of scholarship argues, cannot be ignored. There are two approaches to archival ethics that have dominated conversations about what can and should be done to respond to the needs of individuals in relation to institutional records and their access: rights-based and care-based approaches.

Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor articulate that a rights-based approach is a framework in which "records are seen as tools of legal accountability, and both archivists and users are constructed as autonomous individual subjects,"[9] whereas a care-based approach "replaces the abstract legal and moral obligations of archivists as liberal autonomous individuals... with an affective responsibility to engage in radical empathy with others, seen and unseen."[10] Both of these approaches are characterised by scholarship that focuses on the needs of marginalised communities who are in some way left out of the traditional model of archival procedures and conceptions of who is involved and makes use of a record, and they both aim to create a more equitable space for experiencing and using records. Where they differ is primarily rooted in how

[9] Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81 (2016): 27.
[10] Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 42.

they conceptualise and understand issues of access and the experience of records as well as the solutions that they offer to the archival community to address these issues.

James Lowry, a scholar who works predominantly from a rights-based perspective, offers a particularly salient example of how the differences in the two approaches might produce very different conclusions about the same set of records, using the example of the displaced archives[11] of French-ruled Algeria:

> ... thinking juridically about the Algerian records in France might focus on colonial Algeria's representation in the French parliament and conclude that those records are properly French national property. ... Applications of [critical care-based] theory would also show that the act of displacement has permanent consequences that may not otherwise be recognised by governments and other actors—the archival imaginaries that are opened up may be impossible to close and might become, instead, part of the historical and cultural understanding of the relations between actors.[12]

The legalistic focus of rights-based perspectives, though restrictive of decolonial praxis in the above case, can be useful in working to establish protections and standards of documentation for marginalised communities who create or utilise records "irregularly."[13] Lowry and Anne Gilliland, for example, are the principal investigators for a project called the Refugee Rights in Records (R3) Initiative, which has brought together a variety of scholars to characterise the experience of refugees in recognition of the fact that "personal documentation and particularly

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[11] Which he defines as archives that have been removed from the context of their creation where the removals "are arguably not illicit thefts but somehow legitimised or defensible by virtue of the fact of their being removed by states, regimes or exiled groups rather than individuals." James Lowry, *Displaced Archives* (London: Routledge, 2017), 4.

[12] James Lowry, "Radical empathy, the imaginary and affect in (post)colonial records: how to break out of international stalemates on displaced archives," *Archival Science* 19 (2019): 199-200. A more in-depth case study of these records is provided by Todd Shepherd in *Displaced Archives,* ed. James Lowry (London: Routledge, 2017), 21-40.

[13] Anne Gilliland. "A Matter of Life and Death: A Critical Examination of the Role of Official Records and Archives in Supporting the Agency of the Forcibly Displaced" in "Critical Archival Studies," ed. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017).

official records are pervasive and integral to [displacement crisis response] and to recovery, yet human-centric documentation needs are under-supported."[14] Rights-based approaches create frameworks that affirm that marginalised communities have a right to documentation that is sensitive to their needs, and more specifically official documentation that conforms to archival definitions of a record. While, as will be discussed below, archival scholarship and community-based practices have begun to open up the definition of archives and records beyond traditional Western conceptions of their form, traditional archival records have been recognized as important to social justice initiatives in their own right because "the evidential value of archival records gives them greater power—as legal documents, as evidence in court, and as agents of accountability."[15]

As Lowry demonstrates in the case of the Algerian displaced archives, it is possible for rights-based and care-based approaches to look at the same case study and emerge with widely different conclusions on how the records should be viewed or acted upon. Where a rights-based approach is more likely to focus on establishing rules for records creation and access, care-based approaches tend to focus on the experience of records and how emotional response might be acknowledged and addressed through archival work. Jennifer Douglas and Allison Mills call for attention to be paid to emotional experiences of bureaucratic records as a way of developing a deeper understanding of how archivists might define 'the personal.' The authors focus on the idea of "activating institutional records for personal reasons," a type of recordkeeping 'irregularity' in that archival perspective on the records' purpose would be their use for official,

[14] "Refugee Rights in Records (R3) Initiative Overview," UCLA Center for Information as Evidence, accessed March 23, 2022, https://informationasevidence.org/refugee-rights-in-records
[15] Wendy M. Duff et al., "Social justice impact of archives: a preliminary investigation," *Archival Science* 13 (2013): 332.

institutional business that necessitated their creation. The alienation and frustrations that both authors express feeling when activating bureaucratic records that are about themselves or their family members, they argue, is a site for greatly needed consideration in archival praxis that seeks to centre an ethics of care. Douglas and Mills suggest that archivists should be attempting to understand "how our archival interfaces facilitate or inhibit the personal relationships that might exist between our records and those who create, shape and consult them"[16] as a way of making archives emotionally aware and responsive spaces. This, they argue, is a professional responsibility of archivists in order to "do right by"[17] the "people in our care."[18]

1.2.2 Archival silences and imaginaries

In addition to considerations of access and ownership, a central concept explored in archival scholarship is that of archival silences and archival imaginaries. Verne Harris emphasised the fact that archives are only ever capable of preserving "a sliver of a sliver of a sliver" of the records that document any particular event, community, or society, and called for archivists to acknowledge "the importance of disclosing what is absent from the archival sliver."[19] Nearly a decade later, Rodney Carter revisited this idea of silences and their continued (un)intentional presence in archives and archival work. He observes that "when a silence is discovered, there is the automatic desire to fill it with records"[20] and, like Harris, called on

[16] Jennifer Douglas and Allison Mills, "From the sidelines to the center: reconsidering the potential of the personal in archives," *Archival Science* 18 (2018): 274.
[17] A phrase introduced to the archival community in Catherine Hobbs, "Personal Ethics: Being an Archivist of Writers." In *Basements and Attics, Closets and Cyberspace: Explorations in Canadian Women's Archives*, ed. Linda M. Morra, and Jessica Schagerl (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 181–192.
[18] Douglas and Mills, "From the Sidelines to the Center," 275.
[19] Verne Harris, "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa," *Archivaria* 44 (1997): 137.
[20] Rodney G.S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria* 61 (2006): 225.

archivists to "begin to address past injustices and fill the archives with a polyphony of voices."[21] Discussion of silences exists in both rights-based and care-based scholarship, and these conversations are a central element of what scholars identify as a site for archival activism.

An emerging focus within archival scholarship on the concepts of the (impossible) archival imaginary and imagined records attempts to characterize these silences and how communities have responded to them. Introduced to the field by Caswell in 2014, the concept of the archival imaginary engages with Arjun Appadurai's conceptualization of a shared imaginary, or a "constructed landscape of shared aspirations."[22] Informed by a community's past experiences of archives, archival imaginaries constitute the imagining of future records creation practices, recordkeeping practices, and archival practices to either reinforce or deconstruct existing standards. The archival imaginary itself is agnostic in terms of the type of archival paradigm it engages with; Caswell argues that imaginaries are just as present in the projections of the future made by traditional archives—who often wish to simply continue the status quo and maintain extant silences—as they are in identity-based community archives that inherently challenge what it means to archive and be archived. Although present across archives, the concept of the imaginary is particularly potent for liberatory practices, as it helps to describe how community-led and/or community-centred archives and archivists might "place the work of uncovering what happened in the past in service of building socially just futures."[23]

Gilliland and Caswell elaborate on the concept of archival imaginaries in a paper that proposes the concept of the "impossible archival imaginary," which is used to refer to "situations

[21]Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid," 233.
[22] Michelle Caswell, "Inventing new archival imaginaries: Theoretical foundations for identity-based community archives." In *Identity palimpsests: Ethnic archiving in the U.S. and Canada*, ed. Dominique Daniel and Amalia Levi (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2014), 48.
[23] Caswell, "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries," 51.

where the archive and its hoped-for contents are absent or forever unattainable."[24] They discuss how communities engage in the exploration of impossible archival imaginaries through both the mental and physical work of creating records that do not exist, what they call "imagined records," those that are "never-to-materialize, but pregnant with the possibility of establishing a proof, a perspective, a justice that heretofore has remained unattainable."[25] The authors assert that it is part of the duty of archivists to consider and engage with these impossible archival imaginaries and their resulting imagined records despite their intangibility, because "outside the realms of legal and bureaucratic evidence it can be demonstrated, time and again, that whatever society, agency, community or individual acts upon or invests in as a record, indeed functions in that context as a record."[26] Communities create imagined records as a way of processing grief, validating their experiences, and justifying their point of view. While imagined records hold a different space in legal frameworks as compared to traditional, tangible records, socially, Caswell and Gilliland argue, they have just as much if not more capital.

Some of the most potent examples of imagined records in archival scholarship involve explorations of how communities and individuals subvert the idea of the impossible being impossible.[27] Douglas's work with bereaved parents and their records presents an important study of how silences and/or absences might lead individuals or communities dealing with loss to not only imagine, but to create and manifest records of a kind of imaginary. Douglas and

[24] Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, "Records and their imaginaries: imagining the impossible, making possible the imagined," *Archival Science* 16 (2016): 61.
[25] Gilliland and Caswell, "Records and their imaginaries," 72.
[26] Gilliland and Caswell, "Records and their imaginaries," 57.
[27] In addition to the work that follows, see, for example, Hariz Halilovich, "Re-imaging and re-imagining the past after 'memoricide': intimate archives as inscribed memories of the missing." *Archival Science* 16 (2016): 77–92.

Alexandra Alisauskas demonstrate how records work[28] has enabled bereaved parents to have an active relationship with the children they have lost.[29] Records do not a body make, even when records can evoke the body,[30] but the authors found that the parents they spoke with have created ways "to remember, to stay connected to, to parent, and to imagine their babies" through incorporating recordkeeping as part of their processes of both grieving and loving their children. While the last verb, 'to imagine,' is the literal connection to the concept of the imaginary, all of the parents' records work that the authors identify involves an aspect of making real relationships and relational responsibilities that might otherwise have felt unattainable. Recordkeeping as a kind of parenting and as a means of communicating, of demonstrating and expressing love in loss, is a way of making real what otherwise might be dismissed as imagined, phantom connections. Douglas and Alisauskas conclude the article with a call for new considerations of what should constitute a record in the eyes of the archival community, writing, "we... propose that adoption of a 'grief work lens' and/or learning to look with love can lead to recognition of a wider range of record types and to acknowledgement of creators' agency in defining for themselves what constitutes a record."[31] Through acknowledging the agency that communities

[28] Which they along with Devon Mordell defined in a previous article as both people working with records and records 'performing' work for people. Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisauskas, and Devon Mordell, "'Treat Them With the Reverence of Archivists:' Records Work, Grief Work and Relationship Work in the Archives," *Archivaria* 88 (2019): 84-120.
[29] Jennifer Douglas and Alexandra Alisauskas, "'It Feels like a Life's Work': Recordkeeping as an Act of Love," *Archivaria* 91 (2021): 6-37.
[30] See amongst others: Jamie A. Lee, "Archives as Spaces of Radical Hospitality." *Australian Feminist Studies* 36, no. 108 (2021): 156-164; Jamie A. Lee, "Be/longing in the archival body: Eros and the endearing value of material lives," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016), 33-51; Marika Cifor, "Presence, Absence, and Victoria's Hair: Examining Affect and Embodiment in Trans Archives," *TSQ* 2, no. 4 (2015): 645–649; Marika Cifor, "Stains and Remains: Liveliness, Materiality and the Archival Lives of Queer Bodies," In *Archives and New Modes of Feminist Research*, ed. Maryanne Dever (London: Routledge, 2018), 5-21.
[31] Douglas and Alisauskas, "It Feels Like a Life's Work," 34.

have to create records outside of institutional archives and to imbue these materials with the same power that archival studies has understood records to have, it might be possible to find that there are fewer imaginaries than archival scholars might imagine. This is echoed in other scholarship that explores how silences in traditional archives have been subverted through the creation of alternate recordkeeping spaces. One example of this is the work of Gabriel D. Solis and the Texas After Violence Project to elevate and give collective legitimacy to oral histories of individuals affected by state violence. On pondering the "truthfulness" of archives where records are intentionally created for the purpose of their being archived,[32] Solis argues that "Archives of survival seek truth, but not the 'truth' sought by repressive justice systems. The truths sought by liberatory memory work are raw, relational, revelatory."[33] If, as an act of care, we were to include in our scholarly lens those materials imbued with the 'power' of records work regardless of their relevance to the 'archival' rubric, what new ways might we be able to serve communities who have been wronged, silenced, or ignored by contemporary archival work?

1.2.3 Bridging rights and an ethics of care: the case study of care leavers' records

While rights-based and care-based approaches have thus far been placed in relative opposition to one another, archival scholarship that has focused on the experience of care leavers— a term which is used to refer to "anyone who has spent any time at any point in the care of the state, whether that be residential care (inclusive of secure settings), foster care or

[32] An act that goes against the 'traditional' understanding of what makes a document an archival record. These acts can be aligned with the concept of 'archive intervention,' a concept conceived by Lubaina Himid and explored in, amongst others: Rebecka Taves Sheffield, "The Bedside Table Archives: Archive Intervention and Lesbian Intimate Domestic Culture," *Radical History Review* 120 (2014): 108-120.
[33] Gabriel D. Solis, "Documenting State Violence: (Symbolic) Annihilation and Archives of Survival," *KULA* 2, no. 1 (2018): 9.

kinship care"[34]—has used care and relationality to imagine both rights-based and care-based solutions to archival silences. Research endeavours such as the MIRRA Project in the UK[35] and the 'Who Am I?' project in Australia[36] have sought to understand the recordkeeping practices that exist presently in situations of institutional care for the purpose of exploring how recordkeeping and archival systems have impacted the ability of care leavers to understand their childhoods. These projects have identified gaps in institutionally-created records and barriers to access that have been particularly problematic for care leavers' purposes of identity building. Shurlee Swain and Nell Musgrove, for example, note that "[p]eople look to the records of their time in 'care' for self validation, but the surviving records are frequently sketchy and disjointed, providing at best only partial, and often quite damaging answers to such questions as: 'why was I put into 'care'; 'what happened to me while I was there', and; 'why did 'care' providers treat me in that way?"[37]

Researchers and care leavers—some of whom are researchers in the archival field themselves[38]—advocate for the creation of greater documentation of the life of the child that is responsive to information that care leavers have expressed. Joanne Evans et al. call for archivists to take a rights-based approach and to foster the creation of policies and practices that support

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[34] Access To Records Campaign Group. "It's My Journey: It's My Life! Care leavers and access to social care files" (Manchester: The Care Leavers Association, 2016).
[35] Victoria Hoyle, et al. "Child Social-Care Recording and the Information Rights of Care-Experienced People: A Recordkeeping Perspective," *The British Journal of Social Work* 49, no. 7 (2019):1856-74.
[36] To which almost an entire issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* was dedicated in 2012, the introduction of which being Gavan J McCarthy, Shurlee Swain and Cate O'Neill, "Archives, identity and survivors of out-of-home care," *Archives and Manuscripts* 40, no. 1 (2012): 1-3.
[37] Shirley Swain and Nell Musgrove, "We are the stories we tell about ourselves: child welfare records and the construction of identity among Australians who, as children, experienced out-of-home 'care'," *Archives and Manuscripts* 40 (2012): 9.
[38]Frank Golding, "The Care Leaver's perspective," *Archives and Manuscripts* 44, no. 3 (2016): 160-164.

the archival autonomy of care leavers. They define this autonomy as "the ability for individuals and communities to participate in societal memory, with their own voice, becoming participatory agents in recordkeeping and archiving for identity, memory and accountability purposes."[39] Conversations in rights-based contexts about the experiences of care leavers have led to projects such as the still-in-progress development of the Charter of Lifelong Rights in Childhood Recordkeeping in Out-Of-Home Care in Australia, which likens its approach to that of the R3 initiative, and imagines that it will "support the actualisation of the human rights" of the community whose perspective and needs they centre.[40] Researchers advocate for the creation of greater documentation of the life of the child so that what is currently an archival imaginary might become a recordkeeping reality for future children in care.

Although some of the focus of rights-based policy building attempts to incorporate new considerations for current records, the implications are mostly forward-thinking, aiming to "learn from past mistakes" and "apply that learning to current and future recordkeeping practices."[41] Scholars that centre care in their approach to solutions tend to focus more intently on how care leavers experience existing records and recordkeeping systems. Evans et al. invoke the rights of care leavers as their motivation for their work, and at the same time offer examples of how extralegal tools have sought to honour care leaver's experiences through considering the relationships that are established by archival systems in a relational and care-based way. The Find and Connect Web Resource, described in the chapter as well as in additional Australian

[39] Joanne Evans et al., "Self-determination and archival autonomy: advocating activism," *Archival Science* 15 (2015): 356-7.
[40] Frank Golding et al., "Rights in records: a Charter of Lifelong Rights in Childhood Recordkeeping in Out of-Home Care for Australian and Indigenous Australian children and care leavers", *The International Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 9 (2021): 1644.
[41] Golding et al., "Rights in records," 1643.

scholarship on care leaver records,[42] is a government-funded tool that is part of a larger program that represents "national government commitment to enhanced family tracing and records discovery, access and support services" for care leavers in Australia.[43] The resource rejects the limitations of records description that have resulted from the traditional archival description paradigm—which focuses on depicting the nature of records in relation to their archivally-defined creator—to additionally create description that reflects how care leavers might seek to use them. Identification of the information needs of care leavers has occurred through extensive feedback and input from the community.[44] What has emerged are not only descriptions of existing records that are more relevant to care leavers, but also descriptions that "[own] up to the limitations of the documentation, the shortcomings of appraisal systems which have seen so few records survive, and [seek] to establish a relationship with the person looking for their records."[45] This work presents an example of how archivists are attempting to be better prepared to assist in the navigation of these records, recognizing that, to use the words of Michael Jones and O'Neill, "whether the person finds something or nothing, the whole experience may be stressful, emotional and even traumatic."[46] These efforts align well with a much larger call across the archival community to recognize the power of archival description, how it has in its traditional forms perpetuated exclusionary practices in the archives, and to consider how future

[42] See for example Michael Jones and Cate O'Neill, "Identity, records and archival evidence: exploring the needs of Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants," *Archives and Records* 35, no. 2 (2014): 110-125.
[43] Joanne Evans, et al. "'All I want to know is who I am': Archival justice for Australian care leavers." In *Archives, Recordkeeping, and Social Justice*, ed. David A. Wallace et al. (London: Routledge, 2020).
[44] See amongst others Shirley Swain, "Stakeholders as Subjects: The Role of Historians in the Development of Australia's Find and Connect Web Resource," *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 38–50. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.38.
[45] Evans et al., "All I Want To Know Is Who I Am," 114
[46] Jones and O'Neill, "Identity, records and archival evidence," 120.

decisions regarding language and form are necessary steps towards equity and reconciliatory practice.[47]

As a body of literature, archival engagement with care leavers and their records is representative of both rights-based and care-based approaches and presents a many-textured example of how archival studies literature is reconsidering many of its practices to open the field to more diverse understandings and experiences of the concept of a record. The work being done with and by care leavers challenges archivists to be activists and to "transform the way that archival and recordkeeping systems connect and communicate and are threaded into the community, organisational and social fabrics."[48] The findings of this research identify responsibilities in recordkeeping that extend beyond archivists alone. In addition to those who work to maintain and preserve records following their creation, the landscape of recordkeeping includes a variety of other actors[49] that can include the institutions that are creating records (and within them the individual workers who actually put pen to paper) and the governing bodies at all levels that set policies for what these records should contain and attempt to hold organizations accountable for respecting the rights of individuals in these records.

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[47] See Anne Gilliland, "Contemplating Co-creator Rights in Archival Description," *Knowledge Organization* 39, No.5 (2012): 340-346; K. J. Rawson (2018) The Rhetorical Power of Archival Description: Classifying Images of Gender Transgression, Rhetoric Society Quarterly, 48:4, 327-351, DOI: 10.1080/02773945.2017.1347951; Danielle Robichaud, "Integrating Equity and Reconciliation Work into Archival Descriptive Practice at the University of Waterloo," *Archivaria* 91 (2021): 73-103.

[48] Evans, et al, "Self-determination and archival autonomy," 359.

[49] A term employed both in the previously discussed Lowry article above as well as in care leaver centred work to reconsider the scope of recordkeeping such as in Elizabeth Lomas, et al., "A framework for person-centred recordkeeping drawn through the lens of out-of-home childcare contexts," *Archivaria* 94 (forthcoming).

1.2.4 Turning to adoption: considering the implications of adoptee experiences for archival work

The situations of care leavers and adoptees in the context of recordkeeping are not expressly the same. Most literature on care leavers identifies records as being essential to identity building because of a lack of continuity of those around them to be able to narrate their childhood and family story.[50] In the case of adoptees, there is often[51] at least one parent or family member present who can help to collect and later share post-adoption childhood memories as well as family stories that the adoptee can call their own. A child's adoption story in and of itself is often a source of family mythologizing and storytelling,[52] and adoptees' stories are commonly explored in the realm of fiction and nonfiction for and by adoptees.[53] There is, however, similarity in the absence or limited availability of records to answer questions that adoptees might seek to answer about their past. As such, I argue that adoptees present a related but unique case study that offers additional perspective and opportunity to explore records definitions and to contribute one answer the question posed by Douglas and Alisauskas: "With its narrow focus on both archives of government and on records that have been—or certainly will be—acquired by

[50] See, for example, Cathy Humphreys and Margaret Kertesz, "'Putting the Heart Back into the Record': Personal Records to Support Young People in Care," *Adoption and Fostering* 36, no 1 (2012): 27–39.
[51] Although not always, as will be explored in later parts of this work
[52] Patricia Sawin, "Every kid is where they're supposed to be, and it's a miracle": Family formation stories among adoptive families," *Journal of American Folklore* 130, no. 518 (2017): 394-418.
[53] As discussed in works such as Sarah Y Park, "Representations of Transracial Korean Adoption in Children's Literature." PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009; Margaret Homans, *The Imprint of Another Life: Adoption Narratives and Human Possibility* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Kelly Jerome and Kathryn Sweeney. "Birth Parents' Portrayals in Children's Adoption Literature" *Journal of Family Issues* 35, no. 5 (2014): 677-704; and Macarena García-González *Origin Narratives: The Stories We Tell Children about Immigration and International Adoption* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

archival institutions, what has archival theory missed?"[54] What follows is an attempt to characterise the immense body of literature that has been written about adoption and adoptees and to relate it to themes within archival scholarship as a way of setting the scene for my own work.

Present throughout adoption conversations is the concept of the adoption triad (or triangle), which is a term that is commonly referred to, but of which I could not find the discursive origins. At its most basic level, it refers to the three 'participants' in adoption, the adoptive parents, the biological parents, and the adoptee. The concept of the triad is typically referred to collectively, and each of the participants are viewed to be 'members' of its form.[55] While visual depictions of the triad often employ an equilateral triangle as its symbol, the power dynamics within the relationships that constitute it are not typically conceptualized as balanced. Amanda Baden et al., for example, note that "Adoptive parents are typically viewed as the part of the triad that has the most power and the greatest number of choices."[56] Adoption scholarship often explores the negotiation of the relationships and power between triad members, particularly through the lenses of kinship studies and family studies, developmental psychology and counselling, and communication and discourse studies. In addition to examining inter-triad relationships, studies have also sought to characterize the interactions of triad-members with external entities and the narratives of and perspectives on adoption that exist in wider societal

[54] Douglas and Alisaukas, "It feels like a life's work," 34.
[55]For example in Amanda L. Baden et al. "International Adoption: Counseling and the Adoption Triad," *Adoption Quarterly*, 16, no. 3-4 (2013): 218-237; Leslie Baxter et al. "Narrative Coherence in Online Stories Told by Members of the Adoption Triad," *Journal of Family Communication* 12, no. 4 (2012): 265-283; Madelyn Freundlich and Joy Kim Lieberthal, *The Impact of Adoption on Members of the Triad* (Washington, D.C: Child Welfare League of America, 2001).
[56] Baden et al, "International Adoption," 222.

contexts. In order to remain within the scope of this research, I will primarily focus on literature that centres the experience of the adoptee rather than other members of the triad and specifically on scholarship that focuses on the transracial and transnational adoption experience.

One theme across a variety of this literature is the concept of ambiguity and the performances of family and culture that both highlight and dispel its presence within adoptive families. Of particular importance for understanding this literature is the concept of family boundary ambiguity, defined by Pauline Boss and Jan Greenberg as "a state in which family members are uncertain in their perception about who is in or out of the family and who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system."[57] This is relevant for the experiences of transracial adoptees due to the fact that they often receive conflicting messages about their belonging to their families due to their "visible adoption."[58] At the same as they are receiving messages about how they belong to their adopted families from their family members,[59] this sense of belonging is continually challenged by normative conceptions of family. Devon R. Goss discusses how challenges to passing as kin occur as part of two phenomenon: the visibly perceived otherness of the adoptee within the context of their family—the hypervisibility of the adoptee as a racialized individual—and the ways in which people fail to identify the adoptee's role as a family member, instead assigning another, more 'typical' explanation for the racialized adoptee's presence such as their having the role of a caretaker or romantic partner. The

[57] Cited in Jason Carroll, Chad Olson, and Nicolle Buckmiller, "Family Boundary Ambiguity: A 30-Year Review of Theory, Research, and Measurement," *Family Relations* 56 (2007): 211.
[58] A term used by Kathleen Galvin to describe "families in which members' racial characteristics provide visual evidence of a lack of biological ties both to insiders and outsiders." Kathleen Galvin (2003) International and Transracial Adoption: A Communication Research Agenda, Journal of Family Communication, 3:4, 237-253.
[59] While this language can be perceived as positive in connotation, this is not always the experience. This is something I will return to in a moment.

"incomprehensibility" of their belonging is something that Goss found is not only external to the adoptee, but something they internalise and become hypersensitive to. She writes, "the hypervisibility of [an adoptee's] family formation, which inhibits their ability to blend in in public places, also draws their attention to the incomprehensibility of their family, leading them to wonder how their family is being interpreted by others."[60] One of the key ways that boundary ambiguity is dispelled is through parental strategies that are used to actively affirm the belonging of their child. Kimberly D. McKee notes, "Adoptive families mimic normative kinship in their desire to emerge as an authentic family. They actively '*do* family.' In other words, they continually perform their kinship to be read as legible and legitimate parent-child and sibling-sibling formations."[61]

Parental narratives and acts of boundary management are key ways adoptees begin to understand how to view themselves within their families, and also influence if and how they learn to explain that belonging to others.[62] In her work exploring Korean adoptees' experiences of their parents' external boundary management strategies during their childhood, Sara Docan-Morgan found that "parental responses can be extremely important to many adoptees, whose way

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[60] Devon R Goss, "'People's Heads Do Not Even Go There': Public Perceptions to Transracial Familial Intimacy," *The Sociological Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2018): 119.

[61]Kelly D. McKee, *Disrupting Kinship: Transnational Politics of Korean Adoption in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 72.

[62] For in-depth discussions, see amongst others: K. M. Galvin, "Diversity's Impact on Defining the Family: Discourse-Dependence and Identity," in *The Family Communication Sourcebook*, ed. L. H. Turner and R. West (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 3–19;
Leslie Rose Nelson and Colleen Warner Colaner, "Becoming a Transracial Family: Communicatively Negotiating Divergent Identities in Families Formed Through Transracial Adoption," *Journal of Family Communication*, 18, no. 1 (2018): 51-67; Elizabeth A. Suter,, Kristine L. Reyes, and Robert L. Ballard, "Parental Management of Adoptive Identities during Challenging Encounters: Adoptive Parents as 'Protectors' and 'Educators,'" *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 28, no. 2 (2011): 242–61; Sara Dorow and Amy Swiffen, "Blood and Desire: The Secret of Heteronormativity in Adoption Narratives of Culture." *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 3 (2009): 563-573.

of seeing themselves and their adoptive families may be impacted by how their parents respond to issues of race and racial difference."[63] There is extensive literature that explores how internal and external boundary management work performed by parents can be both affirming and alienating for the adoptee, particularly depending on how parents choose to construct narratives of belonging in relation to culture and race and whether or not they acknowledge their child's racialization and their adoption.[64] In addition to parental boundary management work, it is also important to consider the adoptee's experience of navigating and constructing these boundaries with some amount of independence. This independence can be legal independence, but more frequently begins sooner, in situations where children are asked to speak to themselves and their stories without their parents beside them to perform kinship asserting work, something that Docan-Morgan calls "adoptee-only interactions."[65] As John Raible notes, "Once they grow beyond the cute and cuddly early childhood stage, transracial adoptees will predictably experience racism from various individuals and institutions they encounter."[66]

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[63] Sara Docan-Morgan, "Korean Adoptees' Retrospective Reports of Intrusive Interactions: Exploring Boundary Management in Adoptive Families," *Journal of Family Communication* 10 (2010): 141.

[64] Aurelie Harf et al., "Cultural Identity and Internationally Adopted Children: Qualitative Approach to Parental Representations," *PloS one* 10, no. 3 (2015). doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0119635; Tobias Hübinette, "Post-racial utopianism, white color-blindness and 'the elephant in the room': Racial issues for transnational adoptees of color," in *Intercountry adoption: Policies, practices, and outcomes*, ed. J. L. Gibbons and K. Smith Rotabi (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2012), 221–229; Doris Chang, Kalli Feldman, and Hailey Easley, "'I'm Learning Not to Tell You': Korean Transracial Adoptees' Appraisals of Parental Racial Socialization Strategies and Perceived Effects," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 8, No. 4 (2017): 308 –322.

[65] Docan-Morgan, "Korean Adoptees' Retrospective Reports of Intrusive Interactions," 148.

[66] John Raible, "Lifelong Impact, Enduring Need" in *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, ed. Trenka, Oparah, and Shin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 186.

While "intrusive interactions"[67] can exist across all experiences of adoption, the visibility of transracial adoptees both in the context of their families and in that of the societies they belong to at large inherently ties the 'incomprehensibility' of their belonging to how they are racialised by others. It is not the fact of their adoption that results in incomprehension, but the alignment of transracial adoptees with a racialized other. Riitta Högbacka and Heidi Ruohio found in their exploration of Finnish transracial adoptees, for example, that, "Adoptees of color are indeed categorized outside the intimate sphere, as not 'our own' and not belonging to the 'circle of Finnishness.' They have no power over the racializing gazes and the unwanted racializing attention that they get in public spaces. ... As Ann Anagost puts it, immigrants are transnational adoptees' 'ghostly doubles.'"[68]

How adoptees have experienced their own racial and cultural socialisation, their experience of how they are racialized and interrogated as both children and adults, and how they continue to make sense of where they belong is a key area in which the ambiguities introduced by adoption are being named and confronted by scholars. It is an area of work that is notably being performed by adoptees themselves as they attempt to create a vocabulary for explaining the experience of "occupy[ing] a space somewhere in between as the outsiders within."[69]

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[67] A term chosen by Docan-Morgan to refer to interrogations of adoptee belonging and identity "based on previous research that suggests that adoptive parents and adoptees find these interactions disconcerting and invasive at times." [67] Docan-Morgan, "Korean Adoptees' Retrospective Reports of Intrusive Interactions," 138.
[68] Riitta Högbacka and Heidi Ruohio, "Black and White Strangers: Adoption and Ethnic Hierarchies in Finland," in *Adoption and Multiculturalism: Europe, the Americas, and the Pacific*, ed. Wills, Hübinette, and Willing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 186.
[69] Indigo Williams Willing, "Beyond the Vietnam War Adoptions: Rerepresenting Our Transracial Lives," in *Outsiders Within*", ed. Trenka, Oparah, and Shin (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2021): 259.

Across the adoptee perspective as it is described in both academic work and in literary or creative forms,[70] the ambiguity or unbelongingness that adoptees experience is often tied to a sense of loss and grief. This loss can relate to a variety of events and experiences both possible and imagined, including the literal severing of ties with a birth family but also the imagined, parallel future of a life in which the adoptee was brought up and immersed in their birth culture. This loss can coexist with feelings of belonging and connection, as Rachel Quy Collier writes:

> At the moment, I have decided that I may feel deeply the loss of my biological parents, extended family, village, native language, food, customs, soil, trees, fields, rivers, streams, sea, ancestors' graves, and the place where my umbilical cord was cut and placenta buried, while still enjoying and marveling in the love of my adopted parents, siblings, friends, health, education, and other opportunities. I feel that my ever-present loss—which is some days tangible as a taste on the tongue, a whispered breeze on the skin, a pain in the stomach, and breathlessness, a nausea, a *mal du pays*, a homesickness, and empty space at the table—will and should never be ignored or denied, and to speak this loss is not to be ungrateful, unappreciative, or unthankful for my chance to live.[71]

Collier points to the words of Marlou Russel, who notes that "grieving in adoption is different in some distinct ways from mourning the death of someone who has died... In adoption, a state of limbo exists that is similar to the dynamics of mourning someone who is missing in action."[72] This can, in turn, be attached to another concept conceived of by Pauline Boss, which is that of ambiguous loss. Boss uses the term to encompass two different types of loss that people experience: that which "occurs when there is physical absence with psychological presence" and that which "occurs when there is psychological absence with physical presence."[73] Both of these types of loss relate to the experiences of adoptees. Physical absence with psychological presence

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[70] Documentaries are a common medium through which adoption stories have been communicated to the wider world as of late—the ones that often came up in conversations with participants include *Found* (2021), *One Child Nation* (2019), and *Twinsters* (2015).
[71] Rachel Quy Collier, "Performing Childhood" in *Outsiders Within*, ed. Trenka, Oparah, and Shin (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2021): 211
[72] Marlou Russell as quoted in Collier, "Performing Childhood," 211.
[73] Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8-9.

describes an adoptee's sense of loss of their birth families and culture; psychological absence with physical presence describes their own selves being present, while experiencing or imagining psychological unknowns of how they could have been different people.

How adoptees conceive of or interact with the concept of their birth parents is often discussed in adoption scholarship and, again, can be dependent on how adoptees are encouraged or discouraged to understand the presence of the adoption triad in their lives. Yanhong Liu and Tony Xing Tan describe the spectre of birth parents in the lives of an adopted family using a proposed Cognitive-Affective-Behavioral Manifestation Model, in which they see the "absent presence" affecting adopted children and their parents on cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels. The authors detail two key elements of this model: "1) the absent presence of birth families informs the construction of adoptive identity applicable to both adopted individuals and adoptive parents; and 2) the absent presence of birth families constitutes a vital part of family dynamics of the adoptive family."[74] In this instance, a set of parents that are at once both a reality and an imaginary are involved in a family's dynamic without ever truly being there. While they are no longer the legal guardians of the children they bore and there is an extensive array of records, likely in two countries, that document this, they remain a central figure in the formation of the identity and cultural socialisation of the family.

At this point in my life and my understanding of the construction of families, I do not personally prescribe to the conceptualization of adoption as a "primal wound"[75]—a term proposed by psychologist Nancy Verrier that has been highly influential in adoption literature

[74] Yanhong Liu and Tony Xing Tan, "One family, two children, and six parents: understanding the absent presence of birth families through a five-year investigation of an adoptive mother's narratives," *Asia Pacific Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy* 9, no. 2 (2018): 210.
[75] Nancy Verrier, *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child* (Baltimore, MD: Gateway Press, 1993), 21.

and that posits that "the severing of [the] connection between the adopted child and his birthmother causes a primal or narcissistic wound," which in and of itself is the cause of a wide variety of psychological issues that emerge as the child grows. I am far more interested in making sense of the grief, trauma and loss that adoptees feel as coming from their experiences of unbelonging and desire to belong rather than from an unconscious, innate sense of having had and lost their birth mother's presence from their lives.[76] That said, regardless of why adoptees might be drawn to the idea of their birth parents—primal wound or otherwise—the idea of reuniting is something that is often discussed within the context of adoption. The question of reuniting is also frequently raised by others outside the adoption triad as one of the "intrustive interactions" explored above. There is an extensive literature on adoptees that focuses on the idea of searching and (not) finding birth families or records of them. In particular, many papers focus on the psychological drive for searching or conversely the reasons adoptees decide not to search. This research focus is more often performed in the context of domestic in-race adoptions, particularly because of the higher number of open adoptions and active documentation of birth relations, but there are several studies that have sought to understand the role that searching may play in a transracial adoptee's attempt to define their sense of self.[77] Most recent studies have found that the motivation to search has less to do with psychological distress or feelings of discontent, something purported by many earlier papers, and more to do with adoptees' desire to

[76] This is not to discount the feelings of other adoptees about their adoption and the emotional trauma that the knowledge of being given up or abandoned can result in or to invalidate those who feel seen in Verrier's model, more to set the stage for how I will approach and attempt to interpret participant's senses of grief and loss as expressed in their interviews.

[77] Highly relevant sources to this particular research include Leslie Kim Wang, Iris Chin Ponte, and Elizabeth Weber Ollen, "Letting Her Go: Western Adoptive Families' Search and Reunion With Chinese Birth Parents," *Adoption Quarterly*, 18, no. 1 (2015): 45-66; Danielle E. Godon, Whitney F. Green, and Patricia G. Ramsey, "Transracial Adoptees: The Search for Birth Family and the Search for Self," *Adoption Quarterly*, 17, no. 1 (2014), 1-27.

understand their racial and cultural background and to potentially acquire a sense of belonging that they had not previously felt.[78]

Maarit G. Koskinen and Marja Leena Böök have found that adoptees who found their birth parents and families often experienced a resolution of a dread that was associated with the stories they had told themselves or been told about the condition these families lived in.[79] This offers a particularly relevant point of discussion for the purposes of this project, as the stories adoptees are taught or teach themselves to tell about the circumstances of their being given up are often mediated by the narrative choices of their adoptive parents and may be imbued with a strong emphasis on benefits of adoption and a narrative of loving sacrifice on the part of the birth parent for the better life of their child.[80] While the realities of being 'given up' cannot be ignored as they are inherently a part of the logistics of adoption, adoptive parents tend to attempt to smooth over the harshest aspects of the realities of a child's abandonment or submission for adoption.[81] In her book *All You Can Ever Know*, Nicole Chung writes, "Family lore given to us as children has such hold over us, such staying power. It can form the bedrock of another kind of faith, one to rival any religion... When tiny traitorous doubts arose, when I felt lost, alone or confused about all the things I couldn't know, I told myself that something as noble as my birth parents' sacrifice demanded my trust. My loyalty."[82] The stories that we are told and taught to

[78] Godon, Green, and Ramsey, "Transracial Adoptees."
[79] Maarit G. Koskinen, and Marja Leena Böök, "Searching for the Self: Adult International Adoptees' Narratives of Their Search for and Reunion With Their Birth Families," *Adoption Quarterly* 22:3 (2019): 219-246, DOI: 10.1080/10926755.2019.1627449
[80] Paloma Gay y Blasco, "'A wondrous adventure': mutuality and individuality in Internet adoption narratives," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (2012): 330-348; Collier, "Performing Childhood."
[81] April Chatham-Carpenter, "'It was Like this, I Think': Constructing an Adoption Narrative for Chinese Adopted Children." *Adoption Quarterly* 15, no.3 (2012): 157-184.
[82] Nicole Chung, *All You Can Ever Know* (New York: Catapult, 2018), 4-5.

imagine as adoptees engage with a certain image of adoption, of birth parents, and of birth countries, and shape how we understand adoption and the possibilities of how we might invoke or create imaginaries for ourselves in the future.

1.2.5 On non-academic literature of adoption

The publication of *All You Can Ever Know* in 2018 was the first time in years that I seriously thought about my adoption[83] and, as I reflect upon it now, it was also one of the first books I read that seriously and intimately dealt with the idea of records of adoption. Chung is a domestic adoptee—her birth family had recently immigrated to the United States from Korea when she was born—and so her experience with records is quite different from a transracial adoptee, and yet reading her book felt like such a meaningful experience to me because it was one of the first times I read an account of someone who had similar experiences of growing up and who had the eloquence to write about it. This is not to discount personal narratives of adoption that came before it, but Chung's book in particular was a right-place-right-time experience for me as someone who was then twenty-four and far more aware of the world around me and how I felt about my place in it than I had ever been before. I was working at a bookstore when the book was released and had enthusiastically requested an advanced copy when I read about it in the publisher's catalogue; when Chung visited a nearby university as part of the publication tour, I took the morning off to go and see her read from it. My heavily underlined

[83] If you Google my name and 'adoption,' the first result is very likely a think piece that I wrote and submitted to ThoughtCatalog when I was twenty years old. The editors gave it a rather sensationalist title that I never would have approved had I been given the agency to do so, but the content itself is genuine to my thoughts at the time. It's an interesting piece of my own history of thinking to be able to look back on, particularly now as I am writing this thesis.

copy came with me to school at UBC. In it, on the title page, an inscription begins: "To Mya, my fellow adoptee."

Chung's book didn't inspire a voracious all-adoption-content-all-the-time moment in my life, but it did make real for me the power of personal narrative to express an adoptee's relationship with adoption in a way I hadn't experienced before. It's something that has stuck with me and something that was particularly important as I embarked on this thesis. While there is not extensive literature on adoption records in the realm of archival scholarship, in addition to my own experiences, there were several books written by transracial, transnational adoptees that were particularly influential for how I approached this work because of the way they talked about records from an adoptee perspective. In particular, Sun Yun Shin's *granted to a foreign citizen* was a major catalyst for much of the thinking that I did leading up to my thesis and was highly influential for how I thought about the questions that I wanted to ask.[84]

A significant amount of literature written by transracial, transnational Asian adoptees in both academic and popular spheres has been written by Korean adoptees. This is, in part, because adoptees from Korea have a much longer history, particularly in the United States, as compared to Chinese adoptees, who represent the other most dominant country of origin for transracial adoptees. Kim Park Nelson, notes "the first generation of Korean adoptees was made up of Korean War orphans in the immediate aftermath of that conflict."[85] As a result, Korean adoptees can be as young as born yesterday, but as old as seventy plus. Korean adoptees have been organizing, advocating, and reflecting on their experiences for much longer than their Chinese

[84] Some of my more well-thought out musings about the book's relevance to archival scholarship have been recorded in: Mya Ballin, review of *granted to a foreign citizen,* by Sun Yung Shin, *Archivaria* 91 (2021): 204-07.
[85] Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 41.

counterparts, the earliest of whom would have been adopted sometime around when China's adoption law came into effect in 1992.[86] This is not to suggest that there aren't other Asian adoptees beyond adoptees from Korea or China writing about their experiences or to suggest that Chinese adoptees are not writing about their experiences,[87] but it is an attempt to recognize the character of the body of literature that is adoptee memoirs and creative writing and to acknowledge the significant contributions that Korean adoptees have made to this work.

I believe that this literature offers important opportunities for adoptees to feel seen and heard through their reading of other peoples' stories that might in some way mirror or complement our own perspectives. I also believe that it offers key opportunities for non-adoptees to gain exposure to our perspectives. As a result, incorporating this body of literature was important to me, both during the data collection process (described in section 2.5) and when writing about the research's findings. Throughout the chapters that follow, and indeed in the title of the thesis itself, you will find references to creative work written by adoptees, a testament to the power of creative language to describe and characterise records, adoption, and records of adoption in innovative and engaging ways.

1.3 Where I'm from

The literature described thus far has primarily focused on how social interactions and discourse strategies have been at the centre of how adoption narratives and adoptee identity and sense of belonging have been constructed. However, I would like to consider the impact of records on these processes as well. What literature that does exist at the intersections of

[86] As the maximum age of an adoptee under the Chinese Adoption Law is 13, hypothetically the oldest a Chinese adoptee could be is 43 years old.
[87] This thesis in and of itself is, in a way, proof of the contrary.

transracial, international adoption scholarship[88] and considerations of recordkeeping and records will be discussed throughout my analysis in chapters 3 and 4. For now, I would like to offer a story of my own experience with records of my adoption as a way of setting the scene for the lens through which I have performed this research.

I participated in a Chinese culture trip[89] in 2006 with a group of adoptees from my home state of California, and travelled with my mother after the official trip was over to the city—and the social welfare institute—from which I was adopted.[90] One of the strongest memories I have of the trip is someone from the institute going into an unseen room, looking in their files, and discovering a record that my mother had not been previously provided with that contained information about when and where I had been abandoned. I remember being driven back to the hotel after visiting the school identified in the record as the one where I had been left, crying on my mother's shoulder, asking why my parents hadn't wanted me. While we had found a record that had (miraculously) been kept for eleven years, it did not provide answers; it only raised more questions, ones that I wanted that piece of paper to have told me.

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[88] I specify this because there is a much larger body of scholarship in predominantly legal spheres that looks at domestic adoptions and the logistics of rights in closed and open adoption models that will not be discussed as part of this work.

[89] Loosely defined as a trip taken by an adoptee to their country of birth. In my case, this was a group trip of approximately twenty families that had been organized by a non-profit, but trips can also be organized by individual families or adoptees, government organizations, and tourism agencies. Whether or not the trip itself involves a focus on adoption can also vary. Other language used to describe such trips include 'return,' 'homeland,' or 'heritage' trip.

[90] Several articles discuss the psychology and experience of heritage/return trips, including Johanna Gustafsson, Judith Lind, and Anna Sparrman, "Family memory trips – children's and parents' planning of adoption return trips," *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 15, no. 5 (2020): 554-566; Samantha L. Wilson, and Laura Summerhill-Coleman, "Exploring Birth Countries: The Mental Health Implications of Heritage Travel for Children/Adolescents Adopted Internationally," *Adoption Quarterly* 16:3-4 (2013): 262-278; Kit Myers, Amanda L. Baden, and Alfonso Ferguson, "Going Back Home: Adoptees Share Their Experiences of Hong Kong Adoptee Gathering." *Adoption Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2020): 187-218.

There are multiple aspects of this story that stick out to me as context for the relationship that adoptees have with their understanding of records surrounding their adoption and why I was interested in conducting this research. The first is that from my perspective as an eleven year old, the existence of this record and its retention was 'miraculous.' I'm not sure what prompted the search for any additional records within the files of the orphanage—Did we ask? Was it something they offered to do?—but the fact that there was actually information seemed so impossible. It was a miracle that something about me had been kept by the institution.

The second is that this information, though we took it to be true enough to go and see the school, actually contradicted what my mother was told about where I had been left at the time of my adoption (in that version of the story, I had been found in a field). Just recently when someone found out I was adopted, they asked if I knew my birth parents and I told them "no, I was left at a school." It felt strange on my tongue despite the fact that I have incorporated it into my story as part of my narrative for the sixteen years since that visit. In my head, there is always the follow up: o*r it could have been in a field*. The disagreement of narratives causes the facts of the situation to feel unclear.

The last aspect that I am drawn to consider is the fact that we were not allowed to keep this document nor were we given a copy. I did not realise the absence of this record or even think to ask about until I had begun this research. As part of my process for doing this work, I went through a large amount of my own documents and considered their meaning and my experiences of them,[91] and the absence of this record was something I noticed in the files. When I asked my mom about it, she told me that whoever had retrieved the document had said they would produce

[91] Initially I had planned for this to be included in the work, but as later discussion will show, this preliminary survey of my own records became more informative rather than an incorporated element to the research.

a copy for us, but it had never materialised over the course of our visit. I'm not sure if we ever saw it or were only told that they found something. Not having the document—not being able to point my phone at it in this modern age of Google Translate and ask it to try to decipher the characters so that I can have my own confirmation of what it says and can tell me about what happened—isn't something life-changing, but in my experience, I think there is always a thought of 'well, what if it was?' My thoughts also return to the question of the document's truth and its existence at all. If we didn't see it, if we didn't hold it, did they just tell us a story? Is it the story that they tell everyone? If it was real and did exist, was it actually a record about me or is it just something they pull off the shelf as a performance? If I were to return now and ask for it, would it still be there? Would they give it to me?

A document that tells me where I was left still does not tell me why I was left, and as granular as one can get about what a place of abandonment might signify, there is very little chance that I could ever confirm whether any theories I devise are the truth about what happened. But where there is a lack of narrative clarity, the record itself still feels significant. The multitude of questions that thinking about this singular record surfaces is indicative to me of a depth of experience worth exploring. It is at this intersection of personal narratives and personal experiences of records that I hope to build my research. I believe that it will contribute to the work already being done to understand the needs of individuals with atypical relationships with the state, as well as provide new insight into the experiences of a community for whom the nature of the records they tend to produce or accumulate has not yet been considered in detail in archival literature.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The primary discipline with which this research engages with and hopes to contribute to is that of archival studies. As described by McKemmish and Gilliland, this is a highly interdisciplinary space that is thought to be "a meta-field that cuts across so-called 'content disciplines' and whose research analyses the processes and domains associated with relevant professional activities."[92] As such, although archival studies has a specific body of theory that it draws from and responds to, there is no one technique for conducting research in the field. Considering the state of research in the discipline and its education programs in 1996, Barbara Craig noted that "there is great latitude for using a variety of methods in archives-based research. The choice should be largely determined by the nature of the problem to be studied and the data that is available."[93] Although there is no one 'right' way to engage in archival studies research, many scholars who have engaged in critical archival studies—a term proposed by Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand to refer to: "those approaches that (1) explain what is unjust with the current state of archival research and practice, (2) posit practical goals for how such research and practice can and should change, and/or (3) provide the norms for such critique"[94]—have used qualitative research methods typical of the social sciences and humanities in order to offer critiques of the status quo. Much like the work that has come before this study, I was interested in engaging in the collection and interpretation of perspectives of a particular

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[92] Anne Gilliland and Sue McKemmish. "Archival and Recordkeeping Research: Past, Present and Future," in *Research Methods: Information Management, Systems, and Contexts,* 2nd ed., ed. Kirsty Williamson and Graeme Johanson (Cambridge: Chandos Publishing, 2017), 86.
[93] Barbara Lazenby Craig, "Serving the Truth: The Importance of Fostering Archives Research in Education Programmes, Including a Modest Proposal for Partnerships With the Workplace," *Archivaria* 42 (1996), 108.
[94] Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, "Critical Archival Studies: An Introduction," in "Critical Archival Studies," ed. Caswell, Punzaland, and Sangwand, special issue *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 2.

community about records and therefore sought to use a version of a collective case study approach to the work.

At its inception, this project's design included a two-pronged exploration of the topic at hand using a mixed-methods approach that would incorporate both qualitative interviewing and autoethnographic work. I was interested in speaking to others about their records, but also saw value in contributing my own experiences and reflections from the perspective of someone 'knowledgeable' in the field to offer more pointed reflections on how records might relate to archival theory and practice. This is the form in which my research received approval from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) at UBC in November of 2021.[95] However, in my initial proposal I did not foresee the level of interest that would be expressed in participating in the work. Given how the recruitment and data collection process proceeded, I decided to forgo the autoethnographic elements initially proposed in favour of focus on centering and celebrating the experiences of those that I interviewed; however, I will continue to make space for myself and my perspective in my account of the research as I believe it played an important part in the process.

2.1 Restatement of study purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how adoptee interaction with records of their adoption aligns with the stories of their adoption that they are told and tell and to suggest how these records and their potential absences reflect and contribute to adoptees' sense of identity and belonging. Through this project, it is hoped that the transracial adoptee community will be seen as a community of interest to archives and recordkeeping scholars such that the problematisation

[95] The instruments that were submitted as part of this application and used to guide this research are included as the appendix.

of current recordkeeping conventions and archival perspectives on records and their meanings that emerges from adoptees' experiences might be addressed in future work in both rights-based and care-based projects.

2.2 Recruitment

The study population for this work was narrowed to English-speaking Chinese and Korean transracial, transnational adoptees with no limitations on the country/ies they were raised in or to which they hold a sense of belonging or connection. I made admin-approved posts to two Facebook groups that are specifically created to be community spaces for Asian adoptees and where requests for research participation are not infrequent. In addition to these pages, I also posted recruitment materials to my own social media account in order to reach other adoptees that I knew as well as to increase the potential for reaching others through the sharing of the post to other connections' networks.

2.3 Participants

As mentioned, the level of interest that I received from my recruitment efforts far exceeded the response I expected. I had initially scoped the number of participants to be between three and five, but I received a far higher number of expressions of interest. At the centre of my desire to perform this work was an interest in amplifying adoptee voices in the archival studies research landscape, and so I felt drawn to accommodate as many participants as I felt would be possible given the nature and scope of this work as a Masters thesis. I ultimately conducted interviews with twelve adoptees. While a far more nuanced exploration of their experiences will emerge as part of later chapters, I would like to acknowledge each of them here and provide some demographic information that might help to contextualise their stories. I am incredibly thankful to each participant for being willing to share their story with me and to have it included

as part of this work. As part of the continued consent process, participants were given the opportunity to elect to be referred to by a pseudonym or by their first name and this is reflected in how they are introduced. The level of information provided below is also in relation to the level of comfort that each individual felt in being identified geographically.

Study Participants

- **Jay** was adopted from Guangdong Province, China and was raised in China, the United States, and Hong Kong.
- **Lucy** was adopted from Jiangsu Province, China in the late 90s and was raised in Canada.
- **Olivia** was adopted from Seoul, South Korea and was raised in Denmark.
- **Ma** was adopted from Anhui Province, China in 1992 and was raised in the United States.
- **Clare** was adopted from Anhui Province, China in 2000 and was raised in the Southeast of the United States.
- **Sarah** was adopted from Guangdong Province in 1997 and was raised in British Columbia.
- **Amelia** was adopted from Seoul, South Korea and was raised in Alaska.
- **Cams** was adopted from Guangdong Province, China in 1996 and was raised in Florida.
- **MC** was adopted from Jiangsu Province, China in 2002 and was raised in New York.
- **Emily** was adopted from Guangdong Province, China and was raised on the East Coast of the United States.
- **Chloe** was adopted from Hunan Province, China in 1999 and was raised in Southern Ontario.
- **Shelley** was adopted from Zhejiang Province, China in 1996 and was raised in Eastern Canada.

Although each participants' voice is included in the following chapters, because the level to which each interview explored particular aspects of records and recordkeeping experiences that emerged as overarching themes varied, some interviews are drawn upon more heavily than others.

2.4 Consent and care

As indicated by the content of the literature review, the stories that I intended to ask participants to tell are not always happy. Although not always the case, an adoptee's experience can involve emotions such as anger, grief, and frustration, and can involve discussions of

relationships that are complex, tenuous, and/or completely severed. While the methods of recruitment meant that participants self-selected and therefore were likely emotionally comfortable with sharing their stories, I did not want to dismiss the potential for their participation to result in a provocation of difficult emotions. In recognition of the emotional labour of participation and the potential for the interviews to become a catalyst for or site of distress, I sought to develop a consent and care model for the research that was informed by practices of compassionate research drawn from a variety of disciplines including those of oral history, feminist and queer studies, and also from the work of other archival scholars who have centered relationship building in their work.[96]

At the core of establishing an ethics of care in this research was the model of consent. Considerations of participant needs, questions, and potential barriers to comfort were included in the consent collection process. Stacy M. Carter, et al. note that the recording of consent in the context of online research can lead to varying challenges due to the process being entirely virtual.[97] They argue that written consent formats can create complications, be restrictive, and potentially introduce security concerns, something that I had encountered when conducting smaller research projects as part of my coursework. As a result, both a written and oral consent model were devised and submitted as part of the ethics board review. In addition to offering multiple ways in which consent could be offered, participants were also given the ability to

[96] See amongst others Anna Sexton and Dolly Sen, "More voice, less ventriloquism- exploring the relational dynamics in a participatory archive of mental health recovery," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24, no. 8 (2018): 874-888; Jennifer Douglas, "Research from the Heart: Friendship and Compassion as Personal Research Values," *Australian Feminist Studies* 36, no. 108 (2021): 109-125.
[97] Stacy M. Carter et al., "Conducting Qualitative Research Online: Challenges and Solutions," *Patient* 14 (2021): 711–718.

request a pre-interview meeting to discuss the project and its foci as well as to ask questions via email at any step in the process.

There were two additional touchstones where participants were asked to indicate their continued consent in the process through review and approval of materials to be used. One article that was particularly influential in my incorporation of these aspects of continued consent was Katherine Borland's "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretative Conflict in Oral Narrative Research." In it, she writes, "despite my confidence in the validity of my reading as a feminist scholar, personally I continue to be concerned about the potential emotional affect alternative readings of personal narratives may have on our living subjects."[98] Because of the highly personal nature of adoption stories to the adoptees they belong to and the desire to not fall into the trap of overgeneralizing or projecting my own experiences onto the words of my participants, in the spirit of Borland's call for consideration of the subject, I sought to ensure that participants would be able to review both the transcripts and my interpretation of their experiences before the final submission of this thesis. Following transcription and coding and then again after the writing of chapters 3 and 4, participants were given the opportunity to review content from the project relating to their stories and to express concerns, request revisions, or have elements of their narrative struck from the included content.

One last way I attempted to create an environment of care was through the adaptation of a distress protocol for the interview process from one proposed by Carol Haigh and Geoffrey Witham.[99] While I did not have an extensive array of resources or professionals at my disposal

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[98] Katherine Borland, 'That's Not What I Said': Interpretative Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in *The Oral History Reader,* 3rd ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (London: Routledge, 2016), 419.
[99] Carol Haigh and Geoffrey Witham, "Distress Protocol for qualitative data collection," Manchester Metropolitan University (2015).

or employ, I wanted to make sure that I developed a protocol in advance for potential instances of emotional distress that might occur during or emerge after the interviews. This included developing a guide that could be sent as a follow up to participants if they appeared to experience emotional distress and a workflow for how I might address signs of emotional distress during the interview process. These materials were referenced in the original letter of consent and published for interested parties on a website that I created for the project.

2.5 Data collection

Following the identification of participants and the capturing of initial consent using either written or oral methods, data collection occurred virtually between November 2021 and January 2022. Participants were scheduled for two one to one-and-a-half-hour interviews at a mutually convenient time with no stipulation on how soon after the first interview the second had to occur.

2.5.1 First interview

The first interview consisted of semi-structured interview questions that were shared with participants in advance. The questions were structured around three broad concepts or prompts that sought to not only explore participants' familiarity with and experiences of their records, but also to gain an understanding of each participant's sense of personal and cultural identity/ies as well as what it means to them to be an 'adoptee' or to have been adopted.

1. The first prompt asked adoptees to tell me their adoption story and to reflect on how it may have changed or how their relationship to the ways in which it had been told might have changed as they grew older.

2. The second prompt was given the header 'Records of adoption' and focused on questions relating to extant and missing or non-existing records, wished-for records, and documents or materials that adoptees might have created themselves

3. The third was titled 'Cultural and social perceptions of adoption and identity' and asked questions relating to adoptee sense of belonging, questions that asked them

> to consider ways in which records might have affirmed or denied this sense, as well as the participant's relationship to identifying as an adoptee or as someone who was adopted.

Questions were provided beforehand as a way of allowing participants to consider their answers and to reduce potential anxiety associated with being asked to be an expert on their experience. While the interview script was sent in advance, it was also emphasised to participants that the script was intended to be more of a potential guide for the conversation rather than a literal step-by-step script. I was interested in creating a comfortable interview environment that followed the flow of conversation, and therefore sought as an interviewer to scaffold the interview, but not to keep it to a particular order. My philosophy for the interviews was particularly inspired by the work of Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack who reflect on the practice of interviewing (in their case specifically interviewing women) with the following considerations:

> To facilitate access to the muted channel of women's subjectivity, we must inquire whose story the interview is asked to tell, who interprets the story, and with what theoretical frameworks. Is the narrator asked what meanings she makes of her experiences? Is the researcher's attitude one of receptivity to learn rather than to prove preexisting ideas that are brought into the interview? In order to learn to listen, we need to attend more to the narrator than to our own agendas.[100]

Throughout the interviews, I hoped to create space for participants to tell their stories with guidance rather than to ask them to perform the story they might have thought—or I might have communicated—that I was hoping to 'find'. It should be acknowledged that regardless of whether questions were provided or not, whether a script was adhered to or not, there is an awareness of audience that comes with interviewing and being interviewed that cannot ever truly be fully mitigated. To this end, I attempted to be mindful of the language that I used, particularly

[100]Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis.," in *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2016), 180.

in relation to records and recordkeeping as a way of opening up the concept of the record from its traditional conception as an official legal document. This was notably relevant for the second interview, which took on a different structure from the first.

2.5.2 Second interview

The second interview provided the opportunity for me to ask clarifying or follow-up questions about what had been discussed in the first interview, but primarily attempted to centre a different set of techniques that I hoped would create opportunities to speak about records differently. Douglas Harper argues:

> The difference between interviews using images and text, and interviews using words alone lies in the ways we respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. This has a physical basis: the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information. Thus images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words.[101]

With these benefits in mind, I sought to incorporate two elicitation strategies as a way of prompting participants to think and talk about records.

The first technique was researcher-led and researcher-selected and asked participants to prepare for the interview by reading a selection of literary materials. As discussed in the literature review, I have found that one of the key ways in which documents have been discussed in the adoptee community is through creative writing, and so I thought it would be interesting to not only bring these perspectives into the interview space, but to see if participants had similar readings of the material and their relation to the concept of records and recordkeeping.

[101] Douglas Harper, "Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation," *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002): 13.

These materials were selections from the following texts:

- *Palimpsest: Documents From a Korean Adoption* by Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom[102]
- *Unbearable Splendor* by Sun Yun Shin[103]
- *granted to a foreign citizen* by Sun Yung Shin[104]

In order to reduce anxiety over interview 'performance,' I asked adoptees to read and analyse these texts with an emphasis on it being acceptable to only read what they felt they had time for; as well, I stressed that I was not looking for anything beyond their 'gut reaction' to whether the feelings and experiences described in the texts felt relatable or contradicted their own experiences.

The second technique was researcher-prompted and participant-curated object elicitation. Adoptees were asked to select between one and four items that they viewed as representative of their story or experience with adoption. When referring to records or documents, I tried to offer alternative imaginings of what a record might be in correspondence to how the boundaries of its definition have been reevaluated in archival scholarship, but even this, I'm sure, influenced how participants set boundaries around the definition of the concept of a record that they brought with them to the interview space.

I decided to use object elicitation in my interviews for several purposes. The first was that asking participants to select their own items to talk about offered the potential to see what adoptees might consider records or materials that were about their adoption. The potential for the (re)definition of what makes a record was probably the least likely outcome of this activity, but it

[102] Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, *Palimpsest: Documents from a Korean Adoption* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2019), 32-41; 110-117.
[103] Specifically the poem "Harness." Sun Yung Shin, *Unbearable Splendor* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2016), 43-50.
[104] Specifically the poem "An Orphan Considers the Hand of God." Sun Yung Shin, *granted to a foreign citizen* (Vancouver: ArtSpeak, 2020), 43.

still represents an interesting dynamic of agency on the part of the participant to define the topic of conversation through exercises that are researcher-prompted, but participant-driven.

The second reason relates to the ways in which photo and object elicitation activities have been identified as opportunities to create greater narrative space for interviewees to tell their stories and for a more collaborative way of finding meaning to emerge. Neil Jenkings, Rachel Woodward and Trish Winter argue that photo-elicitation techniques inherently create a richly reflexive interviewing process that stokes the agency and interpretive power of the interviewee. They note that "the elicitation of the photograph is not the task of one or the other party alone. Both are aware that this is what they are there to do. But how they are to do that is not predetermined by the method... it is something that they will collaborate in achieving."[105] This was certainly the case during this stage of the interviewing process, as participants and I would often exchange questions about the document that neither of us had answers to or engage in imagining the records' intent or process of creation. The difference in how we spoke about specific records versus records as a more abstract concept was often quite notable, and speaks, I think, to the effectiveness of this technique.

2.6 Analysis

All interviews were transcribed by me between January and March of 2022. To begin the coding process, I used a deductive approach, applying structural codes that could help to demarcate the life events and perspectives on adoption, culture, and race that I had initially identified as significant through the construction of the interview script. Additional structured

[105] Neil K. Jenkings, Rachel Woodward, and Trish Winter, "The Emergent Production of Analysis in photo elicitation: Pictures of Military Identity," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 9, 3 (2008): Art. 30, section 2.2 paragraph 2.

codes related to records management activities such as creation, retention, disposition, and access were also applied to the transcripts.

Following the application of these more logistical codes, additional inductively identified codes were created and applied to the data. These codes included those that related to:

- emotional themes such as feelings of loss or ambivalence
- power dynamics between adoptees and other actors
- additional recordkeeping themes including perceptions of the participants on the onus(es) of recordkeeping, of records ownership, and records awareness

Even as inductively-defined codes, these codes hold a particularly records-focused slant to them as a result of the purpose and focus of the research. I wish to acknowledge that there were far more details and stories that participants shared with me that, even if they do not grace the pages of this work, deeply affected how I approached telling this collective story.

While it is impossible for this work to claim that it is representative of the whole of the experiences of Chinese and Korean adoptees and their interactions with and perceptions of records, it offers a place to start exploring the rich and many-layered stories of adoptees to continue the work archival scholars are undertaking to (re)define the concept a record and (re)consider what it is that records do.[106] Emerging from the analysis performed and using the framework of records and records work, chapter 3 will explore how the absence, presence, and absent-presence of records intertwines with, influences, and is influenced by adoption stories. Further exploring experiences of records work, chapter 4 will attempt to characterise how adoptee relationships to records have been directly affected by the complexities of the overall network of relationships that adoption creates or complicates.

[106] In particular, it is impossible to ignore the influence of my supervisor Jennifer Douglas on this work and how I have framed and approached it. Even in instances where I didn't realise it at first, this work and its research design is not unlike her own.

2.7 Ethics

While I have, in part, discussed some of the ethical considerations that went into the design of this project, I would like to return to and elaborate on a few aspects of the ethical considerations for consent and identity in this research.

Given the fairly small community that this study targets, it is not unlikely that some of the participants know each other, and I acknowledge that I knew one of the participants before this research began. The latter situation presented reason for concern given that this individual could have felt a sense of obligation to participate due to their relationship with me. However, the structure for the identification of participants for this study was predicated on self-selection, as potential participants were asked to contact me first, and so I hope that this reduced any pressure that this individual as well as any of the participants might have felt to participate. With both this known participant and all other participants, I made sure to have frank conversations about their rights to ask questions, provide clarification or edits to their responses, and ultimately withdraw if so desired as part of the consent process and before conducting interviews even if consent had already been signed.

Participant confidentiality was built into the data collection process through the assignment of participant identification numbers and their use throughout the interview recording, transcription, and coding process before the codes were replaced with a chosen pseudonym. Participants were able to choose the level to which the interviews could be documented, which included options for notes-only, audio-only, or full-A/V recording using the meeting platform. Personally-identifiable information was flagged during the transcription process and participants were given the opportunity to choose the level to which they preferred to be de-identified. This does not mitigate all potential for identification, especially given that

some adoption stories can be quite unique, but because all materials have been previewed by the participants themselves with the knowledge that this thesis will be publicly available, any remaining identifiable attributes have been approved by the participant themselves with the knowledge that they could be identifying.

2.8 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. The first, which has already been mentioned, is that it attempts to characterise the experiences of adoptees somewhat broadly, but it both intentionally and, through the self-selection of participants, unintentionally incorporates only a small sliver of the overall adoptee community/ies, and even of the more specific and yet still enormously diverse Asian adoptee community/ies. In order to address the concept of records and participants' experiences of them in a collective manner, I have, to a certain extent, collapsed some of the nuances of culture and identity and do not, perhaps, fully engage in Jenny Heijun Wills, Tobias Hübinette, and Indigo Willing's call to "resist the urge to imagine a monolithic West and a homogenized Global North, uniform in its motive, history, and current policy on adoption specifically and on immigration in a more general sense."[107] With this in mind, it cannot be overstated that while I attempt to characterise experiences broadly, as well as to offer alternative perspectives where they emerged in my interviews, this research cannot be taken as a generalizable reflection of all adoptees' experiences or even of the nuances of the experiences of this project's participants.

Secondly, throughout the following chapters, I often reference the fact that participants beyond the individual that I am quoting shared similar sentiments about a particular aspect of

[107]Jenny Heijun Wills, Tobias Hübinette, and Indigo Willing, "Introduction," In *Adoption and Multiculturalism: Europe, the Americas, and the Pacific*, ed. Wills, Hübinette, and Willing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 1.

their records using relative terms such as “some” or “many.” I have not attempted to quantify the proportions of these sentiments as part of the findings in favour of using a predominantly narrative tone, which has the potential to introduce questions of the rigour of my analysis. In the context of an exploratory study, I believe that the anecdotal nature of the accounts that follow are highly valuable because they offer a starting point from which future research might emerge while choosing to centre the storytelling of the participants and my own perspective on our conversations.

Another limitation is that I cannot purport to be an expert in the processes of adoption, in the nuances of adoption law, or even of adoption records. During one interview when a participant referenced one of their documents, saying they were unsure of what it was, they said something along the lines of, “Oh, but I’m sure you know what that is.” And the reality is that I didn’t. While I attempted to digest and interact with a wide array of adoption literature and policy as preparatory and continuing work for the undertaking of this thesis, the reality is that this work, both by circumstance and by design, is primarily rooted in the records experiences of the adoptees that I talked to and my own records experience as someone who is adopted. While I attempt to identify some of the records creation conventions that exist and impact the records of Korean and Chinese adoptees, I cannot claim to have full knowledge of all of the processes, especially since they have changed over time. Even with this in mind, I believe that this work is valid in its findings. In fact, the lack of knowledge about the records creation and retention processes that participants and I share is perhaps a finding in and of itself—a severe gap in what adoptees know about the records that were created about them.

2.9 A note on language and labels

In the writing that follows, it becomes important to distinguish when I am referring to adoptees as a community at large and when I am referring to the adoptees that I specifically engaged in conversations with as part of this research. In order to distinguish the two, any time that I am referring directly to the participants in the research, I will use the term 'participants,' while 'adoptees' will be used to refer to the larger community/ies that both self-identify as adoptees and are described as such within scholarly literature.

In an article exploring how Korean adoptees discursively construct adoptive and birth family identity, Docan-Morgan notes that "names have symbolic and relationally constitutive uses."[108] This can refer not only to how adoptees are named and choose to name or rename themselves,[109] but also to the labels that we use to describe our relationships to our family/ies and culture/s. Docan-Morgan argues:

> "Using different names for birth and adoptive family members provided a discursive tool for distinguishing one family from another, and preventing confusion for listeners and themselves. Labeling and naming, in this motive, seems purely pragmatic, yet this distinction divides the adopted person's family identity in two: birth and adopted. Depending on one's audience, there may be pressure to identify one family as 'real.'"[110]

While participants employed their own personal labels and names to describe themselves and their relationships, the notion of attempting to honor each of their individual discursive choices

[108] Sara Docan-Morgan, "Korean Adoptees' Discursive Construction of Birth Family and Adoptive Family Identity Through Names and Labels," *Communication Quarterly* 65, no. 5 (2017): 524.
[109] Elizabeth A. Suter, "Negotiating Identity and Pragmatism: Parental Treatment of International Adoptees' Birth Culture Names," *Journal of Family Communication* 12, no. 3 (2012): 209-226; Jane Pilcher, Zara Hooley, and Amanda Coffee, "Names and naming in adoption: Birth heritage and family-making," *Child and Family Social Work* 25, no. 3 (2015); Jason D. Reynolds et al., "Transracial identities: The meaning of names and the process of name reclamation for Korean American adoptees," *Qualitative Psychology* 7, no. 1 (2020): 78–92.
[110] Docan-Morgan, "Korean Adoptee's Discursive Construction," 544.

rather than utilise consistent language in this work introduces the potential for a lack of clarity that would not ultimately be productive. I wish to acknowledge the fact that choosing to continually apply the labels of ‘birth’ and ‘adoptive’ to describe different entities such as parents, culture, and languages does in some ways reproduce the interrogative, external lens that so often asks adoptees to choose which ‘side’ they feel they belong to. It is not my intent to make a statement on the level of intimacy or distance with which participants feel their relationships to their parents, culture, and languages, nor to imply that one is inherently better or more correct than another. I hope that my application of ‘birth’/‘adoptive’ labels is not alienating to any adoptee reading this work.

Chapter 3: Records at Work

"My past was invented, implanted, and accepted. I'm more real than you are because I know I'm not real."[111]

"It's hard not to wonder how lost these children actually were. What was done to find their parents? How many of those taken into care were given papers that described them as given up or abandoned? Papers with new names, new birthdates, and new identities, papers that turned them into adoptable orphans. Papers that enabled their adoptions to the West."[112]

This research is informed by my desire to understand how records contribute to the ways that adoptees understand, imagine, and navigate their stories. For most participants, awareness of their records was something that was fairly recent for them, and something that was tied to coming into one's own as an adult. This process can involve many needs and desires, including needing to be able to provide or have copies of documents to submit to official business for the first time; developing a sense of one's own individual and cultural identity independent from one's family; making connections to activist or common-interest community groups; and wanting to find biological family. While motivations for interacting with records can vary, there are several trends that emerged from participants' accounts related to what these records mean when they are (re)visited by an adoptee. In this chapter, I will explore how participants perceive these records and their purpose as well as identify how records and their contents interact with projections and evidence of care, concepts of (ambiguous) truth, and opportunities to imagine pasts, presents, and futures.

To begin it is useful to note that many participants identified their relationship with their records—as with their sense of what it means to be an adoptee or to be adopted—as an ongoing process.

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[111] Sun Yung Shin, *Unbearable Splendor*, 71.
[112] Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, *Palimpsest,* 117.

As Ma puts it:

> It's kind of like almost like [finding a book to read]. Like you go to a bookstore, you see a whole bunch of books, you see this one book and you see the title and stuff, but you don't really look into it. And then you go back to the library and are like "Oh, there's that book again. Why don't we go ahead and pull it off the shelf this time?" And maybe you read the back of the book, but you're like "I don't have time for this," so we put it back. And then you go back again and say, "Okay well, maybe we'll sit down and read some of the pages," and then eventually, you get to the point where you've seen it so many times and you've actually read through it and you get... for me, I get always get more value out of something if I revisit it. A better understanding, sometimes I have a different perspective, even, because of my current life situation. …There's some inherent value of revisiting my documents from time to time with different understandings as I get older.

3.1 An overview of the records context

As mentioned in my consideration of the limitations of this work in section 2.8, my understanding of the records that exist as part of the processes of adoption are predominantly inductive in nature. My primary reference was from my own experiences and has subsequently expanded to include records that are mentioned in scholarship as well as in the stories that participants told me of their records. It difficult to provide a finite list of the documentary residue of international adoption because records creation practices vary depending on the originating country, the country and sometimes even the state or region to which the child is adopted to, the organization through which the adoption was facilitated, the time period in which the adoption occurred, as well as how and what might be viewed to be a record of adoption or an adoptee's experience of adoption. That said, it is possible to identify the primary creators of records as well as to define several records creation spheres in which records are produced. What follows is my attempt to provide a general sense of the content of these materials even if the names or types of records that document this information are not consistent.

3.1.1 Creators

In the context of the literal facilitation of the act of adoption, the primary creators of records are **adoptive parents**, **adoption agencies**, **care-providing entities** (such as foster families and social welfare institutes), and **government entities** (such as office of immigration, embassies, and courts). Although it is highly depending on the context, **birth parents** may also be involved in the creation of documents before adoption. As they grow, adoptees and their adoptive parents are often encouraged, asked, or required by **social entities** to produce and create documentation that performs and affirms their ties to one another as well as the adoptee's ties to communities in which they might not traditionally 'fit in.' Even later, as they become adults, **adoptees** have also become producers of other materials that attest to their experiences of adoption and to the experiences of the adoptee community/ies on a larger scale.

3.1.2 Spheres of creation

While this last example of adoptees creating records for themselves sometimes means that they are quite literally creating material for their eyes only, most of the records that are created as part of the adoption process or as part of the life of an adoptee can be viewed within the context of interactions between two of the entities mentioned above. Records can also potentially be categorised based on when in the process they are created—pre-adoption, adoption, and post-adoption. During pre-adoption and adoption, the adoptive parent(s) are typically the most common denominator in records creation and transfer—adoptive parents submit records to and receive records from adoption agencies and government entities, who create documentation based on the materials provided to them by care-providing entities. To provide a very brief sense of how some of these interactions manifest, I will describe several common records types below. While several conversations about non-traditional records types

emerged from my conversations with participants, in order to help orientate the reader to the materials that most closely relate to the concept of the personal-in-the-institutional, the central focus of this research, I will predominantly focus on describing records that conform to the traditional archival imaginings of how records are created and produced.

3.1.2.1 Pre-adoption and adoption records

The **home study** is a document that is created through interactions of the adoption agency and related entities with the (prospective) adoptive parent. It is a process and document that is created by a social worker to report to the adoption agency their assessment of the fit of a prospective adoptive parent for parenthood. It involves conversations about why a potential parent wishes to adopt and also often refers to references provided by friends or family that attest to the potential parent's commitment and character. Although the form and specific content of the home study is dictated by the adoption agency, it is a process that in modern times is required by government entities.[113] This document is often retained by adoptive parents as part of their files documenting the adoption process and can be something that adoptees come across as they begin to explore their records.

A **certificate of abandonment** in China or **orphan *hojuk*** in Korea are documents that are created by adoption agencies and notarized or otherwise approved by governments in birth countries in order to establish that a child can be adopted internationally. These documents are provided to adoptive parents as part of the materials that serve to facilitate the adoption,

[113] In part, perhaps, because it reflects requirements set forth by the 1993 Hague Convention, although it should be noted that although the U.S. signed the convention in 1994, it did not come into force in the country until 2008, and China and South Korea did not sign the convention until 2000 and 2013 respectively. For a detailed discussion of the Hague Convention, the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child, and its relationship to records, see Sonja van Wichelen, "Revisiting the Right to Know: The Transnational Adoptee and the Moral Economy of 'Return'," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 40, no. 3 ((2019): 347-362.

particularly during legal processes to affirm parenthood and citizenship in the adoptive country. In addition to these confirmations of abandonment or orphanhood, materials that are created by care-providing entities or adoption agencies to create a picture of the child and their pre-adoption state include **medical reports**, and in some cases more **socially orientated reports** that either provide information about the child in care or, in the case of known birth parents, an account of the birth parent's history.

In addition to the materials that are created for the legal facilitation of adoption and documentation of a child's (un)known past, there are also records that are created as part of pre-adoption that are more personal in nature. Although not a widespread practice, there are also instances in which care-providing entities will create more casual records of a child's experience such as **photo albums** of their time with foster families or at a social welfare institute. Adoptees are sometimes provided with other materials from their time in care, including **clothes or other objects** that also serve to document their pre-adoption experience. Parents themselves also sometimes create albums or other mementos that document the adoption process, often with the intent to share these materials with their child as part of telling them their adoption story or to display them around the house as a nod to their child's birth country and culture.

3.1.2.2 Post-adoption records

Many adoptees begin their experience of interacting with their records by accessing the copies of these documents that are retained by their adoptive parents. Depending on their situation and their experiences, they or their adoptive families may subsequently attempt to contact government entities or adoption agencies, and sometimes even care-providing agencies directly, in order to acquire copies of records of their past. These processes serve to create their own body of records relating to adoption through the production of **records requests** as well as

any **communication** that an adoptee or their family might have with the agencies or entities as well as, depending on the situation, with their birth parents themselves.

In addition to this communication, other non-legal records that adoptees and their adoptive families produce that relate to adoption include informal records that assert their connection to their families and cultures through things like **school assignments**, **certificates** of religious or cultural induction or inclusion, and **personal accounts and creative writing**

3.2 Starting to interact with records, managing disappointment

The reasons why adoptees decided to interact with their records are varied. Echoing Golding's conception of care leavers' institutional records as a repository of hope, "where we will find answers to questions that have nagged away at us, all the years of our adulthood," [114] many participants expressed a desire to access their records because they were hoping to gain a sense of understanding of some aspect of their adoption story. As with care leavers, the results of consulting one's records often did not materialize the hoped-for information.

Of all of the participants I talked to, Olivia started trying to gain access to and make use of her records at the earliest age. When she was twelve or thirteen, she felt a strong urge to learn more about where she came from and to potentially find and connect with her foster mother and birth mother. Her mother refused to let her see her records, and her own attempts to obtain these documents from her adoption agency, Holt, were denied because of her age; she was eventually able to procure a copy for herself with help from her father. When I asked her what the experience was like, she expressed that the documents did not have the details that she had imagined they would.

[114] Golding, "The Care Leaver's Perspective," 160–64.

> **Olivia:** I guess I naively thought, when I first saw the documents, that there would be more information about my mom. I knew logically that you know, obviously, her name and stuff like that wouldn't be in there, but I had hoped for some kind of description of like even just how tall she was or you know what color hair or her eyes. But you know it's Korea she probably had black hair and brown eyes, I mean, but you know it counted for something. You know, even though it seemed obvious, but there was nothing. I found nothing.

This experience of disappointment was shared by several other participants. In part, this seems to come from the mythologising of some of the experiences of successfully finding family. Chloe, for example, mentioned that she first looked at her records as an adult after watching the documentary *Found*.[115]

> **Chloe:** I guess that sparked l a big urging me to [say], "I want to see my documents now." I [was] tired of having it fall short, where [my parents would just say], "We can't find them right now." Because I had asked for them in the past, and they were just sort of like, "Oh, but it's so difficult to take them out."
>
> **Mya:** What was that experience like, looking at them for the first time? Did that scratch the itch that you that you sort of had gotten about wanting to see them or did it sort of just generate more questions?
>
> **Chloe:** It scratched a little bit. Like if you had like an itch and then you just kind of grazed it with your finger, that was kinda the most that it did for me. It was really nice to be able to see them and take pictures and now that I know where they are, I can get them myself if I need to. I took a couple pictures, but at the same time, there were a lot of things that weren't answered that I thought might be scratched a little more. Because my records weren't very... I don't think they were as thorough as some of the people that I've heard about. And then also there's the whole... Personally, I was like "Oh, maybe I was left with a note," or whatever, but it was just sort of a cookie cutter, "You were found on the street, the police picked you up and you are brought to the orphanage, here's your health assessment." The most I got out of seeing my papers was specifically… I believe it's the street or the whereabouts of where I was found. And then, my name in Chinese characters, the full name. That's the only two things.

The disappointment that Olivia and Chloe felt about the lack of information that the documents provided and the questions that they failed to answer is not uncommon. While throughout their

[115] Amanda Lipitz, dir., *Found*, prod. Amanda Lipitz Productions et al. (Los Gatos: Netflix, 2021), https://www.netflix.com/watch/81476857

childhood, adoptees will often be told or encouraged to tell or imagine aspects of their adoption story, how they are taught to imagine the tale isn't always rooted in the exact details of the records. April Chatham-Carpenter has found that many adoptive parents of Chinese adoptees "engag[e] a dominant birth parent narrative, personifying Chinese birth parents as loving parents who were victims of something larger, outside of their control, similar to what is suggested by authors such as Johnson (2004) and Wolfs (2008), perhaps suggesting these parents have been 'persuaded' by such a narrative themselves from messages they have received from books, adoption agencies, and adoption support groups."[116] When the content of the records isn't robust enough to provide direct, narrative proof of the care or sacrifice that may have emerged from childhood versions of an adoptee's adoption story, it is unsurprising that experiencing these records may feel invalidating or disappointing. However, while explicit narratives of care are often absent from the records, this is not to say that care is not found at all within adoptees' readings of the records they have.

3.3 Documents of care, known and unknown

Adoptee's knowledge or sense of care present in the adoption process varies greatly in relation to the people who might be providing that care. In order to explore these various facets, this section is divided between adoptive parents, who represent a source of already known care,[117] and birth parents and institutions such as adoption agencies and social welfare institutes (and their workers) who facilitate adoption.

[116] Chatham-Carpenter, "'It Was Like This, I Think,'" 178.
[117] Specifically for the purpose of this section, I will be focusing on positive expressions of care, but it should be noted not all of the participants nor all adoptees identify their relationship with their parents as caring.

3.3.1 Adoptive parents

When asked about the records that cause an emotional reaction or the ones that mean the most to them, some participants expressed that they felt the strongest reaction or received the most enjoyment from those that documented their adoptive parents' experiences either as they were preparing to adopt or as they started their lives as a parent.

3.3.1.1 Pre-adoption records

John Telfer explores some of the ways photographs of otherwise unknown relations such as birth parents and the child they have yet to be assigned[118] create opportunities for physical manifestation of a known yet fairly ambiguous relationship. He writes,

> Many couples described the period immediately prior to allocation in terms of feeling, in one woman's words, "almost like a parent, but with a faceless child". Yet upon allocation, upon confrontation with a photograph of the allocated child, a number of participants felt transformed into the realms of parenthood, loving, wanting and feeling strangely connected to the photograph of a child or baby who was to become their permanent parental responsibility.[119]

From participant accounts and from my own experience, receiving the letter of allocation and the photograph that accompanies it is a key moment in adoption stories that parents share with their children that demonstrates their excitement and care for the child that they have yet to meet.

> **Sarah:** When they got this photo and they were told that they were matched with this little baby, my mom was so happy … she went and got the photo blown up. She had [the photo] on the mantle and [other copies] all over the house. … [When] they decided to take a weekend trip, my mom brought the pictures and they were just really happy and celebrating that they got matched.

Another way in which scholars have identified adoptive parents as engaging in internal boundary management practices is through making decisions about their child's name.[120] As

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[118] Sometimes referred to in literature as the 'allocated' child.

[119] John Telfer, "Relationships with No Body?— 'Adoption' Photographs, Intuition and Emotion," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 43, no. 3 (November 1999): 149.

[120] Elizabeth A. Suter. "Negotiating Identity and Pragmatism: Parental Treatment of International Adoptees' Birth Culture Names," *Journal of Family Communication* 12, no. 3 (2012): 209-226.

touched upon in section 2.9, names have the power to suggest inclusion and belonging, and naming is an activity that adoptive parents engage in as part of the preparatory process for adopting their child.

As part of her second interview, Clare selected a record to discuss that she had never seen before preparing for the interview. “So this was a sheet of paper, I found while going through the box earlier. It's names that my parents were thinking of for me.” She paired the document with another, more official one, her certificate of adoption, saying,

> the connection I saw here was this part where it's saying that my Chinese name is changed [on the certificate of adoption]. And it was just really interesting to me because I had a name and like that's one of the things that gets lost or taken or however you want to frame that—for me it kind of depends on my mood, something kind of in between, but there isn't really a better word for that I know of in English. ... And all of this is, again, about me, very official, but not really *for* me and it's like none of this has much consideration about how I'm going to feel about this.

“It's not like super exciting,” she says before turning to the list of names. “This was the more exciting one to me. Because we talked [in the previous interview] about the thought put into names last time.” The list shows a variety of different first and middle name combinations, one of which is Clare’s name. Others on the list incorporate names that her parents must have considered but ruled out. When I asked her what her reaction was to look at the document, she said, “I actually got a little teary when I saw it. Yeah I guess it was just like... almost proof of the thought and care that went into my name.”

For Clare, this evidence of parental joy is not far from her thoughts on the mirrored experiences of her birth parents. She says: “I wonder if my birth parents went through the same process. Like I've wondered if they had picked out a name for me and that I just don't know. There's like a decent chance that they didn't. And that's something that again I may never know about.”

3.3.1.2 Post-adoption records

For Amelia, one of the records she mentions that evokes a particular sense of care is a post-placement report written by her adoptive mother.

> **Amelia:** [There's] this one post-placement report that my mom wrote for the agency, which I actually really love. It's funny to hear what my mom was writing about me when I was five months old. And there are just very funny stories in it. There's a very cute story about how she left me with my brothers once and came back and my face was covered in ice cream. And how they were constantly trying to make me do things, like bribe me into doing things for them. Oh, they really wanted me to start crawling, so they would spend time every day crawling around in front of me and trying to get me to crawl. And it's just like really fun, cute stories, which I really love.

Some of the reason that she feels a connection to this record is because it was written by someone who is familiar to her. She notes,

> one of the things that I think really makes this post-placement report interesting to me [is] because you know even the little thing that my foster family wrote about me and it was all basically like "[She] is a good baby and eats lots of food." I have no image of these people or what my life was like, whereas when I read this, I'm like "Oh, I recognize my paediatrician's name, and obviously I know my brothers, and I know the house this was in when this was happening," et cetera.

Later, when we talked about whether records served purposes beyond completing formalities, she indicated that the care her mother put in to the document wasn't something she necessarily saw to be indicative also of care for her from the adoption agency, even though a post-placement report is ostensibly to ensure that a child is adjusting to their new situation.

> **Amelia:** Like, who was that going to? Who was reading it and what does it actually mean? Did it really matter? I mean what were they going to do? Demand me back? Like that's crazy, you know what I mean? … Is there, another copy of this somewhere in an office in Seoul? Or is it just kind of like, "All right, check that off," you know. I definitely am curious, you know, who's reading this and did they have any attachment to me? Yeah, it's kind of funny.

While the adoption agency, as the intended audience of the records, is not necessarily perceived to be a caring recipient, as a secondary recipient of the record, Amelia certainly is.

3.3.1.3 Parental records retention as care

In addition to documents that they might have created before or after adoption, some participants identified the act of records retention as an act of care. When I asked Lucy if she felt like any of the records she had of her adoption were for her, she first referenced a scrapbook of her adoption journey from China that her adoptive mother had made, and then said, "[my parents] kept all the documents they had right, that was for me so that I could have them. But the documents themselves, it's more of like an official thing; I don't necessarily view them as they were for me."

This sense of recordkeeping and records preservation as care is something that Ma agrees should be the goal but was disappointed to find hadn't necessarily been the case with her family.

> **Ma:** I think if it's someone else's documentation, so like, if I had a child, if I adopted a child with their documentation, I think that would be a bigger undertaking to try to preserve as much as possible for that child for their future, because they might want to know, you know? And being in that kind of vulnerable state, they don't get a say so in what they get to see or not see. And so it would be, I think, my responsibility at the time to do my best to preserve what I can. Now, with my documentation and when I was younger, the documentation that was acquired for me, that was responsibility of my family. And I think part of it, unfortunately, I think, whether it was intentional or not, wasn't kept as well as it could have been. And obviously they can't predict the future, but I think they could have definitely been better... had a better understanding of like "Hey, this might be important, let's try our best to keep this in a safe location." But again part of it, too, is just them not understanding and knowing, ignorance, and so I do appreciate what my family has done, at least for what they could, but there's parts where I am disappointed too and that's just the reality of it.

In part, for Ma, this lack of continued care for the records is perhaps because of the circumstances of her childhood. Her mother, who adopted her by herself, passed away when she was still an adolescent and custody of the records was then transferred to another family member. This in and of itself plays a role in how Ma has experienced her records as parental care.

> **Ma:** So I to guess give you a little context, my mom has passed away at this point. She passed away when I was [an adolescent], so I didn't really get that much time with her, I

> got about six years with her and so at that time I wasn't really interested unfortunately in asking questions about adoption or what that process looks like. And so, you know as I got a little bit older I went ahead and asked my grandmother who went with her to go get me and she could only give me so much information from her personal point of view, but she couldn't give you know everything as far as what my mom would have been able to explain. And so it wasn't until later on, even after the passing my grandmother that I found [pre-adoption] documentation. … that was kind of nice to have and it's one of those things I keep. Like [an] "I know where it is at all times" kind of thing. …I don't have my mom's firsthand testimony, I don't even have my grandmother's second-hand testimony. All I have is this documentation, this piece of paper, saying from her own words what her choices were and bits and pieces of the process that she went through to get me, you know. And I appreciate her that much more for being brave, you know as a single mother saying, "I'm going to do this," like [I'm thinking,] "You go, mom!" I appreciate her that much more.

Although participants knew parental care in different forms, many of their perceptions of care in these records represents a new side of the story than they had previously known. Even in cases where the stories might be similar to those they had been told—Clare for example knew some of the names on her parent's list and Amelia had heard some of those stories before—seeing these actions in the documents offers a new way for them to experience and understand the processes of adoption. Amelia notes that the fact that these documents were not made for her "almost makes it more interesting, I guess, in the sense that it's not like 'Oh, this is the story that someone trying to tell me about my history.'"

3.3.2 Birth parents and social welfare institutes

Overall, no participants described feeling as though the records that facilitated their adoption expressed a strong sense of interpersonal care. The instances of care and connection with which they were familiar had been for the most part relayed to them through their parents' orally communicated stories of people who they met at social welfare institutes or throughout the process of adoption. However, throughout the conversations, many participants were able to and engaged in projections of care on behalf of either their birth parents or other people who had cared for them before they were adopted.

3.3.2.1 Documented actions as care

One type of record that exists for some Chinese adoptees adopted after 1999 is a 'finding ad,' which is a listing—sometimes just text and sometimes with a photo—that social welfare institutes place in a local paper as a way of providing the opportunity for birth parents to come forward and claim their child. This serves as a way of performing due diligence for attempting to identify a child's parentage, which predicates their being available for international adoption. It should be noted that there is little information about finding ads that does not originate from Brian Stuy, an adoptive parent himself who runs the site 'Research-China,' which offers services such as providing copies of these ads as well as reports on the 'reliability' of orphanages for a fee.[121] On the Research-China website, the information page about these ads note that "The ads almost always contain a picture of the child younger than the referral photo received by the families."[122] Even without photos, the ad can contain information that might not have been included in the certificate of abandonment. This was the case for MC, who ordered her ad from Stuy last year.

> **MC:** I think the interesting part to it was [that it says] 'she wore a children's shirt and was wrapped in adult outerwear.' I guess that was the most emotional part, because I hadn't heard that before and I guess if they wrapped me up, I guess that was like some sign of caring.

Where and how adoptees were left often plays a central role in the ways in which adoptees project and are taught to project a sense of their birth parents' care in the story, as it is one of the only seemingly concrete facts about their pre-adoption life in an otherwise quite unknown story

[121] Even in articles such as Patricia J. Meier and Xiaole Zhang, "Sold into Adoption: The Hunan Baby Trafficking Scandal Exposes Vulnerabilities in Chinese Adoptions to the United States," *Cumberland Law Review* 39, no. 1 (2008-2009): 87-130, the authors cite email communications with Stuy as their source of information about the finding ads and their processes.
[122] "Finding Ads," *Research-China*, Accessed April 1, 2022. https://research-china.org/findingads/index.htm

of their birth parents' situation and choices. While this can serve as a source of a sense of care, it is also tempered by the level of unknowns.

> **Shelley:** My mom when she would tell me, "Oh your mom wanted to keep you, but she loved you and she gave you away," she would reference that piece of "Oh, she must have loved you because she placed you somewhere where she thought you'd be found." … So part of my mom's story that she's told me, of the "you were loved," ties into a piece of the documents, which I don't even know if it's true, which again made me try to you know backtrack a bit and be like "Well that might not be the case," which even if that's not how I was left or abandoned if I was at all, you know, obviously I still acknowledge [that possibility] and hope: "Oh, it would be very nice if my mom did love me and did leave in a place where she wanted me to be found," but also knowing that that [it might] not [be] true, …I'm like, "Well, there's a chance that she still loved me, but that's not how it happened," or that did happen, but maybe it was more complicated than that.

Participants expressed a desire to imagine their relationship with their birth parents and other carers such as foster parents or social welfare institute caretakers as having a certain sense of care attached to it, and yet the actions of care that they are able to concretely attach to their birth parents through their actions as documented in their records fail to substantiate a true sense of connection. This sense of potential ambiguity is further explored in section 3.4.

3.3.2.2 Records creation as adoption industry care

How both known and unknown information is documented represents another way in which adoptees have projected the level of care that they received either as a child within the system of adoption at large or within the care of a foster family or at a social welfare institute. Amelia, who lived with a foster family before her adoption, sees the literal production of the level of records that exist as a sign of care, even if they don't expressly portray care within their content.

> **Amelia:** I mean, I guess, I actually have no idea how many medical records are common for babies, so maybe it's not a lot. But like now I go to the doctor every couple of years, you know. They really measured me a lot, and here are all those numbers. But you know it is like, they weren't just like "Okay here's a baby like whatever." I wouldn't say that there's any… I don't I don't get a sense of really emotional attachment maybe, but you know, maybe that's just being expressed in a different way. I also don't really know where there would be room for that in this kind of paperwork. Like I don't think they're going to

> give an adoptive parent a set of paperwork where the foster family's like "I love this baby so much, like please don't take it," you know. So I would say there's a feeling of, a sense of, you know, "They actually like care about my health and well-being," which is I think probably as much as you can maybe really have asked for.

Many participants found that documents confirming their abandonment or orphanhood felt particularly clinical in their approach, but my conversation with Clare offered an interesting perspective on how choices in phrasing and procedure for these documents might indicate an awareness and care for an adoptee's experiences. A passage of Sun Yung Shin's poem "Harness" includes an image of the author's orphan *hojuk*, showing her to be the only member of her family. I asked Clare what she thought about it as compared to the abandonment certificate that she has. Thinking about how we had spoken about the importance of truth, I asked her if she wished she had documentation like the *hojuk* that didn't attempt to paint a story of searching for her birth parents even when she was skeptical that such a search had happened. Rather than viewing the *hojuk* as closer to the truth, she said,

> The Korean [practice of creating orphan hojuks] actually make[s] me feel worse because I feel like in my case at least, [when it says] "They cannot be found," I guess it still feels like you can claim your family. ...
>
> I mean it does feel a little bit like it could be a lie. But also, a kindness, in a way. I do think it is kind of both because having language like "You were forcibly taken from your birth family" isn't particularly nice, even if it is accurate, and I do think, in a way, they probably thought that it would be easier for everyone for it to be kind of a nicer narrative like that, like "Oh, we looked and we couldn't find them," but I don't necessarily believe it. And even if they did look, I don't think the efforts were very good... The language doesn't bother me that much, though, because, I don't take the document that seriously and it's kind of like a performative thing where like it was copied and pasted. It's more of like creating a space for there to be birth parents almost, creating that space where there's [acknowledgement] that they exist.

Records of adoption and the uncertain and sometimes known-to-be-false truths that they offer are the closest that many adoptees are able to get to knowing their stories. While some close doors

on information that they would like to have known, others—within the context of the adoptee's experience as an adoptee—offer the potential to engage with the absent-presence of their past.

3.4 Tempering expectations

Although the records of adoption explored above have the opportunity to offer insight into instances of care, the sense of disappointment that some participants experienced when interacting with their records led them to temper their expectations of the records—and within them information—that they could expect to have or find. Several other participants who had not necessarily experienced disappointment themselves mentioned that hearing about others' disappointment sometimes limited their expectations or even their desire to pursue finding more information. While participants almost always the expressed desire to know the 'big' details about their past—like information about birth parents or circumstances of abandonment—participants also frequently referenced much 'smaller' details that they wished that they could know. For example, many participants, including MC, expressed frustration at not knowing their birth time.

> **MC:** I know, like a lot of birthdays are estimated for adoptees, so not even knowing your birthday is kind of sad. ... I think it's such a privilege to have that information, most people can ask their mom: "Hey, what time was I born?" or like: "Tell me the story about when dad took you to the hospital." I've heard these stories about my parents and my aunts and uncles and my cousins, and I just don't have that at all. ... I want to know my birthday and the time I was born. That's such like a tiny thing.

The use of the phrase "tiny thing" indicates MC's judgement of her own wish for information and also, perhaps, reflects Leah Kim Sieck's finding that "these little details that everyone uses

to anchor their existence with, like birthdays or home towns, grow into big floating questions marks [for adoptees]."[123]

Other participants similarly expressed desires to know information or have access to certain records about themselves that they did not have while also indicating the perceived 'unimportance' of the information. Lucy, for example, brought an imagined abandonment certificate as one of her objects, but acknowledged that the actual information contained within such a document is "practically nothing."

> **Lucy:** They like [say] "This baby was found on the side of this road on this day, her birthday is this." That's pretty much it right? But I think... I don't know, it is something I wish I would have.

Emily has a complicated relationship with her mother, which has, in part, manifested itself in her inability to access all of her records. She describes herself as being "better off" than other adoptees who have been denied access to records that they need to establish their identity—such as a certificate of citizenship—but still expresses a desire to know.

> **Emily:** The records that I don't have are not major record things. It's more stuff that my mom got from the orphanage, which other than personal gain, doesn't really mean shit. … I think there might be a discrepancy on some of the adoption papers which have to do with finders and dates and stuff like that, which aren't pertinent to my existence as a person, but would still be nice to have, just to have some closure on some things.

While this personal information may not be essential to our ability to be people who can go out into the world and exist, the information that adoptees cannot know or cannot access but wish to represents parts of our experiences that have been made ambiguous, details that others might take for granted, resulting in our socialization to understand these facts, even in the context of our own stories, as insignificant. McKee contextualizes this within the act of commodification of

[123] Leah Kim Sieck, "A True Daugher," In *Voices from Another Place: A Collection of Works from a Generation Born in Korea and Adopted to Other Countries,* ed. Susan Soon-Keum Cox, 87, quoted in McKee, *Distrupting Kinship*, 28.

adoptees, in which we are rendered as objects to be acquired and for whom "key markers of self become irrelevant."[124] The attention that records do or do not pay to these details, and the ways in which—as will be explored in the next section—they recreate these details with a sense of ambiguousness of truth, can result in a sense of discomfort or dissociation with an aspect of our stories. Even if we are content with who we are, even if we understand the 'insignificance' of these details, the ways in which these details represent a key part of a 'normal' self linger. These details might be "practically nothing," and yet, they can feel like everything. As Ryan Gustafsson describes it, "[t]o be an adoptee involves a questioning that is unanswerable and hence unending, but which is nevertheless pursued."[125]

3.5 On truths and untruths

Unlike a traditional birth certificate that substantiates in paper a bond that parents might say they feel—or are told they are supposed to feel—the moment their child is born, adoption records such as abandonment certificates and orphan *hojuks* inherently serve to sever family ties as they simultaneously offer opportunity for their creation. This is mirrored in the adoption records that bring adoptees into their new families, which often position the adoptive parents as akin to blood relatives, essentially speaking that connection into being through its verification as legal truth. Barbara Yngsvesson and Susan Bibler Coutin argue that:

> paper trails (records of birth, adoption, citizenship, etc.) do not merely document prior moments and movements but also have the potential to redefine persons, compel movement, alter moments, and make ties ambiguous. Instead of only trailing into the past, papers jut out into the future, requiring the selves who are authenticated by these documents to chart new and sometimes unanticipated courses. Paper trails, which ought

[124] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 28.
[125] Ryan Gustafsson, "Theorizing Korean Transracial Adoptee Experiences: Ambiguity, Substitutability, and Racial Embodiment," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (2021): 313.

> to substantiate truth, sometimes plunge their referents into a reality that is incommensurable with their sense of self.[126]

As seen with orphan hojuks, procedures of transnational adoption often use extant styles of documents and legal procedures in order to deal with the atypical experiences of adoption.[127] It is hard to truly capture the whole of the story within the context of the law and legal records, and for many adoptees, there is a sense that these records were merely for compliance and facilitation of adoption. This is, perhaps, what Ygvesson and Bibler Coutin are referring to as the "plunge" into an alternate reality, one that affirms one's adoption but also fails to provide the full context of the how and why and when.

3.5.1 Navigating untruths and ambiguities

Jay's experience is a concrete example of records establishing something outside of an adoptee's known reality. She was initially cared for at an orphanage that was being run outside of the official Chinese system for social welfare. She began living with her family as a toddler, but because of her lack of originating paperwork, there was a long and complicated process for the adoption to legally take place when she was seven that involved the creation of many 'facts' about her life.

> **Jay:** With the actual official adoption, they had to actually say that I came from a different legal orphanage which I had never actually lived in before, which is why I know any paperwork connected to that is complete b.s. and in no way true. I'm not totally sure about it because my memory is a little bit fuzzy, but I think that they actually used the identity of another orphan there who didn't really make it and I guess died at some point but had like the similar age and name as me.

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[126] Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Bibler Coutin. "Backed by Papers: Undoing Persons, Histories, and Return," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 2 (2006): 177–90.

[127] As opposed to Gilliland's example of "irregular creation and deployment of (irregular) records" where refugees subvert traditional government rules, in these situations, the government itself is condoning and perhaps even generating irregular creation and use. Gilliland, "A Matter of Life and Death," 10.

Jay's story about her records and her firm knowledge that they are a complete fabrication for the purposes of legal adoption represent a unique and complex situation. Her response, much like the other adoptees whose sense of tempered expectations I explored earlier, is to view her situation as something that she cannot do much about.

> **Jay:** I've got some mixed feelings about that, which is kind of why I try not to really think about it too much, if I can help it. I know I'm not going to get any more answers than I already have since it's kind of impossible and I wouldn't even know where to start. But it is a little bit annoying that there aren't really any legal records about me before I was seven.

Although her perception of her own situation is fairly matter-of-fact, situations such as Jay's and general skepticism about the adoption industry at large often lead adoptees with less concrete knowledge about where and when their paperwork became theirs to also question its truthfulness. Perceptions of truth and accuracy of the records play a key role in adoptees' relationships not only to the paperwork, but to their own stories.

One way this emerged throughout my conversations with participants was through the perception of others viewing adoptees with a sense of interchangeability. Clare, for example, said, "I feel like because all of [the records] look so similar like between adoptees, it's like you could just switch out the names and you wouldn't even know." This experience of a sense of arbitrariness due to the lack of specificity in the records is mirrored in other aspects of what adoptees know of the logistics of their adoption, regardless of whether they are documented or not.

> **Shelley:** I was sick [and]… the person from the adoption agency, you know she kind of offered: "Oh, we could switch her out." I'm sure that was not recorded, because who would want to record that, right? But that is, you know, something that just creates mixed feelings that at any point in [the process], my life could be drastically different or I may not be alive.

Being treated as interchangeable perhaps contributes to the sense of ambiguity that Shelley feels about the records she does have of the processes that led to her adoption.

> **Shelley:** Sometimes I feel like when I'm imagining this baby that maybe I don't feel super connected to even though it's my younger yourself. I feel like when I think of like my baby self, I think of my baby self as like Yu Mingxue, not me Shelley, because at the time Shelly was not really my name, that was legally changed after I was adopted.

When did Shelley become *Shelley*? Was her time before being adopted a time when she was technically an entirely different baby with an entirely different trajectory? It is interesting to conceive of the work records are performing as another form of boundary ambiguity resolution that, rather than being performed by parents, is established by government and adoption agency action. When records are made to establish adoptee histories and their adoptions, they establish what is knowable about our stories and where it is that we 'belong.'

In addition to a sense of the arbitrary in their narratives that creates a removedness from seeing oneself or one's true story in the records, disagreements between the records and the facts can also create instances of frustration or confusion for some adoptees about how they ended up where they did. Cams has a letter that documents that their family's application for adoption was refused, but nothing that indicates how this rejection was resolved such that they were able to be adopted. That letter and some of the other communications retained within the file of her records paint very different pictures of the path to their adoption and lead them to more questions than answers about how they were adopted by their family.

> **Cams:** The progression of so many stopping points where any reasonable person should be like, "Maybe I shouldn't adopt a child" just was not there for them, and no one else stopped them because there are letters of recommendation, letters from other people being like, "[This] family would make a great parents." There were just like so many different layers of people being like, "Maybe this is not a good idea." And that is something I am still trying to work out for myself and be like "What happened?" like, "Why did this happen?"

3.5.2 Imagining other records and lost stories

Records failing to provide the 'why' of abandonment are at the core of many Chinese adoptees' experiences. In particular, there is a strong desire for an imaginary record that could provide these answers. In some instances, this emerged through our conversations about bureaucratic records and involved adoptees considering what untruths existed in their documents concerning how they came to be at the orphanage. For example, Chloe expressed feeling like the story that is in her records could be more related to the general act and purpose of adoption rather than capturing the reality of her particular experience.

> **Chloe:** I know there's a possibility that it was wrong and they just, you know, they didn't look [for my parents] or whatever the situation was in China that nobody wanted to come forward or it was just easier to put on documents that this happened, instead of saying, you know, "This person that knew of someone in the orphanage handed a baby to you and here's what's happening," like some inside information that I don't know.

In other cases, the object in which information about an adoptee's origins was captured is imagined to be a personal note or letter from their birth parents at the time of their being left. These possibilities, too, are seen to have the potential to have been lost to the process of facilitating adoption. Just as Chloe questioned the convenience of the narrative that was put forward, Clare expresses skepticism that anything she might have been left with would have been documented.

> **Clare:** I don't know, I could have been left with something; I could have been found in a different place and it wouldn't have been noted. I could have been left with a note or an item and it could have been thrown out.

Skepticism over the documentary truthfulness of their records relates not only to a sense there was a need to make the adopted child 'generic' to facilitate adoption, but also to an understanding of the cultural and political climate that contextualizes their adoptions. At the same time as Chloe expressed a desire for truth and for 'inside information' to have been

included in her paperwork if it existed, she expressed awareness that the one child policy in China would have influenced the creation of these documents and the truths that they might contain. This knowledge complicates how Chloe views her desire for the documents to be accurate.

> **Chloe:** It's important that it's true, the little bit that I get. Just because that is all the adoptee gets a lot of the time. But… I understand it doesn't have to be like the full situation and detail about the whole story [of my birth parents and why I was abandoned]. I don't know... It kind of contradicts each other, what I'm saying, but...

Where Chloe's and Clare's reflections focused on how opportunities for explanation might have been left out of government documentation, Cams' reflection on the absence of an explanatory record relates this imagined record to a decision made by their birth parents

> **Cams:** I've spent a lot of my life trying to justify to myself the reason why I was abandoned. Because on a very broad political policy level, I was left because the Chinese Government instituted a one child policy that penalized people and controlled reproductive rights... You have all of that, and you still have the interpersonal [feelings of]: "You still made the decision to give me up. And you made the decision to not give me a letter, you made the decision to not seek out a domestic adoption. You made the decision." So there are a lot of things that really are still impacting me. And knowing that I'm never going to really have the answers to those... it sucks.

The adoptee experience is full of dialectics like this that we must learn to navigate. Because of the nature of our pasts and our presents, we are often attempting to find a balance between two truths or two identities that might feel contradictory.

3.5.3 Finding a sense of truth

Even as participants expressed doubt that their records accurately represented what happened in the past, some also explained how they took the 'truth' of the records to have their own meaning. Ma, for example, finds that the records that she has of her adoption are valuable regardless of whether they are true.

> **Ma:** I'd rather have something than nothing because it's somewhere I can at least begin to look even if they're not completely, wholly correct. Because someone had to fabricate

> them, you know what I mean? And that is right there is then a link. Like, "Okay well, where did you get that information? How many times have you have you spun the same narrative with other people?" Because you know everything has a beginning somewhere, you know someone told them to do this. So I see some value, even if the documents aren't all that correct.

In my conversation with Lucy, she also brought up an interesting an interesting aspect of adoptees' relationship to documentary 'truth.'

> **Lucy:** I know people are upset with the uncertainty and I get why, but I'm also like...all of the memories I have of birthday parties and family are all associated with this day. … [If I were to learn that what I had been treating as my birthday was wrong,] am I going to say, "Oh, my new birthday is this"? If I ever somehow found out my actual one is, I don't think I would change the celebration day. I mean, first of all I wouldn't change any of the documents, I can't imagine the disaster that would be.

What adoptees and adoptive parents know from records is often the only truth they can move forward with, and while the truthfulness of the documents might be questioned, in order to perform family and to enable an adoptee to partake in cultural touchstones like birthday parties, at some point the records are taken at face value and their information is incorporated into what an adoptee knows about themselves. This lack of certainty is, perhaps, treated as part of the 'darker' aspects of adoption that many adoptive parents choose not to share with their children.[128] Adoptees learn to navigate the ambiguity of their records through learning to understand them as a form of truth. Once these details become truth, their reality, in a sense, defies their ambiguity. In their performance of family and their integration of the fact of the records into their stories, adoptees and their families make truths out of unknowns.

3.5.4 Imagining records (and birth parents) elsewhere

In addition to engagement with impossible archival imaginaries like the letters of why, adoptees also (dis)engage in thinking about far more possible imaginaries. Records retention, as I

[128] An aspect of adoption story narratives explored in Chatham-Carpenter, "It was Like This I Think." This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

briefly hinted at in my exploration of my own (imagined?) record from the introduction, is something that adoptees approach with a sense of skepticism. For many, this is an imaginary that is dampened by self-regulation in order to temper expectations; adoptees' may find it difficult to believe first that a file about them exists and second, that it would have been well maintained. Both propositions seem highly unlikely when considering the sheer numbers of the adoption industry and the lack of perceived care that permeates the records that do exist. That said, there are situations when adoptees' circumstances offer the potential to concretely imagine places where records exist.

For Korean adoptees, imagined records can emerge from their narratives in the form of thinking about their file in Korea, which has the potential to hold communication from their birth parents as well as more information about the circumstances of their adoption.[129] For some, this potential results in a desire to search. As I mentioned before, Olivia began engaging with her records quite early, and attempted to access her Korean file when she was a young teenager. Inspired by the possibility of connecting with her foster mother and her birth mother, she used the resources that were at her disposal as a teen to try and gain access to the documents she imagined could exist that would connect her to a past that she had only seen in a photo album.

> **Olivia:** I basically just emailed them and emailed and emailed and emailed—I was about 12, 13 years old, but I already knew English at that point. My English wasn't fluent or that great, but it was pretty conversational, so I would just email. I would email the hell out of them, I would annoy them. "Be pushy, I want to know this, be pushy," [I would tell myself]. So I was pushy and they didn't really give me that much back, especially because I was a minor back then. So basically yeah, I just called and I emailed and I looked at this photo album and these pictures and tried to decipher where exactly I was. There was this one photo of where my foster mom was like holding me and it looked like we were in a school and I knew the general area where she was living. So when I was 13, I found every single school in that area and it turned out none of them had emails and I couldn't really speak Korean, so I was like "How do I contact them?" And then I found out "Oh, they still have a fax!" and I figured out a way to set up an online fax and I faxed

[129] See, amongst other things, Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom's *Palimpsest*.

> them, I faxed all of them, I was like “Hey, this is my name, this is a picture of me and my foster mum, is this one of your locations?” Some of them went through and some of them didn't, but my mom got a very sharp phone call from Holt to knock it off.

The drive of the closeness of the imaginary, for Olivia, was inspiration to try to overcome the barriers that left things unknown. For other adoptees, the sense of knowing there is a concrete chance of finding something doesn’t necessarily equate to a desire to make the imaginary a reality.

While most Chinese adoptees have very little sense of where they might have been born, and often an ambiguously true reference to where they may have been left, Sarah’s experience is slightly different. Her documents detail that she was born in a military hospital, which suggests it is highly likely detailed records of her birth exist.

> **Sarah:** Because I was born in a military hospital, they must have better records than what was shared with the orphanage. You can't just go in there and give birth. Someone would have been admitted, would have been military personnel, they would have had a number or something. I kind of feel like there is a record out there that at least has the name of a woman who went there that day and had a baby girl, you know. So I feel like if I really wanted to, and I hired a private investigator or something, I could find contact information or something. I just don't really know if that's something I want to do.

For Sarah, while it might be possible to resolve the present ambiguity of her birth parent’s identity, her desire to do so is limited by a sense of uncertainty about what her relationship to those parents would be.

> **Sarah:** The idea of meeting my birth parents is a lot of pressure and it could be a huge letdown, I mean you're essentially meeting strangers. Also if I connected with them—and this is an experience that I've heard from other people who have reunited with their birth parents but have language barriers—it's really hard to actually have a meaningful relationship with them and it doesn't necessarily change your life. That's not a bad thing— I don't think that's a reason not to do it, but, I guess, setting an expectation, it's something that I have thought a lot about. It might not bring me the thing that I think it will. So I don't know. … I'm almost more interested in learning about my birth family in a distant way, more about my general family story and history and my ancestors, and where they've lived. Like have they always lived in that area of China or do I have relatives that migrated from Vietnam or from Thailand? I'm kind of more interested in

> learning the thing that non-adopted people are looking for when they take a DNA test, the whole family history thing.

As Sarah suggests, not all adoptees are seeking the hypothetical 'closure' that resolving the imaginaries of records would provide. While the pressure of traditional conceptions of family might suggest that finding birth parents is a perfect solution to adoptee's experiences of dislocation, loss, and/or unbelonging, the reality is that these emotions and experiences are not something that a single act would erase. Many of the participants grapple, like Sarah, with the idea that their birth parents are strangers at the same time as they hold a desire to find them.

> **Ma:** I mean, I know they were people at some point, at some point they had to be. But I don't... I don't know like if I met them now, I know it would just be super awkward. It would just be like... "These people your parents" is just a statement, there's no real tie to it. Now that doesn't mean that we can't form one and in the future with some time, but definitely in the immediate, they just be people to me, at best. I have the idea of parent, I have the idea that there was some some woman that gave birth to me and some male that contributed half those genes that became me at some time, but I don't... I guess I just wouldn't see them as parents necessarily.

This sense of ambiguous loss, of someone that one is both tied to and untethered from, is experienced by Amelia when she reads about her birth mother in her documents. She says, "there's definitely a lot of, you know, feeling a lot of empathy for this woman, but also like she's not enough of a full person for me to really know how to feel that."

3.6 On documentary intent

Another reason Amelia gives for feeling a sense of removedness relates to her experience of the editorial lens that is present within the documents. Although there is information about her birth mother in the record, the lens through which she is described is not a personal account. This sense of records' authorship disrupts some of the connection that might be possible from the

records, and also leaves Amelia with questions about the editorial decisions that were made when the document was created.

> **Amelia:** So [this record is] the only—obviously very limited and filtered—information that I have about my birth mother. I find it very interesting. …It's funny in a certain kind of way to be reading this man's descriptions of my birth mom. Because it's just removed [by] a layer. He's never met this woman until she shows up five months pregnant, what does it mean for her to be 'gentle and good'? How much time has he really spent with her? And what are the connotations of that?

One of the records that Sarah shared with me was the physical examination record that was sent to her parents when they were informed of their match. It reports the general health of the child and is a document that is common across adoptees. Looking at it, Sarah noted that many of the sections didn't have a documented answer. She said, "It feels like the person who filled it out, like they decided what was worth noting. And there are basics and then they skipped everything else, which for everyone else in that process, that's good enough, but it's definitely not like done with me in mind in terms of learning about myself."

This sense of someone making a decision for the adoptee about what details were important and which ones would be left unknown extends not only to the limited details provided on the documents they have, but to decisions about which records were important 'enough' to have been passed along to the parents or important 'enough' to have been created to begin with.

> **Sarah:** There probably are other things, other documents, but definitely at least other details that someone decided either wasn't important—how could they understand what will be important to me? Of course that's not important to someone who can just ask their birth parents: "What was I like when I was first born? What time was I born? How was I when I was a baby?" It's frustrating that someone along the way decided that [certain details] either weren't important to me, since it wasn't important to the process of adoption.

The discursive decisions that surround adoption narratives are inherently informed by the narrative and editorial decisions that emerge from the records. The stories that adoptees are able

to tell are inherently tied to the information that they are able to access. While revisiting these records often leads to more questions than answers, an awareness of the author represents ways in which adoptees, through their interactions with their records, identify actors that have controlled what they do and do not know, and, as will be explored in Chapter 4, begin to question how adoptees might be better supported and cared for through their records and these actors' role in their creation.

3.7 Chapter conclusion

This chapter set out to explore the information and experiences that participants have had when activating their records. It identified how, through these activations, records of adoption and their contents are sites of exploration for adoptees that reproduce many of the difficult questions of what it means to be 'in between.' How adoptees use records to answer questions they might have about their story and to identify information that can inform their sense of belonging can be tied to a variety of existing affective and social construction theories from both archival and adoption studies contexts. These themes include interactions with social and records imaginaries and the ways in which discursive strategies used to establish family ties affect how adoptees understand and tell their own stories. In addition to serving to help find answers about the details of their adoption, these records create opportunities for adoptees to imagine the care and decisions that went into the entirety of the process of adoption. In some cases, these exercises in wondering allow for the projection of care on a situation that might otherwise often feel somewhat callous. In others, it emphasizes the lack of perceived care for adoptees by the system that facilitated their adoptions.

The interactions with records that are explored in this chapter are rarely related to the use the creators originally intended. Adoptee activations of their records are incredibly personal in

nature and far removed from the legal facilitation work that they initially were created to perform, even though that process is never far from mind. Although every adoptee's story and experiences of adoption are different, participants' stories have come together to paint a picture of a community for whom records and their content hold a high level of promise of answers to an unknown part of their past, but often fail to provide the information they hope to find. In addition to offering insight into adoptee relationships to the facts of their adoption, this chapter also began to suggest ways in which participant experiences of their records are inherently affected by their relationship to the entities that created them. Chapter 4 will attempt to examine another aspect of records interaction, the facilitation of records awareness and access, and to draw connections to the ways these actions, too, are deeply connected and reflective of the interpersonal relationships that the records help to bring to life.

Chapter 4: Exploring Relationships Through a Recordkeeping Lens

"What we have is a hasty and terrible photocopy, dark and illegible, the Korean original. Yet an original of what?

Deformation, a defamation in a home country. An ill report, rumor scandal. A secret.
We are a copy and an original.
We will make a record."[130]

Eric Ketelaar describes records meanings as being two-fold:

> first, the meaning *of* the record and second, the meaning *for* someone or *for* an occasion. The first views ''the'' meaning of a record, in objectivist terms, as the Idea (in the Platonic sense) of that record, which can be inferred from the record by whoever approaches the record. The latter recognizes, in subjectivist terms, "'that information resources do not 'have' meanings, but that different meanings are assigned to the same resource by different people at different times, and that 'the' conventional meaning of a given resource is a matter of intersubjective consensus."[131]

In the context of adoption, the first meaning might be identified as the facts of adoption, while the second refers to the uses that these records offer for different parties for whom these records hold purpose. These different parties might be identified, as in the past chapter, as the adoptive parents, the adoption industry, and the adoptee. The relationships that adoptees have with their records are impacted not only by the records' content and their relationship with their identity as an adoptee (and if and how that holds a significant role in their life), but also through other actors and agents that inherently influence one's experience and knowledge of documents, one's ability to access them, and also one's confidence in being able to replace or even find them. In the first parts of our lives, our ability to understand and register the existence of records of adoption is dependent on if and how we learn what recordkeeping is, what it is about, and how it relates to our stories (and particularly our stories of adoption). Whether or not this is a type of awareness

[130] Shin, *Unbearable Splendor*, 46.
[131] Eric Ketelaar, "Cultivating archives: meanings and identities," *Archival Science* 12 (2012): 23.

that all adoptees acquire and how they do or do not experience agency in relation to this awareness is the central interest of this chapter.

4.1 Parent-child relationships

The research discussed thus far has incorporated an examination of how the stories that adoptees learn and the ways we learn to tell them ourselves are impacted by parent-child relationships and the related notions of parental strategies for boundary management and parental fostering of adoptee cultural, racial, and even, to an extent, adoptee identity. Parents also play a key role in facilitating access to and cultivating an interest in, or at the very least an awareness of, records and the stories that their contents can work to tell. For participants in this project, it appears that adoptee experience and perceptions of records access, moderation, and custody directly relate to their relationship with their parents, and to their parents' relationship with adoption.

4.1.1 Access

As the primary keepers of records for adoptees, parents play a key role in providing or denying access to records and determining what records young adoptees should interact with or be restricted from.

4.1.1.1 Open access to records and encouraging records awareness

Most participants expressed a sense of having open access to their records; however, sensing the records are openly accessible is not the same as being invited or compelled to engage with them. Many participants indicated childhood disinterest in discussions of adoption,[132] and the predominant parental response was to not push the issue. Parents tended to introduce the

[132]Which aligns with the findings of Chang and Feldman, "I'm Learning Not to Tell You," and their explorations of race, ethnicity, culture, and adoptive identities.

possibility of records interaction only when participants chose to ask questions or engage in conversations about their adoption stories. While this importantly centres the interests and needs of the adoptee, it also means that participants often experienced a lack of awareness of what their records might have to offer.

In Amelia's experience, although her parents were very open, she found that she didn't realize there was more to know before her adoptive mother took the initiative to email her with more information.

> **Amelia:** After I graduated college, kind of out of the blue, my mom sent me this very long email sort of detailing everything that they had. And I remember being kind of surprised, mostly because I thought that I already knew everything that they knew and that was why I hadn't asked more questions, but it turns out I didn't. And now I do. … basically what she told me was like, she was like, "You're a full adult now and should have all this information." I remember being like, "I thought I already did." She was like "Oh, I always assumed that you would ask me if you wanted to know more," and I was like, "But I thought I knew everything." It was one of those kind of circuitous conversations.

Waiting for their child to ask questions is a way for parents to respect their child's agency and to allow them to direct conversations about their adoption, but it also presents an important question: what is the role of adoptive parents in cultivating[133] records awareness? Without parental intervention or socialisation in the meaning of records, do adoptees feel sufficiently supported in discovering their uses later in life?

Lucy worked at an adoption agency, which greatly affected her records awareness. She mentioned during our conversations that much of the impetus of her wanting to interact with her records was a curiosity sparked by seeing the type of paperwork that families were being asked

[133] 'Cultivation' is a term employed by Ketelaar to refer to the cultural process of imbuing a record with meaning. He says, "The record has to be cultivated, that is: understood cognitively, valued affectively, and conatively infused with meaning." Ketelaar, "Cultivating archives," 29.

to complete as part of the adoption process. Assessing fellow adoptees' records awareness, she said:

> ... I don't think a lot of people know what their adoption documents even are. It's like kind of... Asking for your documents is not hard, or no that's not true, depending on your situation can be hard, but it's not selfish. You should know what these are, these are yours, they're your records of existence … And then I guess part of it is also: "Do you understand how hard it would be to replace these, guys?" I mean just their existence, knowing their importance and then knowing, you know, you can find some really interesting information in there, if you just look.

In addition to questions of whether adoptees presently lack an awareness of how they might use their records to answer questions that they are already asking, another query that comes to mind is whether a lack of records awareness is, in the minds of adoptive parents, a part of the information that children do not 'need' to know because their parents can hold the weight of that information for them. Does a known lack of archival awareness on the part of the adoptee manifest itself as a sense of parental stewardship of the information that is within the records?

Sarah shared a story with me that presents an interesting case study in how adoptive parents might have their own understanding of the value of their child's adoption records, but perhaps do not understand their role in communicating what that value is as adoptees move into adulthood or the fact that the stories potentially held within the records might not be theirs to discover. On a trip to China that Sarah's family took when she was a teenager, her adoptive parents decided to try to see whether the hospital she had been born at would be able to identify additional information about her birth family history from their records.

> **Sarah:** When we went to the hospital that I was born at, my dad brought photocopies of a lot of the documents that they had received and showed them to people … we ended up getting connected with a woman who worked there, who spoke English and she was able to understand what we were saying and that I was born there. And my dad gave her photocopies of the documents.

> She was gone for a long time, and he thought maybe after we had been there and my parents left their own contact information, maybe we would hear something from someone who knew something at the hospital.
>
> My dad was telling me all this and I found it very interesting because he told me—not at the time, but when I was talking to [him] more recently—he was kind of hoping that maybe something would come out of in. At the time I didn't really realize that that was all happening. …
>
> I knew that we were going to visit the hospital and orphanage and I didn't take issue with that. But they didn't tell me that... I guess I knew it was happening, but they didn't explicitly say to me, "We're hoping that maybe this will lead to getting information about your birth parents" or the possibility to be reunited or whatever. They didn't actually tell me that. … Later after our conversation, I felt a bit frustrated they did that before asking me because like maybe I didn't want that, and I definitely did not go on that trip ready to meet my birth parents, I was just there visiting with my parents.

Sarah's frustration with her parents' decision to leverage the power of her records and use the information within them without consulting her echoes some of the issues of (the lack of) childhood agency that many adoptees feel when they reflect on their experiences of being adopted in general. Raible contextualizes these experiences through the lens of adultism, saying,

> Under adultism, adults get to decide the fate of the young simply because they are adults. … Despite sentimental views of the family in many societies and even though genuinely loving relationships do exist between many parents and kids, children and adults are frequently at odds due to adult power and authority… Adultism is perpetuated throughout the system of adoption, since the various uses of adoption center on adult concerns, rather than on what adoptees (of any age) say they want and need.[134]

Raible's solution is to call for parents to act as allies and "work to share power" with adoptees,[135] even in childhood. In the context of records of adoption, this might look like moving beyond unspoken, yet open access to records to instead focusing on adoptive parents intentionally creating opportunities for their children to participate in the cultivation of records of their adoptions.

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[134] John Raible, "Ally Parenting for Social Justice," in *Parenting as Adoptees*, ed. Adam Chau and Kevin Ost-Vollmers (Minneapolis: CQT Media and Publishing, 2012): 91, 93-94.
[135] Raible, "Ally Parenting," 96.

4.1.1.2 Records Restriction

Not all of the adoptees that I spoke with had a sense of freedom of access to their records. As I mentioned before, Emily and Olivia both experienced being denied records by their mothers when they requested them. When I asked her whether she had a sense of why her mother doesn't let her see particular records, Emily replied, "She's afraid of me finding another family and never coming back to her." In addition to restricting access to records another way parents may exert control over adoptee access to records is through allowing them to access records only under supervision. Emily was able to access some of the materials that her adoptive mother does not typically allow her to interact with, but only when she is there to mediate.

> **Emily:** She has the footage [from when she went to China to adopt me] that she refuses to let come to the light of day unless she's sitting there watching it and can skip through the parts she doesn't want to see. Which is basically all the times that the caretakers are in it. She just skips to the parts where it's just her or the adoption. It's like she's erasing parts by just skipping through it, although she hasn't figured out how to actually delete footage.

This type of surveillance is not always a result of adoptive parents' controlling intentions, but it may be experienced that way by adoptees. Chloe talked about how when she was able to obtain access to her records, her adoptive mother inserted her presence into the experience.

> **Chloe:** She sat with me as I was looking at them. She's sort of brought the box down and said, one by one, "This is the booklet that was"—whatever it was—and then she let me flip through it while watching me
>
> **Mya:** Was that uncomfortable?
>
> **Chloe:** Very much so. Because my relationship with my mom isn't the best, so it was awkward. She definitely didn't intend for it to be: "I'm staring at you," but, you know, intent and execution...

In such situations as Chloe's, even if the intent is not to deny an adoptee access to these records, the power dynamics of parent and child create instances in which records access feels uncomfortable.

4.1.1.3 Records restriction as protective parenting

While records denial often manifests in situations where parent-child relationships are imbued with conflict, there are other situations that participants identified where restricting access to records has the potential to be viewed an act of protective parenting. While Olivia expressed that her mother's refusal to let her access her records was rooted in their unstable relationship when she was younger, she also acknowledged that there was an aspect of protectiveness that might have also been a motivating factor for her mother. She notes, "I actually think the reason why my mom didn't want me to initially see the papers, is because, when I read them, I found out, I was the result of a rape. And that's not... the story that I had been told."

Creating a 'gentler' adoption narrative is an opportunity for an adoptive parent to 'shield' their child from some of the harsher realities and possibilities that the circumstances of their adoption might involve; while restricting information is often problematic and can cause adoptees a feeling of being denied access to part of their identity, the intentions behind this action can be viewed as a form of parental acts of care.

4.1.2 Custody

In addition to discussions of access and restriction or moderation of records, another topic that emerged from our conversations was the question of the appropriate custody of the records. Many of the participants, now aware of their records and interested in engaging with them, expressed an interest in taking custody of their records when they were in a more stable living situation—as young adults, most of whom were just starting their careers or finishing college, they were uncertain of what exactly was to come next. They expressed a sense of comfort in their

parents being the current custodians of the records, but ultimately were interested in a transfer of care.

Some participants expressed a sense that the documents did not belong to only them. Perhaps tied to the sense that some of the documents are more intently focused on the pasts, hopes, and experiences of their parents, these adoptees suggested that some model of shared ownership was a more appropriate way of explaining how they wanted to view the records and where they 'belonged.'

> **Jay:** I think, at least from my situation, I feel lik it's kind of equally important to both of us. Because, for one thing, it affects my whole life and being, but on the other hand, she also did spend over seven years on all of that, and it kind of affects her too since she's my mom. I don't think there's really a simple answer on who [the paperwork] should go to at a certain age... maybe equal access, but that's kind of hard to implement, especially since some people don't have the greatest relationships with their adoptive parents. I think the adoptee should definitely be allowed to take over [custody] if they want to. Probably by eighteen.

4.1.2.1 About my adoption, but not about me?

Pre-adoption paperwork presents an opportunity for an interesting discussion about where adoptees hold a sense of interpersonal boundaries between themselves and their adoptive parent(s). For some participants, the fact that these documents in particular were not intended for the adoptee, created a sense that a record, even if it was about the adoption process, wasn't always something that the adoptee should feel was part of their right to request or possess. Lucy, for example, expressed that she didn't feel entirely comfortable looking at her pre-adoption paperwork.

> **Lucy:** I am a big proponent of 'adoptees should have access to their documents,' however, the home study that [our adoptive parents] were required to do, it's not about me really and it's like it's part of the adoption documents and, like my parents were kind of like, "You can read, if you want," sort of thing, but it was odd because, as I was reading it, it wasn't information about me, it's about my parents. And like... It just felt odd kind of knowing this personal stuff that is in there.

Jay, on the other hand, felt that this type of material could provide answers that would help her to understand her adoption and therefore that it is the adoptee's right to be able to see documents that reference adoptive parents' motivations for adoption.

> **Jay:** That type of information I think should be allowed, since that's already being submitted for application it's not exactly personal private anyway, since it goes through a lot of hands and it very much affects the adoptee's life and perspective, and I think we are kind of owed an explanation of how we got somewhere. Like anything in terms of explanations I think should be allowed.

The ways parents facilitate access to adoption records is reflective of dynamics of both power and privacy that exist in the parent-child relationship. How parents encourage an awareness of records and their meaning(s) also seems to be dependent on parenting strategies and perceived adoptee interest in their story. In the context of scholarship on the liberation of children and the role of a parent as an ally to their child, promoting records awareness and access from a young age seems like a key way in which records could act as a way of increasing childhood agency and a more nuanced basis on which they can decide whether or not to engage in their adoption story.

4.2 Post-adoption services

One of the results that emerges from a search for materials that focus on both adoption and records is a recent book chapter by Kelly Condit-Shrestha. While it should be noted that the author only engages with materials that talk about records in the context of 'the archive,'[136] she asks questions that are not unlike my own, "Who has access to adoption records and how are these materials mediated? What knowledge is imparted, if any, to adopted persons—in their

[136] For further discussion of this distinction, see Michelle Caswell, "'The archive' is not an archives: acknowledging the intellectual contributions of archival studies." *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016).

childhoods or as adults; how is it imparted? How do these practices shape adoption discourse?"[137] The results of Condit-Shreshta's work suggest a lack of agency and a denial of rights to adoptees who are interested in accessing their records, and concludes that these experiences are the result of intentional choices made by adoption agencies "to systematically create and perpetuate specific 'ways of knowing' the practice of overseas Korean adoption... [and] manage how Korean adoptees, and by extension their adoptive families and broader communities, understand the adoption experience."[138]

Access to adoption records that are held outside of the home is facilitated through the provision of post-adoption services by adoption agencies, governments, and social welfare institutes. Participants expressed a variety of opinions on existing post-adoption services that were available to them, as well as having, for the most part, a sense that these services were not adequately addressing their needs. Many expressed a sense of futility in expecting instruments of the adoption industry to actively care about anything related to the adoptee's life beyond the facilitation of their adoption, and yet a desire to see enhanced services either from these groups or from external organizations was also expressed. As they have aged, adoptees have played a key role in creating systems for records awareness and understanding, which will also be addressed at the end of this section.

4.2.1 Records retention

As mentioned in Chapter 3, there is a heavy sense of skepticism that adoption organizations bother to retain records about the children who are adopted through them. Some

[137] Kelly Condit-Shreshta, "Archives, Adoption Records, and Owning Historical Memory" in *Children and Youth as Subjects, Objects, Agents*, ed. Deborah Levison, Mary Jo Maynes, and Frances Vavrus (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 157.
[138] Condit-Shreshta, "Archives, Adoption Records, and Owning Historical Memory," 158.

participants were uncertain specific records about their adoption were kept or even existed to begin with.

> **Shelley:** I never thought that there was a file on me, because apparently it just feels like she doesn't have very good records. I mean, obviously, she must have at some point recorded some things, but yeah I don't know, I never thought that there'd be a file [in her custody] about me specifically because I thought maybe it was like more generalized based on the groups, like in a group: “These are the people who went, these are the dates, this is like the money aspect of it,” but then I never thought that there was something that was [a file with my name on it] and any specific details about me ... I mean if that did exist, yes, I would want it, but I never thought that it did, so now I'm like, “Oh, I wonder if it does.”

Other participants suspected that a file must have existed somewhere at some point and had an interest in understanding the potential record’s context of care:

> **Jay:** I guess, first, I would feel kind of happy that they still physically exist. And then I would feel kind of curious about either who's still holding on to them or how often it gets looked at. And if I don't know the person who has it, if it's in a filing cabinet somewhere in some office, then I would kind of just wonder if the person who sort of has it either knows my situation or would know someone else who would know more about it, so it would just kind of be a whole curiosity type of thing.
>
> **Mya:** Would you want them to care and/or to know about you?
>
> **Jay:** Yeah, I mean if they already have my file, I think I'd feel more comfortable with them having it if they actually cared or at least if they kind of knew what they were holding onto
>
> **Mya:** The knowledge of what they were holding onto in specific relation to you, Jay, or if, for example, it were the case records for 5000 people...?
>
> **Jay:** Mine would be hidden among a bunch of other case records I guess. Realistically, I know that they wouldn't know me specifically or care specifically but, since those documents are kind of so unique and hard to obtain myself, I would kind of prefer that whoever happens to have them would at least have some degree of knowledge or attachment to it as well. Because [if not], then it just kind of feels really cold and unfair for something that's so hard to get to be in the hands of someone who doesn't even know how much it means. It's just kind of weird, I guess.
>
> **Jay:** Oh, I'd also probably be really curious about my neighbor case. Like how similar they are.

Participants expressed strong curiosity about the kinds of records adoption agencies might have, but this information is difficult to obtain in an unclear post-adoption records landscape. Some organizations are better than others about making records access a clear and obvious option on their websites, but due to a lack of transparency about what exactly a records request might unearth, adoptees who proceed with this process could end up going through a records request only to end up with no new information.

4.2.1.1 Agency interactions

In addition to not explicitly providing adoptees with information about their record holdings, adoption agencies are not known for being particularly accommodating or caring in their interactions with adoptees. Olivia's experience of contacting Holt, for example, was characterised by what she saw as a lack of care.

> **Olivia:** I think they should give people better pay, because what I've seen from my personal experience and from what I've seen on TV—because there are actually have a quite a few documentaries also about like Koreans adopted to Denmark like trying to go back to Korea and like finding their birth parents—I think they should get more social workers, because obviously people are going to come back when they are adults or even minors and they are going to try to find their birth parents and they need to be ready for that demand. And I just know they aren't. And they also don't speak English very well. I mean, I get it's annoying that so many people call them, so many people email, but I kind of feel like that's what you sign up for when you became an adoption agency. Obviously the adoption agency is the first place people are going to look, so if they could just you know hire more people, because the ones I talked to what have just seemed incredibly... like very, very unsympathetic and just very tired and very off... very robotic.

In addition to being discouraged by their experiences of interacting with representatives from adoption agencies, adoptees have also encountered instances when they have been denied post-adoption services. One reason why this may occur is the closure of their adoption agency. Several participants discussed feeling that the lack of support they received in the context of their agency's closure was representative of an overall lack of care for adoptees.

> **Emily**: They've made it pretty clear that they've rinsed their hands of the Chinese adoption group that they dealt with for years, which is pretty shit. They said, "You can go through the state government," but they didn't say where exactly or how. … Like what happened all those papers? Did you just trash them? What about those hundreds of people that you've impacted or even possibly thousands... Like, what happened to all that? [For their response to be]: "Oh, I don't know, they might be somewhere, someone might have them," that's really bad.

In not reaching out to ensure that adoptees could have access to their files before the agency ceased to exist and not providing a proper framework through which these records could be accessed, adoption agencies are effectively asserting their ownership over these records and their irrelevance to the contemporary lived experiences of adoptees.

4.2.1.2 File completeness

As discussed in section 3.6, participants examining their records identified evidence of records appraisal decisions that affected whether or not the version of the file that ended up in their hands felt complete. This was something that not only made participants wonder what might have been decided for them about what they would be able to know about their stories, but also to imagine how different policies that prioritised providing adoptees with a complete file could reduce barriers to access and ultimately enable greater engagement with the records when the adoptee is ready to interact with them.

> **Lucy:** I think the government should be going here are the records that we have of you that's not necessarily, just like the big official ones like a birth certificate right and go and give them to the adoptive parents or to the adoptee depending on how old they are and go: "Here's our records of this."
>
> **Mya:** Is that something that should happen like right away? I mean I think something that's interesting about searches for documentation is it tends to be that [adoption agencies] won't engage with you until you're actually an adult, so is that something that you would imagine or that you would want to happen at the time of adoption?
>
> **Lucy**: Yeah. I think first of all, it means [for] everyone, you have it from the beginning. Like all of these documents, I've had them since I was a kid, I just didn't care. But if I cared, when I started to care, it was just a matter of going to our basement and digging them out. I can't imagine having to go [somewhere else], when I started caring, and [to

> have them say], “Well you're gonna have to do this and this and this and contact all these people internationally” ... And it's not even for searching, I just wanted to see them. I don't know if I would have bothered.

Barriers to being able to know what records were retained by overseas institutions come in the form of language barriers as well as procedural and financial ones. As Lucy suggests, if adoption agencies and care-providing entities were to view all records relating to a child’s abandonment or relinquishment and adoption as being vital records that they should have the right to see, it would be much more feasible for adoptees to feel that they have a relatively complete picture of their own records landscape and, consequently, a sense of agency in what can be done with that information.

4.2.2 External bodies

As described in section 3.2, access to finding ads is primarily controlled by one individual who is outside of the official adoption industry. MC’s described her experience obtaining her finding ad as a “weird dynamic.”

> **MC:** So there's this guy named Brian. And I had him send me this, which is a photograph of the newspaper with my finding ad. This [points to one of the paragraphs on the page] is me, I guess. I don't know what any of this means, so I also paid a few extra dollars for a translation, which I can read. It says: “A baby girl was found [on this day] at the gate of the child welfare institute.” That's in one of the documents I have, so I knew that already. And then it says: “She wore a children's shirt and wrapped in adult outerwear” and that's new information to me. And then what comes with that is this document and this says that it certifies that the finding ad was published [on a date] in [a particular edition of a specific paper] and then he signs it and dates it, so he's certifying that he sends me these documents and these are real documents. All of these pieces are very interesting because this is the newspaper, but it's a picture of the newspaper, it's a scan of the newspaper. I don't even know how he got the newspaper, I don't know how any of that works, but I also cannot read any of this—I can pick out the date, so I know that's mine, but I can't read it. It's kind of crazy; that it’s my information that I didn't have, first off, that I had to pay for, secondly, and third, I can't even read it. So then I had to pay extra for him to translate it and then he has to send me a document that he signs to certify that this is real. It's just so convoluted.

What authority, beyond being the only person who seems to deal in finding ads in English, does this person have? Through providing a certificate that he himself signs for authenticity and through dominating the information space about these items, Stuy takes up a position of power over information that the adoptee community finds valuable. While one way to frame this is that it's payment for services rendered on records that are rare and valuable, the practice does, in a sense feel extractive. When records are so difficult to come by, creating additional barriers and marketing the ads as a commodity can add to the discomfort and uncertainty felt by adoptees.

4.3 Adoptee activism

As explained in the methodology chapter, participants and I discussed not only their personal experiences of working with their records, but also the types of experiences recounted in published literature. When I spoke to Chloe about her reading of Sun Yung Shin's poem "Harness," she was drawn to talking about her perception of adoptee resilience and activism in the face of adversity and unknowns.

> **Chloe:** The "we will make a record" line of the poem, I see as meaning that we'll push for documents for ourselves, whether that be to be documented properly as a citizen or citizen of the adopted country that we are in now or documented properly as part of the history of like our birth country. And then even what you're doing now, like [making] our own records of who we are. I think it shows our push for being recognized: "This happened and we are people that are here. We can't just be shoved [aside] as like 'Oh well, that never happened,' or that [our history is] just a tiny piece that nobody acknowledges," you know. I feel like it definitely shows that we do have that push in that fight for people acknowledging us is in general.

Where adoptive parents and adoption agencies may not have cultivated a strong sense of agency and awareness of the importance of records access for adoptees, the stumbling blocks and emotionally fraught experiences that many have encountered through the process of gaining access to and activating their records has led to increased conversations about records in adoptee community spaces. The visibility of records and conversations about records in these online

communities is a key element of adoptee activism that has attempted to address this barrier. The majority of participants mentioned that seeing a post on the Facebook group I recruited in or in another social media community was the primary way they engaged in information exchange with other adoptees. McKee asserts, "by coming together online in adulthood, adoptees are no longer the voiceless and marginalized peoples of the twentieth century relegated to a state of perpetual childhood."[139] Through these groups, adoptees are building a collective voice that acts as a source of information and a site for collective advocacy.

What does it mean for adoptees to come together around records? For some, this has looked like hosting seminars or workshops on how to make freedom of information requests to access records that might have been lost or unavailable to adoptees. For others, it has been through sharing their own stories and helping others to feel they are not alone in their records absence/presence and the complicated relationships that records both succeed and fail in capturing.

The actions taken by adoptees themselves to explore, interrogate, and understand the complex processes that often feel like they are deliberately overly-complicating access to records that they feel are theirs aligns with how other communities have approached and found ways of making archival spaces their own. Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres have utilized Jeanette Bastian's framework of a 'community of records' to identify how genealogists use archives, the role that records play in their work, and whether archivists might be included in the boundaries that the community sets to define for themselves and their work. They conclude that archivists, while present in the workflows of this community, ultimately were not viewed to be active

[139] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 124.

participants and argue, "If communities are defined by both participants and nonparticipants, this lack of participation is an important consideration for the archival community."[140]

What can the ways in which adoptees have learned to help themselves tell us about what the archival and recordkeeping community is not yet addressing in our work? If adoptees are already creating their own, sustainable practice for promoting awareness of records and their uses, what might be the role of archivists or records managers in supporting this community?

One suggestion emerges from my conversations with Shelley, who is involved in several adoption groups and helps to moderate some social spaces. She shared a sense of excitement for how adoptees have been able to come together to create resources, but also a need for a more centralized place for these resources to exist.

> **Shelley:** The Internet has so many things, like it can't be that complicated to have all of us together share our resources in one place, share our experiences in one place. And I do think there's been a lot of adoptees who've tried to make that happen, but it's so hard because we're all over the place, and how do you be like, "Attention all adoptees, there's this new thing out here, make sure you all go to this one place." … And how do you share widely amongst the community? Again, even if you have these Facebook groups, it's so easy for a post to get missed [or] someone joins and they don't know about all the past things that ever has been posted.

Although some government sites attempt to bring information about institutional records together, there is no singular, informative resource that prioritises the needs and interests of adoptees, makes them feel heard, and offers them opportunities to learn about records. While adoptees have, as Shelley mentioned, worked to create some of these resources as a community, it is possible that collaborative efforts between adoptees who are already doing this work and record keepers who have deep knowledge of the existing records landscape might result in the

[140] Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres, "Genealogists as a 'Community of Records,'" *The American Archivist* 70 (2007): 111.

ability to create a space that brings in organizational knowledge while also still respecting community autonomy and perspectives.

4.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has examined how the relationships of power that are present within the dynamics and logistics of adoption are enacted and reflected in the management and provision of access to records. It has explored ways in which adoptees have taken up the mantle of educating themselves about records and areas where they imagine that entities with greater power might begin to acknowledge a need to do right by their experiences.

In its current state, adoption creates a set of relationships with conflicting messages about their perpetuity. While there is an expectation that the bond between adoptive parent and child is ongoing, entities that engaged with the child either as carers or as legal facilitators of adoption fail to communicate to adoptees a sense of continuing care or sense of duty to responding to their needs. This transactional, impersonal treatment is felt by participants through the lack of emotionally sensitive post-adoption services available to them.

If relationships to records and models of access are reflective of the larger dynamics of power and responsibility present within these connections between adoptees, their adoptive parents, and post-adoption-services-providing entities, how might advocating for the agency and centring of adoptee perspectives signal and instigate changes to the overall approach to adoption and adoption-related services? Several questions in particular come to mind:

1. If parents are not already aware of the power dynamics present in how they facilitate or deny access to records, how might external forces play a role in increasing adoptive parents' own awareness of records, their power, and how the relationships between parents and children both affect and are replayed in activities of records access, restriction, and education?

2. How might adoptee experiences of post-adoption services and the centrality of records to their adult journeys to understanding adoption be leveraged by advocates to demand better of these systems?

3. In the spirit of community-led practice, how might archivists and records managers support adoptee efforts, contribute to this community's sense of agency, and provide supports for archival awareness and a new conceptualization of what all involved parties understand records of adoption to be doing?

While providing practical answers to these questions is beyond the scope of this thesis, Chapter 5 will attempt to return to archival literature and align the findings of my work with already emerging solutions to advocating for rights in recordkeeping.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Adoptee interactions with their records represent a second life in more ways than one. In some instances, the experiences we have of these materials suggest the lives of other people, including other imaginations of ourselves. In others, it is the records that enjoy new imaginaries and new applications—where they once served to facilitate or confirm facts of adoption, they also serve to represent the truths that adoptees have built their stories on, the truths that they might never know, and the decisions that others made that affected the lives that they now lead. Records and records imaginaries both dictate and interplay with the stories that adoptees know and are creating for themselves; the stories that emerge from records interactions offer an important contribution to existing discussions that interrogate and assert what the duties of archivists, records managers, and archival scholars are to advocate for more conscientious records creation and records access practices.

A significant aspect of this call for a sense of responsibility on the part of archival professionals is due to the fact that these records—while tied to highly personal thoughts, hopes, and events—are institutionally created. While so many of the interactions that adoptees have with their records, as shown in the stories of participants, happen at kitchen tables and childhood desks and in basements of their family homes, the fact that there isn't typically an archivist in these spaces to provide context and description is not a reason to assume that archivists cannot or should not consider these types of records and records experiences under their purview. Douglas and Mills note, "oppositional distinction between the institutional and the personal … limits the way users and archivists alike imagine institutional archives."[141] To expand an understanding of

[141] Douglas and Mills, "From the Sidelines to the Center," 272.

the ways in which archives and recordkeeping work in the context of institutional records as they are 'released' into personal custody is vital to helping our profession orientate itself to the emotional needs of those for whom the records hold deep significance. Without a better understanding of how we should be imagining the sites and situations where the barrier between institutional and personal might be crossed, we will never truly be 'doing right by' those for whom we might dedicate our work.

Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate how records of adoption and the records and relationship building work that occur through interacting with and gaining access to them contribute to experiences of marginalisation and dismissal of agency for adoptees. These findings mirror those found in scholarship that has explored the experiences of care leavers—particularly when considering the shifts in records awareness that occur as part of the transition between childhood to adulthood and the role of records in answering questions of an otherwise unknown past. Areas where archivists and records professionals have concluded they might best offer support to care leavers as well as other communities such as refugees are an important starting place for considering if and how the archival community can begin to engage in activities that support a socially just and caring experience of records for adoptees.

5.1 Considering the value of frameworks and models

5.1.1 A framework development approach

In particular, one highly applicable way scholars engaged in these conversations have attempted to address records injustices is through the development of recordkeeping policies and frameworks that assert the importance of acknowledging the personal-in-the-institutional and seek to codify recognition of these experiences of records in how acts of record production, appraisal, and access are carried out. While the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child has defined and codified a sense of a child's 'right to know' and the Hague Convention of

29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption has attempted to specifically identify what this looks like for adoption practices, records that technically comply with these requirements do so in ways that meet an adoptee's 'rights,' yet fail to incorporate an understanding of records production that acknowledges "that 'knowing' involve[s] more complex dynamics than a rights framework is able to capture."[142]

In their framework for person-centred recordkeeping, the MIRRA project analysed the problems with current recordkeeping and identified that "currently, each actor looks at the process of records creation from their own (or their employer's) viewpoint and legal responsibilities, without necessarily centring the needs of the care-experienced person. Few considered other perspectives or understood the value of connected responsibilities to improve the outcomes for care-experienced people."[143] Their framework provides a solution to this disconnect between agents responsible for records and recordkeeping by outlining how each entity is connected to, and should be in service of, the experiences of the care leaver, including considerations for how interacting with and activating these records are part of life-long identity formation processes. MIRRA argues that this framework will "be applicable to other jurisdictions, with appropriate revision,"[144] and it is enticing to consider how this applicability might refer not only to other situations of institutional care and care leavers, but also to other communities such as adoptees. The dynamics of the relationships that adoptees hold with other entities engaged in recordkeeping practices surrounding adoption are similar, but not identical to those that care leavers have to the institutions that have documented them, and as such attempting to adapt this type of framework in order to propose more concrete models of adoption

[142] van Wichelen, "Revisiting the Right to Know," 359.
[143] Lomas, et al., "A framework for person-centred recordkeeping," forthcoming 2022.
[144] Lomas et al., "A framework for person-centred recordkeeping," forthcoming 2022.

recordkeeping that similarly centre adoptees and their needs would likely require the development of a variety of archival impact studies that more deeply and quantitatively explore how adoptees experience records of adoption.

5.1.2 Modeling records interactions over a lifetime

Understanding adoptee records engagement as a fluid and iterative process challenges my initial decision to code these conversations in alignment with a records lifecycle model. Rather than following a linear progression of stages, records of adoption appear to develop multiple dimensions in the context of adoptee interaction. Where they continue to affirm and tell the story of the legal process of adoption, in the hands and minds of adoptees, these records undergo a reclamation process that inherently challenges and troubles many of the truths that might have been taken for granted as part of their original use. Viviane Frings-Hessami's proposal of a Repurposed Archive Continuum Model incorporates a 'reclamation' dimension that attempts to characterize the activism that care leavers have engaged in to trouble and question the status quo of records about their time in care.[145] This, too, presents an interesting opportunity for cross-pollination between existing development of models and tools to assess and improve recordkeeping practices in service of a marginalized group that holds parallels to the adoptee community, which has not yet emerged a significant community for study in archival contexts.

5.2 Considering our work as validators and educators

The way that archivists think about records, their meaning, and the work that we perform offers opportunities to identify and characterise affective and deeply personal experiences that might be de-valued or de-emphasised in other disciplines in service of critiquing a political

[145] Viviane Frings-Hessami, "Care Leavers' records: a case for a Repurposed Archive Continuum Model," *Archives and Manuscripts* 46, no. 2 (2018): 158-173.

whole. In providing language that identifies how records production, retention, and access can be inherently tied to affective and deeply personal experiences, archivists engaged in critical archival studies are perhaps the best situated to attempt to translate understanding of these experiences into actions that subvert their negative effects and to advocate for greater understanding of what it is that records do and how interventions in recordkeeping practices can intimately serve as acts of allyship and social justice.

The questions that I asked at the end of Chapter 4 sought to interrogate whether adoptive parents and post-adoption-service-providing entities understood the power they had as cultivators of the understanding of records and, if not, how archivists might intervene as educators to create that understanding. What it would look like, for example, if parents and adoption agencies actively understood and could acknowledge the role of archival imaginaries in the stories that they tell and the stories that adoptees hope to find? How might adoptee experiences of disappointment and alienation when accessing their records feel validated by environments that are actively aware of and acknowledge the power of the imaginary to function as a record?

It is also impossible to ignore how educational interventions might not only create better environments that interact with the status quo of adoption records, but also empower adoptive parents and their children to demand better of adoption facilitating entities and their recordkeeping practices and to have the language to explain why doing right by them is important.

At the end of chapter 4, I also sought to consider how archival scholarship might act as a voice of support to elevate the work that adoptees are doing to "make a record."[146] This is not to assert that adoptee communities require legitimacy in archival contexts in order to succeed, and I

[146] Shin, Unbearable Splendor, 46.

hope that it does not come across that way. Rather, I am interested in examining how current adoptee activism might suggest the value of receiving support from records repositories and records workers through attempts 'from the inside' to democratise recordkeeping, make records access processes more transparent, and assert the importance of centring identity-based explorations of records in archival service models. Thus far, adoptees and adoptee community partners have resourcefully created their own guides, approaches, and recommendations for how records might be approached, often with the view that the repositories themselves are the creators of boundaries that these techniques serve to overcome. If archivists and recordkeepers were to build trusting relationships with adoptees and amplify and provide professional context for the work that is being done by adoptees to make records access and interaction a more caring, emotionally aware, and transparent space, it seems like that would benefit all involved.

5.3 Future directions

This thesis represents a very small sliver of the conversations around adoption records that archivists should see as worth having. In addition to continuing the work to characterise how adoptee experiences offer insight into the workings of archival imaginaries and the power of records to both introduce and resolve ambiguities, other directions for future research that incorporates adoptee perspective include deeper explorations of the development of frameworks and models as discussed in section 5.1, as well as imaginings of archivists and researchers hinted at in section 5.2.

While empowering adoptees and acknowledging their experiences should be at the core of research that focuses on adoption, additional studies that engage and explore the perspectives of adoptive parents as well as other entities that contribute to or facilitate the adoption process

could also be valuable for attempting to develop a model for recordkeeping in adoption that respects and acknowledges the needs of all involved parties.

5.4 Where I'm going

I mentioned in the introduction that my experience with critical archival scholarship and my own records has greatly influenced my perspective on both my adoption and archives and I'd like to conclude with a short reflection on how conducting this research has only further impacted my thinking.

Speaking with other adoptees about their experiences and being able to tie them directly to my own experiences has, for me personally, been an incredibly validating experience. It has affirmed in my mind the fact that listening to personal stories about records and their affects is one way archivists can concretely begin to understand how their praxis influences real life questions about identity, belonging, and trust in institutions.

Something that continues to loom large in my mind is the significant absence of transparency in the records process, particularly when it comes to records retention and access for adoptees later in life. What does it mean that adoption agencies seem to be able to close their doors without having to account for the adoptees whose records they have? What about all of the unknown, unseen records that must have existed in our birth countries at some point in time? All of these records absences contribute to stories that are already full of losses, full of narrative holes that cannot be filled by anything except what we might imagine.

I am also reminded of another silence that is present throughout this work: that of the archival community. In the context of doing archival work, scholars are already beginning to suggest how we might perform our work reparatively and with a consciousness for absences, and yet if we do not *communicate* that this is happening within our institutions and within our

development of policies and our acts to influence records creation, the role of archivists and record-keepers not only gets lost in the frustrations of the system, but also fails to truly meet the needs of those whom we are trying to acknowledge and uplift.

This research has taught me that it is not only important to listen, but to reach out beyond the echo chambers of archival thought, to show that voices and experiences of records are being heard by the professional community who has the greatest chance of influencing how the records landscape might look both now and into the future.

I hope that you have enjoyed listening to my story, to my participants stories, and that it will be a call for you, whoever you are, to elevate the records work of communities who have experienced archival silences, or even archivist silences, and to show that their voices can and will make a record.

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[147] In order to celebrate and highlight the work of adoptees (not limited to transracial, transnational adoptees) present in the literature reviewed for this thesis, I have endeavoured to emphasize their contributions where and when I was able to identify them through their writing by bolding their names in the relevant citations.

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Appendix: Project Materials

CONSENT PROTOCOL

STAGE	COURSE OF ACTION
INITIAL CONTACT	Following expression of interest in the study, the potential participant is sent additional information on the study details including its purpose and procedures. • If the potential participant confirms their interest in particpating, email communication to set up interview times will occur and the option for an introductory meeting in addition to the interviews will be offered in addition to the option for a written consent form.
OPTIONAL: INTRODUCTORY MEETING	If an introductory meeting is requested, it will be scheduled at a time that is mutually convenient. • Topics to go over will be the format of the participatory elements and any questions that the participant might have from the outset. • If the participant expresses continued interest in participating, procedure for procuring verbal consent will occur (see next step).
PROCURING CONSENT	**Written Consent** If the participant indicates that they would prefer a written consent process, they will be asked to return the form with their confirmation of interest in participating. **Oral Consent** If an introductory meeting did not occur, consent will be procured during the first interview session before the interview begins. Regardless of whether it is conducted during an introductory meeting or the first session, the process for procuring verbal consent will follow the Oral Consent Script and be recorded on Zoom.
FOLLOW UP	Following the interview process, it is the goal of the research team to give participants agency in the documentation of their reflection and to keep them informed of the role of their stories in the work. • Participants will be invited to review their transcripts before they are coded and used in the construction of the project's case studies. • In the spirit of a dialogic interpretive process, following the writing process, participants will be contacted and offered the opportunity to review the written materials and confirm that they are comfortable with what has been written
PUBLICATION	Assuming the final thesis is approved, it is the goal of the research team to produce an interactive digital tool that gives back to the participants and the overall community to allow them to explore the research, its products, and related materials that are able to be shared. • Before the tool is made widely available, participants will be invited to interact with the website and its features and request adjustments to their consent should they have concerns about the public nature of the tool.

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WRITTEN CONSENT FORM

Project Title: 'How do we pronounce our skin in English': Records of adoption and their impact on adoptee identity construction

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Mya Ballin. I'm a Masters student at the University of British Columbia (UBC) studying Archival Studies.

My research is about the records that Chinese and Korean transracial, transnational adoptees have of their adoption and the impact that these records have on identity construction.

By completing this research I hope to identify areas in which the specific experiences of adoptees might lend to existing discussions and considerations of archival practice. I also hope to make this a validating project for transracial adoptees, offering a new perspective/angle through which collective experiences and emotions can be expressed and identified as being academically valid and, looking forward into the future, practically supported.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this study, would like further information, or want to provide feedback, you may contact my supervisor: Jennifer Douglas, Assistant Professor at the School of Information, University of British Columbia, IKBLC 487, 1961 East Mall, Vancouver BC V6T 1Z1. Telephone: 604.827.5905. E-mail: jen.douglas@ubc.ca.

You can also contact my thesis committee member: Rebecka Sheffield, Adjunct Professor at the School of Information, University of British Columbia vie email at rsheffie@mail.ubc.ca.

If you choose to be a part of this project, here is what will happen:

1. I will have a virtually-hosted conversation interview lasting 1-1.5 hour(s) with you where we speak about topics such as:
    - Records of your adoption and their significance to you
    - Your adoption story and its evolution
    - Your thoughts and reflections on being a Korean or Chinese transracial, transnational adoptee, including but not limited to your experience of your racial identity and relationship with your family

2. I will have an additional virtually-hosted conversation lasting 1-1.5 hour(s) with you where we take a look at 2-3 specific records related to your adoption that you choose to share with the project as well as a couple of published accounts of the experiences of other Chinese and Korean transracial, transnational adoptees.

- Due to the virtual nature of our conversations, I will request for a digital copy of the records of your choosing to bring to the conversation so that I am able to view them and get a better understanding of their content. You will be asked to send these to my email, which is linked to an encryption service. If you would prefer not to share these documents over email, you can choose to show them over Zoom at the start of the interview. It is up to you whether these materials can subsequently be used in publication or if they can only be used for reference.
- You will not be required to purchase any materials for this interview. Any excerpts from publications will be provided to you. That said, if you would like to review the materials in full, the following are citations for the texts:
    - Shin, Sun Yung. *Granted to a foreign citizen*. Vancouver: Artspeak (2020).
    - Sjoblom, Lisa Wool-rim. *Palimpsest*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly (2016).

3. Following our conversations, if a recording was made, I will be manually transcribing it as part of my work on the project. The transcript will be sent to you via encrypted email so that you can review it. You will have 2 weeks to review, and, if necessary, revise what the transcription and return it to me via email. If you are uncomfortable with anything that has been said, please feel free to change the wording of the answers to clarify your meaning or to delete all or any part of any answer. You will have the same opportunity to review any written materials that summarize or interact with your story.

Data Collection, Recording, and Publication

All communications, including those used to share documents, will be sent using encrypted email.

Because of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews for this project will be conducted via the internet using Zoom software. When you join a Zoom session, you will be asked to give your name. We can supply you with a code you can use instead of your name to protect your privacy. You can also use a nickname or a substitute name if you prefer. On the Zoom platform you may turn off your camera if you do not wish to appear on screen at any point, and you may, from time to time, mute your microphone if you would like to do so, if, for instance, you need to talk to someone near you and do not wish to have it recorded. We will be happy to provide you with technical assistance if you need it.

With your permission, I would like to make a recording of our discussion using the features native to the Zoom to make sure I'm getting an accurate record of your thoughts. This can be a recording that captures both video and audio, a recording that records just the audio, or instead of recording you, I can take notes in my notebook. I may want to re-contact you to clarify information you gave me in your interview. Any recording that is made will be stored on my computer and will not be stored using a cloud storage service.

If you agree to an interview, I will include content and analysis from our conversations on your interview as part of my master's thesis. My supervisory committee will have access to my project and records.

I intend to make parts of my research available online on a dedicated website that will be publicly accessible (i.e. not be password protected). The website will incorporate the technology designed by the Oral History (as) Data project and the Collection Builder project developed by the University of Idaho library that enables projects to thematically tag oral history transcripts or written materials and make those tags filterable/explorable by users and create digital exhibits that link 'objects' (in this case any records that the researcher has been given permission to share on the platform) to locations, timelines, and to one another. You may limit whether my conversations with you are included as part of this online platform. If you would like material related to your story to be made available to others, you may approve them for publication. Your interview materials will NOT be included in any publications without your consent.

Data Storage and Anonymization

The data which includes interviews, the copies of the records you share with me, and my observation notes will be encrypted and de-identified, which means any publications will not use your name, unless you would like to be identified.

I will store your information safely and confidentially in a password protected and encrypted laptop. I would like to be able to use your de-identified information/data in future studies (e.g. a doctoral dissertation).

Risks and Risk Management

The following risks are involved in taking part in this study: you may find aspects of the interview emotionally distressing and intense due to the focus of the conversation being on your adoption and identity. You can feel free to take a break or stop participating in the conversation at any time. As there are plans to make the results of this study available to the adoptive community and the public through a dedicated website, even if de-identification is performed, it is possible that your story will be recognizable to individuals that you know.

Remuneration/Compensation

Though we very much value your contribution to this project, no remuneration or compensation will be paid as part of this project.

Participation and Withdrawal from the Study

You don't have to agree to take part in this study; you can ask me any questions you want before or throughout; you can also withdraw at any stage without giving a reason. If you choose to withdraw, any data that has been collected will be deleted from my computer.

Please note that once that data is made public the final submission of my thesis, you will no longer be able to withdraw. You will, however, continue have the opportunity to withdraw your materials from use on the project website.

Contact for Information about the Rights of Research Subjects

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

The reference for this study is: H21-03122

Recording:

You have your choice of how your interview is recorded. You may choose any or all of the following by marking them with your initials:

_____ You agree that I **may make notes from your interview from memory** after the interview is finished and use the notes as part of my project.

_____ You agree that I **may take notes during your interview** and use the notes as part of my project.

_____ You agree that I **may record the audio of your interview** and use the audio recording as part of my project.

_____ You agree that I **may record the audio and video of your interview** and use the them as part of my project.

You may withdraw materials from the project at any time prior to their use in the ways to which you have agreed.

Personal records:

You may choose to approve the use of the digital copies of records discussed as part of the object elicitation stage of this project in the final products. Please choose **one** of the following options:

_____ Mya Ballin **may** include the digital copies of documents discussed during our conversations as part of her project.

_____ Mya Ballin **may not** include the digital copies of documents discussed during our conversations as part of her project.

You may withdraw materials from the project at any time prior to their use in the ways to which you have agreed.

Online Publication:

You may choose to approve the record of your participation in this project to become part of a website dedicated to this research project. Please choose **one** of the following options:

_____ Mya Ballin **may** include materials from the record of my participation in an online publication.

_____ Mya Ballin **may not** include materials from the record of my participation in an online publication.

You may withdraw materials from the project at any time prior to their use in the ways to which you have agreed.

Consent:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

_____ _____

Participant Signature Date

_____

Printed Name of the Participant

Interview Script

Adoption Story
What is your adoption story?
When do you first remember being told your family's story? Has it changed?
When do you first remember telling your own version of your adoption story? Has it changed?
Who and what have contributed to how you tell your adoption story?

Records of adoption
Did you participate in any adoption-centric events when you were younger? Now?
Have you ever created art or written materials related to your adoption?
What documents are you aware of/have you seen relating to your adoption?
Are there documents that you haven't seen that you know exist? Do you want to see them?
Are there documents that do not exist about your adoption that you wish existed?
Do your records answer the questions that you would like them to answer about your adoption?
Have you ever tried to find more records or more information about the conditions of your adoption? What was that process like? What avenues did you try to pursue this through?

Cultural and social perceptions of adoption and identity
How would you describe your cultural identity? Your racial identity? Has this changed? What kinds of things have influenced how you see yourself now? What role, if any, does your identity as an adoptee play in how you consider your Asian-ness? Your other identities?
Are there particular records that you have seen as affirmational or contradictory to how you describe your identity?
Are there records that you feel are 'necessary' to affirm your identity? That you use in the context of explaining your identity to others?
How did your parents describe your racial identity to you? Your cultural identity? Do they refer to your records in these types of descriptions?
Did you participate in any cultural learning or celebratory events when you were younger? Now?
How would you describe your relationship with the idea of adoption? Of being adopted?
How often do you disclose that you are an adoptee? In what contexts does it feel necessary? Do you ever make the decision not to disclose this information? When and why?

DISTRESS PROTOCOL

STAGE	SIGNS/COURSE OF ACTION
DISTRESS	• A participant indicates they are experiencing a high level of stress or emotional distress • A participant exhibits behaviours suggestive that the discussion/interview is too stressful such as uncontrolled crying, shaking, disengagement with platform, etc.

STAGE 1 RESPONSE	**Pause interview**
	• The researcher will offer several options for reducing intensity of the process, including but not limited to:
	  • Turning the camera function of Zoom off while the interview continues
	  • Taking a time out from the process
	  • Moving to a different part of the data collections process that is not directly focused on the participant's story
	• The researcher will also offer the option to reschedule the remainder of the interview when the participant feels ready

REVIEW	• If participant feels able to carry on: continue the interview with any requested adjustments • If participant does not feel comfortable with continuing, proceed to Stage 2 Response
STAGE 2 RESPONSE	**Halt interview** • If the participant does not feel as though they need to disengage immediately, spend time seeing how the researcher might offer support. Make recommendations for getting support from their emotional support system • If the participants needs to step away immediately, the researcher should inform the participant that they will be reaching out to them with resources and allow the call to end as soon as the participant needs. **In both cases: proceed to Followup Step**
FOLLOWUP	As a followup to halting the interview, the researcher will send the Emotional Distress Email Script and attach the emotional resources handout, which will also have been provided to the participant over the course of the pre-interview email contact. The researcher should also encourage the participant to approach the research team or other related contacts should they have concerns about the research.