

PREFACE

In the winter of 2006, I was in the middle of my last year at the University of Oregon. A good friend of mine who was also active in the student group scene emailed me about a unique summer camp for transnational and transracial adoptees (throughout this book I call this camp the Adoptee Camp). Before college, I had not given much thought to my identity as a transracial/transnational adoptee. Growing up, I knew at least four other (Korean) adoptees, but we were in different grades and were not friends. It was not just the age gaps though. I was less interested in my identity as an adopted person and more invested in being loved, fitting in, and belonging in my family, school, and community. When I received the email about the Adoptee Camp, I had already written two essays on TRNA and was intrigued by the existence of this service, space, and community for adoptees.

That summer as a camp counselor would be my first time being surrounded by other adult adoptees. Fresh from college graduation, I spent five weeks with fifteen other adoptees, one week of training, and another four weeks of traveling together as we hosted four- and five-day camps in four different states. In addition to the adult adoptees of color, I met more than 250 other transracial/transnational adoptee youths that summer. I remember greeting campers as they arrived. Smiles abounded. For some, this was their second, fourth, or even seventh time attending camp. Of course, some kids were extremely anxious. Tears streamed down the face of one child. But by the end of the week, there were different tears, ones that recognized a shared experience not only for the week but for the major aspects of life that were connected through adoption. It sounds hyperbolic, but the Adoptee Camp was a magical space.¹

By the summers of 2008 and 2010, I had finished my two years of coursework at UC San Diego, taking classes in ethnic studies, history, sociology, and literature.

In those summers my camp role expanded. I was on the leadership team, which meant I arrived a week prior to the counselors to plan for the summer. Just before my second summer with the Adoptee Camp, I had taken a graduate course on critical pedagogy, which made me consider the camp as a teaching space. In my new role I had a direct hand in reshaping the curriculum that campers and parents would experience, which allowed me to combine theory with practice.² What made the Adoptee Camp unique was that nearly all the other camps for adoptees were run by adoptive parents and centered on “birth culture”—that is, the culture that transnational adoptees would have experienced had they not been adopted. The director of the Adoptee Camp was an adult Korean adoptee, and all of the counselors were also transnational adoptees. The director consciously changed the camp in 2005 from a birth culture camp into a model that centered the adoptee community, adoptee identity, adoption issues, and race.

Through working at the Adoptee Camp and conducting research (interviews, participant observations, and online content analysis of birth culture camps), I learned that the love intended in adoption and adoption practices (such as heritage summer camps) was not always as simple as it seemed. To be sure, birth culture camps emerged from love. The first one, Kamp Kimchee, was established in 1981.³ By 2013 more than 30 distinct heritage camps for adoptees had sprouted across the United States.⁴ They were a response to the earlier (and in some cases still existing) assimilation and color-evasive models of adoption. Where transracial/transnational adoptees were previously encouraged to erase, hide, and ignore their cultural identity—essentially to “become” White, heritage camps demonstrated transracial/transnational adoptive parenting that was “better than previous generations.” The heritage camps, for the most part, were founded and operated by adoptive parents.

Similar to other summer camps, heritage camps included leisure activities such as horseback riding, zip lines, ropes courses, climbing walls, rafting, campfires, singing, skits, and s’mores. The difference is that campers who attended Kamp Kimchee, Camp Moo Gun Hwa, La Semana Camp, and the numerous other national-origin heritage camps participated in “culturally specific” activities. These included ethnic cooking classes, traditional dancing, arts and crafts, music and games, and language sessions taught by so-called ethnic experts from the community and/or adoptive parents who have already accumulated “cultural knowledge.” Many camps provided on-site ethnic markets for campers to purchase “authentic” cultural objects, art, and artifacts. Camp sessions often culminated with a performance in cultural attire and an ethnic feast. In other words, heritage camps employed what I call “birth culture pedagogy.” Such an approach was meant to celebrate and instill pride in adoptees’ missing ethnic identity and allowed adoptive parents to learn and share birth culture alongside their child; build stronger (and in some cases “normative”) family relations; and generate a supportive adoption

community for both adoptees *and* adoptive families, where they did not have to explain or justify their families and experiences. Heritage camps were the “loving solution” provided by adoptive parents and adoption agencies, intended to combat the loss of cultural identity that transnational and transracial adoption produced.⁵

However, some scholars have critiqued the notions of “culture keeping” by way of these heritage camps as “weak,” “White,” “superficial,” “hegemonic” multiculturalism, and “staged authenticity.”⁶ The point here is not to claim that the culture at such camps is inauthentic. Instead, such practices are substantial precisely because birth culture is knowable and therefore safe, in which adoptive parents can be a substitute for missing culture.⁷ This singular focus is important because learning culture is, on the one hand, a substitute for “lost” culture and an effort to instill ethnic pride in adoptees. Simply by sending their children to camp, adoptive parents can fill this cultural deficit. On the other hand, birth culture references the ghostly presence of the birth parents because they are the (biological) figures attached to the place of origin for the adoptee’s birth culture. Thus birth culture is also about teaching and learning for adoptive parents as a way to acquire cultural knowledge in tandem with their child such that they can be a substitute for the birth parents and birth nation, simultaneously ignoring and displacing the haunting specter of birth parents.⁸

Pam Sweester, adoptive mother and founder of Heritage Camps for Adoptive Families, stated that her experience with transnational adoption, the summer camp, and meeting Indian and Korean people (ethnic experts) through the camp has transformed her identity: “Except for the very obvious color of my skin or shape of my eyes, I honestly feel Indian and Korean sometimes.”⁹ Sweester’s work and sentiment, informed by love of her children, reflect the ways that adoptive parents can (un)wittingly displace birth parents. In an Edward Saidian fashion, they can apprehend the birth culture and become the new mediator of it and repository of lost knowledge.¹⁰ The same could be said about discussions regarding birth parents. In the birth culture camps and retreats that Greg, former director of the Adoptee Camp, has observed, adoptive parents avoid the topic of birth parents. “[It’s] kind of like a slap in the face to them,” Greg says. “It’s kind of a rejection of them as parents.”¹¹ It can be easier to learn about something fun and knowable (culture) rather than to discuss the hidden, traumatic, or unknowable aspects of adoption, let alone the violence attached to the racism, colonialism, and immigration that have produced “missing” cultures in past contexts.

I open with this example of birth culture camps and the Adoptee Camp because they helped me understand the complexity of adoption. Birth culture camps are filled with desire—that is, love, protection, hope, and visions of the future. While working at the Adoptee Camp, I witnessed the love that adoptive parents have for their children. I do not think that their love is much (if at all) different from adoptive parents who attend and/or organize birth culture camps. Heritage camps

have attempted to right a wrong of assimilation and address the violence of lost culture. Yet birth culture as a loving desire is simultaneously a mechanism that ignores or erases power relations and other forms of violence. Based on a deficit model that presumed missing birth culture was the primary cause of harm for transracial/transnational adoptions, this approach displaced or left little room (and certainly no built-in structure) to discuss the difficult issues related to adoption. These issues include racism, thoughts and desires regarding birth parents, and the social and historical conditions that have separated families and made birth culture pedagogy necessary in the first place.

The point is not to casually dismiss or negate the importance and generative aspects of birth culture pedagogy and heritage camps. Nor is this project an underhanded attempt to excuse or apologize for the adoption industry and adoptive parents who have enacted serious harm through efforts that maintain the status quo. Rather, even when something emerges from love, is believed to be loving, and/or the people involved in it had a “wonderful experience,” this does not mean it resolves trauma or is unattached to harm. The industry and system of adoption is tied to different types of violence. In addition, intentional and desiring love can emerge from and have overt and violent consequences that are complex and full of subtle, contradictory meanings.

This book is interested in the expansive gray area that contains the violence of love that pertains to and affects real people and families. How might we analyze (and abolish) an institution—adoption—that has failed and harmed so many people while still affording “complex personhood” to those who are implicated in that institution?¹² Where do we go from here, and how do we begin? What have people done, and what existing models can we follow or use? What genealogies must we know? How can we attend to the ghosts of adoption and the violence of love?

NOTE ON TERMS AND TERMINOLOGY

“Transracial adoption” (TRA) has historically been used to describe the adoption of Black and Native American children into White homes, which are conventions I follow. The terms “international” and “intercountry” are typically used to describe adoptions of children born in another country, even though a large majority are also transracial. Kim Park Nelson notes, for example, that adoptions from Asia are not considered transracial in part because of the “perceived absence of racial discrimination against Asian Americans.”¹³ The terms “international” and “intercountry” also lack attention to the power relations involved with the movement of bodies because they either convey cooperation, equality, or universality. In addition, as cultural anthropologist Toby Alice Volkman has stated, the term “transnational” attends to the “ongoing, crisscrossing flows in multiple directions” of adoptees that create “new geographies of kinship.”¹⁴ Thus I use “transnational adoption” (TNA) instead.

I also use “transracial and transnational adoptees” when referencing domestic and transnational transracial adoptees as a group. Since most transnational adoptions are also transracial (e.g., adoptions from Asia), sometimes “transracial/transnational” is used to reference what would normally be termed “international.” Moreover, this term captures the ways Native American, Haitian, and Ethiopian adoptions, for example, are transnational in addition to transracial. When discussing domestic and transnational forms of transracial adoptions together, I use the acronym TRNA. The only other term that currently incorporates both transnational and transracial aspects of adoption is “transracial intercountry adoption” (TRIA). However, I prefer TRNA because it gestures toward how culture, race, space, borders, and national identities are constructed/unfixed and contested.¹⁵

Following many other experts, I capitalize racial identity terms, despite their socially constructed nature. To capitalize them is to mark them as proper nouns. They are not merely adjectives or generic descriptors, but instead, important specificity and varying sets of power relations are attached to these terms.¹⁶ In 2020 the Associated Press (AP) announced it would capitalize “Black” but not “white” because capitalizing the latter could convey legitimacy to White supremacist groups, which have long practiced this stylization. While many news organizations followed the AP, major news outlets such as CNN and Fox News have opted to capitalize racial identity markers, including White, to follow the recommendation put forward by the National Association of Black Journalists.¹⁷ If such terms (as well as antiquated and offensive terms) are used in quotes, I have kept the terms as they appear in the original source. Lastly, I use “Indian” interchangeably with “Native American” and at times “Indigenous.” Although many people understand “Indian” to be an antiquated and offensive term, it is still an official term used in many Native and U.S. legal contexts.

The term “White supremacy” is often reserved for the Ku Klux Klan and other White nationalists. I use it in the same way as activists across issues and critical scholars across disciplines, which is that White supremacy describes the logics and systems that have not only upheld Whiteness as an ideal but institutionalized it as a hidden norm over time in ways that have maintained and fortified structural racism and settler colonialism. “Settler colonialism” is a thing that is often attributed to the past, and usually without the descriptor “settler,” as a move to innocence.¹⁸ While most Americans are vaguely familiar with the fact that Native Americans were treated poorly, the narratives of “Indian bandits,” “uncivilized savages,” and “vanishing Indians” sanitize the violence perpetrated against Native Tribes. “Settler colonialism” as a concept names the perpetrator of violence—settlers and, more important, the settler state—so “colonialism” does not become a passive noun. I follow Native and Indigenous scholars who underscore that (settler) colonialism is “a structure not an event.”¹⁹ This helps us understand that despite the nation-to-nation relationship that Tribes have with the United States, which is recognized in the U.S. Constitution and hundreds of treaties, the U.S. government has exerted

control over Tribes.²⁰ This is especially true for policy that affects Native children and families. For this reason I consider the adoption of Native American children as both transracial and transnational.

Lastly, throughout this book I occasionally use the terms “they,” “them,” and “their” as singular pronouns.