“I guess someone forgot to ask us if we wanted to be America’s diversity mascots”: The identity journey of transracial, transnational, Korean adoptees

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Molly Jin Ah Rigell entitled ""I guess someone forgot to ask us if we wanted to be America's diversity mascots": The identity journey of transracial, transnational, Korean adoptees." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Lisa M. King, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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“I guess someone forgot to ask us if we wanted to be America’s diversity mascots”: The identity journey of transracial, transnational, Korean adoptees

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ABSTRACT

Korean, transracial, international adoptees (TRIAs) have been given an opportunity to tell their stories in the anthologies *Seeds of a Silent Tree, Voices from Another Place, and More Voices*. Through an examination of twelve stories from these three anthologies, I pinpoint issues that are faced by TRIAs who were raised in white families, and the significance these issues hold. I also discuss the unique perspectives displayed in each anthology, and the overall view of racial identity that can be observed through the study of a unique community. Through their status as in-between races and cultures, Korean, transracial, international adoptees can illuminate issues of race that would otherwise be forgotten. Through choices of display, TRIAs make clear statements about their colors, bodies, and races.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

We are an other. We are the in-between. We are told that we were “saved” or “chosen.” We often do not see in the mirror what we imagine in our minds. We sit outside of each community – feeling neither fully Asian nor fully white. We are twinkies and bananas: yellow on the outside, white on the inside. We move between the two racial groups. We navigate our racial identity as well as our unique identity as adoptees.

It is through narrative that we often come to terms with who we are. By telling our stories, we reach out and connect with those who understand. We learn that racial identity is not black, white, or yellow. We form our own crayon color; we find our own anthem. We are more than our origins. We transcend our latitudes, and travel along many longitudes. We are adopted Koreans.

Background

*International Adoption*

Korean adoption in America started in 1953, at the end of the Korean War. With many children orphaned by the war, and other children born to Korean women and American soldiers, international adoption became the only logical solution to the overflowing orphanages. After the first adoption of a “Korean war baby” in December 1953, letters began to pour in from families attempting to “eliminate a small part of the world’s suffering” (Kim 12). Adoption played into the American ideal of humanitarianism, with Americans wishing to “save” these children who were in need.
Many families who adopted Korean children so soon after the Korean War already had biological children, and saw adoption as not only a way to help, but also a way to “‘round out’ their families, or give ‘playmates’ to their children” (Kim 12). These orphans played a political role, as well, virtue as their status between cultures.

Sentimentalized constructions of children neutralized highly charged political contexts… These two processes are fundamentally linked in Korean adoption—the sentimentalization and depoliticization of children as “pure humanity” also made them available to be dispatched as “sons” and “daughters” who could link people and nations as “ambassadors” and “bridges.” (Kim 19)

This pressure could be extremely strong when placed on these adopted children. However, as we moved further from the Korean War, adoption became less politicized. Families began seeking adoption as alternatives to biological children, whether due to fertility issues or a sense of humanitarian responsibility. Korea remained the leader of international adoptions in the U.S. until the early 1990’s.

*Studies of Adoptees*

Many studies have been conducted involving Korean, transracial, international adoptees (TRIAs), but most of this information has been discussed through the viewpoints of social workers, psychologists, anthropologists, etc. In their article “Reclaiming Culture: Reculturation of Transracial and International *Adoptees,*” Baden, Treweeke, and Ahluwalia describe the process that many TRIAs go through when forming their racial identity. They begin by describing the stage at which adoptees identify with the race of their parents. Being raised by white parents results in “as many
as 78% of Korean TRIAs reported thinking they were White or wanting to be White as children but that a majority of those same adoptees were compelled to heighten their racial/ethnic awareness and shift their identification to fit their Asian heritage” (387). This heightening of awareness is referred to as reculturation. This process occurs when TRIAs wish to explore their birth culture, in order to feel more connected to their racial origins. Some adoptees take language classes, others travel to Korea, some join social groups of other Asians, and some just begin to do their own research. All these methods of reculturation are valid, and help TRIAs to come to terms with their racial identity.

In 1975 and 1976, Dong Soo Kim conducted a study of adolescent Korean TRIAs and their parents. He separated his participants into two groups: one group was adopted before their first birthday, while the other group was adopted after their sixth birthday. “Kim found no significant difference between the self-esteem scores of his adopted subjects and those of other American teenagers. However, adolescents who were placed ‘early’… had higher levels of self-esteem, personality integration, and adjustment than did those placed ‘later’” (Silverman 107). While there are obvious issues with Kim’s methods and conclusions (self-reporting, narrow age group studied, etc.), it is interesting that there was a noticeable difference between children adopted as infants and the children adopted later in childhood. The time of adoption greatly influences not only the self-esteem of the adoptee, but the connection to family and trauma felt from being removed from Korea. These differences can also be seen through the anthologies studied in this thesis.

Another study of Korean adoptees was analyzed by Lei Ouyang Bryant. During an analysis of an Asian American theatre company, and a play they produced that
featured Korean adoptees, Bryant discusses issues of cultural production. Bryant references a question asked by Chin, Feng, and Lee in a 2000 article: “’Who is producing what for whom and why?’” (11). I believe this question can be applied to any form of cultural production, whether it be a musical or an anthology of narratives. In these productions, “the presentation of ideas, emotions, and experiences introduces the possibility for change” (11). The anthologies of Korean TRIA narratives that are analyzed in this thesis also deal with this idea of change. They have an inherent call to action woven through their covers. They wish for an ending of silence, a community, and acceptance.

The use of stories and anthologies provides an opportunity to add to this body of research in a way that has been previously ignored. An emphasis on childhood is evident in almost every study involving transracial, international adoptees. These stories display a progression of racial identity formation that requires the voice of adult adoptees. The previously mentioned studies have focused on ideas held by parents and their children. By analyzing the ways in which they tell their stories, I aim to reveal the next step in the progression. Narratives written by adult adoptees provide a cohesive, coming-of-age arc that is necessary for understanding the experiences and perspectives of the enormous population of transracial, international adoptees. Through a rhetorical analysis of these narratives, I will illuminate our struggles and accomplishments. I will connect rhetorical theory and racial identity theory in order to show how, despite their differences in life experience and childhoods, transracial, international, Korean adoptees develop their sense of racial identity in the same ways. I hope that this connection could later be applied to a broader group, showing similarities between adoptees from various countries.
Asian American Rhetoric

 Significant work has been done in Asian American rhetoric in the past two decades, most notably the publishing of *Minor Re/Visions* in 2004 and *Representations* in 2008. For the purpose of this thesis, however, I have chosen to separate Asian adoptees from Asian Americans. Asian American rhetoric can be seen as an attempt to “reexamine and reconceptualize rhetoric’s purposes and functions beyond the paradigm of western rhetoric” (Mao and Young 4). Yet, the adoptees featured in the stories I analyze do not feel that urge. They were raised by parents and in communities that are a part of that western paradigm.

 Adoptees look for representations of themselves, and the experiences of Asian Americans in general can cause adoptees to feel alienated. We often do not have childhood stories of struggling to bridge the language gap for immigrant parents, or feel the need to connect with the historic pain of those that came before us, to touch on two major issues that arise in stories of Asian Americans. The experiences of Asian Americans and Korean, transracial, international adoptees do not align. I believe that by clumping those two groups together, the uniqueness of the second gets eclipsed by the first.

 Personal Investment

 These anthologies were written by and for adoptees, and I am proud to claim my membership in this community. I was born in Incheon, South Korea, and was adopted and brought to the United States as an infant. I can see my own life reflected in the stories I chose for this thesis. Like YoungHee and Kari Ruth I have felt shame and inadequacy comparing my features and body to those of my white peers. Like Courtney
Young, I have struggled with feelings of curiosity and indifference towards my birth mother. Like Megan Brown, I have addressed racism and ignorance with both humor and rage. The stories of these women are also my stories. Through this thesis, I hope to lift my voice as they have lifted theirs, my attempt to display, rather than conceal, my own body and community.

**Theoretical Framework**

Given the lack of research into adult adoptees, but building off the research conducted with children, a rhetorical analysis using theories by Lawrence Prelli, Beverly Daniel Tatum, and Sharon Crowley helps me to deconstruct the similarities and differences experienced by TRIAs, especially their struggles with body, display, and racial identity. Due to their unique experiences, these adoptees give insight into the use of terministic screens, the progression of racial identity, and the cultural weight inherent in these racially marked bodies. This analysis is important because Korean TRIAs are not only a marginalized group, but one that is rarely acknowledged as separate from Koreans or Asian Americans in general. By doing this type of analysis, importance is placed on Korean TRIAs, and their ability to demonstrate and illuminate the progression of racial identity. And by focusing on narratives written by adoptees themselves, emphasis is placed on the voice of the adoptees themselves, rather than media stories or qualitative studies written about them. They are able to reclaim a sense of agency and voice through the publication of these anthologies.

Throughout this thesis I draw heavily from the writings of Lawrence Prelli, Sharon Crowley, and Beverly Daniel Tatum. Prelli has written about environmental
discourse, the rhetoric of science, rhetorical theory, and rhetorics of display. Although I focus on his work with rhetorics of display, his contribution to rhetoric is much broader than that single subject. Similarly, Crowley has been published on a wide variety of aspects of rhetoric. Her publications range from issues in ancient rhetoric to composition studies to rhetorics of the body. Tatum’s background is not in rhetoric, but rather psychology and religious studies. Her publications are also impressive, but I focus on her work with racial identity formation.

One of the most striking similarities found throughout the twelve stories I analyze is the idea that adoptees choose which parts of themselves to display, and which parts to hide. Their unique status as between races automatically puts some aspects of their bodies on display, but as they navigate their racial identity they are able to cast some parts of themselves into the shadows. In *Rhetorics of Display*, Lawrence Prelli applies terministic screens to such ideas of display. These terministic screens were originally proposed by Kenneth Burke; he discussed language’s ability to direct attention towards a certain path, or away from others. In his introduction, Prelli suggests that “selectivity also is at work in visual as well as in verbal dimensions of display. Paintings, sketches, photographs, and other visual images are rhetorical in that they, too, emphasize some meanings even as they diminish or conceal others” (12). Adoptees use these terministic screens to aid in their choices of how to display their bodies and their racial identity, both in the stories featured in the anthologies, and in their everyday lives.

In my analysis, I use ideas introduced by Beverly Daniel Tatum. Her description of the stages of racial identity formation give clear, concise terms in which to discuss complex issues. While her analysis involves POC (people of color) in general, I find that
the progression she describes can not only shed light on the experience of TRIAs, but that an analysis of adoptees’ application of this process can support Tatum’s ideas in an entirely new way. In this thesis, I primarily use Tatum’s ideas for the experiences of children. In the article “Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom,” Tatum outlines a five step journey of racial identity. Tatum theorizes that people of color experience “preencounter”, “encounter”, “immersion/emersion”, “internalization”, and “internalization-commitment.” Preencounter involves a distancing from race, with the intent to be accepted by “Whites.” Many TRIAs unknowingly spend their childhoods in this stage. Encounter is an experience that awakens a POC (person of color) to their difference from the majority. Immersion/emersion occurs when a POC wishes to learn more about their race, or immerse themselves in that culture. The POC experiences this immersion, which often is seen simultaneously with a rejection of white culture, then emerges with a new security and understanding of their own race. This stage is the equivalent of reculturation as proposed by Baden, Treweeke, and Ahluwalia. Both internalization and internalization-commitment are marked by an acceptance of a person’s racial identity, and a sense of community with others of that same race. The stage of Tatum’s theory that I will focus on during this thesis is immersion/emersion; however, I will use Baden, Treweeke, and Ahluwalia’s term reculturation. This term seems more fitting, partially because of its focus on culture, and its lack of emphasis on an ending. While immersion often happens during reculturation, I feel that emersion is unnecessary. Emersion implies that a TRIA emerges, changed, at the end of this process.
This term implies that there is an ending of this process, and that it only happens once.

Reculturation can continue in differing degrees throughout a TRIA’s life.

In my analysis of the stories of TRIAs, I draw heavily from ideas synthesized and analyzed by Sharon Crowley. These include the politicizing, and therefore racializing, of the body, and the inevitability of this process, and the cultural weight that bodies inherently carry, especially enmeshed in the struggle between “inner” and “outer.” In her afterword to *Rhetorical Bodies*, Crowley discusses the body as “intricately enmeshed in.. ‘the “micropractices” of everyday life’… the personal is the political” (Crowley 358).

The body is always on display, and that display is often a political statement. Korean TRIAs are unable to escape this fact. Despite the picture we may have in our minds of how we are seen, our race is not only on display, but when seen with our families, our difference is highlighted. We become “diversity mascots,” as Kari Ruth describes in her story, “Dear Luuk” (144). Korean TRIAs wear this political statement in the shape of their eyes and the color of their skin. They are seen as ambassadors, speaking for both cultures simultaneously. They provide an opportunity for others to voice their opinions, because they are “not really Korean,” or “basically white.”

Crowley also discusses the issues that arise when considering inside vs. outside. She posits, “how do we mark ‘the inside’ of a human body as opposed to its ‘outside’?” (360). This issue takes on new meaning when considering a group of people whose “outside” and “inside” might not match. While these terms become more figurative, rather than the literal outside of skin that Crowley references, the problems still exist. TRIAs often see their “insides” as matching the race of their parents. They grow up feeling white; their “yellow” outsides do not match their white “insides.” Crowley states
that “bodies are marked in ways that carry a great deal of cultural freight. Identities are also marked by cultural constructions of bodies” (361). The ideas that Crowley discusses in the afterword of *Rhetorical Bodies* are extremely applicable to the narratives found in *Seeds from a Silent Tree, Voices from Another Place*, and *More Voices*.

Although exceptions do exist, I have found that instances of revealing and concealing can be directly linked to stages of Tatum’s racial identity formation. During preencounter, subjects focus neither on revealing nor concealing, due to the fact that they are unaware of their difference. Encounter begins the process of concealing and rejecting racial identity, until immersion/emersion occurs. During immersion, subjects display an interesting combination of revealing and concealing. They often feel that they are embracing and revealing their racial identity, while they still struggle with feelings that emerge due to their unconscious concealing of themselves in the crowd. During emersion, they have willingly embraced the idea of revealing. Internalization and internalization-commitment continue the subject’s revealing of racial identity, and the stories I have identified for analysis in this thesis display these patterns.

Using these key concepts from Prelli, Tatum, and Crowley, the patterns that emerge from these story collections involve the conception of bodies and color, and the experiences that lead to a more balanced sense of racial identity. Adoptees make conscious choices of how to reveal and conceal their politicized bodies, and these decisions tend to follow Tatum’s five step process, moving from concealing to revealing. Therefore, my rhetorical analysis looks at the ways in which TRIAs use mirror metaphors, stories of reculturation, and descriptions of relations, provides a better understanding of the ways in which identity can be negotiated and built.
Anthologies

Methodology

The process of choosing which stories to analyze was a surprisingly difficult experience. I collected *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, *Voices from Another Place*, and *More Voices*, choosing these titles due to their availability and focus on Korean adoptees. First, coding for mentions of racial identity, I identified every story that could provide insight into that progression. I then eliminated both poetry and visual art from the works I considered. I did not believe that visual art would yield the results I wished to explore, and I knew that focusing on either poetry or prose would be effective than trying to blend the two. Within the remaining stories I coded for the qualifying of parents (“birth”, “adoptive”, and “real”), mentions of “saving” or being “lucky” (as well as the resulting focus on Christian language), struggles with color and body, mentions of mirrors, experiences of reculturation, and specific discussions of racial identity. I then tallied the coded terms in each story, looking for not only quantity, but variety. I also looked for stories that show a certain level of reflection, stories that felt most like a bildungsroman. Unintentionally, the resulting twelve stories were written by authors of a variety of ages (approximately from 22-38 at the time of their story’s publication), and all the authors are women. Also, to my knowledge, all the authors were adopted into white families. Despite *More Voices*’s allowance of all Asian-American adoptees, I focused entirely on Korean adoptees. These restriction allowed analysis that was not affected by any issues of different origin nationalities, or differences in the experiences of the different sexes. The variety of ages gave an opportunity to look at both adoptions that were direct results
of the Korean war and those that were not. I believe that the variety of stories I chose to analyze allow for a balanced, logical analysis.

**Anthology Introductions**

Anthologies of writing by Korean are a fairly recent phenomenon, despite the large numbers of Korean TRIAs in America. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be concentrating on twelve stories from three different anthologies. In chapter 2, I analyze the first anthology of Korean adoptees, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*. *Seeds from a Silent Tree* was published in 1997, and was meant to “break a certain silence” inherently forced upon Korean adoptees (Bishoff 2). This silence results from the disconnect TRIAs feel from both their “land of origin” and the “lands we now inhabit” (Bishoff 2). This idea is exemplified in the story “A Few Words from Another Left-Handed Adopted Korean Lesbian” by Mi Ok Song Bruining. Having been adopted at age five, Bruining’s retained memories of Korea contributed greatly to her struggle of identity formation. In the story “Laurel” by YoungHee, a focus on race and body is evident, rather than a focus on an “adoption story.” Kari Ruth turns from these inner struggles to a deeply emotional commentary on the rhetoric of adoption in her “Dear Luuk.” Su Niles, in “My Story… Thus Far; Remembering the Abuse, Healing the Pain,” looks at the intersection between an abusive childhood and accepting her racial heritage. Niles also explores the skin she has claimed in “Obstacles and Challenges.” *Seeds from a Silent Tree* is filled with painfully honest snapshots of the lives of Korean TRIAs.

The stories I chose from this anthology focus on the discussion of parents and parenting practices, skin and bodies, and the political and personal issues surrounding racial identity. Mi Ok Song Bruining and Su Niles discuss the focus their families, and
the public, place on adoptees being “saved” and “lucky.” These not only place the adoptee in an unhealthy position of obligatory gratitude, rather than an emphasis on normal, familial love, but it also causes the adoptee to feel incapable of expressing grief for the life and experiences they lost. Similarly, these stories feature a parenting method that was commonly used for adoptees that ignored racial difference, which caused a lack of expressing and embracing heritage. Both this focus on gratitude and the ignoring of difference contribute to adoptees’ uses of qualifying terms for family connections (“adoptive”, “birth”, and “real.”) All four stories from this first anthology also feature issues of display and body. Korean TRIAs must confront their differences and similarities as they move from a resentment to acceptance. Another set of issues highlighted in these stories is reculturation and the politicizing of racial difference. This is especially felt through Kari Ruth’s deeply reflective and personal letter to a deceased friend. For an anthology that provided a groundbreaking opportunity for Korean adoptees to express their experiences and raise their voices, *Seeds from a Silent Tree* covers a wide range of issues.

In chapter 3, I focus on stories from the anthology *Voices from Another Place*, which was published two years later in 1999. Developed to give voice to a group who felt often entirely characterized by their birth and childhood, this collection details the experiences and issues faced by first generation adoptees, the “legacy of the destruction of war” (Cox 1). In “Hello Goodbye Hello,” Amy Mee-Ran Dorin Kobus relives her journey from a rejection of her Korean-ness, through reculturation, and to acceptance. Kari Ruth (seen earlier in “Dear Luuk”) focuses on her issues of body and how her own reculturation helped to reconcile those issues in “Kimchee on White Bread.” Issues of
appropriation and the embracing of a third culture (neither original nor adoptive) are broached in “Native ‘Korean’ American; Or, How a Korean Adoptee Searched for an Identity She Could Call Her Own” by Loey Werking Wells.

Unlike Seeds from a Silent Tree, discussions of parents and parenting are not a focus of the stories I selected. Instead, Amy Mee-Ran Dorin Kobus and Loey Werking Wells place emphasis on their experiences of reculturation. Kobus attributes her acceptance of her racial identity on her experiences in Korea, and Wells cites the birth of her daughter as the spark that caused her desire to learn more about her culture. Like those from the first anthology, these authors struggle with issues of color, and how they are able to reveal and conceal their body and race. They also confront their own denial of their racial identity, and how both reculturation and body contribute to those decisions.

In chapter four, I analyze stories from the next series by the publishers of Voices from Another Place. Twelve years after the publication of Voices from Another Place, a second work was published. More Voices: A Collection of Works from Asian Adoptees branches out from solely Korean TRIAs, providing a voice to other adoptees. Although the collection contains stories from adoptees of a variety of ages, the stories I have chosen are all written by more recent adoptees (than the stories of the previous two anthologies.) These authors focus on three main issues: blood and familial relations, the mirroring and interpreting of bodies, and experiences of racial difference and their contribution to the authors’ racial identity. In “An Explanation of the Origin,” Courtney Young uses her experience working with Holt International to reflect on her own adoption story. Megan Brown deals with exoticization and feelings of inauthenticity in her story “Yellow in the Bluegrass.” In “Likeability,” Sandra Gibbons presents a
triumphant story of acceptance through reculturation. Finally, Daniel Koehler reflects on growing up in a large, mixed race family in the title story, “More Voices.”

By identifying and analyzing these stories from three separate anthologies, I am able to look for patterns of similarities between the experiences of Korean adoptees, and I am able to draw conclusions about differences based on both time in history and age adopted. Their voices can be acknowledged and appreciated as bringing light and recognition to a group of people who are often not discussed. Their struggles with body, display, and racial identity can illuminate issues faced not just by other adoptees, but also by other minority groups. I hope that my research can be expanded and used to help minorities to better understand their journeys and racial identities.
CHAPTER II

SEEDS FROM A SILENT TREE

Introduction to Anthology

Seeds from a Silent Tree is an anthology containing 45 works, all created by Korean adoptees. The combination of stories and poems are grouped into four categories: “Roots Remembered & Imagined”, “Transplantations”, “Reunions”, and “Seeds of Resolution.” Consecutively, these sections are defined as “images of Korea and birth families from memory and fantasy,” “exploring issues of identity, race, culture, and sexuality,” “adoptees meeting their biological families,” and “individual solutions, both tragic and triumphant” (1-2). This anthology acts as a reaction to the studies conducted with adoptees as children and adolescents. By asking adult adoptees to speak out, Seeds from a Silent Tree reclaims both agency and voice from the clinical, qualitative studies.

In analyzing all five stories I have chosen from this anthology, I pull heavily from the theories of Prelli, Tatum, and Crowley. Bruining, Niles, and YoungHee experience different obstacles completing Tatum’s progression of racial identity formation, due in part to the discussion of parents and parenting. They also struggle with the ways in which they wish to conceal their race by concealing aspects of their skin and personalities. These stories illuminate the need for an awareness of rhetoric. The way adoptees are addressed and discussed needs to move away from a focus on “saving” and birth parents. Reunions are not the ultimate goal of adoption, and racial difference should
be explored and embraced. Similarly, this could contribute to a lessening of the
discomfort many TRIAs feel about their bodies and their skin color. Through this
chapter I connect racial identity and rhetorical theory in order to analyze the experiences
of the authors featured in this anthology.

**Introduction to stories**

*“A Few Words from Another Left-Handed Adopted Korean Lesbian”*

Bruining describes her early years, her adoption, and her struggle with mental
illness. Having arrived in the U.S. at age five, Bruining struggled with feelings of grief
and loss for both her birth mother and Korea. Although she acknowledges a fairly
privileged childhood, the issues she felt surrounding her adoption led to “a great deal of
emotional alienation & cultural isolation” (65.) These problems were exacerbated by
struggles with her sexuality. Bruining attempted to reconnect with her heritage through a
Holt Motherland Tour, an adoption agency sponsored trip back to Korea. Through
forging friendships and community with other Korean adoptees, and other POC, Bruining
was able to come to terms with her place as a Korean TRIA.

*“Laurel”*

Younghee, like Bruining, connects issues of racial identity with issues of
sexuality. Younghee describes the admiration she felt for the body of a white friend, and
the shame it emphasized in her own body. The disconnect that she felt between her
“insides” and her “outsides” halted any acceptance of racial identity that she might have
otherwise felt. Unlike many other stories in these anthologies, Younghee does not reach
a happy ending; the issues she feels with her body and color continue past the publication of her story.

“Dear Luuk”

In a tragic, poignant letter to a deceased friend, Kari Ruth addresses the pressure placed on Korean adoptees. The confusion of racial identity, the disconnect with display and bodies, and the political weight placed on their shoulders – Kari Ruth attributes blame to these ideas for the suicide of “Luuk.” Although the letter ends optimistically, the problems that she brings up, and the weighty consequences they can have, leave the reader feeling emotionally wrought.

“My Story... Thus Far; Remembering the Abuse, Healing the Pain”

Su Niles describes an abusive childhood, and the ways in which adoption rhetoric contributed to her psychological distress. The emphasis her mother placed on the idea of being “lucky” or “saved” became a form of torture, one that Niles seems to place as much weight on as the physical torture she also endured. Through her own reculturation, the friendship and mentorship of her Korean psychiatrist, Niles was able to draw strength from her Korean identity.

“Obstacles and Challenges”

In another story by Su Niles, a more positive journey is described. Niles discusses the disconnect she feels between the culture in which she was raised, and the culture she is “compelled to assimilate” (153). One thing that distinguishes this story from the previous is an emphasis on skin and body. Niles alternates rapidly between discomfort and acceptance when discussing the skin she wears.
“My adoptive parents believed that they had rescued me – a …helpless ‘orphan child.’”

The connection between adoptees and their parents, and how that connection is discussed, is a controversial, potentially harmful issue. These discussions include the qualifying, and therefore diminishing, of family relationships, the parenting methods encouraged for adoptees, and the common descriptions of adoptees being “saved” and “lucky.” These issues, and the heavily Christian viewpoint often overlaid over them, contribute greatly to how adoptees move through Tatum’s racial identity progression. The use of the qualifier “adoptive” in front of “parent” or “mother” can act as an experience of encounter, making adoptees aware of their difference from the norm. The insistence that adoptees were “saved” from the life they would lead in Korea, that they are “lucky” and should be thankful to their benevolent parents, also contributes to the casting of adoptees as “other.” The use of parenting techniques that ignore racial difference, while admittedly sheltering young TRIAs from experiencing encounter too early, removes a sense of comfort from the desire to experience immersion/emersion. Additionally, the presence of strong references to Christianity further complicates the discussion of adoption.

This is the story conventionally told about the origins of international adoption from South Korea. It is a narrative of Christian charity and divine selection, but also one of the “extraordinary” capabilities (even if God-given) of “ordinary” individuals. The key characters in this story are a
quintessential American frontier figure, thousands of needy children, and a
Christian God. (Kim 3)

One common way that adoption is discussed is with a focus on being “saved.”
Strangers will approach adoptees and tell them how lucky they are to have parents who
wanted to save them. Media will feature a story of adoption that spends an inordinate
amount of time describing the lonely, unhappy atmosphere of an orphanage, then move
on to descriptions of the selfless parents who, instead of adopting domestically, wanted to
give a good life to a helpless, third world orphan. Bruining explains that “the
psychological damage done to me as a child has been tremendous & has taken years for
me to resolve,” due to this idea of being “rescued” (65). Despite having memories of her
early life in Korea, Bruining’s family told her that she “should feel grateful & lucky to be
adopted & should not feel sad about anything” (64). Bruining felt that she was never
allowed to grieve what she had left behind in Korea. The emphasis on “saving” focuses
on the negative in Korea, ignoring any positive memories or experiences. Bruining felt
stifled with her emotions being directed towards gratitude and happiness. Niles was also
told that she was saved: “I was raised on my mother’s heroic effort to keep me alive after
the flight [to the U.S.], spoon-fed ‘You’re so lucky’ lines… And I hate the word ‘lucky’”
(145). Niles felt manipulated by her mother’s claims of “saving.” This bitterness is
echoed in Bruining and Niles’ use of “adoptive” as a qualifier of family.

A common pet peeve held by adoptees is the addition of “adoptive” before words
that describe family relations: adoptive family, adoptive mother, adoptive parents,
adoptive brother, etc. The need to add this qualifier adds a sense of inferiority to what
most often feels to be the exact same connection to family. The qualifier “adoptive”
automatically negates the years of connection and love. This is made more apparent when paired with the qualifier “real.” When the media covers stories of adoption reunions, they typically refer to an adoptee’s family as their “adoptive family,” and the adoptee’s birth mother as his/her “real mother.” These terms are extremely harmful in eliminating the stereotypes and stigma that surround adoption. This makes an analysis of what qualifiers and terms are used by adoptees themselves extremely interesting.

Both Bruining and Niles alternate between the terms “my parents” and “my adoptive parents.” In “A Few Words from Another Left-handed Adopted Korean Lesbian,” Bruining refers to her parents as “my parents” twice, and as “my adoptive parents” six times. In “My Story… Thus Far: Remember the Abuse, Healing the Pain,” Niles refers to her parents only once, and that reference is phrased “my adoptive parents.” As an adoptee, this choice of qualifier shocked me. I naturally bristle at any emphasis on adoption as inferior to blood relations. Bruining’s use of “adoptive parents” fits with the ideas of Dong Soo Kim’s study, but Niles’ does not. Bruining was adopted at age five, one year before the “later” group in the study, but old enough that she was able to form connections to Korea. These memories begin to illuminate the reasons why she would refer to her parents as “adoptive parents” 75% of the time. The physical and psychological abuse of Niles’ mother could easily be the reason for the disconnect in Niles’ word choice.

Until fairly recently, the most popular, encouraged tip about raising a TRIA was to ignore racial differences. This “colorblind” method was seen as the best way to not create feelings of alienation or difference, with adoptees “seamlessly acculturate[ing] to family and nation” (Kim 102). It was believed that adoptees would flourish if issues of
race were ignored. Obviously, this method often did not work. Bruining claims that she was “taught to forget [her] memories of Korea” (65). This contributed to issues of body and display that manifested later in her life. Younghee also seems to have suffered from the “colorblind” method. Her serious issues of body and color began early in her life:

“I used to believe I was white. At least I was completely emotionally invested in this belief. Theoretically I was white, my family is white, the community I grew up in was white… The only thing I heard about Korea was that they ate dogs. I denied that I was Korean to everyone, most painfully, I denied it to myself.” (86)

Although Younghee does not explicitly state that her parents ignored her cultural heritage, it can be inferred, partially because she was never taught anything about the country in which she was born. Growing up with the belief that she was white, but seeing something entirely different in the mirror, caused serious psychological issues that continued to plague her past the publication of Seeds from a Silent Tree.

“This skin has cost me dearly”

Bruining, like so many other TRIAs, struggled with the unavoidable bodily displays of race. She could not reconcile the image in the mirror with the image in her mind.

I was convinced I was going insane because I felt so inauthentic. I did not feel white, as I had been raised. I did not feel Asian, as I clearly looked & was. I could not find a way, did not know how to integrate my false self—in acting & being white like my white, adoptive parents… & my true self
in feeling Asian/Korean—into one complete, whole self. I was both & neither. I was suicidal. (Bruining 66)

The inability to escape the physical manifestation of her race, despite the lack of knowledge and cultural belonging, contributed greatly to the psychological issues that Bruining spent her adolescence battling. Although she credits her self-esteem issues with her drive to excel at other activities (horseback riding and art), she blames the disconnect between her inner and outer color with much of her “self-hatred” and “internalized racism” (68). And although Bruining seems to have made peace with many of her racial identity issues, she never claims that her issues of display have faded with her acceptance of her Korean heritage.

YoungHee’s issues of color and body are evident in almost every sentence of “Laurel.” She describes her own appearance in the mirror as “the awful truth,” claiming that the sight of her reflection was a “betrayal” (86). YoungHee acknowledges that most women struggle with comparing their bodies with the idealistic bodies of celebrities and models. Yet, she discusses how race and adoption complicate that idealism. “Race gives this unspoken competition a slightly different slant because of power relations at work… To desire to be an entirely different race is a deep-seated, painful need—a need that is full of shame and inexplicable guilt” (86). This brings up issues of the power of white bodies, the power of the majority. It is both impossible beauty standards and a lack of representation that contributes to such dangerous views of race and inferiority. Children of color who grow up in the U.S. are almost only given role models who are white. We idealize and objectify celebrities’ bodies, and those bodies are almost exclusively white. This becomes even stronger for transracial adoptees; they not only have white role
models, but also white families and peers. They sometimes lack any interaction with those who they might share a racial background. Their admiration of white bodies moves from celebrity objectification into the belief that only white bodies can be beautiful. This is the issue that YoungHee faced when she became close with Laurel, the titular friend of her story: “I saw the way my body looked laying next to her and felt so ashamed to be Asian. My body seemed far too small, almost pathetically unwomanly” (86). YoungHee also points out that she was “not born with shame. [She] learned shame… [She] learned the desire to be white from white culture” (88). As a minority, YoungHee’s body becomes a political statement. She places herself next to bodies of power, white bodies, and her lack of control over how her skin is interpreted is starkly represented.

Su Niles also discusses issues of color, skin, and display. She focuses on the phrase, “I walk in this skin” (153). Niles, like other TRIAs, cannot escape the skin she displays. She can emphasize the ways in which she feels American, the things that mean more to identity than just skin. She discusses her status as American, her connection to “steak, potatoes, McDonald’s and fried chicken” (152-153). She feels bound to so many American ideals. She often wishes to cast her skin into the shadows, to be identified by those images within herself. Yet we cannot hide our skin. “This skin has cost me dearly” (153).

“For me, it’s all about process & progress”

The struggle to reconcile issues of parents and issues of body and culture all contribute to Korean TRIAs attempts to develop a sense of racial identity. Some adoptees seek out experiences of reculturation, while others fight in silence. This journey
of identity is messy, and it often lasts for decades. Even once an adoptee believes they have accepted their identity, they may later struggle with new issues, or new facets of old issues.

Bruining’s reculturation occurred during a Holt Motherland tour. Many adoption agencies attempt to provide adoptees with opportunities to explore their heritage. They provide summer camps, language classes, trips back to Korea, etc. These Motherland tours are touted as an opportunity to explore Korea with a group of people who have had the same experiences and struggles. Not only do they provide a structured way to see Korea, but also a strong sense of community. The individual experiences of adoptees who have attended the tours varies greatly, but Bruining saw it as “painful, but healing” and “profound” (67). She was able to begin the process of reclaiming her heritage, which led her to be able to incorporate parts of Korean culture into her own identity. Bruining, at the end of her story, states: “I am very comfortable with my identities as a Korean lesbian, as a Korean adopted woman” (72). It was a difficult journey, and a continuous process, but Bruining learned to embrace her skin, her inside and outside races.

YoungHee emphasizes the political nature of her racial identity struggles. While comparing her body to that of Laurel, YoungHee discovers: “By witnessing the power she enjoyed, it forced me to realize that although I felt ‘white,’ I could never experience that kind of privilege and power white people enjoy” (88). This politicizing of the body points out what cannot be changed. Adoptees cannot be seen from the outside as white, although they may identify with white culture.

Kari Ruth places a heavy burden onto the journey of racial identity. She emphasizes the role that TRIAs are forced into: “By growing up in white families, we can
be examples, Luuk. We can show others that racial harmony is possible. We just can’t show our burdened backs…I guess someone forgot to ask us if we wanted to be America’s diversity mascots” (144). Adoptees are expected to be ambassadors, due to their existence between cultures, and between races. Just as college pamphlets display the diversity of their students, TRIAs demonstrate the diversity that can exist peacefully within families. Yet, as Kari Ruth explains, that peace is not always peaceful. That burden, that expectation, can wear on the ones wearing a “mask,” the “weight of that façade” (144).

Su Niles discusses loss within her own racial identity. She emphasizes the limitations that reculturation has: “Regardless of how many Korean cultural events I attend, regardless of how much of the Korean language I learn, and regardless of how many Korean friends I make, I will never, ever regain in full measure what I have lost. This is my greatest sorrow…I will never be wholly Korean” (153). Although Korean TRIAs do have a unique opportunity to come to a somewhat balanced racial identity between white and Korean, they are unable to entirely reject one or the other. They will always sit in-between.

“To those who break the silence”

*Seeds from a Silent Tree* was groundbreaking, the first to highlight the experiences told by adoptees looking back on their development. This anthology was an important first, but due to the date of publication, many of the stories were written by adoptees who were not brought to the U.S. until after their toddler years. The focus on infant adoption came later than the initial aftermath of the war. While this does not
invalidate their stories, it does present a different viewpoint than I initially intended to study. Having memories of a childhood in Korea, and of the family members there, complicates the issues of racial identity that are discussed by many scholars, including Tatum. That initial preencounter, while often still present, does not present with an unawareness of racial difference. That difference is often noticed from the first moment these older adoptees step off their planes.

This difference in age is also significant when looking at discussions of family. When an adoptee has vivid memories of their birth family, and vivid memories of Korea, it logically follows that their attachment to their family would be different than those adopted as infants. This also contributes to issues of body and color. It seems that preencounter contributes greatly to the security of identity children feel early in life. They do not feel different than their parents and their peers; they do not notice the existence of white culture and their status as apart from it. This allows them to form stronger senses of self-esteem than those adopted later in childhood. These later adoptees begin their formation of self-esteem and identity without alienation, but that process is interrupted. This throws their identity and their difference into the spotlight. This interruption cannot be beneficial to their self-esteem.

This anthology is also unique in its attempt to group stories into themes. These themes flow like the chronological life of an adoptee, from birthplace to adoption to reunion to resolution. I believe that this use of themes was a result of Seeds from a Silent Tree’s status as the first anthology by Korean adoptees. This emphasis of organization seems to lend a sense of importance and status to a book which, at its conception, probably caused fear of failure. The naming of these themes also seems significant. By
connecting to the metaphor of trees and growing, this anthology highlights the organic. This anthology was cultivated out of a natural progression of time; once enough time passed that these Korean adoptees were adults, capable of writing these types of narratives, the anthology was conceived and produced naturally. The metaphor also implies that the voices of Korean adoptees will continue to grow and lay the seeds for more voices to emerge. This anthology was never intended to be an ending. The tree was initially silent, but as these seeds grow, so do the voices of a community too long quiet.

**Discussion**

As Bishoff and Rankin had hoped, this anthology does break the silence that previously held Korean adoptees captive. The stories that are told act to establish that they have their own racial identity, separate from POC, minorities, or Koreans. Instead of just looking at their identity as falling somewhere between two already established racial identities (White and Korean), they are showing that the range of racial identities held by Korean TRIAs constitute their own community. Korean adoptees have their own issues and struggles, and those are valid and important. Their lives and experiences are separate and independent than those of other communities. And as the first work of its kind, *Seeds from a Silent Tree* seems to formally stake that claim of independence. Until an official publication of Korean adoptee stories, it was almost impossible for others to draw strength from this solidarity. Small communities of adoptees existed across the United States, but their geographical isolation from each other prevented a larger
connection. This anthology broadcasts the similarities that Korean adoptees share, and could be purchased and accessed at practically any location around the country. However, everything about this anthology is automatically colored by its status as first. Other works may develop as reactions to it, but it is impossible to separate the anthology from its groundbreaking status. It is difficult to analyze the intended effects of the anthology that are separate from that first breaking of the silence.

One way in which this anthology stands out is the emergence of identity that is not wrapped in the origins of birth. While all the authors share the fact that they were adopted, they lay claims to other identities as well. Without previous works of this kind, discussion of adoptees was always centered on adoption. News outlets featured stories of reunion and long-lost families, but the identification of the actual adoptees did not often venture past their origin and vague adoption story. The authors in this anthology place importance on their identities as women, as sexual, and as survivors. Despite their status as adoptees, and despite their similar experiences of racial identity formation, these women assert their individuality. They distance themselves from both the media and studies who maintain a fairly one-sided view of adoption.

My analysis of the stories from this anthology also makes claims using the theories of Prelli, Tatum, and Crowley. Concealment and display are intricately woven throughout any story of racial identity. The stories in Seeds from a Silent Tree trace a clear path from a preoccupation with the inability to conceal to an acceptance of the inevitability of display. We all must “walk in this skin” (Niles 153). Everyone experiences some discomfort with their appearance, but this discomfort becomes both racialized and politicized in TRIAs. The stories in this anthology demonstrate the turmoil
that occurs when an adoptee cannot accept their body, but also the peace and happiness that comes with not only the acceptance of the inability to conceal, but also the choice to display. This choice often comes with the emersion that Tatum references. That confidence in the body, and with race, allows an adoptee to emerge from murky waters.

Crowley’s concepts of inner and outer self are demonstrated in the stories in *Seeds from a Silent Tree*. The stories found in this anthology demonstrate the disconnect TRIAs feel between their inner identity and their outer identity. Some feel that the self they see in the mirror does not match the self that they feel inside. Others do not feel that they do not match, but rather wish to impose on their outside the identity they wish they could have. Adoptees also illuminate the issue of how to “mark ‘the inside’ of a human body as opposed to its ‘outside’?” (Crowley 360). Is racial identity outer or inner? Korean TRIAs demonstrate the complexity of this question as they struggle to come to terms with their own display of race.
CHAPTER III

VOICES FROM ANOTHER PLACE

Introduction to Anthology

*Voices from Another Place* was published in 1999. It contains 47 works ranging from poetry, to autobiography, to visual art. The works are organized alphabetically, rather than with any particular progression of themes in mind. The author and artists section of the book contains both childhood and current pictures of the contributors. The introduction explicitly states that this anthology contains the words of the first generation of Korean adoptees. Although this was also the group drawn from for *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, emphasis was not placed on this fact by the publishers. The introduction of this anthology also acknowledges the fact that previous adoptee narratives were not gathered from adult adoptees (barring *Seeds from a Silent Tree*.) This anthology exists to give a voice to this generation, the “legacy of the destruction of war” (1).

In this chapter I will discuss how the three authors, Kobus, Kari Ruth, and Wells exemplify the theories that Prelli, Crowley, and Tatum have discussed. All three authors use terministic screens in order to navigate their feelings about their bodies and race. Kobus and Kari Ruth actively attempted to conceal their Korean heritage, and display their allegiance to white, American trends and beauty norms. Wells craved an identity other than white to which to cling, which resulted in an exploration of the display of a series of identities. All three demonstrate a progression through Tatum’s steps towards racial identity. While Kobus and Kari Ruth focus their stories on that progression,
especially their own experiences of reculturation, Wells discusses a recent desire to reconnect with her heritage. Along with these theories Kobus and Kari Ruth also show the typical politicizing of their cultural bodies, and the struggle to reconcile inner and outer identity. Wells presents a different view of this politicization. By seeking identification with a separate community, one that she was neither born into, nor adopted into, the politicizing of her body is complicated. Her minority status and features allow her to slip in and out of identities, and in and out of communities. All three stories present racial identity and the display of bodies in ways that lead to complex conclusions about identity.

**Introduction to stories**

“Hello Goodbye Hello”

Amy Mee-Ran Dorin Kobus tells the story of leaving her orphanage, with no knowledge of what would come next in her life. She was escorted to the U.S., without being told where she was going or why she was leaving Korea. She describes the traumatic experience of being left in Minnesota by her caregiver, only told that “This is your new family” (42). This assumption that she would be grateful and immediately accept her family was quickly proven to not be true. Kobus struggled to fit in, fighting with her heritage and being bullied. After attending a Korean school and going on a Motherland Tour, Kobus was able to better understand her own racial identity. She was able to cultivate a sense of pride in her heritage through visiting and seeing Korea. As she escorted an infant to the U.S. to be adopted, Kobus saw herself in the young adoptee, connecting its journey with her own.
“Kimchee on White Bread”

Kari Ruth appears as an author again in this anthology. This time, her focus is her complicated relationship with her racialized body. As a child, Kari Ruth struggled with having her picture taken. She disliked the way her Korean features seemed exaggerated in photos. As she grew up, and as fashion trends changed, Kari Ruth attempted to conform to white beauty standards, which managed to place more emphasis on her racial difference. Unable to escape these features, she felt shame at her reflection in the mirror. Later in life, Kari Ruth accepted a job in Seoul, South Korea. This change in the racial majority of her surroundings helped her to work through issues of race and body.

“Native ‘Korean’ American”

Loey Werking Wells compares herself to the ugly duckling, wandering in search of a group/culture to embrace, finding “the ducks because they were the only birds in the pond” (120). Instead of the typical process of reculturation, Wells found herself fascinated with Native American culture. There were no available opportunities to explore her Korean heritage, but she felt that she needed a culture to embrace. Wells’ experiences with Native American populations provide an interesting take on racial identity and minorities. However, Wells came across a surprising desire after the birth of her daughter, the desire for a reconnection with her Korean heritage.

“A special connection”

Reculturation plays an important role in the stories from this anthology. Kobus took language and culture classes from a Korean school, basking in the exposure to “the language, the food, and other adults from Korea” (45). This interest in Korea led to a
Motherland tour. Kobus was faced with both a lack of familiarity and a sense of heritage pride on this trip. She was frustrated by her lack of recognition of the language and customs, expected to have retained memories from her first six years in the country. Kobus discovers a sense of community with the other adoptees on the tour, finding that they shared a “special connection to their motherland” (47). This feeling of comradery and connection flowed organically into the feelings that Kobus felt when escorting an adopted baby to his new home in the U.S. By seeing her own experiences mirrored in this small child, she was able to accept her own journey. The experiences Kobus has in Korea allow her to reconcile the fantasies and memories she has with an extremely positive reality. This reculturation also lets Kobus see that she can form her own identity, and that she is not bound to choose either race.

Kari Ruth’s reculturation was still ongoing as of the publication of this anthology. She first took a Race in Media class at her college. Although she was technically a minority, she felt unable to contribute to class conversations about race relations. From a combination of personal experience and the stories in these anthologies, I discovered that this is a common feeling among TRIAs. When discussing POC, people tend to assume that all people of a race have similar experiences. Jokes and stories about immigrant parents and language barriers are discussed when thinking of most Asian Americans. But TRIAs do not experience these issues. Kari Ruth’s attempt at reculturation seemed to cause even more alienation. Later, however, having accepted a job offer, she moved to Seoul and experienced a complete immersion into the culture. Though she was still struggling with her identity, the new perspective provided by this new setting drastically
changed her ideas of “the norm” (78). Surrounded for the first time by people of the same race, Kari Ruth began to look differently at the world around her.

Wells experienced a more untraditional form of reculturation. For years she felt perfectly comfortable without actively seeking knowledge or connection to her Korean heritage. By finding her place studying Native American culture, she felt that she did not need to reconnect with her origins. Yet, once she had a baby she realized that she wanted to know more about Korea, in order to teach her daughter. Wells states: “I want her to know that her mother looks different because she came from a land far away, a land rich with history, language, and culture… I hope she never has to search as far and wide as I have for what may be very close to home” (124). By teaching her daughter about her heritage, Wells hopes to eliminate some of the disconnect she felt to her own origins.

“Mistaken for a Korean”

Kobus, Kari Ruth, and Wells all have serious issues regarding body and color. Kobus experienced racism early in her life, with her classmates calling her racial slurs and pointing out her Asian features. This made Kobus unable to escape her racial background, because she could not escape which parts of her race were on display. She believed that “to be American, [she] had to look American,” to look white (44). She tried to follow fashion and makeup fads, but by doing so just succeeded in emphasizing her differences. By trying to lead her observers down a path to noticing her hair and makeup choices, Kobus accidentally led them exactly to the path she wished to avoid: that of her racialized features. Kobus also avoided dating Asians, worried that because she “saw [herself] as less important than whites, to be seen with another Asian would have doubled
“her] shame” (45). This discomfort both with her own race, and her avoidance of others of that race, greatly contributed to her feelings of alienation and inferiority.

Kari Ruth experienced similar experiences to Kobus. She also tried throughout puberty to imitate the beauty trends of the majority, beauty trends that are aimed towards white girls. Like Kobus, Kari Ruth only succeeded in emphasizing the very features she wished to take off display. After having her senior portraits taken, she was “disappointed,” having hoped that they would “airbrush [her] eyes larger, make [her] nose a little narrower, [her] cheeks rounder… [She] thought [she] might not look so Korean” (74). Partially because she resisted her own skin, she repeatedly felt uncomfortable and unsuccessful in her attempts to look beautiful. Her fear and unhappiness had a terrible effect on her adolescence: “Whenever I went to the restroom in high school, I always avoided my reflection in the mirror. It ruined the vision of myself in my head. I imagined that my eyes were bigger than they were. Looking in the mirror only brought me back to a reality I didn’t want to face” (76).

It wasn’t until Kari Ruth moved to Korea that she really understood how her own conceptions of beauty and acceptance were skewed. By being surrounded for the first time by others who share features she previously felt alienated for, she was able to better grasp the way she fits into the world. All of a sudden the way her race is expressed through her body was nothing to notice; rather than take herself off display, she was now surrounded by those who displayed the same features. Kari Ruth actually points out that in Korea, it is white people that turn heads: “when I see a Caucasian foreigner, I do a double take. They stand out. They seem large, their body language seems awkward,
almost clumsy, and they sound louder here. They are like an exaggeration of the norm. They no longer are the norm” (78).

In a world where minorities were almost non-existent, Loey Werking Wells searched to find a way to accept her body and color. Like the ugly duckling, Wells waddled over to Native American culture and felt that she finally found a family, describing herself as “one yellow Indian” (122). Wells found that her status as minority gave her an opportunity to participate in other cultures, despite her otherwise outsider status. Her “skin and eyes gave [her] an invisible visa,” created “a cultural free-trade zone” (122). Other minorities experience this same phenomenon. Asians often find that they can navigate Black circles in ways that whites cannot, because they are also minorities. The fear of being considered racist holds many white people back from experiences and discussions that could be helpful. Wells found that she was able to participate in Native American culture due to her status as another sort of “other.” This exploitation of her minority status creates a unique view of the display of bodies.

“Either white or other”

Kobus attempted to entirely deny her Korean origins in order to feel that she fit in with her peers. She purposefully tried to become the exact opposite from every Asian stereotype she knew: “I… learned the stereotyped view that Asians are quiet and passive people. So I became outspoken and wild” (44). Her denial of her heritage became so much more than just denial. At every turn Kobus actively denied or rejected anything that might brand her as Asian. It was not until after her reculturation that she realized that she could embrace more than one racial identity. On her Motherland tour she came
Kari Ruth’s denial of her race demonstrated not only in her choices of display, but also in her avoidance of other Asians. There were several other adopted Koreans at her high school, but they “usually tried not to associate with one another. That Asian-phobia thing. It was like looking in a mirror” (77). Kari Ruth not only avoided literal mirrors, but also the mirroring of her race in other Asians. After her reculturation, she realizes that her alienation from Korea stems from her choices, from the paths she has taken. She was the one who widened the “chasm” “between past and present, Korea and America, childhood and adulthood” (81). She places the agency back in her own hands, after the fact. Kari Ruth emphasizes a desire to “puree” her cultural identity, rather than find a balance between her two cultures (80). She does conclude that she has no conclusion, that a conclusion would be too easy, so, as she says, it’s “back to the mess” (81).

Wells struggles with entirely different issues of cultural identity, due to her unique status as both an insider and an outsider to the Native American community, as an individual who was accepted due to experience and education into Native American culture rather than shared ethnicity. Though not ethnically Native American, Wells claims that she felt welcomed, partially due to her own status as a minority. For most of her life, instead of wondering where between Korean and American culture she should make her home, she wondered how to be a part of a separate culture, without her
participation being inappropriate. She wondered if she was “appropriating from the tribes,” and posits whether “it is better to have no cultural identity at all, to be a polyglot of races, languages, and religions, a member of the world community, than to reinforce existing divisions of race, language, and religion” (123). Wells may have continued to fumble in this limbo of cultural identity, if it had not been for the birth of her daughter. Wells realized that without a racial and cultural identity of her own, her daughter might face the same struggles and alienation.

“Legacy”

It was not through the same publishing company as *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, but it can be assumed that the editor, Susan Soon-Keum Cox knew about the first anthology. *Voices from Another Place* fell only two years after *Seeds from a Silent Tree*. Unlike the first anthology, *Voices from Another Place* does not group its works by theme, but rather by alphabetical order. Cox did not choose to impose her own ideas onto these narratives. This anthology places emphasis on voice. This lack of theme keeps the voices of the adoptees unhindered; the only ideas that shine through are those of the adoptees themselves. Cox simply states:

Voices from Another Place reflects this first generation of Korean adoptees. It tells our story – who we were first… We are eager to share who we are, tell our stories, encourage and help others by what we have learned or endured… There is a great deal of honesty and candor in this book. And there is the unmistakable influence of adoption throughout our lives. Adoptees are usually identified and defined as children. That
we...grow up, and come into our own wisdom is often not acknowledged. We can and wish to speak for ourselves. The voices in this book... speak loudly and clearly and strongly – from wherever they are. (Cox 2)

Cox’s choice to rely on the voices of the adoptees, rather than a series of themes, helps the book to do this speaking for itself. The simplicity of the organization contributes to that “honesty and candor” (2).

Voices from Another Place also includes works that are not text-based. This gives opportunity to a larger variety of artists to have their work featured, to have their voices heard. These works include drawings, photographs, and fashion design. By including a wider range of art and voices, Cox seems to imply that works that transcend language obviously have impact. Those voices can be understood more widely.

Discussion

Voices from Another Place sets itself as separate from the other anthologies through the stories its authors tell, and the things that they conceal. Unlike Seeds from a Silent Tree, the identities in focus are that of adoptees, rather than the separation of sexual orientation and gender. While these authors are also all female, they focus almost entirely on their experiences and progression as adoptees, whether it is their issues of body or their formation of racial identity. This plays into the purpose of the anthology itself. While Seeds from a Silent Tree aims to break an existing silence, Voices from Another Place raises its voice from a whisper to a conversation. This highlighting of voice is not only evident throughout the stories, but also through the words of the editor. This distinction between the anthologies is made even more pronounced due to the
overlapping of author and audience. Due to their only two year difference in publication year, these two anthologies not only reach out to the same audience, but they contain many of the same authors. Even within only the stories analyzed in this thesis, Kari Ruth appears in two separate anthologies. This overlap emphasizes both the difference in organization, and the difference in rhetorical purpose. The voices of the authors of *Voices from Another Place* have no silence to break, no violence to enact. They must only grow in solidarity, confidence, and volume.

The stories of this anthology follow the progression of Tatum’s racial identity model in more thorough, exact ways than many of the stories in the other anthologies. While not much emphasis is placed on preencounter or encounter, reculturation is a major issue in all three stories. More importantly, Tatum’s terms themselves become more relevant in these stories than has been seen before in this thesis. Tatum refers to reculturation as immersion/emersion. Both Kobus and Kari Ruth experience that immersion by experiencing Korea. They both marvel at the Korean faces mirrored back at them. They are immersed, for the first time, in a majority that matches their own bodies. This has a strong effect on their feelings of alienation and isolation in the U.S. Kobus embodies the other half of Tatum’s term: emersion. Kobus describes her own disembarking of the plane as significant to her, not only as the ending of a literal journey, but as a meaningful step in her own development. Although it caused some confusion, that confusion came more from her increased feelings of connections to both cultures than her previous feelings of disconnect.

Like Tatum’s theory, terministic screens are used in extremely interesting ways in this anthology. Kobus and Kari Ruth show both literal and figurative experiences of
concealment before moving towards acceptance and display. Both attempted to conceal their race by latching onto white beauty trends. Kobus actually applied makeup that whitened her skin, an overt concealing of her natural, racialized skin color. She also avoided being seen with other Asians, concealing her race by refusing to draw attention by presenting multiple faces that broadcast difference. Both Kobus and Kari Ruth attempted to figuratively conceal their race by trying to emulate personality traits they associated with white culture. These literal and figurative concealments served to further illuminate and display their difference, despite their intentions.

Kobus and Kari Ruth also demonstrate a progression away from concealment during their formation of racial identity. After her Motherland tour, Kobus began reconciling her Korean and American parts of her self. She ends her story, and her journey thus far, with the acceptance of how her race is displayed, and an acceptance of her placement between white and Korean cultures. Kari Ruth demonstrates the idea that concealment and display can be ironic. By living in Korea, Kari Ruth remains immersed in a place in which she matches the majority. She becomes stuck in the first half of immersion/emersion. It may seem that she has placed her features and body on display, because she is not actively attempting to mask her racial identity. However, this display is ironic, because she is actually concealing herself within the crowd. By blending in, her body is not on display. Kari Ruth also discusses the idea that she has not come to terms with her racial identity, but rather has created a “chasm” (81). This is likely a result of that ironic display, and that failure to move from immersion to emersion.

The politicization of racialized bodies becomes more complicated with the introduction of another culture (beyond white and Korean.) Wells found that her status
as minority gave her an “invisible visa” to move between marginalized groups (122).

Wells somehow combines four distinct communities – white, Korean, Korean TRIA, and “Native American” (Wells does not indicate a particular tribe.) This combining of communities complicates the idea of bodies as political. Wells points out that as a minority, she is able to negotiate between groups, which almost seems to be the removal of the political. She embodies “minority,” but becomes a sort of an ally. This idea, as well as the use of those explored by Tatum and Prelli, acts to set *Voices from Another Place* apart from other Korean adoptee anthologies.
CHAPTER IV
MORE VOICES

Introduction to Anthology

*More Voices* was published twelve years after the publication of *Voices from Another Place*. It contains 51 works: poems, prose, photographs, and artwork. Unlike its two predecessors, this anthology is not entirely focused on Korean adoptees. When discussing the reason for this change, Susan Cox explained: “It is my strong belief that although the birth country is different, many of the thoughts, feelings, joys, and challenges are the same for all international adoptees. Our commonalities are greater than our differences” (3). Although the majority of the contributors are Korean adoptees, there are also TRIAs from Vietnam, Hong Kong, and Thailand. Due to its later publication date and more open submission guidelines, *More Voices* demonstrates a wider variety of opinions and experiences.

In this chapter I look at four stories by women who were adopted as infants, after the first generation of adoptees that resulted from the Korean War. Due to this important difference between their stories and those of the previous two anthologies, they demonstrate a new perspective, and new struggles, though many of the causes of struggle are the same. They still demonstrate aspects of Tatum’s model, but instead of a focus on reculturation, the attention shifts to preencounter and encounter. Despite an acknowledgement of their racialized features, they do not attempt to actively conceal those features. They still have to move towards acceptance, but they do not demonstrate
ideas of concealment or masking as strongly as the other anthologies. These authors also do not focus on the cultural weight or politicization of their bodies, but rather on the disconnect between their inner and outer identities. Young, Brown, Gibbons, and Koehler use the same theories to tell their stories, but the manifestation of their problems and progress are completely different than those of the previous two anthologies.

**Introduction to Stories**

*“An Explanation of the Origin”*

Courtney Young tells her story, highlighting problems she faced with stereotypes, and the disconnect she felt about her origins. She expresses conflicting opinions about reconnecting with her Korean heritage, and seeking her birthmother. Young discusses how being immersed in a culture of adoption while working for Holt International made her much more aware of her own origins and story. Young began working for Holt directly after her college graduation, and she described it as “baptism by fire” (23). She was often asked about her own adoption story, but had never thought through how to explain herself before this job. This new experience caused her to not only question her own experiences, but to examine her identity.

*“Yellow in the Bluegrass”*

The story that Megan Brown tells begins and ends her story with a humorous story of being hit on at a rock concert. She describes how her interactions with a handsome Irish man made her feel both flattered and alienated, objectified due to her racial background. Brown describes a sheltered childhood full of unhealthy feelings towards being Asian. Her descriptions of microaggressions and ignorance ring true with
most TRIAs, as do her deep-seated fears and insecurities. She turns her discomfort in her skin into parody, and uses humor to connect with her audience, rather than to deflect.

“Likeability”

Sandra Gibbons describes her journey from shame to acceptance. Gibbons saw “that people judge each other by skin color,” and it made her “achingly aware” of her own (86). Like many other TRIAs, she attempted to reject racial stereotypes; despite a general lack of racism towards herself, she actively tried to be as cheerful and charming as possible. Through a trip to Korea, Gibbon’s experience of reculturation helped her to realize and accept her status as in-between.

“More Voices”

It was with a naïve, happy view of racial difference that Danielle Koehler grew up in a small town. In a family of seven (four white, 3 Korean), differences between race were never emphasized. Still young when the story was published, Koehler paints a fairly idealistic picture of her childhood and her family relationships. Despite some “culture shock” and curiosity, her story reads like a pamphlet lauding transracial adoption. Yet, underneath her platitudes it is evident that she also struggles with her racial identity.

“The question of blood”

Issues surrounding the legitimacy of family relations rely heavily on terministic screens. The choices surrounding how these relationships are discussed reveal how adoptees view their parents, how they were raised to think about family, and effect the
media has had on their viewpoints. These choices also demonstrate concealment, through what adoptees choose not to highlight in their stories.

One topic that is prevalent in these stories is the idea of blood and blood relations. Courtney Young expresses her anger at being asked about her “real” family, stating that “the explanation of my origin is exhausting, not because I mind explaining my relationships, but because I have to defend the legitimacy of those relationships” (26). The ways that Young labels her family also fall into the categories expected of a later adoptee who was raised in the U.S. from birth. Young refers to her father, mother, and brother as her family. They are her parents, and her brother. She does not feel the need to add qualifiers to their familiar identifiers. Similarly, every mention of her birth mother is named just that way, as “birth mother.” This strengthens Young’s insistence that “the question of blood has no validity to me” (26). Family has nothing to do with the DNA shared along a line, but rather the love and care shared between members. This idea conceals the importance of inherited traits, but reveals the perspective that nurture wins over nature.

Young does not seem to be aware of the conflicting emotions woven into her discussion of her birth mother. She begins the discussion by emphasizing her parents’ support if she had chosen to travel to Korea to find her birth mother. She goes on to say that she “was not interested in finding her” (25). While many TRIs do not feel a desire to search for and meet their birthparents, the ways in which Young refuses these curiosities seem more telling than authentic. Young seems very forced in her assertions that her birthmother wished to keep her, but instead chose to give her a better life. This is an extremely common vein of rhetoric in the discussion of adoption. I remember being
told the same thing by my mother; that my birthmother loved me so much that she chose to give me to someone who could better care for me. However, the reality is much more likely to present a terrified, young woman, faced with a pregnancy that was entirely unplanned. Abandonment of babies in South Korea is a serious issue, and although there might be some women who do have those benevolent thoughts in mind, it is clear that the biggest motivating factor is fear (Kim 17). Young’s assurances that she was wanted not only battle that fact, but also she seems to battle her own words. When discussing the fact that she did not was to find her birth mother, she started to reflect on her own time in an orphanage. “I was not planned. You see I have never been able to escape the reality of what an orphanage is… If I went back to Korea, I would have to accept this, that I was never better than this” (25). These feelings of abandonment color the positive statements that abound in “An Explanation of the Origin.”

Brown makes light of the reasons parents might choose to adopt internationally, telling of a family friend who chose to adopt: “part of me secretly believes that her brood of all boys, no girls, was like having four gallons of milk, but no ice cream. If you had four boys and couldn’t dream of pink onesies and prom dresses, would you blame Cindy for taking matters into her own hands?” (69). This nonchalance, though it ignores the struggles couples go through during the adoption process, echoes the beliefs many hold about the “ease” of “choosing” a baby. It can be assumed that Brown encountered this perspective more times than she would like, because her bitterness bleeds through as she describes adopted babies as “commodities”:

Yes, a commodity. Set them atop your hip! Strap them to your back!

Sling one under your arm and take it to the grocery. The only thing
separating you from nosy neighbors that insinuate that your marriage reeks of failure is children. After all, they are the reason you have that hard-earned backyard and the only, ONLY reason you would ever buy a minivan. Babies! Everybody has to have one. Get yours today. (69)

Well-meaning, yet ignorant people often talk about adoption as if it were this type of shopping experience. It is not uncommon to hear the questions, “How much did she cost?” and “Did you get to pick which baby you wanted?” These questions typically do not come from a place of malice, but rather ignorance. However, this does not make them less hurtful to TRIAs, especially as children.

Despite this discussion, Brown treats the actual question of blood relations in a very matter-of-fact manner. When her parents told her to ask any questions she might have about Korea and her birth family, she responded, “I don’t wonder about my biological mom because I think of you as my mom” (70). The issue does not come up again in her story.

While Gibbons does not fall into discussions of blood and “real” family, she does adhere fairly strongly to the idea of “luck” and “saving.” She tells the story of her parents’ struggle to have children biologically, then their decision to adopt her: “I was surrounded by all the right things – love, happiness, family, friends, and financial stability… I was my parents’ blessing, and they were my saving grace” (85). This statement is indicative not only of the savior trope that often gets used when discussing adoption, but also the extremely common use of Christian language. The statement itself chooses to reveal some aspects of Gibbons’ childhood, but conceal others.
“Yellow people in a blue place”

My analysis of the authors’ discussion of skin and color in these stories utilizes both terministic screens and parts of Tatum’s model. Brown’s childhood experiences demonstrate the difference between the point in that model at which children encounter different experiences. Brown and Gibbons both have trouble understanding and negotiating which aspects of their identity to display, which aspects are impossible to conceal, and which can be concealed.

Brown emphasizes her discomfort as a child interacting with other Asians. Brown’s family hosted a Korean exchange student, who made Brown extremely uncomfortable. This discomfort came not only from being confronted with unfamiliarity, but also from the realization of how different she felt from someone with the same heritage. Brown was young, and this discomfort manifested in a desire to flee, to spend as little time with the exchange student as possible. Having her own features mirrored in someone who she did not understand made her too aware of her own differences during a time in her life that she wished only to fit in, a time at which she identified as white. At a later age, this experience could easily have been considered reculturation. During late adolescence, this exchange student may have sparked a curiosity in Brown, a desire to reconnect with Korea. However, the exchange student was an experience of encounter, which only managed to increase the alienation that Brown felt from the norm.

This mirroring of features also occurred when Brown interacted with Jo, the Thai woman who cut her hair. While these interactions also caused discomfort, Brown also discusses the connection she felt with Jo: “To me, being Asian was an experience just short of having a disability, and Jo and I were crippled comrades” (72). It is difficult to
know whether this feeling of comradery only came upon reflection on her earlier life, or if she felt the same as an actual child, but it is interesting that a mirroring of images resulted in such different reactions between the exchange student and Jo. Though they both acted as mirrors, reflecting the features that Brown disliked, the ones that she wished to conceal, rather than display, the shared Korean nationality may have been another important factor.

Another issue of display that Brown discusses is the use of food descriptors when discussing skin color. While comical, Brown’s bitterness shines through when she states, ‘I’m going to let you in on a little secret about race. If you’re uncomfortable talking about race, try making it delicious… If you read any book featuring characters that are not Caucasian, you will notice they all have mocha, coffee, or olive colored skin… Still afraid of making a racial faux pas? Stick to dessert flavors… Vegetables, proteins, and grain just don’t have the same ring.’ (76)

Like many POC, Brown has pinpointed a sensitive issue, and the confusion of its necessity. The enthusiasm with which non-white skin is described, using these food terms, shines a bright spotlight, taking away the ability of the person in question to take focus away from their skin, their difference. These descriptors do not allow people to make their own decisions on how to display or conceal the reading of their race.

Gibbons also encountered an inability to conceal her racialized features. She was described as “a china doll,” and others often pointed out “how beautiful Asian women are” (86). Though these comments were meant to compliment, whether or not it is interpreted this way entirely depends on where the TRIA is in their journey of racial
identity. Gibbons was still experiencing feelings of wanting to distance herself from
difference when she had to navigate these “compliments.” They caused self-
consciousness and discomfort, rather than flattery.

“You were either white or other.”

The stories of Voices from Another Place demonstrate that not all adoptees follow
Tatum’s model of racial identity formation. While most adoptees are placed in situations
where these ideas must be faced, others manage to progress through their lives in a way
that ignores this model, yet still forces them to encounter their place as “other.”

Young explains that as an adoptee, she wanted to fit in without an explanation.
She had earlier outlined how her introductions were typically presented: “It would often
go like this. ‘This is Jordan’s sister.’ Perhaps a funny look from the observer, ‘She’s
adopted…” It’s like a small child learning that a cat is not a dog” (24). The curious looks
make connections and relationships feel less than authentic. Most questions linger right
below the surface of conversation, but their presence keeps a sense of comradery and
ease from developing.

Many of Young’s statements seem to claim nonchalance or disinterest, but others
go directly against those sentiments. Though she claims to enjoy “looking different than
everyone else,” she speaks bitterly about the stereotypes she faces about being Asian
(24). She often turns to humor to deflect those stereotypes, stating that “sometimes I joke
along with them for the sake of my sanity. I know what is coming; I better just say it
first” (24). These contradictions belay the fact that Young is still struggling with issues
of racial identity, which is to be expected of someone who was only twenty-three when
More Voices was published. Young, throughout her story, tries to place emphasis on her feelings of being happy and lucky with the life she has been given. However, it is statements like “I was interested in Korea, and I was not interested in being Korean” and “Maybe I was upset because I was being asked questions I had never asked myself. But why ask yourself questions when there is no reason to ask?” show the conflicting emotions faced by all TRIAs (25).

It is unusual for a story of racial identity to have a clear cut, neat beginning, middle, and end, but Gibbons recalls her own story in this way. As a child, she became extremely aware of not only her status as different, as one of the only Asians around, but also her lack of grounding in any sort of Korean culture. She describes herself as “a novelty to myself and to those around me. I looked Asian, but that was the only Asian thing about me” (86). She made a conscious decision to reject her Asian-ness, based on slightly strange, unresearched stereotypes. She wanted to make an impression with friendliness and likeability, hoping that those would be how she was interpreted and described, rather than as just “that Asian girl.” Yet, around age 20, she experienced her own reculturation: “Suddenly I felt starved to learn about Korea – its culture and people. At age thirty-three, I returned to South Korea for the first time” (88). This experience helped Gibbons to negotiate her racial identity, with one foot in American culture, and the other in Korean. She not only discovered cultures, but her own happy niche in-between: “This is where I belong… Self-discovery is not only intriguing, but fulfilling – and it is certainly one of those roads which can lead to genuine happiness” (88). Gibbons not only wraps up her story, but her journey, with clear edges and a big bow.
Unlike Gibbons, Brown shows that she is in the throes of discovering and manipulating her own ideas of her racial identity. She spends most of her story describing the childhood experiences that contributed to her identity, without a clear ending of that journey. Yet, she becomes reflective, stating,

I think that people forget to acknowledge the importance in making a distinction between the inside and the outside. I don’t think people always recognize the transparent boundary that lies between the banana peel and the fruit flesh… Sometimes people forget that race is not temporary… You grow into it like a training bra and then, if everything goes okay, you grow up. (79)

This statement shows that Brown is still discovering herself, and still in that process of growing up.

Koehler demonstrates how early she is in her navigation of racial identity in her story. She has not experienced reculturation, yet has been confronted with people and times that have forced her to be aware of her own racial identity. Moving from a small town to a big city, she was suddenly surrounded by a variety of races, including a sizeable Asian population. Unlike typical reculturation, being surrounded by other Asians has served to emphasize Koehler’s differences, rather than to find comfort in similarity. She claims that she has “the reputation of being the ‘whitest Asian women [sic] ever’” (128). It can be hoped that she will experience reculturation, and come to a more balanced sense of her own identity, but she does bring up an interesting possibility.

Throughout the process of researching, analyzing, and writing about Korean TRIA racial identity, I have always assumed that all TRIAs make a decision about their
own identity. I assumed that though they might decide differently, they would all go about making an informed decision. Koehler demonstrates that this may not be true. She may continue in her life without an emphasis on racial identity. She may never explore Korean culture, or visit Korea. And as difficult as it may be to understand, it has to be accepted as not only a possible outcome, but a valid one.

“The voices of adoptees”

As time progressed further from the Korean war, adoption was less a solution to war orphans, and more a symptom of cultural bias and economic factors. This increased the number of babies who were abandoned at birth, rather than later in childhood. These are the adoptees that I focused on when choosing stories from More Voices. These adoptees have no memories of a life in Korea, and no memories of family members who still live there. Their experiences as babies, toddler, and young children are, for all intents and purposes, the same as children born and raised by biological parents. This presents an interesting difference between this anthology and the previous two. Without memories of Korea, and without memories of the trauma of being uprooted and transplanted in the U.S., these early adoptees are given the opportunity to progress and develop without an awareness of their racial difference, at least until their first experience of encounter.
Discussion

There are many factors that set this anthology apart from its predecessors, and all these factors contribute to questions of intention and actual effect. The time difference alone complicates these ideas. There were twelve years between the publication of *Voices from Another Place* and *More Voices*. The necessity of a collection, a physical anthology, that existed in 1997 and 1999 no longer existed in 2011. With the prevalence of the internet, access to stories from TRIAs becomes simple. After a simple Google search for “Asian adoption reunion,” my screen is inundated with news stories, blogs, and YouTube videos sharing the story of different adoptees’ reunions with their birth families. While the first two anthologies were filling an obvious need, a lack of the spread of information in these stories, the need for *More Voices* was much less relevant.

The internet also decreases the separation between different communities of minorities. Before the publication of *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, Korean adoptees did not have a model for the similarities in the stories of adult, Korean TRIAs. That increased that anthology’s importance; it was groundbreaking, and extremely needed. This is not to say that the most recent anthology was not needed, that it did not fill a gap. The types of narratives this thesis pinpoints from *More Voices* exemplify exactly the types of stories lacking in the first two anthologies. If one of the reasons these anthologies exist is to provide representation for adoptees to find solidarity in, before the publication of *More Voices*, there was an entire population of adoptees lacking that representation. These stories do not come from first generation adoptees, but rather second generation, who were adopted as infants and raised by white parents. A large number of Korean adoptees
who were facing reculturation and racial identity in 2011 fall into this population. This anthology addressed issues and struggles faced by this new facet of its audience.

Another difference between both the audience of the anthologies, and the time in which they were published, is the movement towards globalization and a “post-racial America.” As time progresses, and as the internet closes gaps in communication, experiences seem to merge, and differences seem to fade. People of all classes and races are able to access the same information, thanks to the ubiquity of the internet. This is leading a movement to make a claim that America is becoming a “post-racial” place, where all races are equal, and where racial difference loses all value and meaning. While this is looked towards as idyllic by many, due to worries about racism and inequality, an erasure of difference may not be the perfect solution. If the inclusion of other nationalities in this anthology is looked at as a mark of globalization, it becomes unclear whether or not this is a positive change. While it is positive that “our commonalities are greater than our difference,” does the inclusion of other nationalities diminish the focus on the need for connection between Korean adoptees? Does this too closely align to the “colorblind” parenting method that was popular for so long? Is it too soon to push forwards, without a true conclusion reached about the similarities and differences between Korean TRIAs? With only one work of its kind, it is impossible to reach definitive answers to these questions, but it does provide two different perspectives to hold as our community moves forward.

Despite these unanswered questions, the stories in this anthology do provide an interesting difference in the use of Tatum’s racial identity model. Unlike the stories of first generation Korean adoptees, Young, Brown, Gibbons, and Koehler’s stories focus
on the first two stages of this model: preencounter and encounter. Preencounter, in particular, was absent from many of the stories in the earlier anthologies, because many of their later ages at the time of adoption eliminated the existence of preencounter entirely. They entered their families with the knowledge of their racial difference. Young, Brown, Gibbons, and Koehler, on the other hand, were raised from infancy in the United States. They spent the beginning of their formative years entirely unaware of the weight of their differences from their families and from their peers. Due to this, their experiences of encounter occurred at the intended point of development, the young age initially outlined by Tatum. Their preencounter and encounter mimic the experiences of POC in general, allowing these stages to progress as Tatum describes. Additionally, their encounter was not coupled with the trauma of being uprooted and moved to an unfamiliar country, a combination which affects those adopted at a later age. The lack of a focus on reculturation can also be seen as a result of the lack of trauma, and the normative experiencing of preencounter and encounter. These adoptees often do not feel the same loss for the culture they left behind, because they were not able to form memories and attachments as infants. While they often experience reculturation as a curiosity or desire for knowledge, it lacks the same power as those of older adoptees.

These differences bleed over into the experiences of Crowley’s politicized bodies and cultural burden. It is in large part due to this difference of experience in the racial identity formation model that this group of adoptees (adopted as infants, a generation removed from the initial group of war orphans) do not form the same ideas of their bodies as political. They do not feel the same weight on their shoulders to be seen as ambassadors, as the bridge between cultures. This is because of their more normative
development, and lack of push towards reculturation. They are also more likely to lack that political view of their bodies because the general lines between cultures do become hazier with the omnipresent, far-reaching effect of the internet.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I make connections that go beyond individual anthologies to the groups they both feature and the groups that could potentially be featured. Issues of the discussion of parents, the experience of a model of racial identity formation, and the display and concealment of bodies and their political, cultural potential have emerged through the study of these three anthologies, and the application of theories by Prelli, Tatum, and Crowley. I hope to draw larger connections to the context in which the anthologies were published, and the effect of these stories on the rhetorical theories themselves. Additionally, I attempt to demonstrate how this type of rhetorical study contributes to an understanding of the larger field of cultural rhetoric, the formation of racial identity, and the narratives and experiences of the community of Korean, transracial, international adoptees.

These stories also assert their own identity, on top of the identity of their authors. They show that stories of adoption are more than what is easily displayed in the media. They are more than the studies that have objectified and quantified their feelings and relationships. The stories told by adoptees can be just that – stories. They can be beautiful. They can be crude. They can be traumatic. They can be tragic or jubilant. They can be art. These anthologies gave adult, Korean adoptees the chance to tell their stories in this way.
One of the most damaging actions to the formation of racial identity in Korean TRIAs is the qualifying of family. It is a biological impulse to bond with those in your family, which a majority of the time is tied by blood and DNA. However, those with no experience with adoption often believe that blood creates a stronger tie than can be formed through adoption. I expected to see a rejection of such qualifiers in the stories from each anthology. I would not have been surprised to see this issue addressed angrily, or a strong defense of the family ties formed by adoption. In the majority of the stories, instead, I saw a casual lack of qualifiers, but it was not emphasized. Many adoptees switched between the use of “parents” and “adoptive parents,” with no explanation or perhaps conscious decision discussed.

However, I noticed an interesting trend in the use of qualifiers. I found that most often, TRIAs that left Korea as infants did not see any issues with “adoptive” vs. “birth.” This was evident in the stories by Young, Brown, Gibbons, and Koehler. While they did not articulate their reasoning, they did not seem to struggle with their family connections, but rather with their own placement in their communities. It was the adoptees that left Korea in later childhood that most often relied on “adoptive” to signify different types of connection. These adoptees spent enough time in Korea to form memories and bonds, either with their birth family, or with their caretakers. They have memories of their trip to the U.S., and the confusion that accompanied that disorienting change. Although I had never considered it before, it is entirely logical that these would be the ones who would call their parents their “adoptive parents.” It is not to diminish the effort and love they experience, but rather to distinguish a difference between two sections of their lives.
There is one idea that further complicates the use of “adoptive” in a TRIA’s speech. It cannot be ignored that different people, regardless of their origins, have differing experiences with their parents, and differing levels of affection expressed in their homes. As easy as it is for those of us with happy, loving childhoods to assume that all others experience that kind of love, different people parent in different ways, and abuse does occur. In stories of abuse, like Su Niles, it cannot be assumed that memory plays the most important part in deciding how to describe family relationships. Just as biological children fantasize about being the children of celebrities, or characters in books, TRIAs place themselves in the same mental situations. And in the cases of abuse, those fantasies could act as a necessary coping mechanism. When wishing for a more idyllic, non-abusive family environment, the addition of “adoptive” before parent helps to maintain the idea that there could be a better life waiting out there. This complicates the use of “adoptive” when referring to parents, no longer allowing for indignation upon the use of these qualifiers.

The media is another complicating factor to the discussion of adoption, and it becomes one of the most significant perpetuators of harmful adoption rhetoric. The public seems to love reunion stories in general, and adoptees being reunited with their birth parents seems to bring a special tear to the eyes of daytime TV watchers. I have watched these reunions on Oprah, Dateline, and other popular television shows. One story that garnered a large amount of attention was the story of Anaïs Bordier and Samantha Futerman, two twins separated at birth. Through the internet, Anaïs and Sam reconnected and were featured on ABC News, Huffington Post, and many other news sites (Callahan). While it is positive that adoption is placed into the spotlight, and
awareness of adoption and adoptees is spread, the way they are discussed spreads throughout the general public. Those phrases and terms and mindsets are parroted back to adoptees, and can cause a surprising amount of psychological distress. The media places a great deal of significance on the qualifier “adoptive.” They almost never refer to an adoptee’s parents as their parents, and as their story progresses, the emphasis entirely shifts to the birth family. Even worse, the media often starts slipping in the term “real”: “real parents”, “real mother.” While the use of “adoptive” as a qualifier affects adoptees, it most often not noticed by the general public. However, “real” is too clear to not affect everyone. It not only invalidates an adoptee’s experiences, their parents’ experiences, and the connection they have together, but it seems to actively dismantle those family bonds. This can be just as psychologically traumatic to TRIAs as the struggle they face negotiating their color and relationship with mirrors.

When your reflection does not match the person you believe yourself to be it is practically impossible to not struggle with how your body is on display. We cannot hide our race. We can embrace the beauty standards of our adoptive race, but it does not change the fact that the first thing people see when looking at us is our Asian-ness.

Mirrors take on multiple meanings when thinking about racial identity. Literal mirrors display racialized features. They are something that TRIAs often avoid, in order to avoid the differences they feel from their peers and families. Because they wish to fit in, to assimilate themselves into the norm, they wish to conceal their race. Mirrors do not allow them to conceal their race from themselves; they put every disliked feature on display. It is often early in the journey of racial identity that literal mirrors are accentuated. They become a negative embodiment of the struggles in which TRIAs
encounter. Like Kari Ruth describes, the reflection in the mirror can be “shock[ing],” leaving the viewer “aghast” (76). As adoptees grow older, metaphorical mirrors become both a reminder of difference, and a source of similarity. The metaphorical mirrors are individuals who share the same racialized features. These mirrors cause two types of reaction from TRIAs: discomfort/alienation and comfort/solidarity.

These stories also demonstrate the body as inherently politicized and carrying cultural weight. Our skin carries the political weight of our race, and our race’s struggles and battles. This is complicated for TRIAs, who often do not feel that they can claim those struggles as their own. However, the way we cannot effectively conceal our skin color means that those battles are projected onto our bodies, despite the race with which we identify. We become more accessible versions of ambassadors; People feel that they can ask us questions about both white culture and Korean culture, because we fit neatly into neither. We also become “mascots” for multiculturalism (“Dear Luuk” 144). Against our will we are the embodiment of globalization and world peace. The bodies of the stories’ authors also becomes politicized once they identify their sexual orientation. Those connections between cultures become a more complicated web, with so few able to bridge all three communities.

Interacting with other individuals who are Asian often alerts TRIAs to the differences that will always separate themselves from those who were raised by Asian parents. They may see those mirrors as reminders of what they have lost, or as a mocking jeer that says they will never truly fit into any clear-cut racial group. These adoptees may have looked forward to interactions with others of their racial background, and that expectation is sometimes crushed with those feelings of inadequacy and loss.
However, there are those who see their metaphorical mirrors as comforting. Often, these are the adoptees who grew up as the only Asians in their communities. Finally encountering others who share their features can demonstrate that their own features are not strange and unattractive, but just something they share with other Asians. Like Brown, who identified her Thai hairdresser as a “comrade,” TRIAs can be relieved by this sense of solidarity.

Color is a tricky concept for any minority. Not only are minorities often identified by the color of their skin, but within racial groups there is a hierarchy of skin tones. Person of Color as an identifier itself places that emphasis on the idea of color over someone’s actual race. Color itself also carries an idea of resentment and stereotype, when racial slurs and insults often focus on skin color. Skin color cannot be concealed. When we encounter someone new, skin color is often what is first noticed. Adoptees can act out against stereotypes, like Kobus and Gibbons, but that adopting of characteristics cannot erase the way they wear their color on their skin.

The way we discuss race in terms of color can become extremely problematic. It often seems that the minority most discussed is neatly, if inaccurately, summed up by one color: black. And those who identify as black often take pride in the term, rejecting more “politically correct” jargon. Other minorities have not been given the same opportunity with color. This is especially evident in children. Children, when they first become aware of racial differences, lack that type of understandable language. Megan Brown describes this so well: “In the hands of children, multicultural, skin tone crayons, however politically correct, are just crayons” (70).
Through these stories, and the application of Tatum’s model, I have realized how important the process of reculturation is to the formation of a balanced racial identity, and how prevalent that reculturation can be. Without some form of reculturation, adoptees can become stuck in a one-sided version of racial identity. These adoptees seem to reject their heritage, and while they can claim to accept who they are, that rejection does not allow for growth. That is not to say that after reculturation a TRIA must identify as somewhere between white culture and Korean culture. Many adoptees are extremely patriotic, completely immersed in being American. This does not come from denial, but is rather just a choice they make after experiencing reculturation.

Reculturation also presents an interesting dynamic between revealing and concealing. Before reculturation, most TRIAs attempt to conceal their racial heritage, hoping to blend in. Through making Asian friends, visiting Korea, taking classes, and other forms of reculturation, though, it can be assumed that adoptees are throwing off that concealment, and displaying their own differences proudly. However, by surrounding themselves with others that share the same features, adoptees are someone still concealing themselves. Though they are not attempting to change how their race is displayed, they are concealing themselves by blending into a group.

All three anthologies act to give voice and representation to a group that is often not recognized. Transracial, international adoptees have unique experiences and perspectives that cannot be found in the general minority populations. Rather than just seeing themselves as different from the majority, they cannot escape their differences from their peers and even their own families. They can illuminate experiences of realizing, rejecting, and embracing difference. I believe that transracial adoptees and
those of mixed race could offer insight into each other’s racial identity. They share that in-between status, but encounter different types of prejudice, and different experiences of color.

The stories that appear in these three anthologies demonstrate the theories of Prelli, Tatum, and Crowley applied to a far marginalized group: Korean TRIAs. Though the use of terministic screens when discussing race may not be new, the use for Korean adoptees is. The connections between Tatum’s model, Korean TRIAs, and the ways in which terministic screens contribute to the experience of the five steps, can provide insight into other marginalized groups. And Crowley’s interpretations and meanings of bodies, when combined with racial identity and the existence or lack of preencounter, can hopefully be applied to non-Asian adoptees, returning to the race Tatum had in mind when discussing the model.

When studying and learning theory in general, it is easy to forget that instead of theory informing experience, experience can change and expand theory into something more meaningful. Though rhetorical theory is already helpful to many groups and people, it is the application to Korean adoptees that truly opened my eyes. The realization that using these theories not only connected adoptees to other groups who utilize these theorists, but that by doing so, the field itself can grow. In the same way that these anthologies gave voice to those who needed to break silence and reach out to others, the application of theory gives validation to a group that needs representation. Hopefully, this thesis draws connections and helps to spread and embellish the elaborate web that makes up the study of rhetoric.
By publishing these anthologies, Bishoff, Rankin, and Cox are giving Korean adoptees an opportunity to feel represented, to have people they can look to as examples. In the formation of self-esteem and confidence, these ideas of representation are essential. I believe that these anthologies represent a first step in providing Korean adoptees with these role models, with stories in which they can see themselves. There are still strides that need to be taken, but *Seeds from a Silent Tree, Voices from Another Place, and More Voices* provide an excellent example of how adoptees can take ownership of their own experiences and voices, and represent those who need representation.
LIST OF REFERENCES


VITA

Molly Jin Ah Rigell Peek was born in Incheon, South Korea. She was adopted and moved to the United States in 1988. After graduating from Oak Ridge High School in Oak Ridge, TN, Molly attended the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, with scholarships from the Chancellor’s Honors Program, English Department, and Music Department. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English – Technical Communication in 2007, graduating magna cum laude and recognized as the top graduate in her concentration. After spending two years working in education, photography, and music, Molly accepted a graduate teaching assistantship at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in the English department. She presented a paper on transnational adoptees at the Cultural Rhetorics conference in 2014, and participated in the Research Network Forum at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2015. Molly will graduate with a Master of Arts in English, with a concentration in Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics, and a focus in Cultural Rhetorics, in August 2015.