I Am Who I Am: The Struggle as a Transracial International Adoptee

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I Am Who I Am: The Struggle as a Transracial International Adoptee

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Struggles with mental health often affect the lives of international and transracial adoptees. These adoptees deal with issues unique to them that have made an impact since the beginning of their lives. Many people who weren't adopted internationally always had a beginning and knew where life began for them, but most of the time, international adoptees are missing this background. There is no baby book on the family bookshelf displaying the first footprint, the first photos of them in the hospital being held by their birth parents, or videos of them coming home for the first time. Often, their family baby book begins at the age of their adoption, and for international adoptees, that is rarely as an infant. There is a hole starting from their birth. They often carry these uncertainties from the beginning of their life for the rest of their lives.

Russell Ksiez, a junior at SUNY Purchase studying screenwriting and playwriting, was adopted from Azerbaijan at 22 months. He was adopted to be an only child by a single white mother. After being adopted, Ksiez lived in Elm Grove, Wisconsin, outside of Milwaukee-until sixth grade. After a racial comment was made to him at a young age, he and his mother moved to New York to raise him in a more progressive community. Unlike the other kids he grew up around, Ksiez felt that there was no beginning to his story.

Ksiez never knew who his biological parents were, and that has affected him a great deal. "I grew up my whole life knowing nothing, and that has put me through a lot of things that I didn't even realize I was going through," Ksiez said. "When I'd go through angry phases and when I'd go through sad phases, I'd feel like everything that I'd go through in one way or another, they [his biological parents] are still a part of me. Not getting to know them is something."

Ksiez has had trouble finding his identity and attributes that to a feeling of not belonging. "I'd look around every Christmas and despite feeling the love of family, I'd still have that voice in the back of my head [saying] that you're not related to any of these people,

like you are part of their family legally, but by blood, you're not," said Ksiez. "My double standard for me anyway is kids, or people asking me about my culture and stuff and not knowing it kind of hurts, just as much as feeling like I didn't belong in the family, but I don't know."

Elm Grove, Wisconsin, and Haverstraw, New York, the two areas where Ksiez was raised, are predominately white. When kids would see Ksiez with his mother, who is white, people's first question would be about who his dad is. Kisez has a noticeably darker phenotype than his mother, although Azerbaijani people are considered Caucasian. "Kids always wonder, where is your father? What happened? I've often been depicted as having a Hispanic father or a Black father," said Ksiez. In other cases, when Ksiez was younger, he had a Black babysitter and people assumed that she was his mother and was married to a white man, due to his skin complexion.

Growing up for Ksiez was difficult, especially not knowing what to follow in terms of identity. Ksiez said that at a young age he wanted to be Black because of the hair styles. He admired that look but knew it wouldn't fit him due to the texture of his hair. Ksiez also started listening to music artists like the rapper Eminem. Ksiez was also heavily influenced by white people, due to Eminem. "I'd try to follow in their footsteps or try to be who they were so I wouldn't have to be me as a kid. That's hard as a kid if you're walking around trying to be a mini-Eminem that's a target for bullying and things like that," Ksiez said. "I think I tried to dye my hair blond and that was one of the big things when I knew I wasn't white, when I saw blond hair on brown skin and on my skin it just didn't look well."

Ksiez also mentions that on legal documents he would identify himself as white.

While Ksiez was in school, he compared himself to his American-born peers in certain situations. He used to get in trouble, like any kid would, but he noticed a difference in punishment between him and his white peers. "I'd get in trouble in school, or I'd be doing

something bad with a white kid and the white kid would sometimes get in less trouble, not knowing what I did," Ksiez said. "I really thought the white kids were given more than me, especially in school."

These experiences have affected Ksiez's mental health, he said. He experienced depression and anxiety throughout the years while navigating the challenges of not knowing how to identify himself and the idea of being adopted. "I feel like I was on an island. I felt like almost half of me should have been adopted Half of me felt like me that I didn't belong in this family no matter how much they'd tell me; half of also felt like I knew nothing about my country to the point I could never go back," Ksiez said. "I think for us [adoptees], we have to struggle with the fact that, sometimes, we will always feel not good enough."

Even though Ksiez still struggles, he has come far from where he was. "I feel like it would be easier if I'd never been adopted, but then there'd be a 99 percent chance that I'd be dead by now," Ksiez adds, "I understand that I have a golden opportunity to have a life that people who aren't adopted would die [due to hunger or other life-threatening situations] and I think I got to take that and run with it."

Ksiez is not alone. According to a 2021 Washington Post article, "Transracial Adoptees Struggle to Talk to Their White Parents About Race," the growth in transracial adoption within the foster care system is much greater than same-race adoptions in the recent past, stating that such adoptions increased by 58 percent between 2005-07 and 2017-19, with same-race adoptions increasing by just 24 percent. However, transracial adoptions are still just 28 percent of all domestic adoptions in the United States.[1]

According to the U.S. The Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, the number of international transracial adoptions has gone down since 2012. Most international

[1] Rachel Hatzipanagos, "Transracial Adoptees Struggle to Talk to Their White Parents about Race," Washington Post, 13 Dec 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/transracial-adoption-racial-reckoning/

adoptees are from Asian countries, mostly China. The peak of international adoptions occurred in 2005 with over 22,000 adoptees. Most of the adoptees were female and about 1 to 2 years of age.[2]

In an interview done by the University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts Psychology program, Richard Lee, a professor of psychology there who focuses on internationally adopted Koreans, said many adoptees experience what he calls "transracial adoption paradox."[3] Which is, growing up with all the privileges that come with being a white person in America, but, as they grow older, leave the family home or go to college, the privilege and perception is no longer there and they are left to deal with being an ethnic minority in a white society without the experience and training as a child growing up learning to deal with their differences. Another thing that can affect a transracial adoptee's self-perception can come from the amount their adoptive family exposes them to their culture of birth. While they occasionally dine at a restaurant of that ethnicity or attend a street festival, many adoptees don't see that as enough;-as adults they explore these cultures on their own, sometimes in very immersive ways. Child Welfare Information Gateway promotes education on child welfare, adoption, child abuse and neglect as a part of the children bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. A 2020 factsheet produced by Child Welfare for families parenting racially or culturally diverse adoptees encourages learning about the cultures of the children.[4]

The 2021 Washington Post article on transracial adoptees raised in white families in a predominantly white community, suggest children often struggle to achieve a healthy sense

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[2] U.S. Department of State, *Adoption Statistics from the Bureau of Consular Affairs,* https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/adopt_ref/adoption-statistics-esri.html?wcmmode=disabled

[3] Flora Pollack, "Lee on Transracial Adoption" University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts, Psychology, 21, January 2023, https://cla.umn.edu/psychology/news-events/story/lee-transracial-adoption

[4] "Parenting in Racially and Culturally Diverse Adoptive Families," Child Welfare, September 2020, https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/parenting_diverse_families.pdf

of self-identity, both in how they view themselves and how they feel they are perceived by their peers. This sense of self and sense of how they fit into their school, community, and family can affect transracial adoptees in different ways.

This becomes an issue because it affects how the adoptees see themselves. Growing up in a white neighborhood, and seeing the differences with their classmates, insecurities start developing. These insecurities start affecting the adoptees in many ways. In an NPR transcription of a podcast, "Adoption Stories,"[5] the host, Andrea Seabrook, interviewed Jill Smolowe, one of the editors, "A Love Like No Other," a book about adoption stories. Smolowe and Seabrooke talked about the difficulties that adoptees may have. When they tell people they're adopted, questions will get asked, and assumptions start being made. It makes sense because kids don't fully understand what they're asking, but it could offend the international or transracial adoptees.

Many people in the United States, including transracial adoptees, struggle with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. According to Richard Lee's research "The Transracial Adoption Paradox,"[6] many transracial adoptees face issues because of confusion and uncertainty of identity, the culture they're from, or the white culture in which they are raised. These struggles can lead to insecurity or even depression or anxiety.

According to an Arizona State University article, "The New Nuclear Family,"[7] by Marshall Terrill, in an interview with Cassandra Cotton, an assistant professor at the T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics at ASU, says people of different nations and races are coming together to form families in a way that our country has never experienced before. This substitution of the traditional "nuclear family" is influenced by the

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[5] Andrea Seabrook, "Adoption Stories," 26 December 2005, *NPR,* podcast
[6] Richard Lee, *The Transracial Adoption Paradox: History, Research, and Counseling Implications of Cultural Socialization,* 31(6): 711–744, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2366972/pdf/nihms-46199.pdf
[7] Marshall Terrill, *The New Nuclear Family,* ASU News, https://news.asu.edu/20200924-discoveries-new-nuclear-family

ever changing and rapidly sophisticated technology which brings people across the world together with the click of a mouse or tap on a smartphone. One popular way to start a family is through international adoption. According to a 2021 Atlantic article, "The New Question Haunting Adoption,"[8] written by Olga Khazan, there was a time when many Americans were adopting babies and children from developing countries, and many of the children they were adopting are of a different race than themselves.

According to the U.S. Department of State-Bureau of Consular Affairs, an average of 12,832 children were adopted internationally by United States citizens between 1999 and 2021. The numbers changed depending on conditions, such as adoption policies in other countries, conflicts and wars, and the United States' relationships with these countries. According to a Travel.gov information page on understanding The Hague Convention of 1993 (which is the standard of care for internationally adopted children), provides guidelines regarding the welfare and rights of adopted children.[9] Changes in these policies and how they are interpreted by adoption authorities in both the United States and the adoption "source" country can affect the numbers of internationally adopted children.

According to a 2010 New Yorker article, "The Last Babylift,"[10] written by John Seabrook, international and transracial adoptions first started in the United States in the years after World War II and the Korean War. Orphans from Germany and Japan were flown out of their war-torn countries and to new homes. This practice continued in the 1970's, during and following the war in Vietnam. Ellen Herman, a history professor at University of Oregon, in a project on adoption history, wrote that the start of international adoptions in the United States

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[8] Olga Khazan, "The New Qurstion Haunting Adoption," *The Atlantic,* 19 October 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/10/adopt-baby-cost-process-hard/620258/
[9] Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, *Understanding the Hauge Convention,* https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/Adoption-Process/understanding-the-hague-convention.html
[10] John Seabrook, "The Last Babylift," *New Yorker,* 3 May 2010, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/10/the-last-babylift

was in 1955 when Henry and Bertha Holt, a couple from Oregon, were able to obtain a special act from the U.S. Congress, which allowed American citizens to adopt "war orphans" from Korea. Many of these babies and children were the offspring of Korean women and American G.I.'s and were stigmatised in Korean society as being illegitimate or because of their mixed race. The Holts then started the first international adoption agency in the U.S., Holt International, which is still active today.

International adoption became more popular after the success of Holt International and grew slowly over the next few decades, but increased significantly when China opened its orphanages to allow "orphaned" children to be adopted by families from other countries. Chinese orphanages were filling up with babies that were not truly biological orphans, but abandoned by their birth families, and in most cases those families were impossible to track down.

According to a 2017 NPR Morning Edition news piece, "American to Stand Trial Over Guatemalan Adoptions,"[11] countries in Latin America became popular to adopt from in the 1980s as there was an abundance of orphans available for adoption caused by several wars in the region. Adoption fraud was suspected in some of these countries, in particular Guatemala, where babies who were not actual orphans were adopted for a fee and through baby brokers. Guatemala shut down its international adoption program in 2007 and now works to keep babies in the country.

According to a Time article, "Romanian Baby Trade: A Brief History of Baby-Lifts,"[12] by Katy Steinmetz, Romania's communist regime was overthrown in 1989 and became a popular country for Americans to adopt from as there was a widely believed idea

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[11] Maria Martin, "American to Stand Trial Over Gutemalan Adoptions," Morning Edition, *NPR,* Podcast, https://www.npr.org/2017/04/27/525833219/american-to-stand-trial-over-guatemalan-adoptions

[12] Katy Steinmetz, "Romanian Baby Trade-- A Brief History of Baby-Lifts," *TIME Magazine*, 3 February 2010, https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1958674_1958689_1958681,00.html

that orphanages in that country were overflowing with abandoned and neglected children due to that unrest. Since then, Romania has undergone changes to its adoption policies. These changes were needed as Romania's adoption system was exploited and many children and babies were adopted through a black market, while others were adopted who had medical problems, such as developmental issues, which were hidden by authorities in Romania. Adoptions from Romania have decreased significantly as the Romanian government has improved their own child welfare system, and there is little need now for international adoption.

In the early 2000s, China and other Asian countries became more popular for adoption. Caryn Clark, 20, a junior at Montclair State University studying animation, was adopted from the Chinese province of Guangxi. While growing up, Caryn had trouble with their identity "It was hard when doing family-based assignments in school from a young age. In elementary school, the creation of a family tree was difficult. I didn't know what to do," said Caryn.

They identified another issue: "Living in a predominantly white town, I didn't see diversity or people like me. I can only think of five Asian people from my high school. Now, I've definitely gotten better with my self-image and that being me is enough and beautiful."

Carolanne Clark, 24-years old, sister of Caryn, who works at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, New York, as an assistant administrator of the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion program, was adopted from Jiangxi Province, China. When Carolanne was growing up, she enjoyed celebrating Chinese holidays with her family. But when Carolanne started getting bullied around 2 and 3-years old, she began to have trouble with her identity. "I started to wish that I looked like my white friends because they were the standard of beauty in society's eyes," said Carolanne. "I wanted to do well in my classes but didn't want to come

off as too smart with the fear of fitting into the Asian stereotype of being exceptionally smart; however, when I didn't perform well academically, I felt 'less Asian.'"

Carolanne also dealt with racism while growing up, but she does feel more confident with her identity. "I've definitely grown more confident in who I am, but I still find myself struggling from time to time. I grieve the loss of a culture I've never known, including the language," said Carolanne, "I've been called a 'banana,' meaning that I was yellow on the outside and white on the inside—an insult both racist and degrading."

Yung-yi Diana Pan, an associate sociology professor at CUNY Brooklyn College, has an interest in families and parents and their efforts at maintaining birth cultures, and focuses on adoptees from China. "In identity research there are identity assertions and identity ascription," she said. "Identity assertion is how you may want to present yourself or how you believe your identity. Identity ascription is how people identify or perceive you and what society expects you based on phenotype, the physical characteristics. We attribute phenotypes to race," said Pan.

The idea of identity ascription and assertion is shown in the identities of adoptees in different ways. Holly Belshaw, a senior in the Dance Conservatory at SUNY Purchase, has been given different roles and songs based on her race, which is Asian. "I've gotten songs for Asians, and I got a song from an Asian musical solely because I'm Asian. Just because I'm Asian, you shouldn't be giving me these things," she said. Belshaw added that she will always have to assert herself to get the roles that aren't based on her race.

Caryn also has noticed that they were put into a "box" when it came to identity. "Identity issues that I face growing up in a predominantly white community include feeling 'too white' for Asian spaces and 'too Asian' for white spaces," said Caryn.

Olivia McLellan, a sophomore psychology major at SUNY Purchase, who was adopted from Guangxi Providence, China, had trouble with self-identity growing up.

"Finding a sense of self was something I struggled with for a long time. I never wanted to be the same person one day compared to the next; it was very difficult to find something that worked for me all of the time," said McLellan.

McLellan said that growing up, her identity was put into a box like what Caryn mentioned. "Actually, the main challenges I faced when being put into a 'social box' was from other adoptees. It felt like everything became a competition around them. I constantly got told that I'm 'too white' or 'that's so Asian of you,'" said McLellan.

Melanie King, a senior at SUNY Albany studying Political Science and International Studies, who was adopted from Yunnan Province, China, had a different perspective in terms of identifying herself. "Self-identity for me has been a small struggle while growing up, due to looking different than most people," said King. "But today I have found a large community of Asian Americans that I share culture and values with, so I feel a lot more in touch with my roots."

King said she identifies herself as Chinese and is proud of it. "I think now I resonate more with my Asian roots due to making such close connections with others in the Asian community in college," said King. "So, yes my self-identity has changed over time by being okay with being my true self and not worrying or caring about judgements from others."

Obviously, there were some struggles that King faced growing up. King faced racism in elementary school, and it was "tough because I never fully understood what was happening until after the situations occurred, which is sad because I never really got to stand up for myself," said King.

Michaela Mermelstein, a junior at SUNY New Paltz studying sociology, who was adopted from Chișinău, Moldova, grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood for the latter half of her life. Mermelstein grew up in the Bronx until middle school before moving to Hastings-on-Hudson, New York. While in the Bronx, Mermelstein felt like she was able to fit

in with the other brown kids. "I attended an extremely diverse elementary school where I assumed I was the same identity as the other brown kids, which I later discovered wasn't true since they were either Latina/Hispanic/ or Southeastern Asian and I'm Romani with Middle Eastern and South Asian descent," said Mermelstein. "When I moved to Hastings-on-Hudson for middle school and high school I stood out so much to the point where I was just uncomfortable being in school."

As the time went on in Hastings, Mermelstein got used to the environment around her. "I felt uncomfortable most days that first year in Hastings but managed to make friends. By seventh or eighth grade I had become accustomed to it and wasn't uncomfortable, but rather felt there was no choice but to accept the environment I was in," said Mermelstein.

Mermelstein adds, "I noticed that the majority of my friends were also people of color and minorities. Maybe we all are drawn together in hopes of seeking comfort with others who look like and understand each other."

Rufina Holcombe, 45, is a business owner of Dental Professionals, a dental profession employment service, in Seattle, Washington. Holcombe was adopted from Daegum, South Korea by a single white mother. As Holcombe grew up in Jerome, Idaho, which is predominantly white, religious, and conservative, she dealt with issues pertaining to self-identity. "Self-identity was definitely difficult growing up. In my earlier childhood, I was keenly aware of being different from most of my peers," said Holcombe. "I remember loving blond hair and wishing my name was Jennifer, and my favorite dolls were blond haired and blue eyed."

Holcombe went away for college and was in a rebellious phase of her life. "I think much of it had to do with my inner-self fighting to be expressed after being repressed for so long. It was the first time I had a taste of freedom from my religious upbringing, and I wanted to be young and wild and free," said Holcombe. "I spent eight years living in New York

during my thirties and I attended law school at night and worked for a firm during the day. Becoming an attorney gave me a lot of self-confidence."

Holcombe now feels confident in who she is. "Somewhere along the way, I think with age and maturity, my struggle with self-identity has mostly morphed into an acceptance of who I am," said Holcombe.

Holcombe feels as though society does put her in a box based on her race. "The concept of being 'American' is still largely driven by the idea of being white and Christian and so the whiter and more Christian we are, the more we fit in," said Holcombe. "At the same time, I think society expects Asians to be intelligent, hardworking, and maybe a little geeky. As an Asian woman, there is an expectation that I am perhaps subservient and meek, as well as sensual."

Julia Kelley, a first-year student in the master's program for vocal performance at Ohio University, was adopted from Guangzhou Province, China. Growing up, Kelley had difficulty finding her group of people. Kelley says, "I'm either not white enough, not Asian enough or different because I'm adopted. It seems to be a constant search because I want to find a group where I feel like there are no questions asked or no hesitation that I belong." Kelley is very proud of being who she is despite those struggles with self-identity.

The article, "Korean Transracial, Adoptee Identity Formation," written by Wendy Marie Laybourn, investigates how international transracial adoptees form identities. In her research are mixed findings, Laybourn noted that transracial adoptees had abandoned or rejected their racial identity fully and would show it by showing no interest or shame towards their own race.[13] Laybourn also found that one factor to respondents' racial identity was

[13] Wendy Marie Laybourn, et al., *Korean Transracial, Adoptee Identiy Formation,* page 3, DOI: 0.1111, 31 October 2016, University of Maryland

based on discrimination. If there were fewer experiences with discrimination, people felt more confident about their racial identity.

Many transracial adoptees have dealt with racism or other forms of discrimination. Caryn mentions a situation at a crystal shop where “the owner started talking to me and my white friend and assumed I had good grades and I must be pursuing a career as a doctor,” said Caryn. “Another person asked me if I was an American citizen and when my mother was coming to the United States to get her citizenship.”

As earlier mentioned, due to the racism, Ksiez’s mom moved them from Wisconsin to New York. Kiesz adds, “I’ve gotten called towel head, terrorist, turban head, stuff like that, you know, just growing up, I’ve been called stuff like that.”

Kelley adds that racism did happen to her throughout her life. “There have been moments of racism, whether it be comments from strangers, and I got denied my driving permit because the man didn’t believe my parents were my parents,” said Kelley.

Despite the racism that some adoptees faced, there are some who appreciate and celebrate their cultures. Kelley’s parents were very encouraging of her learning more about Chinese culture. “I think my parents did a good job with keeping me aware and educated so I was always proud of being adopted and being different,” said Kelley. She added that she went to Chinese school for six years as well to learn Chinese.

Both Caryn and Carolanne celebrate the Chinese New Year with their parents. Caryn enjoys cooking and baking, so they explore Chinese recipes. During the Chinese New Year, Caryn and the whole family make dumplings to celebrate.

Like earlier mentioned by Pan, identity ascription and identity assertion will always be present no matter what, especially for people of color and adoptees. “We all have these ascriptions where we are constantly pushing against, for us, people in general, for people to disrupt these flat ascriptions, we must assert and own the space,” Pan said.

Those who are adopted will always have the struggle of identity and how they are perceived, but there will eventually be a time where they are content with who they are and accept that they will have to assert themselves to try and break assumptions based on race. According to Laybourn, self-identity will always be hard to fully understand and come to terms with, but acceptance of where they are now will help them get to the point where they can fully find who they are and how they will identify themselves.[14]

[14] Laybourn, "Korean Transracial," 5

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<u>Interview Logs</u>

Melanie King- on the phone
Instagram: @_melanieking_
6 November 2022

Rufina Holcombe- on the phone
914-216-1723
5 November 2022

Russell Ksiez- in person
262-955-4471
7 November 2022

Michaela Mermelstein - on the phone
646-248-1915
15 November 2023

Caryn Clark and Carolanne Clark- on the phone
845-699-4602 (Caryn's number)
25 November 2022

Holly Belshaw- on the phone (Instagram call)
Instagram: @Hollywang
2 January 2023

Olivia McLellan- on the phone (Instagram call)
Instagram: @livgxm
2 January 2023

Julia Kelley- on the phone (Instagram call)
Instagram: @_singerjuliaa_
5 January 2023

Yung-yi Diana Pan- on the phone
541-231-9520
21 January 2023