

Where Do I Fit In?

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Submitted to the Journalism Board of Study  
School of Humanities

In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College – State University of New York  
May 2023

First Reader: Professor Simon Surowicz

Second Reader: Professor Anna Ozbek

## Project Summary

### *How does adoption in the U.S. affect Asian adoptees' sense of belonging?*

The way you look heavily influences people's initial impression of you and the way you were raised influences who you are as an individual. In the U.S., approximately 5 million Americans are adopted. According to an article from [npr.org](https://www.npr.org), about 200,000 of those people are of Asian descent. For Asians that are adopted into White or non-Asian families and grow up in predominantly White neighborhoods, this creates a feeling of not knowing where you fit in. You grow up clearly knowing that you don't look like the rest of your family, but you also don't feel Asian enough. You didn't grow up learning and experiencing the same things as other kids that grew up in Asian families did.

Basically, you get stuck in this strange middle area where you look like one thing but feel like something completely different. This causes an issue of Asian adoptees feeling that they can't lay claim to either of their cultural identities. As someone that was adopted at 8 months old from South Korea into an entirely Italian family, I have experienced this feeling myself.

The rise in anti-Asian hate crimes over the past few years has not helped this issue. An article from [npr.org](https://www.npr.org) says that since August 2021 it's estimated that there were around 9,000 anti-Asian hate crimes in the U.S. since the beginning of the pandemic. For Asian adoptees, this is something that causes a lot of confusion about how to feel and it can cause tension amongst family members. Based on an article from [latimes.com](https://www.latimes.com), "even the most sensitive non-Asian parents can't fully understand the aggressions and micro-aggressions that Asians, both children, and adults, often suffer."

The article then goes into a series of quotes from Asian adoptees on how they feel about all of the hate crimes that are happening. Some people said that because they didn't grow up in an Asian family they feel that they get to experience the racism and stereotypes that come along with being Asian, but not all of the fun things like having a connection to food, language, family, etc. Another person said that although she loves her family, her own brothers would make fun of her for being Asian and when she would get upset her parents would tell her that she was being too sensitive. That was something that really hit me because as much as I love my family, I have spent my entire life having to listen to family members talk about how much my cousin, who is biologically related to my mom, is so much like my mom. I remember my aunt saying on multiple occasions that my cousin might have well been my mom's daughter instead of hers. That is something that I think heavily ties into why this story is important to tell. Not only do I think that it's important to shine a light on the topic of Asian American adoption and give adoptees a place to voice how they feel, but I also think that family and friends of people that are adopted need to be educated a bit on what might be considered inappropriate to say and do in the presence of someone that is adopted. Saying the wrong thing, even if not done intentionally, can lead a person to feel like more of an outsider, even within their own family, than they already do.

The reason why I chose this topic and why it's so important to me is because oftentimes it's hard for people that are adopted to talk about how they feel towards adoption and in my case, I've never been very open or comfortable discussing my personal situation with anyone, even my parents, until more recently. Being able to look at someone and say "I'm adopted," has always been a struggle for me and something that

I've always tried to avoid saying or talking about, but now I have come to both learn and accept that not only is this something about myself that I can't change no matter how much I want to, but it's a part of what makes me and so many other people who we are.

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/527V4Q-DX-A>

## Transcription/Script

	Carrie: It's such a kind of central, integral part of who one is, how they came into the world.
Baby photos and recent photo of me	Mom: We adopted you when you were like eight months old, so you're over 22 years now. So about 22 years ago.
My parents and Carrie	Carrie: I definitely do remember your parents and just, have, I don't remember, you know, everything the meeting and a lot of specifics. But overall, I really remember how fond I was of working with them and that they struck me as so ready like they were there, you know, to to be parents.
	Dad: Carrie was great. It was actually very relaxing and comforting. Working with Carrie on your adoption.
My family and Carrie and me with Carrie	Dad: Carrie was involved from the gecko from the very beginning when she first met with us to the last minute, when she brought you down to the off the airplane and down the corridor in JFK, which was a great moment. I still cherish that moment.
	Mom: When we did have difficulty conceiving biologically. It was like a no brainer. It was like, great, cause I was already there. Like, it wasn't something that I had to get myself over. I think some for some people who adopt, maybe they're like, oh, you know well we couldn't have our own child through natural biological means. So we're going to, I guess plan B is to adopt. But for us, I think it was always like both for we're kind of on the table. So yeah, when we did try to conceive naturally and then when we had trouble, we were like, okay, this is great. This is where we were, this is what we're meant to do.
Family photos	Mom: We chose to adopt because we really wanted desperately to have a family and to the US it didn't matter, you know, if it was via adoption or via natural childbirth, whatever.
Family photos	Carrie: If you quiz me, I don't know that I could remember a lot about your family, but I remember overall, like strong family ties. I remember like strong connections, you know, whether it was to siblings or to grandparent, you know, your

	grandparents or whomever. I remember having like they had whole lives already, but that this was really going to be sort of the natural progression.
	Amanda: My name Amanda Larch I am 22 years old.
Amanda as a child	Amanda: I was seven years old when I was adopted.
	Amanda: I was adopted from Nanjing, which is Guangzhou Province.
Videos from Chinatown and photo of Amanda and adoptive mother	Amanda: Definitely within the first couple weeks. When I was in the U.S., I was pissed because like I went from like my environment where there was a bunch of Chinese people and then all of a sudden there's just white people and like, this woman that adopted me was like, is now my mom and she's white and I was like, This is not fair and stuff like that. So like for me, I was like a little bit salty about my adoption, like when I was younger, It kind of progressed more when I like got older. But at the time I was just like why?
Megan and her family	Megan: It makes me feel complicated. Is very complicated. I'm very happy in my uniqueness, but at the same time as any adoptee, I feel like feels like I do crave the quote unquote normalcy of knowing what it feels like to be in a family and looking like those people.
Megan as a kid	Megan: I've always been open about it. I feel like because growing up like I was, it was very obvious. It was obvious. It was like, I can't be this Asian person in a white community without explaining myself. I'm just another story of somebody who's living in both worlds.
	Carrie: A question for a lot of people who are adopted. You know, how do I sort of make sense of who I am?
Photos of Megan	Megan: I used to forget I was Asian and then I would catch myself in a reflection and be like, oh yeah, it was crazy. Like, but at the same time, like now I'm like, that was freaking delusional, you know, because it's like, Yeah, I do love both sides and I am and I am both. But to almost deny the Korean side and just be like yeah I'm Korean on the outside, like that's it. Like, you know, it's like I can 't do that.
Video from Chinatown	Amanda: Since I mostly grew up in the US, I felt like I'm more I should belong in, like what the white American culture. But then with people saying things that make me feel

	<p>like I shouldn't belong in the U.S. and I know I don't really belong in China since I don't have the cultural and language background as one would. growing up in China, it just like made me feel like I don't really belong anywhere. So then, like where do I belong?</p>
Megan's art and Megan and her family	<p>Megan: I feel like being adopted was just this cool. Like, it was just like another thing about me. It was like, yeah, I like paint. Whatever. I'm adopted. Whatever. Like, you know what I mean is another thing. But now I feel like people make it like an identity. Like this is who I am. And it's like, yeah, and you know, I am. But and I feel like that, that internal question, like of like, yeah, I'm adopted and the trauma that comes with it, you know, it's like, why did I bog myself down with this, you know, it's like, ignorance is bliss and I miss, like, living in my little bubble of being like, yeah, I'm Korean on the outside, but I have Italian blood.</p>
	<p>Amanda: Everyone always assumed that, like given by my adopt my given adoptive name, they always assume I'm white, but then they're kind of like taken back a little bit when they found out I'm like Asian and I don't have like a quote unquote Asian sounding last name.</p>
Korean restaurant	<p>Megan: I don't know, Korean culture and like, I don't have any mannerisms or anything that really like, it's like, yeah, like this is Korean, you know, like, this is my Korean side because I do feel like I was so I just put it away for so long, like, I just put it into like, this dark little place in my mind was just like, I'm just Korean on the outside. I don't care about it. I don't even care about my culture, whatever. Like, so it's like it wasn't till now that I started diving into it. And that's, you know, also in my the whole mental health just went down because I'm like, how do I balance both? Like, how do I be both?</p>
	<p>Carrie: I think the teen years are just going to be complicated and adoption is just another layer to that.</p>
	<p>Megan: I went over to my Korean friend in high school. I went over to her house. They were like, Oh my God, you're Korean like start speaking to me in Korean. I'm like, No, no, no. I don't know. It like, I'm sorry, I'm adopted, I'm white. Like, I really don't. You know what I mean? Like, basically white. And they never invited me over again. Like, I never went back to that house. So it's just like, it was like, damn, like, like, if only they were welcoming, you know, it really</p>

	sucks.
Chinatown and Chinese restaurant	Amanda: I have one friend and her mom, she's like, very traditional Chinese. And she was like basically saying like, oh, since you're raised by white people, you're not like really Asian or Chinese and like, you don't really know the heritage or whatever, even though I do. And it's just like we don't do the same thing as her family would, but it's just like, kind of makes me feel less of a Chinese person or an Asian person.
	Carrie: Some of the core pieces and areas of identity, as an adoptive person are around birth parents.
	Dad: Your mom and I, we're like, we want you to you know, I would want to meet this woman and just say thank you. I think you should if it makes you comfortable in that. I don't feel like, you know, I feel bad for mommy a little bit because your birth father so hard. That would be hard to track. So mommy kind of has a little disadvantage.
Me and mom	Mom: I think it makes me nervous just because there's so many unknowns. It's like, oh, like, well, they like each other. Will they connect? Well, what's the story? I don't know the story behind it, so I really don't know. I have confidence in our relationship. So I don't ever think that it would threaten our relationship.
	Amanda: I don't have any connections with my biological family, and I kind of do have a desire to sort of reach out to them. But realistically, I know that's kind of difficult to find them at this point.
	Carrie: When you look at like, say, people, adoptees going and trying to search out birth parent or background information, there are a lot of layers and kind of a process to do that.
Holt logo	Megan: I started the search. I literally submitted my paperwork and I wrote the letter and everything, and I sent it to Holt. And then they told me that whatever address that my birth mom had on file, she's not there anymore. So my letter just came back and they did it like twice.
	Carrie: In the world, right? Whether they're adopted or not, they're people who are more curious about identity and about, you know, human relations, about feelings. And and they're just going to be more fit, suited sort of to to explore.

	<p>Megan: It's a whirlwind of emotions and it's a constant journey and process of understanding like, yeah, I'm curious about the person who birthed me and what they're doing out in the world. And it almost seems like wrong that like I can't find her like even Korea can't find her.</p>
<p>Megan and her dad and Bencivenga name meaning</p>	<p>Megan: I remember it was my high school prom and, you know, like me and all my friends were taking pictures, whatever. And I remember this one kid coming up to me like, oh, like, where's your dad's? Like, how come we never see him? Like, blah, blah, blah. Is he Asian? Because we never see your dad. Like, is he Asian? And I'm like, You're joking, right? I was like, you're joking, right? My last name is Bencivenga and you think my dad is Asian? Like, What? In what world? You know what I mean? And I just remember, like, looking him like I'm adopted.</p>
	<p>Amanda: I never really had, like, a decent relationship with them. Not like that it's bad. But I would say that we were just never really close. And they always made me feel like I'm excluded from the family. So I just never really felt the need to bond with them.</p>
<p>Megan and her family and Italy</p>	<p>Megan: From what I've seen, the Korean Italian adoptees often are more happier. We come up in better families. I mean, obviously not for everybody, but I feel like I see more Italians and Koreans living merrily. When I visited my family in Korea, in Italy, they were all so welcoming like it didn't matter what my face looked like.</p>
<p>My cousin</p>	<p>Mom: I do you see what people are saying when they say that my biological niece is like me in habits, in like just her personality a little bit. So I do see that. But sometimes they just go overboard, I think, in just saying it, and I can totally see where that would make you feel like, oh, well, I'm not biologically related, so therefore I wouldn't even have a fighting chance at this.</p>
	<p>Dad: I find it very inappropriate and, and I get upset and I really get upset for you, even though I want to say something. But it just will blow up because I don't they don't mean it. I think it's somehow somehow it's a weird they're trying to bond with mommy and I don't get it. I think it's stupid they're just saying stupid things. And I think it's they just don't know. They don't get it sometimes.</p>
<p>Chinatown</p>	<p>Amanda: Oddly enough it kinda made me look back upon,</p>



	<p>like, my adoption history and, like, forced me to reconnect with my Chinese heritage and, like, assess how my upbringing is going to be different compared to, like other Asian American families and how like my Caucasian white family are never going to really understand.</p>
Megan and her family	<p>Megan: It made me realize I'm not walking around with my family all the time. I am an Asian woman on the street like I have gotten harassed on the streets of New York as I'm walking home. So it's like, okay, yeah, I was raised by Italians, but I'm I am Korean and I am another part that represents this Korean community. Like, yes, I may not be 100% Korean full fledged into the culture, but I'm an I am another face that represents it.</p>
	<p>Amanda: I had a couple of people follow me and my parents were just like, oh, that's not that big of a deal it happens to your sister all the time, X, Y, and Z. But like this man was like literally inches behind me, ready to push me. And I was just like, this is not normal.</p>
Photos of Megan, Amanda, and me as children	<p>Megan: It is okay to not be okay, first of all. And it's okay to process like what the heck we went through because it's a lot from the very, very beginning, from the moment we were born and the moment we were given away. It's sad and we can say that and it's okay because it's not so sad anymore. You know what I mean? And we're okay now. And we lived good lives, most of us. But through it all, I just feel like you have to process it. You have to process it like no matter what, in whatever way, how long it takes for you to accept that this is the reality, then it's like a light bulb goes off and you're like, you know what, no, I'm unique. I'm freaking cool. I have a story to tell.</p>
Zoom footage from my interviews with Amanda and Megan.	<p>Amanda: It's okay to not know what you want and like how you feel. Also consider reaching out to other adoptees since they also have the same experiences, it might be comforting to know that you're not alone and have this like support group of other people who are in the same shoes you.</p>

## Interview Log

Carrie Yedwab, therapist and former social worker at Spence Chapin, 11/8/22, zoom interview

Subject of interview: therapy and social work in relation to adoption

Contact: [carrieoliveri.licsw@gmail.com](mailto:carrieoliveri.licsw@gmail.com)

Amanda Larch, Chinese adoptee, 10/20/22 and 4/4/23, zoom and in-person interview

Subject of interview: identity as an Asian-American adoptee

Megan Bencivenga, Korean adoptee, 10/24/22, zoom interview

Subject of interview: identity as an Asian-American adoptee

RoseMarie Alfieri, parent of an Asian adoptee, 4/10/23, in-person interview

Subject of interview: being a parent of an adoptee

Contact: [rosealfieri@icloud.com](mailto:rosealfieri@icloud.com)

Michael Alfieri, parent of an Asian adoptee, 4/11/23, in-person interview

Subject of interview: being a parent of an adoptee

Contact: [michaelalfieri1@verizon.net](mailto:michaelalfieri1@verizon.net)

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