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With this interest in how origin stories are internalized into adulthood, I planned to interview adult adoptees and ask generally about their adoptee experience and more specifically what kind of language adults used to explain adoption to them as children. However, the discourse over *Blue Bayou* and, even more broadly, discussions of any minority representation in popular media, led me to consider if I had the right to ask adoptees that I do not personally know, to offer me their emotional labor to sit with and think through their lived experience. In these past years, 2020 through 2022, there has been increased attention to the ways in which the media portrays minority experiences. Poet and author Ocean Vuong and actress Arden Cho spoke as keynote speakers at GW's 2021 Asian Pacific Islander Heritage Celebration. When asked about Asian and Asian American representation in popular media, Vuong emphasized that representation is not enough. He noted that he prefers to use the word "presence" as a way of directing attention to more behind-the-scenes roles. Are there Asian and Asian Americans involved in writing, directing, producing, etc.? As an Asian American adoptee myself, is that reason enough to set out on interviewing other adoptees about their lives? I believe that one day it might be, but personally, it has always been easier to share more surface-level, adoptee-specific experiences living in the United States than it is to share deeply intimate questions and thoughts on the many unknowns of where and who I came from along with

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<sup>6</sup> The use of parents to mean adoptive parents is something that is comfortable for my own experience and is not necessarily the case for all adoptees. Neither set of parents will ever be referenced as "real" or "actual" unless referencing a conversation with someone who uses these words. I will always refer to my birth parents as such and the use

how I came to be adopted. I did not want to misrepresent someone else's story or speak *for* others as Justin Chon did. I realized that I needed more time to emotionally process for myself before I could ask it of anyone else.

All of this brings me back to Elizabeth Chin and autoethnography. Chin offers the reader an intimate look into her psyche, her life, and her relationships through the format of autoethnography. *My Life With Things* chronicles the connections that Chin forges and discovers through various things in her life. Her work engages deeply with the life and theory of Karl Marx as Chin unravels her love of things. For Chin, the autoethnography allows her to interrogate the paradoxes that she inhabits. Citing Theodor Adorno, she uses her life with things to articulate that “to hate a tradition properly ... ‘one must have it in oneself’” (Chin 2016, 4). Her book is a lens into how she can love things and hate capitalism and calls the reader to ask themselves how they are implicated as well. The form of the autoethnography created this opportunity for me to share my own experience and blend it with the anthropologists that I have found helpful throughout my studies in a format that could be legible, and hopefully helpful, to other adoptees. It is a mode of writing that allows me, as the writer, the opportunity to blend the genres of classical anthropological ethnography and narrative storytelling. My autoethnography also demands attention to the fallibility of memory, as many entries travel back and forth in time for a “hindsight is 20/20” reflection.

The final inspiration for the form and structure of my autoethnographic thesis is the work of Max Libiron, entitled *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021). Their book explores a level of specificity in method and practice that I found liberating. Many early readings in my anthropological studies make broad, sweeping claims on the state of humanity and

culture. Libiron, on the other hand, employs specificity in their methodological approach to ethnography: “I think of specificity as a methodology of nuanced connection and humility,” (2021: 22) and problematizes *We*, writing that “*We* is rife with assumptions” (23). Their emphasis on ethnographic specificity has stuck with me throughout my final year of studies. As I have noted in the coming footnotes, my use of adoptee for the duration of this work is highly specific to my own experience as a transracial, transnational, Chinese American adoptee. From casual conversations with friends who are also transracial, transnational, Asian adoptees, I know that some of my experiences will travel<sup>7</sup> and resonate with others while others will not. As an autoethnography, this entire endeavor is highly localized to my experience. They might not travel outside an adoptee exclusive space, but some might. I also acknowledge that my use of footnotes is also inspired by Max Libiron, who makes extensive use of their footnotes for expanding thoughts, adding tangents, acknowledgments, and honoring those who supported or aided in their work. I am, maybe notoriously, “bad” at storytelling. Recounting one story might derail into three other tangents that provide context or further information to aspects of the original story. Utilizing footnotes will hopefully convey this characterization of my own storytelling voice.

As an autoethnography, I also hope to practice what I’ve been taught throughout my anthropological coursework. Many of my classes have had heavy decolonial influences and over the past two years, I’ve reflected deeply on what decolonization in anthropology means. Drawing on the response to *Blue Bayou* and the words of Ocean Vuong, I shifted the focus and the form of my master's thesis away from studying or researching other adoptees. Anthropology and the practice of participant observation

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<sup>7</sup> By travel I mean resonate with and affirm an experience or feeling that you, the reader, have.

have a long legacy of extraction and harm that I do not want to perpetuate. Audra Simpson writes on what ethnographic refusal means for her work as an indigenous scholar doing ethnography with her community, and that has deeply shaped my approach to research (2007).<sup>8</sup> I have chosen the form of autoethnography because I am still reckoning with my own place in this world, the country, as an adoptee, and as a queer Asian American. To ask someone who they are and how they have come to be before truly and intimately knowing myself did not sit right with me.

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<sup>8</sup> Ethnographic refusal operates as a dialogic practice between the ethnographer and research participants. It is a practice of establishing and respecting boundaries.

## Entries

The following entries occur throughout different locales and at different points in time. As both storytelling and critical reflection, these slices of my experience flag some of the influential moments in the shaping of my own personhood. I am who I am today as a result of a dialogic lived experience between myself and the rest of the world. There are times when strangers will label me, and mark me out in ways that fit their neatly constructed identity boxes. But life is not simply letting the world tell you who you are, it is how you answer. At the core of this work, of my life, is a story of belonging: times when I felt out of place, and times when I have found my place.

### By Any Other Name

During a heritage trip to China that I took in 2013, families had the opportunity to order custom name seals, also known as chops, for themselves or even as gifts to friends and family. The company that produced the name seals was provided with our English names<sup>9</sup> and they transliterated them into Chinese characters on the stamp. My name, Nina is easy as it is two syllables that are sounds that exist in the phonetics of Mandarin, Ni 妮 Na 娜. I have a third chop that is smaller and is the only one that is not a transliteration of Nina, but is of my Chinese name 湖群 (HúQún).<sup>10</sup> All three of the seals have rabbits as the decorative end which was chosen because I was born in 1999, the Year of the Rabbit in the Chinese Zodiac calendar. The most striking detail as I look at them now is that all

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<sup>9</sup> I have a Chinese name which was given to me by the orphanage. It is 红湖群 (hóng húqún) and is listed on my Chinese passport from when I was a baby, and on the adoption papers. The first character indicates the family name and, according to my mom, is just the family name that all of the babies at the orphanage were given for official documentation. My parents kept the name Huqun as one of my middle names but on US documentation it is always written as Hu Qun with the characters separated.

<sup>10</sup> Looking at the picture of what the stamp looks like on paper, I was surprised to realize that the script is more similar to an older form of Chinese and is not in simplified characters. In simplified Chinese, the three lines on the left side of 湖 are a radical that means water, but in the past this radical looked more like a flowing river. See [this website](#) for a better look at the characters.

of them include my name Nina in English above the Chinese characters. The inclusion of my English name in English letters marks this seal as belonging to someone who is not necessarily familiar with Chinese characters and thus not a native Chinese person who might use this in its official purpose as a form of signature on a document. It is for an outsider. This is a souvenir to sit on a shelf.

Naming itself is something that can hold great significance in a transracial transnational Asian adoptee. The vast majority of families and households adopting Chinese and South Korean children are White and live in Western countries (Dorow 2006; Kim 2010).<sup>11</sup> As noted previously, the Chinese name given to me by the orphanage was incorporated into my legal name on US documentation as one of my middle names. Other families will also do this if they don't keep the birth language name as the adoptee's legal first name. While I personally still feel connected to my Chinese name, which I used during my Chinese courses at GW and during my study abroad semester in Shanghai, I want to acknowledge and highlight that this is not the only experience in the broader adoptee community. I have spoken with other adoptees and seen testimony in online adoptee communities of people who legally change their first name back to their birth language name. Those who consider doing this or who have done this often express anger towards their adoptive parent(s) for changing their name in the first place. Sara Dorow explores this phenomenon in her book on transnational adoption from China but from the lens of the adoptive parent(s):

Adoptive parents in the United States sometimes balk at the Chinese names given to their children by orphanages, in part because the names do not seem

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<sup>11</sup> The majority of my research has centered the experiences of South Korean and Chinese adoptees. These are not the only sending countries within the scope of transnational Asian adoptions but are prominent in the existing literature on this community. This is also a product of my own identity as a Chinese adoptee and my personal experiences with other adoptees who are by and large Chinese or Korean.

individually meaningful to parents or are meaningful in ways that uncomfortably connect the child to abandonment and institutionalization. For example, in some orphanages all the children found in the same year are given the same daily name, their given names perhaps including a Chinese character that reflects where or when they were found. (2006, 99).

Another practice is the renaming of the adoptee by their parents, but something that sounded equally Chinese (or ethnic) but was easier to pronounce as English speakers. Thus, the anglicization of ethnic name pronunciations and renaming can function to assert “white racial dominance through language,” (Bucholtz, 2016: 277) even if adoptive parents are not aware of this implication.<sup>12</sup>

In middle school, I had a homeroom teacher who thought it would be funny to embarrass all of us by reading out our full names on the envelopes containing our report cards. For whatever reason, nothing was more embarrassing in middle school than for your peers to know your middle name. My teacher had a hard time pronouncing my Chinese middle name and had to ask me how to pronounce it, which I obliged to the best of my ability at the time. The thread I want to highlight is my ability to produce an accurate pronunciation with limited knowledge of spoken Mandarin.

Mispronouncing names by cultural others is something that many minorities in the United States can relate to. Comedians Key and Peele flip the script on this experience in their comedy sketch titled “Substitute Teacher” (cited in Bucholtz 2016; Comedy Central on Youtube). In the skit, Keegan-Michael Key plays a substitute teacher taking attendance. The class is composed of predominantly White students with typical

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<sup>12</sup> I have also had many people ask me where I got my last name, signaling that it was not matching their visual perception of my Asianness. Other times I’ve had classmates or substitute teachers mispronounce my last name Mellor in a Spanish way where the double L creates a Y sound like “MayOR.” In school if there was a substitute teacher taking attendance there was an occasional double take when I raised my hand to my name being called.

Anglo-American names which Key proceeds to mispronounce. For many folks with non-Anglo-American names, this is a common experience in school and the workplace. This shared experience gets shared through various channels and bonds minority groups together. What Bucholtz highlights is that the renaming or nicknaming of students with non-Anglo-American names can be a form of cultural erasure (2016).

A narrative I've seen repeated in the adoptee community is adoptees not knowing how to pronounce their birth language names. If not taught the language, adoptees have no basis of phonetic knowledge with which to even begin trying to pronounce their birth language names. This is evident in Chinese adoptees whose Chinese names have the X or Q initial, as these sounds are not part of the English phonetic system at all. Another obstacle for Chinese adoptees is the tone system in Mandarin. Paradoxically, not knowing how to pronounce a birth language name can further distance an adoptee from a sense of cultural belonging, and feeling disconnected with their birth culture can lead to ambivalence towards knowing how to pronounce their birth language name.<sup>13</sup> Bucholtz's article then implicates adoptive parents who choose to remove their children's birth language names in a process of cultural erasure and racial bleaching. It can be an attempt on the parent(s)' side to shield their children from this genre of microaggression, and thus an attempt at helping their child blend into White American society. However, there can be further alienation when adoptees who have Anglo-American names are then questioned for their names. Once, at an orchestra camp when I was around thirteen, we were gathered in our practice room waiting for everyone to get back from lunch. The

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<sup>13</sup> None of this is to say that feeling disconnected from a birth culture is good or bad, or that not knowing how to pronounce a birth language name is shameful.









































































