SHARING STORIES, MAKING SPACE: RELATIONAL LITERACY AND KOREAN AMERICAN ADOPTEE RHETORICS

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation uses a cultural rhetorics methodology of story and relationality to examine the role of racial isolation in the leadership practices of Korean American adoptee community leaders. While scholarship in Writing and Rhetoric has used story and relationality to critique the historical erasure of racially marginalized peoples, the discipline has yet to do so from the specific perspective of transnational transracial adoptees. That transnational transracial adoptees are overwhelmingly adopted into predominantly White homes and communities and must thus develop their racial (person of color) and cultural (White American) identities separately uniquely positions them to further nuance discussions of race and racial literacy. In this study, I interviewed four past and present leaders of an adult Korean American adoptee organization in the Midwest. A theoretical framework of *relational literacy* both emerged from and guided my analyses of their stories and yielded three key findings about racial isolation: (1) racial isolation can occur among people of the same race/positionality; (2) disorientation can occur in the initial stages of intentionally building relationships with other adoptees as a result of racial isolation; and (3) racial isolation is not only a matter of physical environment but also of ever-shifting emotional, intellectual, and spiritual states.

These insights suggest that Korean American adoptees' leadership practices of facilitating relationships (between adoptees, Korean culture, Korea, critical histories of adoption, Asian Americans), establishing safe spaces for programming, revising essentialized racial and ethnic categories (i.e., "Korean American" and "Asian American"), facilitating relationships between their and other adoptee organizations, and cultivating the next generation of adoptee community leaders are contingent on adoptee leaders' own experiences with racial isolation. Moreover, analysis shows

that adoptee leaders' own experiences with racial isolation also inform what and how they design and implement programming for membership. The final chapter identifies how a framework of relational literacy can be widely applied in Writing and Rhetoric scholarship, as well as its contributions to the fields of Asian American rhetoric, cultural rhetorics, and adoption studies.

For the adoptees, especially those who show us the way.

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

AKA NY	Also-Known-As
AKASF	Association of Korean Adoptees San Francisco
FCC	Families with Children from China
IKAA	International Korean Adoptee Associations
KAAN	Korean American Adoptee and Adoptive Family Network
KAD	Korean Adoptee
NABSW	National Association of Black Social Workers

CHAPTER 1:

RELATIONAL LITERACY: IDENTIFYING [WITH] RHETORICS AND RELATIONS IN ADOPTION FROM KOREA TO AMERICA

> What is it like to be cut off from a past, to be born as if there is no past? What obligation do your parents bear to expose you to the ways of the old country? To bequeath memory unto you, where none existed before? To unfold life's lessons in the same patterns, the same strokes and catechisms, that another set of parents in another time and place might have used? . . . A self-indulgent pose, I know: I have a history, I have blood parents, I have a kind of access to the past that an adoptee does not. How can I make our situations equivalent? I can't. I don't. Though I suffer slightly from glaucoma of the memory, I do not labor in the darkness that shrouds the adoptee. If I chose to, I could reverse the creeping blindness.
>
> — Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*

I begin this chapter with the above epigraph by Eric Liu because it is an artifact that marks a starting point to my personal "journey" out of racial isolation as a Korean American adoptee. While Liu's memoir was published in 1998, I wouldn't read it until 14 years later in 2012. In the span of those 14 years—and for all the years before—I, like many transnational, transracial adoptees[1], actively avoided contact with people like me; i.e., Asians, Asian Americans, and other adoptees. This avoidance wasn't particularly hard to achieve, either. Racial isolation is like that. The predominantly

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[1] In the term *transnational, transracial adoptee*, "transnational" signifies that the adoptee was adopted from a different country than that of their adoptive family and "transracial" signifies the adoptee is of a different race than their adoptive family.

white spaces and communities I moved in as a result of my upbringing made it easy to starve those parts of me; to put them away somewhere deep down where I hoped they couldn't reach me.

For 25 years I convinced myself that this was just how it was and how it would always be. And then, suddenly, on a day like any other, I read Liu's words and for the first time I saw myself so starkly, so plainly on the page. It was dizzying. Disorienting. *Exhilarating*. Like taking a big gulp of clean, fresh air after holding your breath for so long you can't really remember when you started doing it or why. From Liu's questions about what adoptees through adoption (i.e., certainty in who and where we come from) to his concession of privilege as a Chinese American with Chinese parents (i.e., certainty and access to where he comes from), I felt profoundly seen. Understood on a level I'd never been before. In inviting adoptees to the table—in recognizing them as racialized people who, because of circumstances beyond their control, have valuable insights to provide regarding race, family, and belonging—I felt the full force of years of quiet yearning for personhood come to the surface. That yearning would drive me to build close and lasting relationships with other Korean adoptees, the likes of which span states and continents, and have altered my life forever.

I share this story now because it is essential to who I am as both a researcher and a person. It therefore informs my theoretical and methodological framework in this dissertation, which as readers will see in the following chapter, hinges on story and relationality. What's more, this story orients readers to the condition of racial isolation in Korean American adoption, a key concept to this study and to the lived experiences of most Korean adoptees worldwide. In particular, this story demonstrates the impact racial isolation can have on adoptees regarding feelings and realities of alienation and non-belonging in our own skins, homes, families, and communities. It highlights how we are often not equipped with the language to describe or analyze these feelings and realities until much later in life, and it highlights how we have to move beyond our upbringings in racial isolation to seek those who are like us (i.e., other adult Korean adoptees and Asian Americans) to do so.

At its core, this dissertation is centered on the establishment of a relational understanding of systemic oppression. Specifically, I argue that analyzing systemic oppression through a framework of relational literacy enables us as scholars of writing and rhetoric to conceive of oppression as a matter of relationships. In other words, one mechanism for creating and maintaining control over others through unequal power dynamics is to isolate (limit or eradicate completely) a subject by denying them access to certain kinds of relationships while sponsoring their access to others. Deborah Brandt's concept of sponsors of literacy[2] reminds us that, though "the interests of the sponsor and the sponsored do not have to converge (and, in fact, may conflict) sponsors nevertheless set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty" (167). This "setting of the terms for access" is perhaps best understood in the context of my study via what I call "readymade relations," or predetermined sets of relationships that interpolate subjects into readymade identities, i.e., fixed identities predetermined by sponsors that the sponsored do not necessarily choose for themselves. While such identities may bestow upon the sponsored certain accesses and power, they are always already conditional in that they require the sponsored to forfeit other relations—other potential identities—or risk devastating losses.

In this chapter, I explore systemic oppression through racial isolation, readymade relations, and relational literacy. I specifically illustrate these concepts through Korean American adoptee subjectivities and, in so doing, set the stage for the following chapters that present this dissertation study as an examination of the storied experiences of four adoptee leaders of an adult Korean American adoptee organization in the Midwest. Given participants' positioning as foreign-born children adopted from a different country (transnational) who are predominantly of a different race than their adoptive families (transracial), I show that Korean adoptees can uniquely exemplify how

[2] Brandt defines sponsors of literacy as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, and suppress or withhold literacy—and advantage by it in some way" (166).

systemic oppression is exerted and maintained through the regulation of relations that benefit some (adoptive parents and national agendas) and disenfranchise others (birth parents and adoptees). What's more, my study highlights how adult adoptee leaders are practicing strategies of resistance that seek, embody, and teach relational literacy to revise readymade relations, particularly relations sponsored and imposed by racial isolation as a condition of their adoption.

Below, I explore how the study of literacy has been used by rhetoric and writing scholars to address the historical erasure of intersectionally marginalized people. I then introduce Korean American adoptees as the focus of this dissertation study and demonstrate how racial isolation, as a condition of their adoption, interpolates adoptees into what I call "readymade relations." I show how these readymade relations rely on racial isolation to superficially deracialize adoptees and assimilate them into predominantly White families and the national imaginary. Overall, I situate my participants' work and stories within this history to show how their development and sponsorship of relational literacy revises racial isolation and readymade relations.

Literacy, Rhetoric and Writing, and Historical Erasure

In the discipline of rhetoric and writing, literacy has been used to illuminate erased and hidden histories and subjects through the study of minoritized subjects' literacy practices. For instance, Royster has defined literacy as "what happens when we 'gain access to information' and proceed to 'use this information . . . to articulate lives and experiences and also to identify, think through, refine, and solve problems, sometimes complex problems, over time" (45) in the context of nineteenth-century African American women's literacy practices. Brandt has used the concept for literacy sponsors to explore economies of literacy and argue for a more nuanced understanding of conflicting literacies in the writing classroom. Blending Royster's and Brandt's insights, Pritchard has situated literacy as a means for forming relationships with Black queer ancestors that address historical erasure and the struggle for selfhood in the lives of contemporary Black queers. Relatedly,

Young has used the concepts of minority discourse and autoethnography to situate literacy narratives as a rhetorical strategy for confronting and intervening in dominant cultural practices via a process he calls "minor re/visions." His positioning as an Asian American is especially relevant to my study in that it illuminates the ways race and citizenship have been bound and mobilized in the production and erasure of Asians and Asian Americans as at once alien, invasive, and a model minority.

Following these scholars, I posit that literacy can be understood as the ability to access sponsors that provide resources for navigating systems of meaning making. I specifically argue that key to such a definition of literacy is the establishment of new sets of relationships, particularly with people, that bring individuals and communities in contact with new ways of meaning making that enable them to better navigate and resist oppressive systems. The literacies sponsored by these new sets of relationships empower individuals and communities to critically understand how and why they have been positioned by particular systems of meaning as well as intervene in and revise those positionings and systems. While this study follows a similar orientation to literacy as relational, it extends the aforementioned studies via its rootedness in the usage and teaching of what I call "relational literacy" in the context of community leadership. I argue that, like the minoritized participants in the scholarship above, Korean American adoptees use relational literacy to construct relationships with *one another* that empower them to better understand their Asianness and adopteeness, affirm their connections to Korean adoptee culture and community, and affirm the usefulness of their own experiences to intervene in social and political issues.

Why Relational Literacy?: Identifying Racial Isolation and Readymade Relations through Rhetoric

Broadly speaking, *relational literacy* is an ability to enact practices that are relationally expansive and accountable to the ways individuals and communities have been differently positioned by systems of power and control. When one is relationally literate, they are able to seek and access new relations, allowing them to gain and create forms of knowledge and identification that are historically informed and relevant to one's lived experiences with marginalization. In my study, I identified how leaders of an adult Korean American adoptee organization in the Midwest demonstrate, model, and sponsor relational literacy through the three literacy practices of: (1) ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of one's readymade relations; (2) the use of racial literacy to generate critical, historically situated understandings of one's ever-evolving relations and attendant disorientations; and (3) disidentifying with readymade relations and enacting/sponsoring systemic change that revises racial isolation and readymade relations. As a theoretical framework, relational literacy both guided and emerged from this study. In later chapters, I do a deep dive into how the four leaders at the heart of this study developed relational literacy through the forging of new relationships with other adult adoptees and, to some extent, other Asian Americans (Chapter 3), as well as how they sponsor relational literacy for other adult adoptees through organizational programming and community advocacy, i.e., disidentifications (Chapter 4). For now, however, I focus on readymade relations and racial isolation as conditions of transnational transracial adoption that produce the exigence for adoptees' development of relational literacy.

It is important to note here that the following presentation of readymade relations and racial isolation is the result of the three aforementioned literacy practices that demonstrate relational literacy. Specifically, it is the result of ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of my own readymade relations, reflections that have been made possible by my relationships with other adult Korean adoptees. These relationships and reflections have, in turn, sponsored my development of racial literacy, which I use here to generate critical and historically situated understandings of Korean

adoption to work through disorientations that arise in my ever-evolving relationship to it. In the conclusion of this chapter, I explain how my presentation of readymade relations and racial isolation performs and demonstrates relational literacy as a form of disidentification that enacts and sponsors systemic revision of racial isolation and readymade relations.

It has been widely confirmed in critical adoption scholarship that most of the over 200,000 children adopted from Korea since the end of the Korean war in 1953 have been placed in predominantly White homes and communities where they are usually isolated from other non-Whites (Kim; McKee; Park Nelson; Palmer). As such, racial isolation has been shown to be a pervasive condition of Korean adoptees' adoptions into predominantly White families that stymies adoptees' abilities to build relationships with one another and other racially minoritized groups (Kim; McKee; Park Nelson; Palmer). Park Nelson has defined racial isolation as "having little to no contact with people of other races" and notes that it is "unusually demanding for transracial adoptees because an exploration of birth race is sometimes seen as a rejection of adoptive race and family" (85). Of the 65 adult Korean adoptee participants who submitted oral histories for her study, a majority expressed a learned desire to be White that led them to dissociate from and shun their Asianness out of shame[3] (133). Another transnational, transracial adoptee scholar, Lene Myong, has further noted that racial isolation, for her, was "primarily enforced through white syllabi and the exclusive introduction to white thinkers and writers by white faculty" (102). Thus, a component of adoptees' racial isolation is embodied not only in their lack of relationships with other people of color (including other Korean adoptees), but also in a lack of relationships with people of color's ideas, experiences, rhetorical traditions, and cultural productions. Without such relationships, it is

[3] Park Nelson's participants' stories indicated that this desire came from living around only Whites and wanting to fit in/not stick out to avoid racial stigmatization brought on by their visible racial difference. Among some of the consequences of this, participants cited low self-esteem, self-hatred, internalized racism, isolation from family and friends, and more (133-9).

extremely difficult for adoptees to gain relational literacy and renders what bits of relational literacy they are able to attain incomplete at best and, at worst, superficial.

Given the above, I assert that the condition of racial isolation in adoption from Korea to America produces what I call "readymade relations" that limit adoptees' abilities to explore and identify with key dimensions of their lived experiences—namely their lived experiences with racialization[4]. In alignment with Brandt's concept of sponsors of literacy, readymade relations are sets of relationships that sponsor readymade identities and, in so doing, foster dependency of the sponsored on the sponsors both intentionally and unintentionally. Dependency is achieved via the isolative nature of these relations, as they are exclusively limited by sponsors to relations that reflect and reinforce readymade identities. For most Korean adoptees, this means that their only relationships prior to adulthood are with White, non-adopted individuals and communities who not only lack racial literacy but who also have a vested interest in its denial. As a result, these readymade relations cannot adequately validate nor address adoptees' experiences with racialization as the systemic normalization of Whiteness hinges on the misrecognition and erasure of race. Adoptees are thus unable to develop relational literacy because racial isolation prevents them from seeking and accessing relations that can help them gain forms of knowledge (i.e., racial literacy) relevant to their lived experiences with racial marginalization.

It is crucial to mention at this point that this dissertation is only a starting point for the concepts of racial isolation, readymade relations, and relational literacy. As such, its scope is limited to the specificities of Korean American adoptees, particularly the four Korean American adoptee leaders at the heart of this study and myself. Thus, my present conceptualizations of racial isolation, readymade relations, and relational literacy as put forth in this project must be considered in

[4] Park Nelson has said of this phenomenon that "transracial adoptees are in the unusual position of developing our racial identities separately from our cultural identities," a feat that racial isolation and readymade relations cannot adequately support (18).

accordance with our specificities and contexts. Though my participants and I have had similar experiences growing up in racial isolation, adoptees and their experiences of adoption—even those as similar as ours—are deeply complex and thereby not standard or monolithic.

Colorblind Rhetoric, Adoptive Families, and American Racism

In this chapter and throughout this dissertation, I argue that, in the case of Korean adoptees, readymade relations can be understood as a form of relational hegemony. This hegemony is exerted via readymade relations' erasure and dismissal of key dimensions of the sponsored's identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, age, class, etc.) to maintain sponsors' desired relationship(s) with and for the sponsored. This kind of hegemony is most immediately experienced in the White adoptive family, as adoptive families' desires for a child (i.e., "family completion"[5]) have tended to elide racial literacy in favor of focusing parenting efforts on *assimilating* transracially adopted children into White American cultural norms (Howell; Kim; McKee; Myers; Palmer; Park Nelson). These efforts toward assimilation are often founded on and deployed using a rhetoric of colorblindness that codifies race as a superficial difference in skin color that one can choose to see/acknowledge (i.e., "not racist") or not (i.e., "racist"). As opposed to racial literacy, certain forms of colorblindness thus codifies racism as a thing of the past that is only legible in acts of physical or extreme verbal violence. It assumes the present to be "post-racial" and denies recognition of racism as structurally embedded in American culture and institutions, attributing it instead to individuals.

Before moving on to an explanation of colorblind rhetoric, I first want to acknowledge the ever-shifting complexities of colorblind racism and my use of the term throughout this study. From here on out, I refer to colorblindness as a rhetoric enacted to erase racial difference between transnational, transracial—particularly Korean American—adoptees and their white American

[5] I put this term in quotes as a way to acknowledge its pronatalist and heteronormative assumptions that implicitly suggest families can only be "completed" by children.

families and communities. My use of the term here does not necessarily apply across all types of adoption (i.e., domestic, transnational, transracial and transnational), nor does it necessarily apply across Asian American adoptions (i.e., Korean adoption, Chinese adoption, Indian adoption, etc.), particularly as these adoptions span time and shifting historical contexts. For instance, in her study with Chinese American adoptees in both White and Asian American adoptive families, Andrea Louie examined the creation of adoptive families' identities by studying how "forms of whiteness, Chineseness, and ideas about multiculturalism and race" inform how adoptive parents approach their adopted children's construction of Chinese cultural and racial identities (12-3). Louie's data demonstrated that "today's adoptive parents operate in a context in which the nonwhite origins of their children are seen as positive aspects of identity that should be fostered, and not wholly absorbed or erased" (181). Thus, Louie argues for a more complete comprehension of how Korean and Chinese adoption differ regarding time frame and discursive framing (i.e., family, assimilation, adoption) (56). In terms of time frame, Korean adoption spans from the late 1950s to the present with a peak in the 1980s while Chinese adoption spans from 1992 with a peak in the late 1990s to the present. This finding illuminates how Korean adoptees' experiences of assimilation through colorblindness differ from those of Chinese adoptees, as Louie's study suggests Chinese adoptive families have listened to adult Korean adoptees' critiques of adoption and sought to use those critiques to parent their adopted children from China (57).

As such, given the earlier mentioned similarities of participants' and my own experiences with colorblindness as well as the limited scope of this dissertation, I refer to colorblindness in white adoptive families in terms consistent with scholarship by Korean adoptees and Korean Americans who have used ethnography and oral history in studies with adult Korean adoptees (Kim; McKee; Park Nelson; Palmer). Readers should be aware that such a definition of colorblindness in the context of Korean American adoption is rooted in specific discursive critiques of rhetorics that have

shaped and structured the origins and modern practice of Korean American adoption (i.e., neoliberalism, globalism, racism, Christian charity, etc.). Moreover, this study is situated within a specific community of Korean American adoptees who were adopted into white families during the 1980s. In this time period and in this context, colorblindness was primarily operationalized and conceived of as a means for assimilating adopted non-white children into white American homes via the erasure of racial difference. In this way, it's something many Korean American adoptees were tacitly expected to accept and enact to achieve family cohesion (Kim; McKee; Palmer; Park Nelson). Though this kind of colorblindness may differ throughout the Korean American adoptee community depending on factors such as time of adoption as well as cultural and global goings-on, it is relevant to mention given that the participants of this study were raised in the 1980s.

I now proceed to define colorblindness and its relevance in the context of this study. When invoked by those who wield Whiteness, this curtailed conception of race is itself a modern enactment of racism in its denial and erasure of the ways racialization affects the racially minoritized. The rhetoric of these denials and erasures tends to be viewed as "racially just" by Whites, as it works to maintain a fiction of racial equality that benefits the racial majority while continuing to disenfranchise racial minorities. In the context of Korean American adoption, adoptive families' colorblindness has been shown to minimize and erase adoptees' experiences of racism in and especially beyond the home space[6]. Several studies with adult Korean adoptee participants have reported that adoptive families' and communities' deployment of colorblind rhetoric led adoptees to internalize the racism they experienced instead of receiving the support and resources necessary to cope, i.e., develop racial literacy (Kim; McKee; Palmer; Park Nelson).

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[6] Counseling psychologist Richard Lee has called this the Transracial Adoptee Paradox. This concept describes how non-White adoptees are socialized as "members of the majority culture" and that it becomes problematic "when adoptees have to transition from racial invisibility within White families and communities that do not recognize a racial element of their identities, to the visibility of the 'real world' where race is recognized and adoptees must cope with more explicit forms of racialization" (Park Nelson 136).

A brief exploration of American race relations and their impact on domestic adoption in the 1960s and 1970s further reveals the role of colorblind rhetoric—and race in general—in the denial of racial literacy in the adoption of foreign-born Korean children. For example, Park Nelson has suggested that it is essential to examine domestic transracial adoption and foreign transracial adoption from Korea as inextricably linked[7]. Specifically, she has highlighted how the widespread visibility of advocacy by proponents for racial justice in Black American[8] and American Indian[9] communities led to a decrease in the number of domestically adoptable transracial children that, in turn, catalyzed an increase in transnational transracial adoptions—particularly of Korean and, later, other Asian children (Dorow; Kim; Park Nelson). This organized opposition to domestic transracial adoption in the 1970s drew attention "to past racism in adoption policies and the potential for future abuse, focused on African American and American Indian populations—minorities that had high visibility in the civil rights movements of the period" (Park Nelson 7). Kim, citing Dorow, confirms that the high visibility of these populations' claims of cultural genocide via domestic transracial adoption led to the adoption of foreign-born Asian children because they were "construed as a safe choice for financially able Americans to adopt more 'flexibly' racialized children who not only are more easily assimilated but whose birth parents are less likely to make claims on their children" (27). This perception was further affirmed by the invisibility of Asians in America that persists to this day via *the model minority myth*, of which Park Nelson has said:

[7] Park Nelson notes this is because the first domestic transracial adoption in America took place in 1948 and that the Indian Adoption Project began in 1958, five years after the first recorded transnational Korean adoption (5).
[8] Of this phenomenon, Park Nelson writes: "At its conference in 1971, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) repudiated transracial adoption, predicting that transracial adoptees would have poor psychological adjustment and racial identity, and be unable to cope with episodes of racism and discrimination without the guidance of a parent of the same color; subsequently, the organization led efforts to end out-of-race adoption of African American children under a stated goal of protecting children and preventing 'cultural genocide.' The same year, a meeting of American Indian leaders issued a statement that also identified transracial adoption as 'cultural genocide'" (6).
[9] In 1978, the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) made transracial adoption placements of American Indian children illegal without the consent of the child's tribe (5).

> …the perceived absence of racial discrimination against Asian Americans made the transracial adoption of Asians into white homes appear "safe," and did not evoke the same race-based cultural conflicts that dominated debates on domestic transracial adoption. Not only did the Asian American community not respond negatively to these adoptions (then or now), adoptive parents could believe that their Asian adopted children could expect a life without negative exposure to racism. (7)

Thus, given the invisibilizing force of Asian racialization relative to that of African Americans and American Indians, the practice of adoption from Korea must be understood as very much rooted in the evolution of American racism. Such an understanding enables us to see the limitations of assimilation and colorblind rhetoric in transnational transracial adoption, as neither has protected adoptees from experiencing racialization and racism in a systemically racist society.

In addition to the histories of colorblind rhetoric as an evolution of American racism mentioned above, another key factor driving adoptive families' focus on the assimilation of their transracial children into White American culture is the social and legal processes of producing adoptable children. Adoption agencies and orphanages have been shown to commodify adoptees through what McKee has called *social death*[10], or "the dissolving of biological/family ties to Korea" that "erases adoptees' histories and manufactures new identities" (27). Howell has called this *de-kinning*, or legal and social processes of "de-kinning" children from their original familial and cultural contexts and kinning them anew into another (228). In other words, to symbolically and legally make a child someone else's child via adoption, the historical imperative has been to erase the child's origins for the purposes of assimilation into adoptive families. McKee further asserts that "Natal alienation operates in conjunction with this social death and results in *social and cultural isolation* due to

10 Of this dissolution, McKee notes that many adoptees' birth dates and records have been altered by orphanages and adoption agencies to make them more appealing for adoption. She argues this indicates how "biographical details are seen as fungible and mutable as part of the orphan manufacturing process" (28).

the inability to integrate ancestral lived experiences to inform present-day social realities" (27; emphasis added)[11]. In this way, racial isolation stems from and reinforces certain notions of colorblindness.

As a widely accepted structuring of relationships, readymade relations are thus paradoxical in that they are at once the very mechanisms that enable relationships between sponsors and the sponsored as well as the very mechanisms that can constrain the sponsored's ability to cultivate relationships beyond sponsors. In the context of Korean adoptees, this means that, through processes of social death and de-kinning, readymade relations with White adoptive families and communities are what legally and socially enable adoptive parents to adopt a child and are also what enable adoptees as abandoned children and orphans to gain adoptive family. However, it also means that the structure these readymade relations impose on adoptees and adoptive families *simultaneously disenfranchise* adoptees by erasing their pasts (birth families, culture, land) via social death and de/re-kinning, as well as erasing their racial difference (visibly Asian in predominantly White families and communities) via colorblind rhetoric and racial isolation. Moreover, I argue that examining the historically paternalistic and dependent nature of the relationship between Korea and America reveals that the very act of adoption from Korea to America mirrors and *reproduces* the same structures of paternalism and dependency in relationships between Korean adoptees and their White American adoptive families.

Relationships of Dependency, Adoption as Love, and Adoptees as Gifts

[11] Of social death, McKee notes "Not only are [adoptees] estranged or displaced from their birth countries and families, any link to their ancestries are eliminated. Through the erasure of connections to their biological origins, adoptees…lack access to their cultural and social histories. Social death prevents adoptees from maintaining connections to their birth culture and creates orphans in name only as many adoptees have living biological parents (27).

As an adoptee, relational literacy enabled me to seek and access relations with adoptee scholars, Korean Americans, and their work to gain and create forms of knowledge and identification (as presented here) that are historically informed and relevant to my lived experiences with racial marginalization. These relations have furthermore enabled me to assert that the relational configuration in which Korean adoptees vis-à-vis Korea are forced into a dependent relationship with benevolent and paternalistic White adoptive parents vis-à-vis America is arguably a technology of neocolonial control. In *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption*, SooJin Pate explains how Japan's surrender to the Allies at the end of World War II brought independence to the Korean peninsula for the first time in 40 years. However, neither Russia nor America left after the victory. Instead, amidst the brewing tensions of Cold War distrust, the north and south became each superpower's respective laboratory for building communist and democratic nations in Korea. America's occupation of Korea (which continues to this day) was thus justified by what Pate calls "a rhetoric of independence"[12] that disingenuously recoded "U.S. imperialism as an anticolonial project" via a conditional supply of monetary aid (24). This aid and rhetoric shaped the geopolitical relationship between the US and Korea into a paternalistic one, in which Korea became dependent on US aid to recover in the aftermath of not only WWII, but in the aftermath of the Korean war as well. As such, this neocolonial relationship of dependency between the US and Korea is what ultimately led to and normalized adoption from Korea to the US via a reproduction of the structures of this relationship between Korean adoptees and their predominantly White adoptive families.

[12] Of this rhetoric of independence, Pate notes that US government taskforces asserted their vested interest in "'the progressive development toward independence of dependent and suppressed peoples in the Far East'" (24-5). In this way, this rhetoric of independence actually worked to solidify Korea's dependence on the US, which allowed the US to forge South Korea in its own democratic, free market image.

Key to the neocolonial relationship of dependency between the two nation states is the condition of assimilation imposed by those in power upon those without power. For instance: just as the US monetarily sponsored South Korea's assimilation into democracy, so too did immigration law, mass media, and adoptive parents sponsor Korean adoptees' assimilation into American families and, metonymically, their assimilation into the nation. In both instances, assimilation as a condition of sponsorship works to fix the sponsored in readymade relations and identities that reify sponsors' control of the sponsored by ensuring the sponsored's dependency on them. This is precisely what makes the relationship (that between Korea and the US as well as that between Korean adoptees and American adoptive families) neocolonial—subjugation is accomplished without traditionally legible instances of violence like military force, but is rather accomplished with illegible and unmarked instances of symbolic violence like the conditional provision of monetary aid. This raises the question: if the US used monetary aid as a form of symbolic violence to secure a relationship of dependency with Korea that allowed it to establish a democratic state there in the interest of fulfilling its desire to eradicate communism, what have adoptive parents done (both intentionally and unintentionally) to create a relationship of dependency with their adopted Korean children that have allowed them to fulfill their desires for family?

As I have shown in this chapter so far, this question cannot be answered without relational literacy. Specifically, relational literacy allows us to see how the rhetorics of adoption as love and adoptees as gifts have shaped readymade relations for Korean adoptees by ultimately positioning them paradoxically as both objects and subjects (but only as partial subjects). As Kit Myers has suggested, what qualifies these rhetorics as symbolic violence is that they are comprised of discursive statements that attempt to fix meaning in relation to adoption and are imposed upon adoptees as absolute truth. Myers further argues that such statements "hide what happens before and what occurs after the moment of adoption. They enact *symbolic violence* by reproducing 'real' (legible

adoptive) families and precluding the importance of past and future identities of adoptees, acknowledgment of birth parents, and complex (non-heteronormative) family structures" (176). Myers also shows how the rhetoric of adoption as love hinges on the erasure of adoptees' and birth parents' personhood/subjectivity by coding their legibility as "always in relation to the adoptive family and its symbolic community, which has the authority to rescind legibility through accusations of 'ungratefulness' and 'bitterness'" (185). In this way, the symbolic violence enacted on adoptees via rhetoric of adoption as love can function to limit and withhold opportunities for adoptees to identify as anything other than their adoptive parents' children and as children who should be grateful for being "rescued" from countries considered to be alien and backward.

The rhetoric of adoption as love is also deeply entwined with the rhetoric of adoptees as gifts. McKee posits that configuring adoptees as gifts enables adoption agencies and adoptive parents to euphemize their participation in the selling and buying of children. She states that:

> The gift metaphor frames adoption as not only an act by which the adopted children must be grateful, but also requires adoptees to be grateful for the gift of adoption. After all, another child could easily be in their place. The latter is important to consider because of rhetorics that frame the adoptee as *chosen* by their adoptive parents. This consumeristic construction of choice is what simultaneously positions the adoptee as object and as subject—the recipient of the gift of adoption. (31)

Thus, when paired with rhetoric of adoption as love, rhetoric of adoptees as gifts works to hold adoptees to what Kim has called "the promise of happiness." Adoptees who fail to uphold this promise—either by harboring interest in their pasts, biological families, and lands of birth, or by sharing and politicizing their experiences with racism and citizenship as a result of their adoption—risk being perceived as "'mean, bitter, angry, or dangerous'" (256). In this way, the structures of adoptees' readymade relations sponsor readymade identities that, in order to successfully inhabit,

require adoptees to remain silent regarding their experiences with racism (and any other experiences that disrupt the fiction of their seamless incorporation into American adoptive families). The structures that interpolate them into readymade identities thus position them as "happy," "well adjusted," and "grateful" (read: fully assimilated, i.e., conforming to the condition of assimilation) or "angry," "maladjusted," and "ungrateful"(read: unassimilated, i.e., rejecting the condition of assimilation).

I explain the mechanics of how these rhetorics maintain and rely on racial isolation and the condition of assimilation implicit in Korean adoptees' readymade relations because they are essential to understanding how relational literacy has emerged from and been performed via adoptee-to-adoptee relationships. In her ethnographic study with adult Korean adoptees, Kim has described adoptee-to-adoptee relationships through the concept of *adoptee kinship*:

> relationships of intimacy and identification actualized through and necessitating continued practices of care and reciprocity...founded on the arbitrariness and contingency of adoption histories. … adoptee [kinship] is based on a peculiar mix of inalienability and substitutability that recalls the ambivalent origins of adoptees who may be viewed either as precious gifts or exchangeable commodities." (95)

As this passage suggests, performing adoptee kinship entails decentering (not eradicating) readymade relations and readymade identities to instead center the very things those relations and identities work to erase—i.e., "the instability and uncertainty of origins and the involuntary forfeiture of historical and cultural connections, whether one thinks of oneself as an alien, a foundling, an orphan, or a kidnapped child" (97). In centering adoptees and their lived experiences of adoption (as opposed to traditionally centering adoptive families and nation states) adult adoptees' relationships with other adult adoptees require them to excavate their lived experiences as racialized and adopted people through purposeful and communal explorations of their readymade relations and racial

isolation. The continued practices of care and reciprocity in adoptee kinship build, perform, and sponsor relational literacy via a uniquely transnational, transracial adoptee rhetoric that directly acknowledges and confronts how legacies of racism and US imperialism have positioned them as exceptional immigrants and objects of pity and charity.

Korean American Adoptees, Relational Literacy, and Writing and Rhetoric

The above begins to demonstrate how this study and the knowledges developed by adoptee scholars in adoption studies have the potential to expand literacy studies in the discipline of writing and rhetoric through the theoretical model of relational literacy. Relational literacy in these contexts is the ability to seek and access new relations to gain forms of knowledge (e.g., embodied knowledges) and identification (e.g., transnational transracial adoptee, Korean adoptee, Asian American, scholar) that are historically informed and relevant to Asian American adoptees' experiences with marginalization. And because Asian American adoptees' experiences with marginalization are largely race- and adoption-based and thereby contingent on histories and systems of American racism and transnational adoption, this study (and necessarily scholarship in adoption studies) can enrich the discipline's work for racial equity in the institution of higher education. More specifically, this study offers a theoretical model of relational accountability[13] that can be generalized to all colonized subjects, as it accounts for the ways individuals and communities have been differently positioned by systems of power and control.

By now, readers should have a cursory understanding of relational literacy as a concept and method for revising readymade relations. My presentation of readymade relations and racial isolation, itself the result of the literacy practices that perform and demonstrate relational literacy—i.e., ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of readymade relations and the use of racial literacy to generate critical and historically situated understandings of Korean adoption and attendant

[13] I go into further detail on this concept in Chapter 2

disorientations—can be seen as a performance of disidentification that enacts and sponsors systemic revision of racial isolation and readymade relations. For instance, through the example of Korean American adoptees, readers should now understand the importance of adoptee kinship as a form of relational literacy that has emerged out of a complex and conflicting interplay of historical events, rhetorics, and relationships. From post-WWII and Cold War geopolitics to relationships of dependency between nation states, and from replications of such relational structures in American adoptive families to rhetorics that work to erase the centrality of race in transnational transracial adoption, this chapter provides the context and historical imperative for comprehending the gravity of Korean American adoptees' community leadership.

In Chapter 2, I explain my reasons for building and applying a cultural rhetorics methodology of story and relationality for this study as well as how the methodology guided my selection and use of certain methods. In Chapter 3, I analyze participants' stories through a lens of relational literacy regarding their initial developments of relational literacy. I show how participants' stories (as well as my own) can be understood as examples of the first two points of relational literacy and situate their leadership of adoptee community as stemming from their experiences with racial isolation and the disorientation that can occur upon initial interactions with other adult adoptees. In Chapter 4, I build on participants' stories (as well as my own) from Chapter 3 to show how participants perform(ed) the third point of relational literacy in their sponsorship of racial literacy through organizational programming. I specifically focus on how they do this by providing cultural strategies for negotiating racial isolation as a process instead of a static condition. Finally, in Chapter 5, I present a summary of the findings of this study, explain its contributions to writing and rhetoric scholarship, identify its limitations, and provide suggestions for further study. Overall, I argue for relational literacy as a means for advancing scholarship on race in the discipline, particularly in the fields of Asian American rhetoric and cultural rhetorics.

CHAPTER 2:

STORY, RELATIONALITY, AND RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY: BUILDING AN ADOPTEE-CENTERED METHODOLOGY

> "One can take a class in Korean language and culture but there is nowhere to take a class in being an adoptee. Adoptee knowledge cannot be so directly transferred because it is lived and embodied knowledge grounded in inauthenticity—the inability to speak Korean correctly, for instance—that is distinctively shared by adoptees."
> — Eleana J. Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 124

> "…exchanging adoption stories is an informal ritual of socialization among Korean adoptees. Making connections based on personal adoption histories forges relationships that become the foundation of adoptee community"
> — Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 19

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a majority of the over 200,00 Korean adoptees that have been adopted overseas since the end of the Korean War in 1953 have been raised in predominantly White families and communities as a condition of their adoption. This condition, also called racial isolation, produces what I call readymade relations that often limit adoptees' abilities to explore and identify with key dimensions of their lived experiences—namely their lived experiences with racialization. I explained how readymade relations can be understood as a form of literacy sponsorship that hinges on isolation and assimilation to un/intentionally foster dependency of the sponsored (adoptees) on sponsors (adoptive families and receiving nations). By briefly summarizing key aspects of the overlapping histories of adoption from Korea to America, I also explained how

such relationships of dependency are achieved via an accumulated synergy of rhetorics (i.e., colorblind, adoption as love, and adoptees as gifts) that work to erase the centrality of race in transnational transracial adoption.

It was important to establish racial isolation and readymade relations in the context of Korean American adoption to illustrate the gravity of adult Korean adoptees' development of relational literacy, or the ability to seek and access new sets of relationships to gain and create new kinds of knowledges and modes of identification that are historically informed and relevant to an individual's or group's lived experiences with marginalization. Because the structures of readymade relations are made up of and reinforced by rhetorics of colorblindness, adoption as love, and adoptees as gifts and maintained by racial isolation, Korean adoptees have had to cultivate relational literacy by constructing relationships with *one another* to better understand their Asianness and adopteeness. As my participants show in the following chapters, relational literacy enables adoptees to affirm their connections to Korean adoptee culture and community as well as to locate value in their lived experiences to intervene in social and political issues affecting adoptees and other minoritized groups.

In Chapter 1, I introduced relational literacy as a theoretical framework that both guided and emerged from this dissertation study with four leaders of an adult Korean American adoptee community organization in the Midwest. In this chapter, I present how my values of relational accountability and learning through difference determined my methodology and attendant methods as a scholar and Korean adoptee. I specifically discuss how and why I built a cultural rhetorics methodology of story and relationality for this study and explain how my methods of ethnographically informed interviews arose from this methodology in an effort to maintain relational accountability with participants throughout the research process.

I begin with abbreviated versions of my own origin stories to orient readers to my methodology and methods as well as to demonstrate my values as a researcher. I then review the literature in cultural rhetorics, adoption studies, and Asian American rhetoric with an eye toward how practitioners in these fields have used and theorized story and relationality to identify and revise adoptee and Asian American erasure in academia. I then illustrate how a cultural rhetorics methodology using story and relationality guided my study and enabled me to conceptualize my adoptee participants' leadership practices as forms of relational literacy. I conclude by introducing the adult adoptee community organization at the center of this study.

How did *you* get here?: A Korean Adoptee in Academia

As a Korean adoptee, I have many origin stories. In one of these stories, the most familiar story, I am a three-month-old, chubby-cheeked infant named Park Soo Jung, case number K88-585, born March 9, 1988. I was adopted as such by Jan and Byron Firestone, a middle-class White couple living in central Pennsylvania. Admittedly, this is more their story than it is mine and that's okay because it's still an important part of who I am and how I came to be. Prior to adopting me, Jan and Byron had wanted a child for many years. They tried and tried but were unable to conceive biologically so they turned to adoption. Adoption was not easy for them—it involved stacks of paperwork, self-reflections, group sessions, thousands of dollars, and a lot of waiting. After a few devastating false starts with domestic (American) adoption, they were finally approved to adopt an infant from Korea. (Ironically, two years later, they would inadvertently become pregnant and deliver a biological son, my younger brother.)

My mom has spoken with me a few times about hers and my dad's struggles to conceive and adopt. We don't talk about it often, though, because those memories are painful for her and understandably so. In many ways, they're painful for me, too. I try and put myself in her shoes in these moments; a feat that has gotten easier now that I am the age she was when they were trying

and am starting to think about having kids myself. Yet, still, scarcely can I imagine the hours, weeks, months, *years* of her life she gave away, hoping. Scarcely can I imagine the breadth of her devastation when, over and over again, things didn't work out. What does that do to a person? What does it do to their relationships—their relationships with themselves, their significant others, the dreams and visions they had for their lives, their families and friends?

In another, less familiar, origin story, I am the fourth-born daughter of Cho Young-ja (birth mother) and Park Sam Seok (birth father). There is still a lot about this story I do not know—a lot I was never meant to know—because only last year did it begin unfolding for me. I have had to (will continue to) come to terms with the possibility that it likely never will. In this origin story, Park Sam Seok, Cho Young-ja, and their three daughters lived as rural poor in the southern reaches of the Korean peninsula by the coast. An active man who has always enjoyed working with his hands, Sam Soek had many jobs, including one as a fisherman harvesting *gim* (seaweed) from the sea and owner/operator of a small grocery. Young-ja, I found, died of liver cancer in 1995 when I was just five years old. I was relinquished for adoption by my birth parents because of their poverty. Park Sam Seok had injured himself, resulting in the closing of the grocery. With three children already, they could not afford to care for another.

In yet another origin story, I am in a Composition Studies class in the spring semester of my MA, reading works by Jacqueline Jones Royster, Victor Villanueva, Scott Richard Lyons, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Their scholarship stirs something dormant in me, something nascent. When the following 2012 fall semester rolls around and it is time for me to select a project for my MA essay, I sift through a mountain of possibilities, none of which feel particularly right to me. But when I remember the aforementioned scholars, I get an idea: as an Asian-looking person adopted by White Americans, *I* have an interesting story to tell about race and ethnicity, don't I? The experience of excavating myself for this project led me to so many texts I never knew existed or thought were

possible, like Asian American memoirs, Asian American rhetoric, and critical histories of Korean American adoption by Korean American adoptee scholars. The relationships I formed with these texts and, by proxy, their authors led me to seek adult adoptee community post-graduation, which leads me to my final origin story.

In this last origin story, it is 2016 and I am attending my second conference on Korean adoption, the 18th annual Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network (KAAN) conference in Pittsburgh, PA. I attended my first during the summer of 2013 and, though the experience was terrifying and intense, it was also exhilarating to be surrounded by hundreds of Korean adoptees in spaces made specifically for us. It has been a long, grueling day of sessions and, still not knowing many adoptees, I almost go back to my room for the night after dinner. But I get a call from my friend, another adoptee in the area, who says she's going to take me out for a drink. When we arrive at the bar, she introduces me to Hye Wol and Ben, both of whom are participants as well as past and present leaders of the adult Korean adoptee organization at the heart of this study. I find them so engaging and easy to talk to that I stay out longer than intended. The following day, before I head back home, they invite me and a few other adoptees to lunch at the Church Brew Works. Together, we talk for hours about our experiences growing up as Korean adoptees adopted into White homes and how each of us found our way to the adoptee community. But we don't just talk about that, we also talk about "normal" things, like school, jobs, families, friends, etc. When it's time to go, I don't want to leave. I don't want to forfeit the peace I feel from hanging out with them. In the years that follow, my friendships with Hye Wol and Ben and the friendships I gained with other adoptees as a result will push me to go places and do, think, and be things I never thought I would or could. Our relationships will lead me, ultimately, to relational literacy.

I tell these stories because they are a reflection of who I am and the values that drive me as a researcher. In particular, as this chapter demonstrates, my research practices and methodologies are

always undergirded by a scholarly commitment to accountability and difference. My commitment to accountability means I believe research to be a reflection of the researcher and that research should be useful (read: accountable) to those at the center of our studies. My commitment to difference means I believe *how* we research should be determined by context as opposed to a universal standard and that there are many equally valid ways to know and produce knowledge. I share the stories above as an explicit acknowledgment that this dissertation is shaped by my own experiences as a Korean adoptee because accountability, to me, entails transparency. Moreover, it is crucial that I share my stories to be accountable to participants and the communities they represent because this dissertation would not be—I would not be—without their leadership and time. I also share the stories above because they provide context for my investments in this study as well as for the relationships between me and my participants that led to this dissertation as a Korean adoptee cultural production. They are a reminder that, while I discuss readymade relations in this piece in very specific ways (i.e., in terms of how the uneven power dynamics embedded in them effect adoptees), their structures also construct adoptive and birth families in ways that go beyond the scope of this project. Thus, in my origin stories, particularly the first one, I gesture to the validity of my adoptive parents' experiences of my adoption as well. Finally, my stories demonstrate how stories told by marginalized peoples (in this case, Korean adoptees) can expand what is possible to know and how (e.g., the common conception that adoption is a "good" and "moral" thing).

In the following section, I describe the project of this dissertation and draw on scholarship in cultural rhetorics, adoption studies, and Asian American rhetoric to show how I assembled a methodology that reflects my aforementioned values of accountability. The scholarship is addressed in this order to illustrate how my cultural rhetorics methodology uses story, relationality, and relational accountability to contribute to revising the ways scholarship on adoptees has been traditionally co-opted by non-adoptees (i.e., adoptive parents, psychologists, social workers) as well

as how Asian American rhetoric's historic use of story and relationality informs this study and how this study thereby expands it. I then explain how the methods I used grew out of this methodology and were accountable to research participants and the study's goals. I conclude by introducing the adult Korean American adoptee community organization at the center of this dissertation in preparation for the sharing of participants' stories regarding their leadership of the organization in Chapters 3 and 4.

Story, Relationality, and Researching Korean Adoptees

Given my scholarly interest in adoptee rhetorics, particularly Korean American adoptee rhetorics, it was crucial for this study to engage racial isolation. As mentioned thus far, adult adoptees have reported that racial isolation caused and still causes them to struggle with their identities due to adoption- and race-based marginalization. For example, they are often considered by others to be too Asian to be White and too White to be Asian or a person of color. Adoptees have further reported coping with this marginalization by internalizing microaggressions as well as other forms of everyday racism by avoiding anything and anyone that might associate them with Asianness or adoption in the eyes of their peers.

The above indicates that race is a defining force in Korean adoptees' lives and, yet, racial isolation continues to undermine this fact. Adult adoptee organizations, nonprofits that are run by and for adoptees at both the regional and global levels, are one of the few meaningful resources for adoptees that provide them access to relevant and competent support in this regard. The question that drove this study was thus: **How do experiences with racial isolation shape the leadership practices of adult adoptee community leaders?** To begin answering this question, I built and applied a cultural rhetorics methodology around story and relationality. Below, I explain the methodological affordances of story and relationality for this particular study as well as how this methodology informed my methods in recruitment, interviewing, and data analysis.

Why Cultural Rhetorics?

As scholars of rhetoric and writing, Cobos, Ríos, Sackey, Sano-Franchini, and Haas have posited cultural rhetorics in the discipline as emerging from a history of scholarship by minoritized scholars across a variety of disciplines (140). I chose a cultural rhetorics methodology for this study primarily because cultural rhetorics requires that researchers build theoretical frames from within the communities they work with and that those frames be relevant to the communities' rhetorical practices. To this end, Bratta & Powell assert:

> More than anything, *cultural rhetorics is a practice, and more specifically an embodied practice*, that demands much from the scholars who engage in it. First, scholars must be willing to build meaningful theoretical frames from inside the particular culture in which they are situating their work. To do so means understanding a specific culture's systems, beliefs, relationships to the past, practices of meaning-making, and practices of carrying culture forward to future generations. In this way, it requires that scholars move beyond simply applying frames derived from one culture/tradition to another culture's rhetorical practices. (emphasis added)

Something to note here is that cultural rhetorics is a relational, embodied research practice for maintaining accountability between researchers and communities/cultures. To this effect, Cobos, Ríos, Sackey, Sano-Franchini, and Haas outline that foregrounding the body has meant situating listening as "a mode of interpretive production that is based in the body" and that, as such, "listening becomes a method for enacting and illustrating how bodies hold meaning, make meaning, and are meaningful" (143). In other words, cultural rhetorics requires researchers to critically and recursively account for their roles, relationships with, and orientations to scholarship and the communities/cultures their scholarship arises from and impacts.

This demand for an embodied approach to academic study is not only fitting for my own values of accountability and learning through difference, but it is also fitting for holistically comprehending the value of adoptee knowledge. In terms of the former, a cultural rhetorics methodology enables me to ethically account for my relationships to the participants and organization at the center of this study, as well as for my relationships with adoption and with readers. I use embodiment, then, to make transparent my thought and research processes, my biases and procedures for mitigating them, and my goals. I speak more about this below in my discussion on story. In terms of the latter, a cultural rhetorics methodology is particularly relevant to the study of adoptee rhetorics because, as the first epigraph to this chapter evidences, adoptee knowledge is "lived and embodied knowledge grounded in inauthenticity—the inability to speak Korean correctly, for instance—that is distinctively shared by adoptees " (Kim 124). Thus, a methodology that works to make embodied knowledge legible is one that stands the best chance of enacting accountability to my adoptee participants.

Why Story and Relationality?

Story is a key dimension of cultural rhetorics. It has been shown to be a method and methodology for building theories (Chawla; Monberg; Powell et al.; Ramos; Riley-Mukavetz), a way of knowing and creating and representing knowledge/theory, particularly embodied knowledge (Chawla; Monberg; Powell et al.; Ramos; Riley-Mukavetz), and way of negotiating and asserting identity (Chawla; Monberg). In addition to story being a necessary element of a cultural rhetorics methodology, it is also an optimal method and practice for me as a researcher and for my adoptee leader participants. For example, the stories I shared at the beginning of this chapter, as well as the stories I share throughout regarding my lived experiences in relation to my research process, are all evidence of how story can function as all of the above. They are a way for me to be transparent and accountable to my participants, conflicting relations, and readers by reminding them that this

dissertation is not an attempt to fix and universalize adoptee experience but is rather a representation of it as filtered through my worldview as the researcher. My stories, like those of my participants, are also pedagogical in that they teach readers, particularly non-adopted and non-Asian readers, how to listen for and recognize Korean adoptees' embodied knowledge in story (Monberg).

That stories are also pedagogical means story is a key way of learning through difference because it allows for the formulation and representation of knowledges that have historically been considered inferior to Western objectivism. As such, it is an optimal means for engaging adoptee knowledge, which scholars have shown is forged and negotiated through adoptee kinship, and that the sharing of adoption stories among adoptees is a form of communal care and reciprocity. This is evident in the second epigraph of this chapter: "…exchanging adoption stories is an informal ritual of socialization among Korean adoptees. Making connections based on personal adoption histories forges relationships that become the foundation of adoptee community" (Park Nelson 19). Given this, the use of story as methodology is particularly accountable in the context of adoptee research because it is a practice of care and relationality upon which adoptee community itself is built. Moreover, Chawla has noted that "a people without stories are a people without a history," meaning that the disappearance of a group's stories/histories equates to "a disappearance of their selves, identities, and humanities" (20). Accordingly, the sharing of adoptees' lived experiences with readymade relations and racial isolation through storytelling has become a way for them to forge and assert identities and histories for themselves that revise the dominant rhetorics of colorblindness, adoptees as gifts, and adoption as love that work to disallow it.

Like story, relationality is a key dimension of cultural rhetorics. In building an Indigenous research paradigm, Shawn Wilson has defined relationality in terms of epistemology (study of the nature of thinking and knowing) and ontology (study of the nature of reality). He notes that relationships both shape and are reality in that they are the means through which people come to

think (i.e., relationships teach people how to think) and know (i.e., people learn, know, and transmit knowledge through relationships). Given this, Wilson contends that, because one has many kinds of relationships—with people, the environment/land, the cosmos, and ideas—there are many realities and many ways to think, know, and teach (73). Importantly, Wilson does not distinguish between realities by ranking one as "better" or "more accurate" than another; rather, he argues that they must be considered in relation to one another through what he calls relational accountability. For Wilson, relational accountability is a recursive practice through which one fulfills their responsibilities to their relations. He notes that, for researchers, this means maintaining accountability to who and what we study by remaining attentive to context, particularly in terms of how we choose what we study, how we gather information, how we interpret that information, and how we transfer the knowledge resulting from those interpretations.

Relationality and relational accountability thus allow me to use story as an in-group researcher to privilege adoptee knowledge through adoptees' relationships—particularly their relationships with one another, their birth country, birth families, adoptive countries, adoptive families, globalism, and more via my own relationships with participants. In the following chapter, readers will witness the relational nature of participants' stories and how story allows them to enact relationality through participation in adoptee community and work through feelings of disorientation they may incur as a result. Readers will also see how I myself enact relationality through story in my presentation of participants' stories, as these stories are based on my relationships with them, the adoptee community, and adoption itself. What I endeavor to make transparent through these practices is that this study emerged from relations I have been building with Korean American adoptee communities and, specifically, with the community leader participants of this dissertation.

Story, Relationality, Relational Accountability, and Adoption Studies

To further illustrate the ways story, relationality, and relational accountability are the most appropriate methodology for this study, I will briefly explain how they have been used in adoption studies and Asian American rhetoric. In adoption studies, research on transnational transracial adoption has historically been dominated by studies by psychologists and social workers, most of whom are either White adoptive parents, non-adoptees, or both. Traditionally, these scholars have employed developmentalist frameworks to measure mental health (i.e., "adjustment") of adopted children and adolescents. Kim has argued that such a framework is limited in that it treats adoptee adjustment as individualized and decontextualizes transnational, transracial adoption from its historical, social, and political contexts; thus, these studies have been touted as "expert knowledge" and used in various settings to promote adoption as ultimately positive[14] by eliding the neocolonial nature of its existence and workings[15] (9). According to Kim, in the 1990s, new studies indicated attention to "ethnicity" and "race," but reduced and conflated them to uninterrogated notions of culture. Kim asserts that it wasn't until the mid-2000s that scholars began qualitatively and ethnographically attending to how adoptee subjectivity is impacted by geopolitical and socioeconomic forces in ways that reveal, build, negotiate, and affirm "interpretive models of adoptee subjectivity that are more multiple and complex" and acknowledge the ambiguities and ambivalences of transnational, transracial adoption (10). Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of these studies have been conducted by adoptee researchers.

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[14] Park Nelson echoes this in her book *Invisible Asians*, noting that in adoption studies research, "the perspectives parents, social workers, and adoption advocates have taken center stage, even in research that supposedly focuses on the experiences of adoptees" and notes these perspectives have typically taken the form of "improving adoption practice" through "'the best interest of the child'" in spite of lacking adoptee stories (20).

[15] McKee has called this the "transnational adoption industrial complex" (TAIC), which she defines as "a neocolonial, multi-million-dollar global industry that commodifies children's bodies" and asserts that it "reflects the intersections and connections of the Korean social welfare state, orphanages, adoption agencies, and American immigration legislation" (2).

Given adoption studies' history with the preclusion of adoptee perspectives, story is thus key to a methodology that aims to be accountable to adoptees and the ways they have been marginalized and silenced in the narration of their experiences. Relationality as enacted through adoptees' stories, then, allows adoptees to make rhetoric and meaning for themselves by re/relating their lived experiences to people, places, objects, and ideas that readymade relations and the rhetorics that comprise them have worked to sever and erase. For instance, in telling my own stories here, I was able to briefly account for my most important relations in spite of the conflicts they, at times, pose to one another—my adoptive family, my birth family, my scholarly work on adoptee and Asian American rhetorics and representation, my participants, and the wider adult adoptee community. What's more, story enabled me to enact this relationality without subordinating one for the other to show how all of them have and continue to shape my experience and identity as a Korean American adoptee researcher. In the following chapters, readers will witness my participants' enactment of relationality and relational accountability through story, too, as participants narrate their lived experiences with racial isolation and readymade relations (Chapter 3) and with sponsoring relational literacy for other adoptees and Asian Americans (Chapter 4).

Indeed, the aforementioned shift in adoption studies to be more inclusive of adoptee perspectives has set a much-needed foundation for productively widening the scope and impact of the field. This dissertation specifically arises out of ethnographic studies with adult Korean American adoptees like those by Kim (2010), Palmer (2011), Park Nelson (2016), and McKee (2019). While all are concerned with the ways Korean American adoptees negotiate processes of identity, racialization, enculturation, family, transnationalism, and unequal relationships of power, they each provide unique insights that both complement and build on one another. For instance, Kim, Park Nelson, and McKee all critically engage the neocolonial, geopolitical, and transnational histories of Korean American adoption. In particular, Kim studies the ways adoptees "denaturalize

both kinship and citizenship" to "reveal the limitations of that vision[16] in a world order that is profoundly organized around exclusionary boundaries of nation-based citizenship and blood-based kinship" (267). Through his adult adoptee participants' stories, Palmer develops a model of racial identity development specific to Korean adoptees[17]. Park Nelson's participants' oral histories specifically elucidate racism and colorblindness within processes of minoritization in American and Korean cultures from the perspectives of Korean adoptees. McKee also uses oral histories, though does so with a special focus on "the intertwined and complex relationship between the adoptive family and American citizenship" to show how adoptees' voices "expose the tensions produced by social and legal citizenship in discussions concerning the recent cases of adult adoptee deportations"[18] (103). Accordingly, this study also situates the stories of adult adoptees within critical histories of geopolitical relations between nation states and positions the adoptee participants as adoption experts.

The contribution this study makes to the aforementioned literature stems from its rhetorical methodology and focus on adult adoptee community literacies. In general, the above studies take a social science approach to the study of adoptee identity formation whereas this study takes a humanities approach through the study of adoptee rhetorics as community literacies. Moreover, while the studies above engage adult Korean adoptee leaders to some extent, they do not focus on adult adoptee leadership practices specifically. This study thus builds on the foundation of their

[16] The vision Kim refers to here is "the global or the potentiality of postnational cosmopolitanism" (267).
[17] Palmer calls this model *the dance of identities theory* and notes "this 'dance' involves the adoptee moving between and among three connected and simultaneously distinct identities—White cultural, Korean racial, and Korean transracial adoptee" (8). Further, he asserts that "the main difference between the current racial identity development models and the dance of identity theory rests in the belief that there is no one starting place and thus no one ending place; there is no one direct path to empowerment—rather, empowering one's identity comes through engaged explorations and continued reflections" (19).
[18] The undue crisis of the deportation of adults who were transnationally adopted and brought to this country as children is perhaps best represented by the cases of Adam Crasper and Philp Clay. Adam in particular is one of many transnational adoptees who has suffered abandonment and abuse from adoptive families. His case was highly visible because he was deported back to South Korea in 2016 after applying for a green card. As his adoptive parents did not get him naturalized as a citizen, he was deemed not a citizen due to a loophole in the Child Citizenship Act of 2000.

work by showing how leaders of adoptee community organizations use story and relationality in ways that further nuance and elucidate the complex dimensions of racial isolation in and among adoptees. This study also identifies how adult adoptee community organizations sponsor relational literacy for other adoptees through programming and mentorship to provide adoptees with more opportunities to negotiate and affirm their identities as Korean American adoptees.

Story, Relationality, Relational Accountability, and Asian American Rhetoric

I now turn to the discipline of writing and rhetoric, in which the field of Asian American rhetoric has also engaged story and relationality as a critical lens for visibilizing and making legible Asian American experiences in ways that work to revise cultural hegemony. Many have specifically applied this lens to systems of US immigration and citizenship to critique how these systems have historically constructed Asian Americans in policy, education, and popular culture as dehumanized figures of "yellow peril," perpetual foreigners, non-citizens, the model minority, and "illiterate" (Hoang; Lopez; Lowe; Mao & Young; Sano-Franchini, Monberg, & Yoon; Young). For example, through story, Monberg & Hoang have enacted relationality to Asian American communities, histories of their erasure, and academia's role in said erasures by highlighting how the discipline has had "limited knowledge of how Asian Americans use language to disrupt racialized representations of themselves and their communities" (96, their emphasis). Story and relationality thus yielded a revision of those relations via "'writing against dominant forms of theory, evidence, and scholarly genealogies that either rendered Asian/Asian American writers invisible or conflated...[them] with second language learners" (97). Similarly, Young has used story and relationality through literacy narratives to critically engage literacy representations of Asian Americans[19] and how they impact him as an Asian American teacher and scholar. His stories/literacy narratives thus begin the work of

[19] Young refers here to "the use of 'Asian American English' or 'Yellow English'; the social hierarchies marked by Pidgin; the silent Asian American student" (9).

intervening in and revising these representations by re/connecting them to legacies of uneven power dynamics. Meanwhile, Hoang has used story to enact relationality in exploring the construction of the literate American ethos and how Asian American activists—particularly student activists—have contested its constraints. Through her enactment of relationality to her Asian American student activist participants, the students' institution, as well as the roles of academia, exclusionary immigration law, and hidden histories of Asian American activism, Hoang revises Asian American erasure and visibilizes their prominent role in seeking justice in the teaching of literacy. Taken together, these studies exemplify a critical need in writing and rhetoric for Asian American rhetoric/ perspectives as vital to the work of discipline.

While Mao and Young note that Asian American rhetoric "draws upon discursive practices both from the European American tradition and from Asian, as well as other ethnic and worldly traditions" (5), for Asian American adoptees, it's not that simple. Drawing upon discursive practices from Asian rhetorical traditions is particularly complicated for Asian American adoptees because, as most are adopted into non-Asian, particularly white homes, they often lack connections to their histories and birth cultures and, thereby, vital pieces of these discursive traditions. This study, then, seeks to understand the ways Korean American adoptees are producing Asian American rhetoric that re/make those connections, as well as highlight the roles of story and relationality in said makings. More specifically, adoptees are re/making those connections using story and relationality as communal practices of care in ways that elucidate racial isolation as a process as well as a condition of physical environment.

I conclude this discussion of my methodology and the literature with an explanation of the methods I used in accordance with this study's cultural rhetorics methodology of story and relationality. In many ways, this dissertation is a result of my close relationships with three of the four participants (Hye Wol, Michelle, Ben) of this study and my scholarly—as well as personal—

commitment to Wilson's notion of relational accountability. In deciding how to gather my data, I grappled with using methods that would honor and maintain my scholarly and personal accountability to my already established relationships with participants. Doing so required me to constantly re/negotiate the terms of study to ensure it would benefit and be useful to participants and their work leading adoptee community. I thus spoke with each person separately about the study and asked if they had the time and willingness to participate. During these talks, I expressed interest in inviting one or two of the original founders of the organization to also participate as well. Hye Wol, Michelle, and Ben affirmed this interest by connecting me to Alex both in person (at an adoptee conference hosted by the organization in 2018) and online (email). All participants gave me a verbal agreement regarding their participation. After receiving this verbal confirmation, I completed the mandatory training required by Michigan State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and submitted the mandated materials (protocol, interview questions, and informed consent form). These materials were approved within a week's time. I then emailed each participant a comprehensive packet of the informed consent form, the interview questions, and my dissertation prospectus.

Given my values as a researcher of accountability and learning from difference, it was important for me that participants knew as much as possible about the nature and protocol of the study so they could make an informed decision to participate or not. I deemed it necessary to provide participants with the interview questions several weeks in advance, so they had time to consider what they wanted to share, what they didn't want to share, and how they wanted to tell their own stories. On the consent form, I explained the study, participants' rights and roles in the study, and highlighted that their participation could be withdrawn at any time throughout the process. I did so as an enactment of my relational accountability to them, as I know they all have full-time jobs, a variety of families, and lead adoptee community in their free time; I did not want

their participation to hinder their ability to attend to these things. All consented formally by signing the forms. Another measure of accountability I enacted was to anonymize participants with pseudonyms, of which each chose their own. I further anonymized the organization, which I refer to as KAD Midwest[20], as well as the organization's location, which I refer to as Midwest City.

After obtaining consent through both informal and formal channels, I reached out through email to identify dates/times to conduct interviews that worked for participants. Our mutual respect for one another's time and resources led us to settle on conducting the interviews in the most convenient ways possible for all. As the next chapter shows, I met with Ben in a library in his hometown when he came through to visit his family. I met with Hye Wol and Michelle on the same day on a trip I made to participate in the organization's monthly programming event. Alex and I spoke over the phone during a date and time that worked best for her schedule as a practicing therapist and academic. Interviews were recorded using the VoiceMemo feature of my iPhone. At the beginning of each interview, participants gave their verbal consent to being recorded. I then transcribed the interviews. Recordings and transcripts were then stored electronically on a secure server.

My cultural rhetorics methodology of story and relationality both guided and emerged from data collection and coding. Specifically, to analyze participants' stories, I used methods that would enable me to code in a relational manner. I thus coded for similar themes across participants' stories in accordance with elements of social worlds/arenas/discourse analysis from grounded theory, as such analysis asks "how people organize themselves in the face of others trying to organize them differently, and how they organize themselves vis-à-vis the broader structural situations in which they find themselves and with which they must come to grips, in part through acting, producing, and

[20] "KAD" is an adoptee-created shorthand for "Korean adoptee" and is a colloquial term Korean adoptees often use to refer to themselves and other Korean adoptees

responding to discourses" (Clarke 109). In doing so, I identified 17 total themes, many of which were both discreet and overlapping. The eight most prominent themes that spoke to how adoptees are organizing themselves in the face of others trying to organize them differently were:

1. Connecting adoptees to one another;
2. Connecting adoptees to Korean culture, Korea, and critical histories of adoption
3. Adoptee genealogies; planning/reflecting on programming
4. Training next generation of leaders
5. Expanding relations/literacy/options for identification
6. Providing adoptee-specific programming and expanding 'Asian American', 'Korean', and 'Korean American' categories
7. KAD Midwest's work for social justice
8. Leadership practices

It was from analyzing the similarities and differences among these themes in participants' stories that the model of relational literacy emerged.

Readers will see in Chapters 3 and 4 that I ultimately interpreted the data by triangulating these themes with my own embodied experiences of being a Korean American adoptee as well as with my close relationships with my participants and in accordance with a model of relational literacy. Based on the themes above, I observed that, in giving participants the questions in advance so they had time to consider their answers prior to the interview, participants (and I with them) naturally used the interview as an occasion to enact the first and second practices of relational literacy, i.e.: (1) ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of one's readymade relations; (2) the use of racial literacy to generate critical, historically situated understandings of one's ever-evolving relations and attendant disorientations; and (3) disidentifying with readymade relations and enacting/sponsoring systemic change that revises racial isolation and readymade relations.

Moreover, in reflecting on the interviews and stories during the writing of this dissertation, I again naturally enacted the first and second practices of relational literacy myself. Through these processes, I also observed how participants' storied reflections and insights regarding their leadership of KAD Midwest were examples of how the third practice of relational literacy, i.e., participation in the enactment of systemic change that revises isolation and readymade relations through practices that are relationally expansive and accountable to the ways individuals and communities have been differently positioned by systems of power and control. Again, I naturally enacted the third practice of relational literacy as well in the writing of this dissertation, as it will join a corpus of Asian American, cultural, and adoptee rhetorics.

Now that I have explained the methodology and methods of this study, I use the remainder of this chapter to introduce KAD Midwest and highlight how it functions. I conclude this chapter with a brief summary of ground covered and a preview of the chapters to come.

Introducing KAD Midwest

KAD Midwest is an adult Korean American adoptee organization that was founded in early 2008 by three adoptees. One of the founders, Alex, is featured in this study. The organization celebrated its 10th anniversary by hosting the 32nd International Korean Adoptee Association (IKAA) conference, or "mini-gathering," in 2018. As a registered 501(c)3 tax-exempt non-profit organization, KAD Midwest individually—as well as collaboratively with other adoptees, Asian American, and Korean American organizations—plans, sponsors, and executes monthly events and programming for adult (and increasingly teenaged) adoptees in Midwest City. According to its website, the organization's mission is to:

> ...create a welcoming space for members of our community where they can connect, learn, grow, give back, and build awareness around issues related to transracial adoption, AAPI experiences, and multiculturalism. We engage our network through

> monthly social, cultural, and educational events, and offer volunteer and mentoring opportunities throughout the year. We also engage in advocacy to directly support our community. KAD Midwest[21] organizes a monthly dinner and various cultural events for adoptees, annual events with various Korean American organizations in Chicago, social events for adoptive parents and their families, in addition to volunteering opportunities. ("Our Focus and History")

In accordance with this mission, the leaders on the KAD Midwest executive board source funding from local organizations and the regional Korean Consulate General for their programming. Recurring annual events include: celebrations of Korean holidays at a board member's home like Chuseok (Korean fall harvest holiday) and Seollal (Korean Lunar New Year), an Ugly Christmas Sweater party and sleepover (American holiday), and a summer picnic with the local Lions Club who sponsors a homeland tour for Korean adoptees. In addition to these yearly staples, the organization has also hosted events like Korean cooking classes, movie screenings and panel discussions of Korean films and films on adoption, adoption conferences, and talks by Korean adoptee scholars on adoption and Asian American scholarship, sports outings, and more. They also collaborate with local organizations on mentorship programs for adoptee youth and adoptive families.

The above are forms of what I will refer to as "formal programming" throughout the remainder of this dissertation to distinguish this kind of programming from what I call "informal programming." Informal programming is ad hoc and unofficial in that it is not sanctioned or funded by the organization. It usually takes the form of impromptu meals, happy hours, and outings that involve members of the executive board, but are based on personal relationships between executive board members and other adoptees. A personal example I can give of this is from this past summer in 2019 when a group of us gathered for dinner and drinks to send off an adoptee friend who was

[21] Pseudonym inserted in this direct quote from their website.

moving to Korea for study. I attended along with several members of the executive board and other members of KAD Midwest who knew the adoptee. This is a relatively common occurrence for KAD Midwest leaders given their wide network—when an adoptee from out of town or out of country come to visit the city, whether for work or vacation, one or two of the leaders will organize a group event (usually dinner and noraebang[22]) through Facebook and whoever is free that evening can join. It is my contention that these moments of informal programming are just as important as formal programming, because it is through these unofficial social events that adoptees can further cultivate relationships with one another through which they can continuously learn and teach what it means and can mean to be a Korean American adoptee.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have explained the purpose of this study as well as how I as an in-group researcher built a cultural rhetorics methodology of story and relationality. I drew from scholarship in cultural rhetorics, adoption studies, and Asian American rhetoric as well as from own embodied experiences as a Korean American adoptee and to demonstrate the importance of story and relationality in Korean American adoptee community to show why this was the best methodology for this study. I then explained how my methods of ethnographically informed interviews arose from this methodology as an effort to maintain relational accountability with participants throughout the research process. I also introduced KAD Midwest as the organization through which participants have and continue to enact and sponsor relational literacy for other adoptees.

In the following chapters (3 and 4), I apply my cultural rhetorics methodology of story and relationality to participants' stories. More specifically, in Chapter 3 I present participants' stories that

[22] Noraebang is Korean karaoke. It takes place among groups in private rooms and features both American and Korean hit songs.

illustrate their experiences with and moving beyond racial isolation and the relational structures it tends to reinforce by forging relationships with other adoptees. I use my own stories to further illustrate how these stories enact the first and second practices of relational literacy. In Chapter 4, I present participants' stories to show how they developed and perform the third practice of relational literacy through their leadership practices by sponsoring relational literacy for KAD Midwest constituents. Again, I use my own stories to further show how these stories enact the third practice of relational literacy.

CHAPTER 3:

"CREATING COMMUNITY, CATALYZING CHANGE":

RACIAL LITERACY, RACIAL ISOLATION, AND READYMADE RELATIONS

In previous chapters, I have argued for relational literacy as a means for understanding the mechanics of systemic oppression in a neoliberal, globalized world order. Using Brandt's concept of sponsors of literacy, I posited systemic oppression as a matter of relationships by asserting that cultural hegemony is maintained through relationships of uneven power dynamics between nations. More specifically, I asserted that, through processes of neocoloniality (policy, mass media, monetary aid), the oppressive structures of such relationships get rhetorically reproduced between people via what I call readymade relations, or predetermined sets of relationships that interpolate subjects into readymade identities. Readymade identities are fixed identities predetermined by sponsors that the sponsored do not necessarily choose for themselves. While such identities may bestow upon the sponsored certain accesses and power, they are always already conditional in that they require the sponsored to forfeit other relations—other potential identities—at the risk of suffering devastating losses.

Thus far, I have illustrated this phenomenon through the study of Korean American adoptees, the majority of whom have been raised in racial isolation as a condition of their adoption to Western nations where the racial majority is White. In examining the historical accumulation of rhetorics of colorblindness in the context of Korean American adoption, adoptees as gifts, and adoption as love, I have shown how adoptees' readymade relations (i.e., adoptees as gifts who should be grateful for being "rescued" and adoptees as honorary Whites) work to assimilate transracial children into predominantly White homes, communities, and cultures. These readymade relations are maintained by racial isolation and their structures are inherently hegemonic in that they replicate the neocolonial mechanisms of control embedded in geopolitical relationships between

their respective nation states—in this case, the relationship of Korean dependence on US aid as sponsored by the US's occupation of South Korea post-WWII.

As a result of the above, I have asserted that adult Korean adoptees are developing, performing, and sponsoring what I call relational literacy, or the ability to seek and access new relations, allowing them to gain and create forms of knowledge and identification that are historically informed and relevant to an individual's or group's lived experiences with marginalization. In particular, I have referenced previous studies (Kim; McKee; Palmer; Park Nelson) to suggest Korean adoptees are cultivating relational literacy by constructing relationships with *one another* that enable them to better understand and affirm the centrality of race and adoption in their lived experiences. As this chapter and the following chapter demonstrate, relational literacy is a means through which adoptees can affirm their individual and collective identities as adopted Korean Americans to revise racial isolation and readymade relations for present and future generations of transnational transracial adoptees as well as for other minoritized groups.

In this chapter and the next, I present stories shared by the four adoptee leaders of this study—Ben, Hye Wol, Michelle, and Alex—that illustrate the role of recursive reflection, racial literacy, and disorientation in the development of relational literacy. In this chapter, specifically, I do so by analyzing participants' stories of their initial movements beyond racial isolation and readymade relations. I theorize their stories as performances of the three literacy practices mentioned in Chapter 1[23] and highlight three key findings of this study: (1) racial isolation can occur among people of the same race/positionality; (2) disorientation can occur in the initial stages of intentionally building relationships with other adoptees; and (3) racial isolation is not only a matter of physical

[23] In Chapter 1, I explained that participants demonstrated, modeled, and sponsored relational literacy through the three literacy practices of: (1) ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of one's readymade relations; (2) the use of racial literacy to generate critical, historically situated understandings of one's ever-evolving relations and attendant disorientations; and (3) disidentifying with readymade relations and enacting/sponsoring systemic change that revises racial isolation and readymade relations.

environment but also of ever-shifting emotional, intellectual, and spiritual states. Overall, I show how these findings were guided by and emerged from relational literacy and argue that relational literacy as a framework indicates racial isolation is less of a static condition and more of a recursive, rhetorical process that is continuously broken down and rebuilt through community-based practices of story and relationality.

In accordance with a cultural rhetorics methodology and methods of grounded theory that build theoretical frames from *within* a culture as opposed to imposing them (Bratta & Powell; Clarke; Rosaldo), my presentation of participants' stories does not follow the typical format of most academic pieces. Instead of beginning each story with how it conforms to the practices of relational literacy, I let them unfold and *then* explain how the stories—as theories themselves—yielded a framework of relational literacy. In this chapter, I focus almost exclusively on how participants' stories indicated what became the first two points of relational literacy: (1) ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of one's ever evolving relationships with people, places, objects, and ideas; and (2) the use of racial literacy to generate critical, historically situated understandings of one's ever-evolving relations and attendant disorientations. In the next chapter, I focus more on the third point. My purpose in structuring as such is to illustrate processes by which Korean adoptees move beyond racial isolation and readymade relations to relational literacy by forging relationships with one another (this chapter) and how they, in turn, come to sponsor relational literacy for other adoptees through adoptee community and advocacy (next chapter).

Through the inclusion of my own stories as a researcher in relation to the participants and the making of this study, this chapter also visibilizes how the interviews with participants mirrored and were an extension of our relationships with one another, adoption, and the wider adoptee community. Moreover, they are a performance of my own ongoing development of relational literacy by showing how their stories informed and mediated my own. Our stories thus do many

things at once: they demonstrate how stories are a fundamental practice of Korean adoptee community and adoptee kinship (Kim; Park Nelson) and, therefore, the most ethical and relationally accountable methodology for a study like this one; they are performances of our relationality with one another and others; and they theorize. Prioritizing our stories is important because, without them, there would be no stories, no study, and no me. It is a way for me as both a researcher and Korean adoptee to account for a wider readership than just that of my academic committee, because this dissertation is not cultural rhetorics—it is not relational literacy—if it is not relationally accountable (useful) to the cultures we work with and for.

Before diving into participants' stories, I first provide a brief synthesis of racial literacy and disorientation so readers can better understand their roles in the development of relational literacy for Korean American adoptees. As racial isolation and readymade relations gave the adoptee leaders in this study limited options to draw on for identification as Korean American adoptees, racial literacy and disorientation were key to comprehending how their experiences with other Korean American adoptees enabled them to revise these relations via their participation in the founding and building of KAD Midwest. My participants show in the following chapters how relational literacy thus enables adoptees to affirm their connections to Korean adoptee culture and community as well as locate value and use in their lived experiences to intervene in social and political issues affecting adoptees and other minoritized groups.

Korean American Adoptees and Racial Literacy

Adoption from Korea to America has traditionally been justified and sponsored by the US and Korean governments, adoption agencies, social workers, and adoptive families via the deployment and circulation of assimilationist rhetorics (colorblindness, adoptees as gifts, and adoption as love). Such rhetorics have, importantly, been found to be more palatable when imposed on Asian adoptees as opposed to African American and American Indian adoptees (Dorow; Kim;

Park Nelson). Advocacy by African American and American Indian communities in the 1970s resulted in the stigmatization of domestic transracial adoption as cultural genocide (Park Nelson), which led to an influx of transnational transracial adoption from Korea because Asians were "construed as a safe choice for financially able Americans to adopt more 'flexibly' racialized children who not only are more easily assimilated but whose birth parents are less likely to make claims on their children" (Dorow 27). Given these points, I argue that adoption from Korea to America is fundamentally rooted in and a result of American racism, even as Korean adoptees—and, by extension, other Asian/Asian American people—were (and still are) assumed to not experience racism.

Race's centrality in Korean adoption, then, is maintained not through its visibilization (which, in Western societies, tends to equate to existence), but through its *in*visibilization (presumed nonexistence). To prevent race from becoming visible in adoptees' lives, adoptive families have been shown to either ignore/deny their child's race or to only give it token acknowledgments (culture camps, sporadic consumption of Korean food and other aspects of Korean culture) that are usually so infrequent they more often than not reinforce the belief that race does not and should not affect adoptees (Kim; McKee; Park Nelson; Palmer). In other words, adoptive parents' desire for a normative family unit or a "real" family has been traditionally realized through the active and passive rejection of racial literacy[24]. Put yet another way, the oppressive structures of readymade relations as sponsored by white adoptive families via assimilation (achieved through colorblindness and racial isolation) are, at their core, antithetical to racial literacy because they hinge on the belief that the only

[24] McKee has conceived of this in terms of racial performativity, or adoptees' and adoptive families' performances of race (in this case, whiteness) to "prove their normalcy" (62). She has also used the concept of racial blindness to describe how adoptive parents "passively deploy racial blindness by not addressing the racial difference, refraining from participating in activities related to the child's ethnicity, and living in a racially isolated area" as well as actively deploy racial blindness by "ignor[ing] their child's questions about their country of origin and operat[ing] as if the child had no other life prior to their adoption" (64).

way to eradicate racism is to not acknowledge race (Palmer) nor legacies of racism in the US (McKee); and further imply adoptees are not only lucky to have been "saved" by adoption, but that they also are lucky to have "escaped race" (Park Nelson). This, in turn, impacts adoptees' ability to develop relational literacy, as supporting meaningful relationships between them, people of color, and other adoptees can un/intentionally disrupt adoptive parents' assimilation efforts.

As a concept, racial literacy emerged from the concurrent works of legal scholar Lani Guinier and sociology scholar France Winddance Twine and was later extended to writing classroom pedagogy by education scholar Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz. While each defines racial literacy differently based on their contexts, what links them is the unanimous insistence that racism is maintained through structural inequities as a tool for preserving the rights and privileges of those deemed to be in the racial majority (White) at the expense of those deemed to be racial minorities (non-White). For instance, Guinier referred to racial literacy as "the ability to read race in conjunction with institutional and democratic structures" (120). She specifically argued that *Brown v the Board of Education* was won on the basis of racial liberalism[25] that utilized a rhetoric of colorblindness to define racism as an issue of individual prejudice (i.e., not systemic). As such, "the tactic of desegregation became the ultimate goal, rather than the means to secure educational equity"[26] (95). For Guinier, racial liberalism stands in stark contrast to racial literacy, which she proposes is: (1) contextual, not universal[27]; (2) emphasizes the relationship between race and power by reading "race

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[25] Guinier characterized racial liberalism as "positioned the peculiarly American race 'problem' as a psychological and interpersonal challenge rather than a structural problem rooted in our economic and political system" (100).

[26] According to Guinier, racial liberalism secured and mobilized white middle-class sympathy as the "attorneys in Brown and their liberal allies invited the justices to consider the effects of racial discrimination *without fear of disrupting society as a whole*" (emphasis added) and furthermore noted that "to the extent that Brown reflected the alliance of some blacks and some upper-class whites unthreatened by desegregation, it left out crucial constituencies for change, including southern black educators and poor rural blacks" (95).

[27] Of this, Guinier says: "does not assume that either the problem or the solution is one-size-fits-all. Nor does it assume that the answer is made evident by thoughtful consideration or expert judgment alone. Racial literacy depends upon the engagement between action and thought, between experimentation and feedback, between bottom-up and top-down initiatives. It is about learning rather than knowing. Racial literacy is an interactive process in which race functions as a tool of diagnosis, feed- back, and assessment" (114-5).

in its psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions"[28]; and (3) does not focus exclusively on race and instead constantly interrogates "the dynamic relationship among race, class, geography, gender, and other explanatory variables"[29] (114-5). Together, these points suggest an understanding of racial literacy rooted in the ongoing interplay in relationships between the structural and the personal and indicate Korean American adoption to be a form of racial liberalism.

Though Guinier suggests race must be constantly interrogated in relation to other dimensions of identity and power, examining this definition through a lens of relational literacy requires us to further flesh out *how* these interrogations can and do happen. Winddance Twine's definition of racial literacy within the context of White and Afro-Caribbean multiracial families in Britain provides a useful heuristic for this particular task. For instance, Winddance Twine defined racial literacy as "a form of racial socialization and antiracist training that the parents of African-descent children practiced in their efforts to defend their children against racism." For Winddance Twine, racial literacy is:

> … cultural strategies and practices designed and employed by parents to teach children of African and Caribbean heritage to (1) detect, document, and name antiblack racist ideologies, semiotics, and practices; (2) provide discursive resources that counter racism; and (3) provide aesthetic and material resources (including art, toys, books, music) that valorize and strengthen their connections to the transatlantic culture of black people in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States.

[28] Of this, Guinier says: "It acknowledges the importance of individual agency but refuses to lose sight of institutional and environmental forces that both shape and reflect that agency. It sees little to celebrate when formal equality is claimed within a racialized hierarchy" (115).

[29] Of this, Guinier says: "It sees the danger of basing a strategy for monumental social change on assumptions about individual prejudice and individual victims. It considers the way psychological interests can mask political and economic interests…" (115).

While not identical to Guinier's definition, I argue that these definitions are complementary in that, together, they illustrate how the structural shapes the personal and vice versa. For example, parents of multiracial children cannot effectively teach their racialized children how to detect, document, and name antiblack racist ideologies, semiotics, and practices (Winddance Twine) if they themselves are not invested in understanding race as contextual and not universal, etc. (Guinier). In other words, parents of multiracial children (personal) cannot sponsor racial literacy without considering and ascribing to Guinier's three points of racial literacy (structural); and Guinier's three points of racial literacy (structural) cannot be realized without implementations at the personal level, such as instances in which parents of multiracial children sponsor racial literacy through racially literate parenting strategies and practices (Winddance Twine).

Sealey-Ruiz later defined racial literacy within the context of education, the first-year writing classroom in particular, as "a skill and practice in which individuals are able to probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race and institutionalized systems on their experiences and representations in US society" (386). She further argued that "students who have this skill are able to discuss the implications of race and American racism in constructive ways" and that the desired outcome of racial literacy in "an outwardly racist society like America is for members of the dominant racial category to adopt an antiracist stance and for persons of color to resist a victim stance" (386). Again, while this definition is not identical to Guinier's or Winddance Twine's, it is complementary in that it advocates for critical understandings of the interplay between structural and personal dimensions of race. Like Winddance Twine's definition in particular, it begins to explain *how* constant interrogations of race and other dimensions of power and identity happen, i.e., through discussions (in this case, in FYW) of the implications of race and American racism in which those in the dominant racial category claim an antiracist stance and persons of color to resist a victim stance.

I describe these definitions of racial literacy at length because they are key to understanding relational literacy in the context of Korean American adoptee community and community leadership. Given these definitions, I assert that *racial literacy is a necessary dimension of relational literacy, regardless of context*, as Guinier's third point of racial literacy suggests and as Winddance Twine's and Sealey-Ruiz's studies verify. In turn, relational literacy complements and expands these existing definitions by highlighting *how* one gains racial literacy: by seeking and accessing new relations and their teachings to recursively reflect on and revise their own readymade relations and race. Thus, adoptees' attainment and subsequent sponsorship of relational literacy necessarily require the development and sponsorship of racial literacy. Based on the definitions of racial literacy above as well as the stories shared by the adult Korean American adoptee leaders in this study, racial literacy in the context of adoptees can be defined as a skill and practice in which adoptees recursively explore (both individually and communally) the effects of systemic racism on their experiences and representations in US society. In alignment with Sealey-Ruiz, adoptees with this skill are able to discuss and critically think through the implications of American racism, which in turn enables them to adopt an antiracist stance (as those raised in the dominant racial group) *and* resist a victim stance (as racialized adoptees). In alignment with Guinier, they do this through an orientation to race as contextual, in relation to power dynamics between the structural and personal, and indelibly connected to variables of class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, age, and geography. In alignment with Winddance Twine, this orientation to race and the racial literacy that results from it enables adoptees to then sponsor racial literacy—and thereby relational literacy—for other adoptees through the provision of cultural strategies that empower adoptees to strengthen their relationships to themselves, other adoptees, Korea, Asian Americans, and the Korean diaspora.

Korean American Adoptees and Disorientation

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed examines queerness, diaspora, family, and race through a queer phenomenological framework that demonstrates how orientations are socially and politically organized. Through this framework, she argues how orientations shape what is socially and bodily given, i.e., acceptable. Accordingly, Ahmed asserts that queer phenomenology is the study of these orientations and how bodies that do not adhere to them can create new orientations (new personal and political possibilities) through experiences of disorientation. She describes disorientation as:

> Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use object's that do not extend their reach. At this moment of failure, such objects "point" somewhere else or they make what is "here" become strange. Bodies that do not follow the line of whiteness, for instance, might be "stopped" in their tracks, which does not simply stop one from getting somewhere, but changes one's relation to what is "here." (160)

Importantly, disorientation is not only about the experience of it—it is equally about what one does with said experience, particularly in terms of using them to inhabit the world in ways that support those who have been made to appear strange and whose lives are marginalized as a result. Moreover, Ahmed notes that "orientation is achieved through the loss of such physical proximity" and that queer phenomenology works by "bringing objects to life in their 'loss' of place, in the failure of gathering to keep things in their place" (165). I explain queer phenomenology and disorientation at length to show their relevance to the stories shared by adoptee participants in this chapter.

In particular, this chapter highlights participants' stories of disorientation as experienced in the seeking of new relationships, i.e., relationships with other Korean American adoptees beyond racial isolation. Readers will see in this chapter that these relationships teach and sponsor new ways

of knowing, being, and doing (e.g., racial literacy) for adoptees, the initial uptake of which can incite disorientation in the sponsored. Based on participants' stories as well as my own, I suggest disorientation is prevalent in such cases because adoptees' sponsorship of relational literacy (and thereby, racial literacy) necessitates the centering of adoptees' race and adoption. As race and adoption are often decentered and, at times, suppressed within White adoptive families and communities for the purposes of assimilating and kinning adoptees, actively engaging race and adoption with other adoptees can be overwhelming and anxiety-inducing. In Ahmed's words, the adoptees in this study, myself included, were orientated to the decentering and invisibilization of race and adoption within our White adoptive families and communities given our close physical proximity to them via readymade relations. Then, upon choosing to be in close physical proximity with adoptees in young adulthood, we experienced disorientation via the centering and visibilization of race and adoption given its unfamiliarity and demands. Together, this chapter and the next demonstrate how such disorientation allowed us individually and collectively dwell in our losses as adoptees (loss of place/birth country, birth family, birth culture) and enabled us to identify strength and possibility in the failures of keeping things (ourselves included) in their place.

In this way, disorientation is a key process and practice in the development of relational (and, thereby, racial) literacy. As suggested above, one begins developing relational literacy by seeking to reflect recursively on racial isolation and readymade relations. For Korean adoptees, this means reflecting on the roles of race and adoption in structures of readymade relations and using these reflections to generate critical, historically situated understandings of one's ever-evolving relations. These reflections/stories are themselves an enactment of disidentification with readymade relations and thus have the potential to revise racial isolation and readymade relations.

In this chapter, I focus exclusively on the stories shared by the participants of this study regarding their personal journeys out of racial isolation and readymade relations. This sets the

groundwork for Chapter 4, where I then show how their storied experiences leading adoptee community via KAD Midwest can be seen as evidence of how the sponsorship of relational literacy works to revise racial isolation and readymade relations. As participants' stories in this chapter show, for Korean adoptees, disorientation tends to occur in the initial stages of building relationships with other adoptees, though it is not limited to the initial stages. It can manifest both when an adoptee is exposed to other adult adoptees for the first time and when an adoptee returns to racial isolation and readymade relations after being exposed to other adult adoptees for the first time.

Ben's Story: "Who I Could Become"

Ben and I met for the interview at a local library near his hometown. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the methodology of this study necessitated that interviews be conducted in the same spirit as KAD Midwest's informal programming to show how these "hangouts" become vehicles for the development and sponsorship of relational literacy. As such, we planned to converse for an hour until the library closed and then drive down the street to a Korean barbecue spot to meet a group of adoptee friends for dinner. As such, the interview fit rather neatly into how we normally do things. Living a few states away in Midwest City, Ben returns a few times a year to his home state to spend time with his family. Every time he comes for a visit, he drops a message in his home state's Korean adoptee group on Facebook and organizes a dinner that is always well attended. Adoptee friends travel as far as two to three hours to spend time with Ben and fellow adoptees, and the dinners always take place in different Korean restaurants. I have been to many places and tried many different Korean foods I would not have if not for my friendship with Ben and the others.

Ben is the current president of KAD Midwest and has been involved in the organization since February 2015. As he tells it, his story as a leader of adoptee community began during the senior year of his undergraduate education, when he found a group on Facebook for individuals who identified as Korean and adopted: "I joined it and there were about maybe eight people in that

group. And so we started to meet in real life. It was a small enough group that it was pretty feasible and we're all on campus anyway so why not." For Ben, finding this group beyond the home space (college and social media) was the beginning of his journey out of racial isolation and readymade relations.

I want to highlight that, at this point in our conversation, Ben did not immediately jump into details on his co-founding of the Korean American adoptee student organization at his college. Rather, our conversation continued into an array of other topics and, eventually, recursively looped back around to a deeper dive into the mechanics and motivations of his work in this capacity. This is especially significant in regard to the first practice of relational literacy, as it requires ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of one's readymade relations. Recursivity was also embodied in the interview itself as I had heard Ben mention this group in passing before, but only now had the opportunity to hear the story behind its formation and what it meant to him. Recursivity is key to relational literacy because it enables deeper relational and comprehensive understandings of stories and storytellers' contexts. To make a story relevant to a specific moment, storytellers must recursively go back to the story's original context and effectively mediate its meaning in that context in order to produce a relevant retelling in a new one. In this way, stories evolve with relationships, and it is the tracing—the storying and restorying—of these stories and relationships that establish history. This is extremely important for adult Korean adoptees whose readymade relations enact what Myers has called symbolic violence on adoptees by "hid[ing] what happens before and what occurs after the moment of adoption" (176). In such hiding, adoptees are positioned to lack the context necessary for asserting a traditional sense of agency over their identities.

As we came back around to his work building adoptee community in college, I asked Ben whether or not his experiences starting the Korean adoptee student organization on campus informed his orientation to his leadership positions with KAD Midwest. He responded by noting

that, "[Growing up] I was surrounded by them [adoptees] all the time but never really engaged in it. So, I guess what the group helped me do back in 2006 is it got me thinking more along the lines of an intentional community that's unique, [and] not the same thing as the general Korean Students Association, for example." Of the Korean Students Association on his campus, he said: "It was, it was nice to have that there, but it didn't quite hit the spot. *There was something missing to it as well, like the whole adoptee element*" (emphasis added). The above indicates that, through his participation in this interview, Ben demonstrated how recursivity in storytelling can enable one to draw on the accumulation of their experiences and present realities to make sense of—to make meaning of—the past and vice versa.

Furthermore, in making this story relevant to the context of our interview, the recursive nature of Ben's reflection necessitated a synthesis of his experiences being part of and leading adoptee community since establishing the college group in 2006. This synthesis resulted in the use of racial literacy to generate a critical and historically situated insight about that group in that it got him thinking intentionally about the unique positioning of Korean adoptees in relation to other Asian Americans, Korean Americans in particular. To do so, he reflected on the evolution of his relationship to the group from something they were giving a try to something that yielded racial literacy. Examining Ben's insight here through a lens of relational literacy allows us to see the necessity of recursivity in storytelling as well as its necessity in the generation of critical, historically situated understandings of one's ever-evolving relations and attendant disorientations—in this case, a critical understanding of how systemic racism has similarly yet very differently positioned Korean American adoptees and Korean Americans. Moreover, Ben's insight helped *me* as both a researcher and adoptee further consider how racial isolation can exist among those of the same race (Korean Americans and Korean American adoptees).

Like Ben, the adoptee leaders in this study shared stories in their interviews that indicated isolation from other adoptees is what ultimately led them to found and lead KAD Midwest. Such a trend suggests that relational literacy is achieved through the active and intentional cultivation of relationships beyond the structures of readymade relations and the conditions of isolation that impose and maintain them. Furthermore, these relationships are usually with those who acknowledge and embody the importance of centering the differences readymade relations are designed to elide. For adoptees, this means that in spite of the risks (e.g., potential losses via the strain and decay of relationships with adoptive family and friends), adoptees stand a better chance at developing identities that are relationally accountable to all the ways they are called to identify (as adoptees, as honorary Whites, as Korean Americans, as racialized people) by cultivating relationships with other racialized beings, especially relationships with other Korean adoptees.

Ben's subsequent story about an experience he had at a local storytelling event further illustrates this point. At the event, he listened to a Taiwanese American professor describe her reasons for immigrating to America in her 20s. She told the audience that she wanted to pursue the fine arts, and that her parents and others did not approve of this desire. According to Ben, she explained that "she had to get away from Asian people to discover herself. She said she had to be alone to get a better sense of who she was." In reflecting on this, he concluded:

> For me it's the opposite. I was thinking about this as she was telling the story [that it was] really ironic for me because I spent my whole life feeling like I was away from my own people. Like, in terms of just physically, racially. And only by getting involved with other Korean adoptees did I start to learn more about myself. It was weird hearing that and then feeling the opposite of what she was saying. And so I think my adoptee experience, my identity as an adoptee as I've begun to embrace

> that part of me, I think I have a lot better sense now of who I am. Not just who I am, but who I could become.

As evidenced by Ben's testimony, adoptees who grow up in racial isolation often lack access to key people and resources (like other adoptees) who can sponsor racial literacy by helping adoptees process what it means—and can mean—to embody a transnational, transracial adoptee subjectivity. Though Ben did not name any specific experiences with racism or its impact on his wellbeing during our interview, I see them implicitly in his story. For instance, his claim that "only by getting involved with other Korean adoptees did I start to learn more about myself" indicates that he did not have the necessary means to learn about who he is (racial literacy and relations who could sponsor it for him) and, as he puts it, who he could become during earlier phases of his life when he was racially isolated from other adoptees. Furthermore, Ben's sharing of this story became an opportunity for me to similarly reflect on how my relationships with other adoptees over the past four years, especially though KAD Midwest, has similarly sponsored my ability (relational literacy) to embrace my own Korean American adoptee identity as well as embrace who I could become as a result, e.g., an adoptee researcher producing scholarship that can be of use to both rhetoric and writing and adoptee communities.

Recall that the main function of the structures of readymade relations is to assimilate (i.e., erase/decenter difference) and that, for Korean adoptees, assimilation is sponsored through racial isolation and rhetorics of colorblindness, adoptees as gifts, and adoption as love. The structuring of readymade relations thus ultimately gives adoptees two binarized options for being: they are either perceived to be "grateful, happy, and well-adjusted" or they are "ungrateful, angry, and maladjusted" (McKee 9). Embedded in the imperative to be "grateful, happy, and well-adjusted" are the assumptions that adoptees need not wonder about birth cultures/families and that adoptive families' love and acceptance of them is alone sufficient for assuaging any harms of any racism they might

experience. Adoptees who fail to adhere to these assumptions are often believed to be "ungrateful, angry, and maladjusted." This logic presumes that, if adoptees are "grateful, happy, and well-adjusted," they will not need to wonder or search for birth culture or family, nor be too affected by experiences of racism, because they are already supposedly fulfilled and supported and, thus, should not be in need of anything else. To this effect, McKee notes that "happiness is linked to accepting the narrative of adoption promulgated by mainstream adoption discourse—the notion that adoption is the best option" (9). In other words, the readymade relations that enable the incorporation of transnational, transracial adoptees into their adoptive families tend to preclude the possibilities of a sense of happiness and fulfillment that considers other relational possibilities, such as those to their birth cultures/families and to other adoptees and racialized people.

Given this, I suggest that stories like Ben's indicate a critical awareness of the ways readymade relations and racial isolation, both intentionally and unintentionally, call on adoptees to paradoxically identify with Whiteness (which benefits White adoptive families and receiving nations), often at the expense of identifying with key elements of themselves like race and adoption (which benefits adoptees). When Ben says "I think my adoptee experience, my identity as an adoptee, as I've begun to embrace that part of me, I think I have a lot better sense now of who I am—*not just who I am, but who I could become*," (emphasis added) he is illustrating that recursive, critical engagements with his identity (like the ones evidenced above in our conversation) as a non-White racialized person adopted into a White home have catalyzed his involvement in building and maintaining adoptee community. What's more, he illustrates that these recursive engagements have opened up new identificatory possibilities for him (and consequently for other adoptees, myself included, through his leadership) that arise out of the reciprocity and care of adoptee kinship.

Hye Wol's Story: "Something We Never Had"

My interview with Hye Wol took place on a trip to Midwest City that, like my interview with Ben, was conducted in the same spirit as KAD Midwest's informal programming. I drove in from out of state with another adoptee friend and together we met up with a group of KAD Midwest friends for a KAD Midwest sponsored event. This month, the event was to attend a Chicago Fire soccer game together. The executive board of KAD Midwest reserved stadium seats through a member who works for the team. It was my first professional soccer game and we had a great time cheering for a Korean player on loan to the team with the other Korean American fans. The next day, I brought lunch to Hye Wol's place and we caught up over a meal. The interview took place in her home and, as such, felt very familiar to me because it is a place I have been many times—a place imbued with memories of conversations we've had before on adoptee identity and community. It is thus a setting embedded within ongoing relations and in which the relations we have built together continue to be sustained and honored. In fact, four years ago in 2016, before I really knew any of the KAD Midwest folks, I spent the night at Hye Wol's and her partner's place on my very first trip up. Since then, I have spent many a night and day there hanging out, talking about adoption and our lives, our work, watching movies, playing games, and gathering with other adoptees and Asian American friends in both formal and informal capacities. This interview was thus, for me, one more occasion to reflect on and further develop my own relational literacy in relation to Hye Wol's.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Hye Wol served a six-year term as the president of KAD Midwest prior to Ben. Her stories in this section demonstrate the many complexities of racial isolation, particularly in terms of how it can differently affect individuals depending on race and ethnicity. For example, Hye Wol was adopted into a White family in a racially and ethnically diverse area on the east coast. She described growing up with Black, Asian, Latinx, and Queer friends and noted that because of this she "always had a strong Asian American racial identity" and she had

"always known [she] was Korean." Based on such an upbringing, it would seem Hye Wol did not experience racial isolation in quite the same way other adoptees do. However, after explaining the above, she added what I argue is a critical caveat: "…but [being] culturally [Asian/Korean/adoptee], you know, that's been kind of a different kind of journey." In other words, Hye Wol's rearing in a pan-racial, pan-ethnic community instilled in her a strong sense of her racialized identity as Asian American (as Korean American, specifically), but because she grew up without access to other adoptees, her sense of her *adoptee identity* and, therefore, her cultural/ethnic identity as a Korean American adoptee remained undeveloped until she met another adoptee for the first time while away at college. This highlights how the racial literacy Hye Wol has developed through expanding her relations since childhood made possible her understanding that a Korean adoptee's racialized identity cannot be separated from their adoptee identity and vice versa. What's more, it highlights how it is possible to still be racially isolated (cultural/ethnic Korean adoptee) even among other racialized peoples (Black, Asian, Latinx).

As our conversation unfolded, Hye Wol, like Ben (and consistent with the first practice of relational literacy), recursively looped back around to reflect on her upbringing and early adulthood in racial isolation (ethnic/cultural isolation). Such recursivity enabled her as a storyteller to draw on the accumulation of her past experiences with and beyond racial isolation and her present realities as an international leader in Korean adoptee community advocacy. In so doing, she generated racially literate insights as tools for making sense and meaning of the racial isolation (ethnic/cultural isolation) she grew up with as well as its flux in form over the years. For instance, when Hye Wol moved to the Midwest to attend a conservative Evangelical college, she found herself immersed in a different kind of racial isolation (racial *and* ethnic/cultural) in which a much more narrow definition of Korean American was sponsored than that she was accustomed to: "Korean American at my college really meant 'Christian'. You know, like, very Christian and very, you know, 'good'." While

somewhat ambiguous, Hye Wol's use of the word "good" here seems to suggest that the prevailing paradigm at her school was to sponsor readymade relations that assimilated students by employing a rhetoric of colorblindness that worked to erase the racial, ethnic, and cultural dimensions of identity (and others) in order to center and sponsor a Christian identity over all else. This erasure and invisibilization of race (as well as ethnicity, since colorblindness conflates them) had a negative impact on Hye Wol's identity, as evidenced by the following admission: "I had a really tough experience in school and felt really demoralized as a woman [and] as someone who identified as a person of color."

Moreover, Hye Wol's demoralization as a woman and person of color here highlights the profound sense of alienation and disorientation Korean adoptees experience in the rejection of their chosen identities by others. Through Sara Docan-Morgan's work on the intrusion of strangers in the lives of adoptees and their adoptive families, Park Nelson has shown how "racial remarks from those outside the family can disrupt adoptees' self-proclaimed White identities" (137). While the claiming of a White identity is not the case for Hye Wol, her story indicates that her claiming of a Korean American identity as one that fundamentally differed from the college's definition of Korean American as exclusively "good Christian" was akin in effect to "the dissonance of claiming an identity not supported by others" or "being [told you are] wrong about your own identity" (137). As a Korean adoptee who grew up in racial isolation of both the racial and cultural/ethnic variety, I knew the feeling. Being told by the majority of people in your life that you are not who/what you personally identify as (for me it was White in childhood and, later, Asian American adoptee in adulthood) is disorienting, painful, and alienating. It alienates you from those you have always known and identified with and it alienates you from yourself.

Yet, in spite of the racially inflected demoralization she experienced, college was also pivotal for Hye Wol because it was there that she met another Korean adoptee (Michelle), who would later

invite her to join KAD Midwest shortly after its founding in 2008. Yet, it is important to note here that Hye Wol's initial interactions with KAD Midwest were disorienting to her at first because they required her to disidentify with readymade relations. As Hye Wol's story evidences, disorientation was a key part of the process of moving beyond readymade relations and racial isolation to adoptee kinship and relational literacy. Of her first experience with the KAD Midwest adoptees, she said:

> I was totally weirded out. At that time, I really didn't know what it meant to be a Korean adoptee and I was very confused by meeting other Korean adoptees. I had gone to [Korean culture] camp[30] once as a kid. Had a good experience, but it was when I was 12. I had been around lots of different people, but Korean adoptee was new to me. I was always used to being emotionally and psychologically alone in that space and was not used to the idea of a group identity.

Here, Hye Wol details the disorientation she experienced in figuring out what it meant/could mean for her to identify with other Korean American adoptees. She described it as an experience that left her feeling "weirded out," "confused," and "not being used to" such contexts.

In many ways, Hye Wol's experience of disorientation after meeting other adult Korean adoptees for the first time mirrors my own and her story helps me contextualize mine. Her story specifically prompted me to think back to my own first experience being exposed to other adult Korean adoptees. In the midst of my MA research on Korean adoption, I stumbled upon an organization called the Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network (KAAN) that hosts an annual conference on Korean adoption for adoptees, their families, and adoptive families. I attended the 2013 conference in Grand Rapids, MI on a whim and I did so by myself. Having no prior context for being among other adoptees, I was completely overwhelmed by the feeling of seeing so

[30] Korean culture camps are summer camps for Korean American adoptees. In the past, they have largely been run by adoptive parents. In more recent years, adult adoptees have taken a more central role in many of the camps. One of the most well-known of those camps is Camp Sejong, which was started in 1992 and now has chapters throughout the US.

many people who looked like me and had experienced such similar things because of it. Upon entering the lobby for registration and check-in, I was immediately reduced to tears. I was so scared of being with other adoptees—what if they didn't like me and what would it mean if other adoptees didn't like me?—that I clung to the White adoptive mothers and the familiarity of the readymade relations they represented to me.

What both my and Hye Wol's stories illustrate here is that disorientation usually accompanies moving beyond readymade relations and isolation. As the structures of readymade relations are culturally hegemonic in that they replicate neocolonial relationships of sponsorship and dependency between nations, moving beyond readymade relations and isolation can trigger intense instances of shock, confusion, alienation, and pain, as well as related emotions like sadness, melancholy, anger, hurt, grief, regret, and frustration. Because the facet of isolation in readymade relations actively and passively prevents and/or discourages the pursuit of relations that can sponsor relational literacy (and, thereby, racial literacy), disorientation upon first exploring such relations is a common phenomenon and part of the larger process of disidentifying from readymade relations and racial isolation, which I more deeply explore in the following chapter. Furthermore, because the structures of readymade relations are intended to assimilate subjects into a partial approximation of the status quo and because sponsors' power in readymade relations is maintained through dependency of the sponsored on sponsors, experiencing relations and rhetorics that are antithetical to assimilation and dependency (e.g., racial literacy) require subjects to re/encounter—sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently—racial isolation, readymade relations, and readymade identities as "strange."

Hye Wol's story thus demonstrates that a key element of moving beyond readymade relations and racial isolation for adult adoptees is disorientation in regard to normative conceptions of adoptees (adoptees as honorary Whites, adoptees as gifts, and adoption as love) and race

(colorblindness) sponsored by said relational structures. When asked why she continued showing up for KAD Midwest programming when it wrought such feelings, Hye Wol responded by saying, "At first it was more out of obligation that I kept coming. It was kind of like *this sense that there's something here*. I don't even remember how it felt, *but it was an uncomfortability that I wanted to keep exploring*" (emphasis added). Hye Wol's sense that "there's something here" can be seen, then, as evidence of her nascent uptake of racial literacy, particularly as it applies to transnational transracial adoptees. Her "sense that there's something here" can be connected to her previous statement about being used to being "emotionally and psychologically alone" in the adoptee headspace. Perhaps she sensed that a group identity in terms of adoptee community might open up new possibilities for her own identity, particularly in terms of what it could mean to identify with her adoptee identity—an option that had been previously unavailable to her without access to other adoptees.

While Hye Wol struggled with the dysphoric effects of disorientation in regard to readymade relations in her exploration of adoptee kinship and development of relational literacy, she noted that it was KAD Midwest's mentorship of Asian adoptee youth and their adoptive families that eventually convinced her of the group's necessity. In particular, she shared a story of working with young Chinese American adoptees during KAD Midwest's annual mentorship program with Families with Children from China (FCC), a nonprofit organization with chapters throughout the continental US that supports Chinese American adoptees and their adoptive families. Hye Wol explained, "we would hang out with the kids and also talk with the adoptive parents about issues around our adoptive experience." In working with FCC through KAD Midwest as an adoptee mentor, Hye Wol elaborated:

> A light bulb kind of went off for me personally. And it was like, for me, this is why it's so important; because somehow being able to love those kids and their families [meant] we needed a group like this. And *we can give these kids something that we never had.*

> I think that was so powerful for me that I felt like I understood the point of coming. And so, at that moment, I went from wanting to just hang out—like having a new social group of friends—to really feeling like there's a missional value to what we do that's worth investing in. (emphasis added)

My purpose in emphasizing Hye Wol's assertion that "we can give these kinds something that we never had" is to highlight her nascent identity as a leader/sponsor of relational literacy for future generations of Asian American adoptees. While she was not specific in our interview regarding what exactly it is that "we never had," I suggest she may be referring to racial literacy—particularly as a resource for moving beyond readymade relations and isolation to relational literacy. Her earlier discussion of her upbringing in ethnic/cultural isolation and of having been "used to being emotionally and psychologically alone in that [Korean adoptee] space" indicates that what we never had were cultural strategies for identifying and navigating racism as well as resources for affirming the richness of Korean, Asian American, and Korean American adoptee cultures such as those put forth by Winddance Twine.

Again, Hye Wol's story of finding the value in Korean adoptee community mirrors my own and her story helps me contextualize mine. At the earlier mentioned 2013 KAAN conference, I went from enforcing my own racial isolation from other adoptees to pushing myself to engage with them through meals, volunteering as staff for the adoptee youth program, and attending an adoptee-only session facilitated by an adult adoptee LISW. As volunteer staff for the youth program, I and two other adult adoptees chaperoned a group of Korean adoptee kids and teens to the local zoo and a bounce plex while their adoptive families attended sessions. I remember walking into the bounce plex with our rowdy gaggle of brown-skinned, black-haired kids and being shocked by how much we stood out from the predominantly White patrons. I felt my throat tighten and my stomach turn to lead as I tried to guess all the awful things I assumed people were thinking when I'd catch their

gazes on us. All I could think was *Asian invasion, Asian invasion, Asian invasion*. Soon enough, however, the kids calmed me down. For them, this was somewhat normal. Many had adoptive families who had been involved with KAAN for years; they knew each other because they always came on the youth trips and were accustomed to being around adult adoptee volunteers like me and the others. I watched with relief as they bounded around from station to station, too caught up in their togetherness to care too much about how different we looked. I came expecting to give those kids something I'd never had (adoptee community and affirmation in who we are as Korean adoptees) and, yet, it was them who ended up giving it to me.

Michelle's Story: "Third Option"

My interview with Michelle took place on the same trip to Midwest City as my interview with Hye Wol. After our interview, Hye Wol and I took a walk through the park beside her apartment and then she drove me over to Michelle's. It was the first time I had ever been to Michelle's home and, through the process of the interview and listening to Michelle's stories, I felt a deep affinity with her that I hadn't before because, in the past, we'd only met up in larger groups for KAD Midwest events. It will become apparent in what follows that Michelle's stories also prompted me to enact the first practice of relational literacy by reflecting more intentionally on some of my own relationships, particularly my relationship to Christianity. Like my interviews with Ben and Hye Wol, my time with Michelle felt natural, like muscle memory. A time of one-on-one adoptee friend togetherness before a planned dinner in the evening at one of our favorite KBBQ spots in the city with other adoptees from KAD Midwest. As you may be able to tell by now, this is how it goes—one rolls into town, calls on KAD Midwest, and before you know it you're among your people, reveling in one another's company; organically moving in and out of intense discussions about adoption and moments of intense fun and camaraderie.

Michelle has been part of KAD Midwest since its inception in 2008. She was initially drawn to the organization by her friendship with another participant in this study, co-founder Alex. She joined the executive board almost immediately and served as president for a brief period before stepping down to reassess her priorities. She returned to leadership six months later as Secretary and stayed on the board until 2017, at which point she transitioned to the Advisory Board[31]. As a co-chair, she was a major organizer of *Creating Community, Catalyzing Change*, the 2018 IKAA conference (colloquially referred to as a "mini-gathering" among KADs, with "gathering" designated to every third year of the conference when it takes place in Seoul) for KAD Midwest's 10-year anniversary, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Michelle grew up in a small town in the Midwest with White parents and a brother who was also a Korean adoptee but not biologically related to her. As she tells it, "…my high school was predominately White. The church that I went to was predominantly White. Most of my friends were White." It wasn't until college that she started making Asian American friends. Her journey beyond readymade relations and racial isolation began with her participation in a homeland tour to Korea that she took after graduating college in 2006. The tour was organized by her adoption agency, Holt International[32], the agency I came through as well. On this tour, Michelle met one of the future co-founders of KAD Midwest, who was also interviewed for this study (Alex). She noted that the homeland tour was the first time she had spent a concentrated amount of time with other adoptees and that, "though there were some really hard things on the trip, it was still like we were experiencing it together and I really appreciated that." In other words, Michelle's experiences of

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[31] The Advisory Board is comprised of past board members of KAD Midwest who no longer server in executive functions but who continue to associate with the organization by providing counsel where necessary.

[32] Missionaries Harry and Bertha Holt were among the most visible in this regard, as they were the first to adopt eight Korean orphans in the 1950s. Through encouraging and helping other Christian couples adopt from Korea, they started Holt International, one of the most prominent adoption agencies who now facilitate adoptions not only of children from Korea to wealthy receiving nations, but also children from other countries like China, Vietnam, Colombia, Thailand, Philippines, Haiti, and Bulgaria.

immersion in a community of adoptees for the tour helped alleviate some of the stresses and disorientations of returning to her country of origin for the first time. Moreover, it was this experience that led her to get involved in KAD Midwest in 2008.

While Michelle was not specific in terms of the "really hard things," Alex's story about her experience on the same tour names some of these as "the praying and visiting the Holt graves. We had to get our pictures taken. You know..." At this point, Alex trailed off, and I all I could say was "yeah…" and trail off as well, because I knew exactly what she meant. Homeland tours to Korea have traditionally been done through adoption agencies like Holt as well as through overtly religious (Christian) organizations by non-adoptees like Nest/둥지 and InKAS. These tours provide adoptees with important opportunities to explore the country, culture, and sometimes families of origin; however, they are also more often than not run by people who are not adoptees (i.e., agencies, Korean nationals, Korean Americans). While not intrinsically a bad thing, this can be problematic for adoptees when tour programming is designed more around an organization's personal goals (forwarding religious missions, organizational self-promotion, assuaging of Korea's national guilt over transnational transracial adoption) as opposed to adoptees' needs and wellbeing.

The homeland tour I went on was not agency-run, but when Alex says "praying," I know she means adoptees were pressured to submit to tour/agency-sponsored prayer that, given the pivotal role of the Holts and Christian rhetoric in histories of Korean adoption, likely construct adoption as Christian charity that adoptees should be "grateful" for benefitting from. Similarly, when Alex says "visiting the Holt graves[33]," I know she means adoptees were made to decenter their own experiences of adoption (loss, displacement, alienation, in some cases verbal and physical

[33] The graves Alex is referring to here are the final resting places of Harry and Bertha Holt, the Christian missionary couple from Oregon who played a major role in normalizing and neoliberalizing Korean adoption. They founded Holt International, a global adoption agency that facilitates the transnational adoption of foreign-born children. They were buried in the Ilsan Center in Goyang City.

abuse), birth families' experiences of adoption (loss, alienation, poverty, exclusionary cultural mores), and the role of American imperialism in adoption to center and revere the Holts and Christianity. And when Alex says "we had to get our pictures taken," I know she means adoptees were instructed to pose for photographs that were used to rhetorically valorize the Holts, the agency, and the practice of transnational transracial adoption. For all these reasons and more, it is crucial for adoptees to have one another on these tours as witnesses and processing for mental health, as trained adoption-competent therapists are usually unavailable in spite of the fact that the tours can be triggering for adoptees.

Michelle's story further shows how the tightknit bonds adoptees tend to build with one another on these tours enable them to endure the profoundly intense and usually life-altering experiences of return. For instance, Michelle shared with me that, after weeks of exclusively being around other Korean adoptees on the tour, returning to her life of relative racial isolation in America caused further disorientation to her identity. More specifically, she struggled to relate to some of her closest friends, even though they were all of the same race:

> When I came back, I remember having a really difficult time. I was living with four girlfriends at the time, all of whom I'd been close friends with in college, and many of whom are Asian American. But I just remember feeling very alone and feeling like even my close friends couldn't understand what I had gone through.

Here, Michelle describes the disorienting feeling and loneliness of racial isolation in a way she had not before. In college, prior to interacting with other Korean adoptees, she had been able to find comfort in her Asian American friends and roommates; but post-tour, she faced the difficulty of losing this comfort as she found it difficult to relate to them after spending so much time with people with whom she could relate regarding some of the most fundamental parts of herself and her identity (i.e., being transnationally, transracially adopted from Korea). Michelle's story thus

demonstrates how racial isolation can exist even amongst peoples of the same race. The reasons for this are multiple and varied depending on the context, though I suggest this particular layer of racial isolation stems from race as a social construct imposed upon individuals through processes of racialization (the use of stereotypical tropes to distinguish between individuals based on superficial traits such as skin color). Put another way, imposing the same racial category of "Asian American" on different ethnic and cultural groups of, say, East Asians (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.), fails to account for the rich diversity of those cultures and ethnicities.

It was Michelle's time with other adoptees on the tour and her subsequent struggle with racial isolation after that led her to join KAD Midwest at its inception in 2008. Like Hye Wol, Michelle experienced a sense of disorientation upon joining KAD Midwest. However, because she already had a context for adoptee community from the homeland tour, particularly with Alex, she felt less confused and more uncertainty in not knowing what to expect. She specifically joined based on the relationship she had established on the homeland tour with KAD Midwest's co-founder, Alex. Michelle explained:

> The only backdrop I had for hanging out with groups of adoptees was the homeland tour and so I think I just didn't really know that much. I didn't know what to expect. So, I mostly went based off my relationship with Alex and wanting to be closer friends with her. And then, through her, was exposed to meeting a lot of other people. But, a lot of it was new to me. I just didn't know that these types of groups existed [and had] never really been exposed to them.

Here, Michelle expresses feelings of uncertainty around joining an organization by and for adult adoptees, citing a lack of awareness of the existence and potential of such organizations. Readers can observe this same lack of awareness in the stories of all participants in this study, which highlights the presence and effects of racial isolation and readymade relations for Korean American adoptees.

Furthermore, understanding Michelle's story through the lens of relational literacy enables us to understand how the intentional act of seeking to strengthen her relationship with Alex—especially through involvement with KAD Midwest—became a crucial first step to revising the readymade relations of her adoption by accessing new sets of relationships (Alex and KAD Midwest) to gain and create new forms of knowledges and identification, particularly ones that are relevant to adoptees' lived experiences with marginalization (the second practice of relational literacy).

The final story Michelle shared about how she got involved with KAD Midwest demonstrates how disorientation induced by the pursuit of relational literacy can put one at odds with important facets of their existing relations and, thereby, their identities. For instance, Michelle described the particular challenge of developing her adoptee relations and identity in relation to her already established relations and identity as a practicing Christian:

> I grew up evangelical Christian and I still consider myself to be Christian. But I remember feeling like all of the people I was meeting who were active in the adoptee space had very much rejected Christianity. So [I felt] like, 'If I'm going to be active in this adoptee space, but I do still consider myself to be a Christian, will that be accepted?' Or, is that sort of seen as like, 'You don't get it, the whitewashing [of Christianity].'

Korean adoptees' aversion to Christianity referenced in this story stems from the Christian missionary roots of adoption from Korea. Scholars have well documented the ways rhetorics of Christian charity have served to sponsor adoption from Korea in ways that denigrate the sending country (i.e., birth parents, culture); valorize the receiving country (i.e., adoptive parents, culture); and erase adoptees' trauma, loss, and dislocation through forced diaspora (Kim; Mckee; Palmer; Park Nelson). Yet, not only did Michelle struggle with a lack of understanding from the adoptee

community around her Christian identity, but she also felt from her church community a lack of understanding around her adoptee identity:

> …in my church community, people didn't necessarily understand my adoption story. And because of how my adoptee identity was developing, I had a lot of problems with how adoption was talked about in the Christian context and how different metaphors were sometimes used. And so I had this tension of feeling like, 'Okay there's different pieces of me that are recognized and celebrated in these different contexts, but how do I really have a whole sense of self?'

The tensions described above indicate a fundamental struggle of disorientation that can be particularly common in the early stages of developing relational literacy. As evidenced by her understanding of how Christianity has traditionally whitewashed adoption from Korea, Michelle's uptake of racial literacy through her engagement with the adoptee community highlighted for her a need to revise her relationship with the church as well as revise her relationship with the adoptee community by figuring out how to identify with other adoptees while simultaneously identifying as Christian. These revisions were particularly challenging because, in both cases, she risked losing relationships that were important to her. In this way, her story in the context of our interview functions as an instance of the first practice of relational literacy, or ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of one's readymade relations.

In spite of these challenges, Michelle was able to draw on a key relationship with a close friend for a sense of validation in her struggle and, ultimately, a way forward. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, this friend was neither a Korean adoptee nor a member of her church community, but was a Japanese American friend from church:

> I remember talking with her about how I felt like I had to choose one or the other. And feeling really torn and frustrated and upset that I didn't really want to choose,

> but I didn't see any [any other way]. Like those were my only options. And she was just like, 'Well, maybe there's a third way.' And it seems really simple to say that, and she's like, 'I don't know what that is.' But she's like, you know, 'Your life and your existence is proof that there's some other way to be. That you don't have to pick one.'

Of particular import in Michelle's story is the possibility of "a third way," and that her existence as both an adoptee and a person of the Christian faith is evidence of that possibility. In recognizing both of these identities in Michelle, however competing, her friend enacted racial literacy to sponsor a shift Michelle's relationship with herself and, consequently, her relationships with her adoptee and church communities, relationships that, however conflicting, she maintains to this day. She continued by noting:

> I go back to that a lot when I feel like I'm stuck in some kind of binary choice because I think that's kind of how I was raised. I was raised very black and white and that there's one right way and one wrong way. And what you're supposed to do with your life is figure out the 'right' way. I think my life has constantly been this unlearning of that.

Above, Michelle describes how working through the challenges of incorporating pieces of her identity that were at odds with one another helped shift her previous understanding of "right" from a binary choice to a third option. Importantly, Michelle herself was the third option. I posit that the kind of "one right way and one wrong way" binary she mentions here may be derivative of the hegemonic structures of readymade relations that attempt to fix people into normative constructions of being. In this way, her story demonstrates how racial literacy through the development of relational literacy can create tension between important facets of a person's relationships/identities and also demonstrates how individuals can leverage relational literacy to exert agency over how they

dis/re/identify with these conflicting facets to revise readymade relations in ways that are accountable to their specific lived experiences and truths.

At the beginning of this section, I noted that Michelle's stories prompted me to reflect more intentionally on some of my own relationships, particularly my relationship to Christianity. Prior to hearing the above story, I had harbored a great sense of disdain for organized religion, particularly Christianity. My best friend in childhood lived two doors down from me and came from a strict Baptist background. As one who struggled quietly with my race and adoption, those struggles increased when she and her mother spoke to me about how I was going to hell because I had not asked Jesus into my heart. My friend's intention, of course, was not to hurt me. In fact, I look back now and see she said these things because she cared about me. But it wounded me, nonetheless, to be told this, especially by her mother, who would often secretly listen in on our phone conversations as well as openly complain about finding strands of my long black hair lying around her house, as if I could help when hairs fell out of my scalp. A few times she even followed me around with a hand vacuum and humiliated me by joking about it in public with front desk workers.

So, when I learned later in life about the Holts and their deployment of rhetorics of Christian charity that eventually helped turn Korean American adoption into a booming industry whose profits came from the active separation of families, my aversion to Christianity deepened. As Michelle engaged in the first and second practices of relational literacy in the sharing of her story with me in our interview, I was moved by my relationship with her, my deep appreciation for her and her leadership, to similarly enact the first and second practices of relational literacy and rethink and revise my own prejudices. It is a process I am still engaged in, but thanks to Michelle, I am learning to affirm and find value in others' experiences that differ from my own as well as affirm and find value in my own experiences of religion.

Alex's Story: Practical *and* Personal

Alex is one of KAD Midwest's three co-founders and is the only participant in this study with whom I had no prior familiarity. She and I met very briefly at the earlier referenced IKAA conference that KAD Midwest hosted in Midwest City in 2018 and were later connected through email by Hye Wol. The interview for this study was the first time she and I spoke one-on-one at length. Listening to her stories became a way for us to establish a relationship with one another. For me personally, it was also an act of relational literacy, as expanding my KAD Midwest relations in turn enabled me to gain and create new knowledges and identification (e.g., this study) that are historically informed and relevant to my and others' lived experiences with marginalization as Korean American adoptees.

When asked during our interview what she believed was important to know about her regarding her stories about KAD Midwest, Alex began by explaining her upbringing in racial isolation. She was raised by a White family in the rural Midwest and immediately noted that, largely because of this, she "was never part of a formal adoptee group." When she was young, her parents did try to take her to an adoptee event put on by her adoption agency, but Alex reported getting into a fight with one of the children in attendance and noted that "that was the last time [my parents] attempted that." It wasn't until the age of 25 that Alex met and interacted with other adoptees (of whom Michelle was one) when she went on a homeland tour organized by the Holt agency in 2006. On this tour, she met Michelle and, as will be discussed in the next chapter, their friendship provided an important foundation for both of their work in leading KAD Midwest and developing its organizational identity.

While Alex's experience of the tour was not without its problems, her time in the land of her birth with other adoptees motivated her to move beyond racial isolation to pursue racial literacy through different modes of participation in Korean culture, particularly through a job in a Korean

restaurant where she met even more adoptees. Shortly after returning from Korea, Alex applied for a PhD program in behavioral psychology in Midwest City and, in the year between the end of her MA and the start of her doctoral program, she got a job at a new Korean restaurant where she lived. Through her work waitressing at the restaurant, Alex explained:

> I really actually learned about Korean people there. Not just Korean people, white people too. I [learned] about so many things working there. The owner was maybe like, five years older than me, and we became really close with [them and their] family.

Alex's testimony here indicates that her experiences on the homeland tour in 2006 exposed her to new sets of relationships (with Korean culture and Korean adoptees) that showed her other relationships—other realities, such as those in which her racialized and adoptee identities are foregrounded—were possible. Moreover, her testimony also shows how that exposure motivated her to deepen those new relationships by doing something she had never done before: work in a Korean restaurant with no command of the language and no cultural experience with Koreans beyond the brevity of the tour. Her relationships with Korean Americans (restaurant) and adoptees (tour and restaurant) can thus be seen as sponsors of her uptake of racial literacy through relational literacy, as evidenced by her statement that she learned about Korean and White people there. Furthermore, Alex's interests in the job at the restaurant, as she describes them, were at once practical ("I wanted to make some extra money") and personal ("I really wanted to learn to make all of the recipes and stuff like that"). This feat of merging the practical and the personal was a recurring theme in Alex's stories and something we bonded over in our conversation after the interview because I could definitely relate. While she studied behavioral psychology and now specializes in counseling adoptees and other folks with identity-related struggles, I am studying rhetoric and writing and specializing in adoptee rhetorics and community literacies. My area of

research, this study included, has been a way for me specifically to merge the practical (making ends meet by using my skills for scholarly analysis and pedagogy) and the personal (understanding more about and visibilizing people like me who all too often get subordinated and erased). This is a prime example of how adoptees sponsor relational literacy for other adoptees—by sharing stories of their lived experiences with marginalization that have the potential to affirm and connect others who are similarly marginalized. As one of the only scholars in the field of writing and rhetoric studying Asian American rhetoric and community literacy through the lens of the Asian American adoptee experience, I often feel isolated and erased (doubly so, too, given the historical imperative for Asian Americans to be overlooked and erased in larger conversations of race). However, listening to Alex's story has helped me recontextualize myself as one of many adoptee scholars across the disciplines that are using academic research to learn about and elevate Korean adoptees' unique experiences of race, family, gender, sexuality, class, and dis/ability.

It is worth noting there that, in describing her journey out of racial isolation, Alex did not speak much on disorientation in initially developing racial literacy as Michelle and Hye Wol did. She spoke instead about meeting and building relationships with even more adoptees through her work in the restaurant. These relationships later motivated her to step into a role as a sponsor of relational literacy through the co-founding of KAD Midwest in 2008 with two other Korean American adoptee women. In the story that follows, Alex further illustrates the importance of relational literacy, particularly in terms of the relationships it makes possible and how the potential to lose those relationships can become a grave concern:

> When KAD Midwest first started, or at least when I met the people who I organized KAD Midwest with, we were all operating from this idea that there's been so many unsuccessful Korean adoptee groups that have not [made it]—and not even just in Midwest City, all over, right—to get a group together and to sustain it.

> I was really hesitant because first of all, we're all at different stages in our lives and have different feelings about our identity and stuff like that. I was a doctoral student and the other two, one had just graduated from undergrad and the other was working full time.
>
> And so [I wasn't sure] how this going to work. I hope we stay friends, that sort of thing. Because that's what we were really concerned about because we knew this long history of groups not just being created and then splitting up but being created and then being very conflicts and contentions, like people breaking off.

More on the fraught history between Korean adoptee groups that had come before KAD Midwest in Midwest City and what that history has to do with KAD Midwest's sponsorship of relational literacy will be explored in-depth in the next chapter. For now, it's important to note how the above illustrates a concern for preserving relationships with fellow adoptees, which, I argue, takes on a particular sense of urgency given the situation. Remaining friends no matter the outcome of their efforts was important to Alex not only because they were attempting to do something that had already been attempted several times in the past, but because the potential loss of the relationships she had with the two co-founders (as well as the relationships that would come from the organization itself and the relationships she built with founders of the previous groups in Midwest City while researching the groups' histories), but also because it would have been devastatingly tremendous to lose those all she had gained through her relationships with the co-founders up to that point. As Alex had already developed her identity as a Korean American adoptee at that point through her ever expanding relationships and racial literacy beyond the restrictive structures of readymade relations and racial isolation of her upbringing, she knew the gravity of what was at stake for her personally if she and the other co-founders were to go through with establishing KAD Midwest together.

In the final section below, I synthesize participants' stories to show how they exemplify and sponsor relational literacy, particularly its first and second points. Readers will see how, through relational literacy, Korean adoptees use racial literacy to develop relational literacy in regard to the Korean American adoptee experience.

Conclusion: All Our Stories and What They Can Teach

In this chapter, I presented the stories the adoptee community leader participants of this study shared with me regarding their personal journeys out of racial isolation and readymade relations. In general, their stories show how the practices of recursive reflection, racial literacy, and disorientation in the development of relational literacy have and continue to be a means for making sense of their experiences in this regard. The sharing of my own stories in relation to theirs further demonstrates how their stories also function as a form of sponsorship of relational literacy for me (the researcher who is also a Korean American adoptee) as well as for readers. Their stories specifically sponsor nuanced understandings of the interconnectedness and complexities of racial isolation and readymade relations, the role of racial literacy in revising these, and the phenomenon of disorientation that often accompanies it.

In examining the leaders' stories of racial isolation through the lens of relational literacy, it becomes possible to see how racial isolation can occur even when one *does* have access to people with whom they share a race (ethnic/cultural racial isolation) and other people of color (race-based racial isolation). The development of racial literacy is crucial in this regard, as it enables adoptees to distinguish between race and ethnicity by contextualizing the role of histories (Korean American adoption and American racism) in how adoptees are differently positioned in relation to other Asian Americans and people of color. For example, while Michelle and Alex experienced racial isolation as we traditionally tend to think of it (isolation from access to people of color in general), Ben and Hye Wol grew up *with* access to people of color—for Ben, other Korean adoptees and for Hye Wol,

other non-adopted people of color but reported still experiencing the alienating effects of racial isolation in childhood (Ben) and in early adulthood (Hye Wol). One reason for this is likely the pervasiveness of colorblind rhetoric, a rhetoric that thrives on the absence of racial literacy and which I have addressed in Chapter 1 as taking on a specific character in the context of this study. This was especially apparent in Hye Wol's story of her experience at college where a colorblind rhetoric was deployed to promote a "good Christian" identity at the expense of all other identities. For Ben, it was likely that he did not engage with other Korean adoptees growing up in spite of having access to them due to a lack of racial literacy (i.e., an understanding of why it would be important and valuable to interact with other adoptees) and perhaps because, as many scholars working with adult adoptees have observed, adoptees often experience tremendous pressure to fit into/identify their White families and communities, which often results in an avoidance of all things Asian and adoptee (Kim; McKee; Palmer; Park Nelson). What both Ben's and Hye Wol's stories thus seem to suggest is that racial isolation can happen even when one has access to other Korean adoptees like them (Ben) and even when they have access to other people of color (Hye Wol).

Michelle's story of re-experiencing the disorientation and alienation of racial isolation after returning from her homeland tour to Korea further indicates how racial isolation can be experienced among people of the same race. Having taken the first steps out of racial isolation and readymade relations by going on the homeland tour, her return to racial isolation was disorienting to Michelle because even her Asian American friends who shared her race could not understand the specific impact of Asian American racialization on her, at least not as completely as fellow Korean adoptees could. What Ben's, Hye Wol's, and Michelle's stories together imply, then, is that *only relationships with other Korean adoptees* (what Kim has called adoptee kinship) *can comprehensively sponsor adoptees' development of relational literacy* in regard to their identities as adoptees because of how specifically they are positioned in relation to others. This is not to say it isn't possible for adoptees to achieve a sense of

peace about their adoptee identities without building relationships with one another. Rather, it is to say that adoptees' relationships with one another are the most likely relationships to sponsor relational literacy for them because such relationships can account for the unique dimensions of the Korean adoptee experience in ways others, even relationships with other Asian Americans and people of color, cannot.

What participants' stories also show is that disorientation is a common response to moving beyond racial isolation and readymade relations. For the community leaders in this study, Hye Wol's and Michelle's stories specifically illustrated how disorientation can occur in the initial stages of building relationships with other adoptees (Hye Wol and Michelle) as well as after the initial stages of building relationships with other adoptees when adoptees return to racial isolation (Michelle). I posit that the former occurs because, in being around other adoptees, that which the structures of readymade relations center (their Asianness, Koreanness, adopteeness) in the interest of assimilating adoptees into predominantly White families and communities must be centered in the interest of relating to other adoptees. To explain how the latter happens, I must first tell a story about one of the defining moments of my relationships with Ben, Hye Wol, Michelle. In 2017, we and a few other KAD Midwest adoptees traveled together to San Francisco for the IKAA mini-gathering hosted by the Association of Korean Adoptees San Francisco (AKA SF). We shared an Air B&B and spent the weekend together attending conference sessions, eating, meeting new adoptee friends, and exploring. As a result, it was disorienting to return to the racial isolation of my life back home because I went from having direct and constant access to adoptees to having indirect and limited access. Hye Wol and Ben reached out to through our group chat in Facebook Messenger to, as leaders, let those of us who were newer to the community know that it was very normal to experience "post-conference blues" and "withdrawal" after being immersed in adoptee community

and stories for such a concentrated period of time. They even shared their own experiences (past and current) with that kind of disorientation, which ultimately helped us process our own.

All of this to say is that disorientation, as experienced through racial isolation (or any kind of isolation) after moving beyond it, is not necessarily something that fades, but something that, with community, becomes more manageable. I myself continue to experience processes of disorientation, even as a seasoned member of the Korean adoptee community who has been going to adoptee conferences and events for six years. And just as it is my relationships with fellow adoptees that have helped sponsor my move beyond racial isolation, it is also my relationships with fellow adoptees that help me stay grounded in my adoptee identity when I have to physically return to it. It is likely that this is why Michelle felt alone even among her Asian American friends upon returning from her homeland tour and first time being around other adoptees in 2006. What's more, our stories of disorientation and our recursive reflections on them (first practice of relational literacy) help generate critical understandings of these experiences (second point of relational literacy) like the ones outlined above.

In the next chapter, I share participants' stories regarding their experiences as leaders of adoptee community through KAD Midwest to demonstrate how the practices of recursive reflection, racial literacy, and disorientation covered in this chapter can lead to the sponsorship of relational literacy through disidentification/cultural productions for others as a means for revising isolation and readymade relations (third point of relational literacy). Together, their stories illuminate the different forms such sponsorship can take.

CHAPTER 4:

REVISING RACIAL ISOLATION AND READYMADE RELATIONS WITH RELATIONAL LITERACY AND DISIDENTIFICATION

While Chapter 3 focused on the roles of recursive reflection, racial literacy, and disorientation in the development of relational literacy in the context of the Korean adoptee community leader participants' initial movements beyond racial isolation and readymade relations, Chapter 4 focuses on these practices in the context of participants' leadership of KAD Midwest. Using a lens of relational literacy, I show how participants' storied experiences leading adoptee community via KAD Midwest's formal and informal programming can be seen as evidence of how the sponsorship of relational literacy works to revise racial isolation and readymade relations. I argue such revisions are disidentifications (cultural productions) that occur through processes of disorientation that arise out of the contradictions (e.g., race, family, citizenship, belonging) embedded in adoptees' readymade relations and racial isolation. In this way, disorientation is a facet of disidentification, which is itself a cultural practice and production of adoptee community enacted through story, relationality, and racial literacy. As participants' stories illustrate, disidentification occurs at both the individual and communal levels and is always geared toward action, particularly action that visibilizes and centers that which readymade relations and racial isolation are designed to invisibilize and erase: the role of race and adoption in Korean adoptees' lived experiences and identities.

In this chapter, I build on Ben's, Hye Wol's, Michelle's, and Alex's stories from Chapter 3 to further illustrate and nuance the roles of recursive reflection, racial literacy, and disidentification in the development of relational literacy. I especially emphasize the third practice of relational literacy, or the enactment/sponsorship of disidentification to revise racial isolation and readymade relations. This practice enabled me as a researcher to identify a major theme in their sponsorship of relational

literacy as the facilitation of relationships between adult adoptees and Asian American communities via formal and informal programming and mentorship. I first unpack disidentification as cultural production to orient readers to participants' stories and the work they simultaneously enact and represent. I then explore said stories to explicate how the participants enact and sponsor relational literacy through five themes that emerged from the data: (1) the facilitation of members' relationships to one another, Korean culture, Korean American culture, and Korean American adoptee culture; (2) the establishment of programming spaces that are as safe as possible for adoptees; (3) the revision of "Korean American" and "Asian American" racial/ethnic categories; (4) the facilitation of relationships between KAD Midwest and other Korean adoptee organizations; and (5) the intentional cultivation of the next generation of adoptee community leaders. I conclude with a brief discussion of these findings and suggest they indicate that racial isolation is less a static condition of physical environment and more an ongoing process.

Korean American Adoptees and Disidentification as Cultural Production

As Chapter 3 asserted, disorientation can often accompany adoptees' initial movements beyond racial isolation and readymade relations. Building on this, Chapter 4 shows how the experience of disorientation can lead to the enactment of disidentification. Disidentification has been well theorized by scholars like Lowe (1996), Muñoz (1999), and Rhodes and Alexander (2012). I begin with Muñoz in conjunction with Rhodes and Alexander, as within the context of this study they offer general conceptions of disidentification and its utility in the discipline of rhetoric and writing. Muñoz has defined disidentification as a "hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance" that recycles and rethinks encoded meaning. Specifically, Muñoz argues that:

> the process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include, and

> empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, identification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (31)

Key to this definition is disidentification as action, particularly *performance*. For Muñoz, queer of color performance art are productions through which queer of color subjects critically engage and disidentify from stereotypical representations of themselves and. Moreover, he asserts these performances are political and that disidentification is "a crucial practice of contesting social subordination through the project of worldmaking" (200). Rhodes and Alexander have expanded on this definition to the context of queer archive-making by simultaneously performing a queer rhetorical archive as well as theorizing the rhetorical and pedagogical possibilities of queer archives through alternative modalities of rhetorical practice.

Lowe has similarly described disidentification as action and performance, specifically the act of making/performing Asian American cultural productions that "[emerge] out of the contradictions of immigrant marginality [and] displace the fiction of reconciliation, disrupt the myth of national identity by revealing its gaps and fissures, and intervene in the narrative of national development that would illegitimately locate 'the immigrant'…" (9). According to this definition, Asian American disidentification is a dialectical process that takes place through Asian American critiques of the many rhetorical contradictions embedded in Asian immigration and citizenship (e.g., exclusionary immigration law, yellow peril[34], model minority myth) to/in the US. For Lowe, these productions are the result of experiences of disorientation. In examining Asian American novels as Asian American cultural productions, she illustrates how these productions disidentify with stereotypical

[34] As Lowe notes, yellow peril, or the nineteenth century (and onwards) fear that Asian immigrants will displace Whites demonstrates the US's national anxieties around Asian immigration, even as the US contradictorily purports that Asians are the most assimilable racial and ethnic minorities through the model minority myth (19).

representations of Asians in the US imaginary and, in so doing, function as "sites for the emergence of a new subject" (33) and "new forms of solidarity" (53).

Given the above, this chapter examines participants' stories of leading KAD Midwest and argues that the organization's programming and behind-the-scenes planning can be understood as acts of disidentification. In accordance with Muñoz, if disidentification "scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications" (31), the encoded messaging that KAD Midwest's programming scrambles and reconstructs are those embedded in rhetorics of colorblindness, adoption as love, and adoptees as gifts. As detailed in Chapter 1, such encoded messages include: assumptions that race does not/should not impact transracial adoptees and that Asians do not experience racism in America (colorblindness); assumptions that adoptees who are "well-adjusted" and fulfilled should not wonder about their origins (adoption as love); assumptions that adoptees who do are "ungrateful" (adoptees as gifts). Participants' stories in this chapter, then, specifically show how KAD Midwest's programming and planning are enactments of disidentification that expose and rework these encoded messages' in ways that acknowledge and value adoptees' multiple and intersecting identities and the identificatory possibilities disidentification affords.

In this chapter, readers will see how relational literacy as a framework elucidates Korean adoptee community practices/processes of disidentification and the distinctly Korean American adoptee cultural productions that result. Overall, I argue that participants' stories ultimately show how KAD Midwest was established on the grounds of story, relationality, and relational accountability, and how it continues to run on such. However, before presenting the data, it is important to remind readers of the ways story, relationality, and relational accountability function in

relational literacy and why they are particularly salient to the study of Korean American adoptee rhetorics.

Building Community: Revisiting Asian American Rhetoric and Asian American Adoptees

Recall that story and relationality are inextricably entwined in that stories are the symbolic vehicle through which relations are un/re/made and revised. In other words, every story (in all the various forms stories take) is a means for organizing and representing relationships between people, things, places, spaces, time, and ideas and, as such, are a form of knowledge production. Following Shawn Wilson, this means that *relationality* refers to a person's recognition that "reality *is* relationships or sets of relationships" and it is the process of relationships; as such, there can be many realities (73). Thus, the readymade relations referenced in the prior chapter are the result of particular stories that fix adoptees into particular sets of relationships/realities, of which racial isolation is a major component. And while these stories/relations constitute one reality of adoption, a reality centered in geopolitical systems of capital exchange and "family completion"[35] that privilege adoptive parents' and nations' perspectives; the stories adoptees tell from their own embodied experiences navigating these stories/relations suggest possibilities for still other relationships, stories, knowledges, and realities. As such, this chapter is invested in analyzing what can it mean to decenter these perspectives/stories/realities and prioritize those of adoptees instead. More broadly, this chapter is invested in analyzing what it can mean to decenter readymade relations and use relational literacy to seek and access new relations to gain and create forms of knowledge and identification that are historically informed and relevant to lived experiences of marginalization and disorientation.

[35] I put this term in quotes as a way to acknowledge its pronatalist and heteronormative assumptions that implicitly suggest families can only be "completed" by children.

Adoptee Disidentifications: From Racial Isolation and Readymade Relations to Racial Literacy and Adoptee Community

In listening to the stories participants shared regarding their experiences founding and leading KAD Midwest, I found that a major theme in their sponsorship of relational literacy occurs through the facilitation of relationships between adult adoptee members of KAD Midwest via formal and informal programming and mentorship. In conjunction with the organization's programming, these relationships have been shown to prepare adoptees for and provide them support in their engagements with adoptee community. To continue emphasizing story, relationality, and relational accountability as key to the rhetorics produced by leaders of Korean American adoptee community, I share excerpts of my own stories in conjunction with those of my participants stories to illustrate their sponsorship of relational literacy and enactments of disidentification. Readers will see that, in their capacity as leaders of KAD Midwest, the participants of this study facilitated relationships among members and themselves to: (1) the facilitate members' relationships to one another, Korean culture, Korean American culture, and Korean American adoptee culture; (2) establish programming spaces that are as safe as possible for adoptees; (3) revise "Korean American" and "Asian American" racial/ethnic categories; (4) facilitate relationships between KAD Midwest and other Korean adoptee organizations; and (5) intentionally cultivate the next generation of adoptee community leaders.

Performing Disidentification through the Sponsoring of Relational Literacy by Facilitating Adoptees' Relationships to One Another, Korean, Korean American, and Korean American Adoptee Cultures

The first theme in participants' stories regarding their performance of disidentification through the sponsorship of relational literacy is their connection of adoptees with one another, Korean, as well as Korean American and Korean American adoptee cultures. I begin this section with one of Ben's stories because it provides a relevant metaphor for the gravity of participants'

stewardship of KAD Midwest and the role of relationality in their sponsorship of relational literacy. As Chapter 3 showed, the leaders' stories all indicated that experiencing isolation from other adoptees is ultimately what led them to found and lead KAD Midwest. To this effect, Ben offered his understanding that KAD Midwest functions as "a beacon for Korean adoptees," or a way to connect Korean adoptees with one another, with Korean culture (language, food, practices, histories), and with Korea (the homeland) itself. This beacon metaphor is particularly applicable to the theme of racial isolation that tends to permeate the lives of transnational, transracial adoptees. A beacon is often defined as signal or light that is commonly affixed at a height to guide vessels. Its utility lies in its purpose as an object for guiding a target audience in conditions that obscure wayfaring. Beacons are thus made to facilitate survival in precarious situations. Ben's intentional usage of this term indicates an understanding of adoptee community (through KAD Midwest) as a means for adoptees to navigate rhetorical conditions where their wayfaring has been obscured—such as conditions of racial isolation and readymade relations. The metaphor of the beacon suggests that the relationships KAD Midwest facilitate between members, members and leaders, leaders, objects, places, and ideas fundamentally center race, ethnicity, and adoption; an act that implies a relationally literate theory of adoptee community predicated on adoptee kinship. In short, the metaphor gestures to how KAD Midwest provides ways out of the profound confusion most transnational, transracial adoptees experience when isolated from sponsors of relational literacy that can speak to the layered complexities and possibilities of embodying a Korean American adoptee identity.

As he proceeded, I came to comprehend Ben's descriptions of KAD Midwest's programming as performances of disidentifications—what Lowe would call cultural productions—and instances through which the organization sponsors relational (and, thereby, racial) literacy. He said, "It's a way to connect Korean adoptees with each other. Like, going back to [the point that]

some people may never have seen another Korean adoptee before." In this quote, Ben reinforces the exigence of racial isolation for adoptee community by highlighting how some adoptees have never seen another Korean adoptee before. He continued with:

> It connects them with the Korean culture as well. Cause I know some adoptees wouldn't [know how] to go about themselves at a Korean restaurant for the first time and navigate that, especially when the serving staff might not be able to communicate with them. So that can be intimidating. [KAD Midwest] is a beacon in terms of connecting Korean adoptees with that culture and even just knowing what [Korean] language resources are available because KAD Midwest will provide that as well. And in terms of connecting adoptees to Korea, [we connect them to] the land as well. What I mean by that is having the Gathering[36], knowing that the Gathering is available for us. I wouldn't have known otherwise that there was such a thing. Like an adoptee-specific conference that takes place in Korea.

Ben's recognition and prioritization of facilitating adoptees' relationships with one another through the facilitation of relationships between adoptees and Korea, Korean and Korean American cultures, and Korean American adoptee cultures implies that the sponsorship of racial literacy is a significant component of the development and sponsorship of relational literacy. Moreover, it implies that his performances as a leader in this capacity can be understood as performances of disidentification in that they acknowledge and reconstruct encoded messages in rhetorics of colorblindness, adoption as love, and adoptees as gifts—particularly those that assume adoptees who are "well-adjusted" and fulfilled should not wonder about their origins. This quote demonstrates that, for Ben, one of KAD

[36] The IKAA Gathering is a triennial conference for Korean adoptees by Korean adoptees that takes place in Seoul, South Korea. It was originally put on in 2004 by the International Korean Adoptee Associations (IKAA), a global organization that unites regional adult Korean adoptee organizations like KAD Midwest across the world. In the two years between every Gathering, regional adoptee organizations host "mini-gatherings," a similar kind of conference but on a smaller scale than the one that occurs in Korea.

Midwest's major roles as a community organization serving adoptees is to facilitate relationships between Korean adoptees, their birth culture, and the histories therein. What's more, KAD Midwest leaves it open to adoptees to decide what those relationships mean to them in that the options and resources are there, but not forced or prescribed. They are, in other words, providing *options* for adoptees to further explore their identities as Korean adoptees collectively with other Korean adoptees.

In transcribing our interview, Ben's above description of KAD Midwest prompted me to pause and reflect on my own initial experiences with adoptee community and KAD Midwest. I thought about growing up in racial isolation without an adoptee-informed context for relating to or identifying with other Korean adoptees or with myself as a Korean adoptee. I thought about how, like Alex, my parents tried to take me to an annual agency-sponsored Christmas dinner for adoptees and adoptive families when I was young. We attended for only a handful of years before I vehemently refused to go. I was too focused then on trying to mitigate my racial difference in the midst of my predominantly White friends and community to conceive of that dinner as anything other than antithetical to my mission to assimilate and prove I was no different than anyone else. The shame I felt in having my differences identified and ridiculed by others was a powerful motivator for me to assimilate in accordance with my readymade relations by eschewing all things Asian and adoption in adolescence as well as into adulthood. Given these experiences, I have very much benefitted from KAD Midwest's work to connect me with other adoptees as an adult and it is a practice I now engage in as a seasoned member of Korean adoptee community and as one of the few out there whose scholarship engages critical perspectives of adoption from an adoptee perspective. I have met some of my closest adoptee friends through KAD Midwest and, this fact aside, a testament to the organization's success in such advocacy is that Korean adoptees travel from

all over to be a part of KAD Midwest's programming, some coming as far as Iowa, Ohio, New York, and more.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, KAD Midwest connects adoptees to one another, Korean culture, as well as to Korean American and Korean American adoptee cultures through formal and informal programming that I argue can be understood performances of disidentification that revise racial isolation and readymade relations. For instance, KAD Midwest organizes monthly events for constituents that range from celebrations of Korean holidays like Chuseok (Korean fall harvest holiday) and Seollal (Korean Lunar New Year); to Korean cooking classes; to the annual Ugly Christmas Sweater and Halloween parties (American holidays); to adoptee-led self-care workshops, movie screenings of Korean films and films on adoption, documentaries and podcasts by adoptees on adoption, adoption conferences, and talks by adoptee scholars on adoption scholarship. While these events fall under the category of the organization's formal programming, they all feature informal elements like group dinners and casual hangouts. In general, both kinds of programming offer adoptees a variety of complementary modes of engagement (formal talks, breakout discussion groups, expert panels, casual conversation, etc.) with the many contradictions of their marginality.

An example from my own experience is the organization's 2016 event with Kim Park Nelson, an esteemed Korean adoptee scholar who studies Korean adoption. Kim was flown in from Minnesota to give a talk about her recently released book *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* at the Hana Center, a local Korean American nonprofit coalition affiliated with KAD Midwest that provides critical services like language, translation, immigration services, etc. to Midwest City's Korean immigrant community, adoptees, and other marginalized groups. During Kim's talk, I experienced firsthand how KAD Midwest sponsors relational literacy for adoptees through the formal event of the talk (expansion of relations not only with an adoptee scholar and critical histories of adoption but also by a Korean American

community organization) as well as through the informal dinner (KBBQ restaurant) and noraebang (Korean noraebang joint) that followed. As an adoptee attendee of this event—itself a performance disidentification and a uniquely Korean adoptee cultural production—I had the opportunity to learn from the performances of: a scholar whose research has been key to my own journey out of racial isolation and readymade relations (in terms of what it can mean to be an adoptee *and* an adoptee scholar); I got to speak with her personally at the dinner and in the parking lot about it (mentorship); I forged new relationships with other adoptees (some artists, students, designers, engineers); and learned from KAD Midwest's executive board how to facilitate these kinds of relations (open and honest conversations about adoption and race and how they have impacted us) and how important they are to adoptees.

It should thus come as no surprise that, in discussing his role as a leader who connects with prospective members to one another, Korean culture, as well as to Korean American and Korean American adoptee cultures, Ben used the theme of *Creating Community, Catalyzing Change* from the September 2018 IKAA conference KAD Midwest hosted to celebrate its 10-year anniversary. In particular, he used this theme to describe what he perceives his role to be in the organization: "my part is more about connecting people and bringing people into the fold and making sure they feel welcome in the community. … I connect with them in terms of if they want to get involved or if they want to learn more, or just making them aware of it because, again, I didn't really think about that when I joined KAD Midwest." Importantly, when examined through a lens of relational literacy, Ben's point about "making them aware of it" highlights the fact that most Korean American adoptees exist in conditions of racial isolation from other adoptees. That he references his own experience of not having really thought about it upon joining KAD Midwest hints that ongoing and engaged reflections of his own experiences with racial isolation and coming out of it have enabled him to perform/sponsor disidentifications aimed at expanding adoptees' relational possibilities

through connection with the parts of themselves their readymade relations often elide (race and adoption). Ben's connecting of adoptees to one another, Korean culture, as well as to Korean American and Korean American adoptee cultures, then, are performances of disidentification that revise racial isolation and readymade relations by sponsoring racial literacy through the provision of cultural strategies (connection to other adoptees) for navigating the ways race and adoption impact adoptees' lives and identities.

Though it may be tempting for non-adoptees to assume KAD Midwest's facilitation of relationships between adult adoptee members and leaders is only useful to adoptees, relational literacy allows us to see how Hye Wol's stories below indicate the opposite. In the paragraphs that follow, I draw on participants' insights to show how the organization's performances of disidentification through the sponsorship of relations between adoptees highlights its ultimate mission of making the world more just and habitable for all, not just adoptees. I specifically argue that, as a Korean American adoptee serving entity, KAD Midwest indeed centers adoptees in the achievement of this mission. Moreover, as Hye Wol's and Alex's stories illustrate, their work with the organization is based on social justice and, as evidenced by the second half of the title of the 2018 conference they hosted, it is based on catalyzing change. Put another way, the leaders' stories gesture to adoptees' unique positioning as between worlds to advocate for adoptees' rights, which has necessarily led them to simultaneously advocate for Asian American rights and, more broadly, immigrant rights.

Recall that, in Chapter 3, Hye Wol noted that what initially convinced her of KAD Midwest's necessity was its work with adopted Asian youth. The following stories indicate that engaged, recursive reflection over the years and the development of racial literacy has led her and the other leaders to prioritize the performance of disidentification through the sponsorship of racial literacy in their programming. For instance, when asked about her leadership practices with the

organization, Hye Wol specifically identified the rhetorical practice of "being missional" to ensure KAD Midwest always functions in accordance with "whatever our local Korean adoptee community needs." One example of what it means to be missional, as Hye Wol explained, is for the executive board to work together to "make sure we never become too internally focused." For her, this has meant taking up "more of an outward thinking [orientation] as opposed to this inward thing where we focused on ourselves and got too caught up in our in our interpersonal stuff." While Hye Wol does not discount the importance of internal connections in the organization, she is careful to temper leadership's focus on such connections with external ones to ensure KAD Midwest's relational accountability in always serving the adoptee community over individual interests. In other words, effectively and holistically serving the needs of adoptees requires leaders to consider wider forces and structures of power (e.g., readymade relations and the neocolonial relationship of dependence between Korea and the US) that have and continue to shape adoptees' lived experiences in order to maintain accountability to those lived experiences.

In describing what she meant by "outward thinking," Hye Wol emphasized that the founders of KAD Midwest were grounded in a social justice orientation to building the organization. She equated this to what she called "a strong missional foundation" and further noted that:

> It was never just about socializing. Although, at the beginning, that's how we were building our bonds. But it was always about multiculturalism, education, and I think that the founders collectively had more of a 'global mindset'. [It was] definitely a very diverse mindset and, I think, a social justice orientation. So, I think that was always part of our group.

Here, Hye Wol reflects on the importance of KAD Midwest as a space for adoptees to socialize with one another by highlighting that such opportunities for socialization were how they initially built their relationships together. Implied here is a critical understanding based in recursive reflection and

racial literacy that racial isolation stymies adoptees' abilities to engage multiculturalism, education, a diverse mindset, and a social justice orientation. Ben confirmed this in a story he shared with me about what other adoptees have noticed regarding KAD Midwest's organizational success:

> We actually have people who want to get involved with activism and make change as opposed to some groups that just want to get together to have dinner. Like, there's also that and that's good, I'm not trying to criticize it. It's just, maybe to some people it's considered incomplete to them. We all have to start somewhere, and I know for me it would be too much to ask someone at the first event to start going to these [marches] and advocating. I think it has to happen on a timetable.

Taken together, Ben and Hye Wol's collective orientation toward KAD Midwest as both social *and* political emphasizes Hye Wol's claims that the organization is both internally and externally focused and that, as such, there is a larger context and possibility for adoptees to organize and identify as agents of their own experience and as agents of change. While members and even the leaders of KAD Midwest are not obligated to participate in social justice efforts, relational literacy shows that KAD Midwest provides the option. Moreover, their statements suggest that social bonds between adoptees are important to establish before jumping into political organizing and advocacy work.

Performing Disidentification by Sponsoring Relational Literacy in the Creation of "Safe Spaces" for Korean Adoptees

The second theme in participants' stories regarding their sponsorship of relational literacy is the performance of disidentification in the creation of "safe spaces" for Korean adoptees to participate in organizational programming. Interestingly, participants did not explicitly define safe spaces as adoptee-only spaces, but their stories about cultivating safe spaces for adoptees appeared to recodify the term "safe" in the context of KAD Midwest as adoptee-only. As Chapters 1 and 2 explained, what is "safe" for adoptees has largely been determined by adoptive parents, orphanages, adoption agencies, and social workers and is usually framed in deracialized, assimilating terms. Thus,

significantly, Hye Wol's, Michelle's, and Alex's recodification of the term from a distinctly adoptee perspective represents a uniquely Korean adoptee need for Korean adoptee community, thereby determining that "safe" in this context often means adoptee-only. Relational literacy makes visible the fraught emotions and traumas that can be involved in this process, which has led the leaders to invest in performances of disidentification (i.e., the production of "safe"/adoptee-only spaces) in order to be accountable to the disorientation that often accompanies movement beyond racial isolation and the structures of readymade relations.

The importance and challenges of providing these kinds of spaces were touched on in each of the participants' stories. Using relational literacy, I was able to see their stories and the work they represent as performances of disidentification that acknowledge and reconstruct encoded messages in rhetorics of colorblindness, adoption as love, and adoptees as gifts—particularly those that assume race does not/should not affect adoptees (colorblindness), assumptions that adoptees who are "well-adjusted" and fulfilled should not wonder about their origins (adoption as love); assumptions that adoptees who do are "ungrateful" (adoptees as gifts). As rhetorics of colorblindness, adoption as love, and adoptees as gifts have tended to silence and invalidate adoptees' experiences with marginalization, participants show that adoptee-only spaces are important for safely processing the impact of such rhetorics on adoptees' lives. For example, both Alex and Michelle framed their stories of cultivating safe spaces (i.e., adoptee-only spaces) for programming in terms of challenges the organization has faced in membership retention. Alex noted:

> Someone asked if they could bring their mother. I'm glad they asked, but no, because at the time we were really trying to make and advertise ourselves as a safe space for adoptees. Maybe if it was someone's very first meeting, sure, a partner or supportive friend [could come] so you don't feel totally alone. But for the most part with follow-

> up meetings, you know... This adoptee who was kind of involved at the time was like 'Well I don't want to be a part of this group if you're so exclusionary.'

Michelle added:

> How to deal with people who have opposing opinions has been a recurring issue of like, 'We should have a space that's just for adoptees,' or even if we have an event that's quote-unquote 'open' for adoptees to bring others. And then some people are bringing too many others and someone else is like, 'Well why is so and so [bringing] 10 people?' Does that then make the space feel unsafe for [them]? First and foremost, it's supposed to be for adoptees.

Alex's and Michelle's stories here show a critical attention to how to best provide safe spaces for adoptees to connect with one another and process their identities. While they both acknowledge that adoptees who have never connected with other adoptees might feel safer with a non-adoptee friend/partner or an adoptive parent present for their first event with KAD Midwest, they also acknowledge that "safe space" means adoptee-only or mostly adoptee-only.

This raises the question: why might adoptee-only spaces be safer for adoptees than ones that include non-adoptees in the context of adult adoptee groups and organizations? Alex's and Michelle's stories in the previous paragraph show how some—even adoptees themselves—can view the construction and performance of adoptee-only spaces as "exclusionary" and therefore antithetical to community. While it is not untrue that adoptee-only spaces are exclusionary to some degree, it is critical to consider why such exclusions might be necessary to comprehend their value. As previously mentioned, Hye Wol noted that KAD Midwest's mission is and always has been to help adoptees "find a strong, shared, cultural and *specifically adoptee citizenship identity*" (emphasis mine). Adoptee-only spaces are thus valuable in this context in that they can facilitate adoptees' uptake of relational literacy by giving them the space to explore (as safely as possible) adoptee-to-adoptee

relations beyond the immediate influence and potential backlash of readymade relations. As suggested by Michelle in the previous paragraph, the point at which a space can become unsafe for an adoptee's development of a strong, shared, cultural and specifically adoptee citizenship identity is when they feel obligated to not only manage their emotions around critically considering their adoptee identities for the first time, but when they must also manage the emotions of non-adoptees, especially those of their own readymade relations (e.g., adoptive family).

An example I can give of this from my own experiences was an incident that occurred in the spring of 2019 when I published a blog post about my birth search. In it, I described the excitement and anxieties I had regarding my upcoming trip to Korea and meeting my birth father and three birth sisters for the first time. My adoptive mother read it and sent me an email in response, in which she praised my writing and affirmed my use of it to elevate adoptees' lived experiences by openly sharing my own. While pleased by this, what was hard for me was her caveat that I not forget I am still her daughter. Such a statement was jarring to me because it decentered *my* needs as an adoptee and instead centered her insecurities as an adoptive parent that I might renounce my membership in our family to join another. Of course, this had not even been on my mind—as an adoptee, my existence requires me to be comfortable with discomfort and one of the discomforts I have learned to live with is the cognitive dissonance of being of two families at once. Given the immense stress and anxiety of conducting a birth search, traveling to Korea without major supports, and meeting my birth family (all while working toward a PhD, no less), what I needed from her at the time was the reassurance that, no matter how it turned out, she would support me. And while I did get some of that from her, her possessiveness was hurtful because it signaled to me that, perhaps, she didn't understand why I was doing this after all. Of course, her feelings here are very valid and arguably "normal" given the circumstances. Though, to me, it had nothing to do with replacing one family with another. It was about better understanding a very vital part of myself that

cannot be excised. It was about being relationally accountable to myself so I could better be relationally accountable to all my relations, adoptees especially. In conjunction with participants' stories above, this story indicates how disorienting and painful it can be for adoptees to disidentify from racial isolation and readymade relations to develop and enact relational literacy. Had my blog post been only viewable by adoptees, I would have received mostly support and affirmation in what is an extremely difficult process (reunion).

What Hye Wol's, Alex's, and Michelle's stories illustrate in conjunction with mine is my earlier claim that, because adoptee kinship is "founded on the arbitrariness and contingency of adoption histories" (Kim 95), it necessarily entails the centering of adoptees' racial and familial differences. Understanding our stories as performances of disidentification through the sponsorship of racial and relational literacy moreover illuminates how this has been constructed by readymade relations to be at odds with the prioritization of assimilation through adoptees' social death/de-kinning and the erasure of their race via colorblindness. It also illuminates the need for such structures to be revised. Recall that adoptees and non-adoptees are very differently positioned in relation to one another in Western societies that privilege blood-based conceptions of family and racialized standards of belonging. Given that such conceptions and standards have historically resulted in racial isolation, adoptees are often well-versed in existing in racially isolated contexts (i.e., assimilating) and much less versed, if at all, in existing in racially diverse and/or adoptee contexts. Assimilating into Whiteness often tacitly or explicitly encourages adoptees to avoid openly identifying with that which makes them fundamentally different from their predominantly White counterparts—adoption and race.

Through the performance adoptee kinship, these deferred and at times outright denied differences are purposefully centered, which can cause adoptees exploring their adoptee identity through adoptee community for the first time a variety of unprecedented emotions like grief,

anguish, anger, sadness, frustration, elation, joy, and more. Non-adoptees, on the other hand—particularly those that an adoptee might bring for a sense of security to their first adoptee event like family, close friends, and partners—are usually equally, if not more, lacking the relational literacy necessary to effectively and respectfully navigate adoptee-only spaces, programming, and issues (i.e., not take it personally that adoptee kinship can give the adoptees they care about something they can't). This lack of relational literacy on the part of adoptees new to adoptee community is expected due to racial isolation and the structures of readymade relations. In many ways, the spaces KAD Midwest performs and provides for adoptees through their programming are designed to facilitate new adoptees' incorporation into the fold as evidenced by Hye Wol:

> That's one leadership practice, being really missional and making sure that we were more than just a social group. Like, what was it we're seeking accomplish, and how does our programming reflect that? So, our first line might be to be a critical safe space for adoptees, so making sure that the way we did events, we created that safe space. So, we would challenge ourselves as a board to reflect on past events. Like, was there an event where people came who were new that somehow expressed to someone that no one welcomed them, that they didn't feel cared for? On the other end, did people express (new folks) that they really understood what the group was doing, that they felt good about it?
>
> And we would challenge ourselves to be better. So, we'd say like, 'This event we didn't do such a great job of reaching out to new folks. It felt like we were being a little clique-ish. So, we would evaluate our own practice. If we believe in making the world a little bit safer for the next generation of adoptees, what are we doing towards that end, right? Are we are partnering with the social justice-oriented groups in our area who are working on adoptee rights issues?

However, given that KAD Midwest's mission is focused on adoptees and not non-adoptees, non-adoptees' lack of relational literacy in this regard can be detrimental and undermining to the organization's mission to revise that lack. As attendees are encouraged to disidentify from grand narratives of adoption as a selfless, loving act as well as from the colorblind ideologies that often structure adoption and adopters' and adoptees' self-conceptions, non-adoptees risk assigning the management of what are often feelings of guilt, defensiveness, possessiveness, disbelief, anger, sadness, and more to the very adoptees they came to support.

KAD Midwest's provision of a "safe space" for adoptees can also be connected back to the previous section in regard to KAD Midwest's investment in both the social and the political. In particular, as one who has functioned in the capacity of connecting adoptees to one another, Korean culture, as well as Korean American and Korean American adoptee cultures (i.e., creating community) Ben's stories perform his cognizance of how being among other Korean adoptees for the first time can be triggering. I posit that this cognizance is evident of a critical recognition of the one thing we all share as adoptees: that our first experiences of life are upheaval and loss. To this effect, Ben noted, "You know there's a lot of anxiety that goes into your first event. Or even your pre-first event. There's a lot of people who would like to go but they're not sure what's going to happen, if they're going to feel triggered." Of course, there are certain gains accompanied by that loss—such as the gaining of new families (chosen and potentially biological), homes, lives, and opportunities—but these gains do not and cannot erase the forced losses that make these gains possible in the first place. The paradox of adoption is, at its core, a traumatic one: for one family to be made, another must be unmade. By virtue of the adoptee kinships on which these communities are built, participating in adoptee communities like KAD Midwest can bring adoptees into direct confrontation with this loss and, as Michelle's and Alex's stories illustrated in the previous chapter, adoptee kinship can also be accompanied by the risk of losing new adoptee-to-adoptee relations. In

recognizing this, then, Ben seeks to be a mitigator of that trauma by acting as a friendly, welcoming presence for new and re-engaging members. A beacon, if you will.

Moreover, as performed in his own story, Ben recognizes the recursive nature of trauma and loss Korean American adoptees may experience. Here, I want to briefly revisit my previous point I Chapter 3 about how, in first mentioning that he co-founded a Korean American adoptee student organization on his campus in undergrad, Ben did not immediately go into details about this experience. Instead, he noted that, while he began the group in the spring semester of 2006, "I got distracted with finishing school… [with] my first job out of college and so my priorities shifted to that. And so, this whole adoptee community, I put it on hold." He moved to another state in the Midwest for his first job out of college and, from 2006 until moving to Midwest City in 2015, focused primarily on establishing his career as a software engineer, which meant explorations of his adoptee identity were superseded by explorations of his career. The conversation then moved into Ben explaining how he first got involved with KAD Midwest in 2015, the year he turned 30 and moved to Midwest City. Though he did not elaborate on why his career took precedent over adoptee community, it is reasonable to assume his decision had to do with all the common reasons people focus on their careers, such as for practicality, survival, and the building of a professional foundation to support their growth and goals. However, I would also suggest that these dis/engagements with adoptee community prior to Ben's decided commitment to his leadership roles in KAD Midwest also point to an embodied understanding of the anxiety and trauma of disidentifying from racial isolation and readymade relations. In this way, his role in creating community by connecting with other adoptees, particularly first-time attendees, can be seen as stemming from his lived experiences grappling with the very traumas and anxieties that make taking the plunge so risky and fraught in the first place.

I now return to Hye Wol's use of "missional" to describe her leadership practices with KAD Midwest as fundamentally based in social justice to further explore the organization's performance and promotion of Korean American adoptees' relational literacy and, through that literacy, their self and collective possibilities for identification. In order to understand the magnitude of where KAD Midwest is now as an organization known on both national and global levels for their successful work connecting *and* advocating for adoptee and immigration rights, it is necessary to understand the co-founders' original goals. Alex remarked that:

> Initially, what I felt I had a lot of momentum for—what I really wanted to do—was what Hye Wol and KAD Midwest have gotten into now. So, a lot of social political activism and advocacy, which is actually what [redacted] and [redacted] were gearing for back in the late 90s. Having these two advocates in the community back in the late 90s wanting to organize adult Korean adoptees to challenge immigration. It was just way too much. No one was interested. And so, when KAD Midwest first started, that became a big reality to me that people don't want to have things like process groups or even like talk about it. They'd rather meet for dinner and go out.

This story is significant for several reasons. Here, Alex highlights how the co-founders' original goals for the organization were based in social justice and advocacy for adoptee rights, particularly immigration rights[37] and aligns these goals with those of two leaders of an adoptee group in Midwest City that had existed and disbanded prior to KAD Midwest's establishment. I want to note that, at this point in our conversation, Alex went on to the tensions between previous adult adoptee

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[37] As mentioned in a footnote in Chapter 1, transnational adoptees are vulnerable to deportation due to a loophole in the Child Citizenship Act of 2000 that granted automatic citizenship to transnational adoptees who were under the age of 18 at the time of the law's passing. This left adoptees over the age of 18 (18,603 according to Adoptees for Justice and the Korean Health Ministry) undocumented. This loophole has meant deportation back to countries where adoptees do not have social networks and do not know the culture or language and has exposed many unsavory truths about adoption, such as the fact that there are few to no protections for children adopted into abusive homes. As a founding member of Adoptees for Justice, Hye Wol is involved in lobbying Congress to pass a bill that will grant automatic citizenship to all transnational adoptees.

organizations in Midwest City. However, toward the end of our time together, she recursively looped back around to reflectively expand upon the aftermath of her realization that members, back then, preferred to be more social at the expense of political advocacy:

> The advocacy part, it wasn't just people not being ready. I also wasn't putting in 100 percent and was coming from a very myopic sort of approach as well. I was a student. I was like, 'This is will be like great, we'll make change.' But thinking back, people were open to the psycho-ed support piece of it. I think that probably showed in the connections that were made. But ultimately, what it came down to I think at the time was just having community members or having Korean adoptees know that one another exists, and that they had an organized base to do so. Whatever their interests were or could be with other adoptees could be explored and we wanted to invite others to experience and explore that.

Exhibiting the first and second points of relational literacy in her storytelling enabled Alex to practice relational accountability here by considering how her divided priorities (PhD degree and leading KAD Midwest) also contributed to the organization starting out more social as opposed to politically minded. She also indicates a critical flexibility in negotiating her own desires for the organization and the desires of the members they were attracting who preferred to keep their interactions with other adoptees social at the time. Her openness, as evidenced when she says "*Whatever their interests were or could be with other adoptees could be explored* and we wanted to invite others to experience and explore that" (emphasis mine), suggests the importance of ensuring KAD Midwest's missional programming reflected the needs of the community. And though that meant sidelining political advocacy and pushes for social justice for adoptees, it was worth doing for the organization to become what it is today, i.e., both social and politically active.

Beyond Hye Wol's use of "missional" to describe KAD Midwest as an outward-facing community organization, she also used "missional" as a heuristic for the organization's rhetorical work of building and performing programming—as disidentifications/cultural productions—and providing supportive services to Korean adoptees in Midwest City. In particular, she noted that, as their mission is to help adoptees "find a strong, shared, cultural and *specifically adoptee citizenship identity*," (emphasis mine) the executive board "picked films that intentionally drew upon different themes [of Korean American adoption]" and "invited academics [to speak at roundtable events] that touched on themes around transracial adoptee identity and what it means to be an adoptee." For example, Hye Wol shared that such planning resulted in biannual roundtables where speakers engaged constituents on issues impacting Korean American adoptees, such as birth searches and dating. In these regards, KAD Midwest's programming can be seen as performances of disidentification in that they expose and reconstruct messages encoded in rhetorics of colorblindness, adoption as love, and adoptees as gifts—particularly regarding assumptions that race does not/should not impact transracial adoptees as well as assumptions that adoptees who are "well-adjusted" and fulfilled should not wonder about their origins. As such, these performances provide adoptees with resources they often lack in adoptive families and communities. Birth searches, in particular, are not often presented to adoptees as an option by adoptive families and communities because adoption from Korea to America became popular due in part to the closed nature of said adoptions (Kim; McKee; Park Nelson). Moreover, adoptive families and communities, which are, more often than not, overwhelmingly white, are not prepared to provide support to adoptees around dating due to a lack of racial literacy and critical understandings of how race affects dating for adoptees. Thus, KAD Midwest's provision of resources and support for such issues can be understood as pedagogical and instructive in that they explicitly and intentionally foreground and perform how such facets of life impact adoptees and, by extension, their senses of selves and

resulting identities. It also expands adoptees' relations, thereby contributing to their development of relational literacy.

Performing Disidentification by Sponsoring Relational Literacy to Revise "Korean American" and "Asian American"

The third theme in participants' stories regarding their performance of disidentification through the sponsorship of relational literacy is their development of relationships with Midwest City's larger Korean American community. In the stories that follow, I show how the leaders' efforts in doing so work to revise narrow definitions of "Korean American" and "Asian American" to mutually benefit adoptees, Korean Americans, and Asian Americans as a whole. This is particularly important because it demonstrates the need for revisions to these terms in that it reflects that readymade relations in adoption from Korea aren't only imposed on adoptees by adoptive families and nation states, but that they can also be imposed on adoptees by Koreans and Korean Americans. As both Korean American adoptees and Korean Americans (and Asian Americans broadly writ) struggle with erasure and stereotypical representations via the model minority myth and yellow peril, adoptees' sponsorship of relational literacy through the expansion of the "Korean American" and "Asian American" designations has the potential to benefit Korean Americans and Asian Americans as well as adoptees.

In terms of adoptees' interpolation into readymade relations with Korean Americans, Hye Wol's story of working with first- and second-generation Korean Americans indicates that these relations can vary depending on generation. Of working with the second-generation, Hye Wol noted, "...it's more of a peer kind of thing. We're all struggling through the same identity questions in different ways. So, we just hang out together and talk about community leadership, Asian American representation, and stuff like that. And they've invited KAD Midwest to talk about adoptee activism and other things we're engaged in." There are two things of import to notice about

this. The first is Hye Wol's assertion that second-generation Korean Americans tend to share more similarities with Korean American adoptees given the similarities of their struggles with race and identity and the second is that adoptees and Korean Americans are establishing relationally accountable connections with one another through mutual performances of disidentification (i.e., the sharing of stories of their lived experiences with racial isolation and readymade relations). What's more, advocacy for adoptees' and immigrants' rights have resulted from adoptees' development and sponsorship of racial literacy.

Though it may be tempting to conflate Asian and Korean Americans with one another as well as with those who fall in either category, it is important to note that many Asian Americans, particularly those of second and third generations, report experiences of liminality similar to those experienced by Asian American adoptees. For example: they face racism and the rhetorical erasure of their experiences of racism via the model minority myth[38] and they grapple with lost connections to their families' cultural origins via expectations of cultural assimilation. However, as Ben's story in the previous chapter suggests regarding why he felt it necessary to start a Korean American adoptee student organization on his college campus despite the fact that a Korean American student organization already existed, the differences in these experiences of liminality are critical. While non-adopted Asian Americans might struggle with injuries incited by racism and the double injury of the simultaneous erasure of those injuries, they still see their phenotypical makeup reflected in their families and the media their families might have access to based on connections maintained to the homeland. Non-adopted Asian Americans may also struggle with maintaining connections to their cultural origins due to expectations of cultural assimilation in America, yet those connections are less

[38] In her 2014 book *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, Ellen D. Wu traces the invention and evolution of the model minority myth, often applied to Asians in America, particularly East Asians. She defines "model minority" as "a racial group distinct from the white majority, but lauded as well as assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically nonthreatening, and *definitively not black*" (3).

obscured by the particular power of the transnational adoption industrial complex[39]. In no way is this meant to diminish the challenges Asian Americans face, nor do I mean to suggest that adopted Asian Americans "have it harder" than non-adopted Asian Americans. My purpose in engaging these similarities and differences is only to note that the differences are important to consider in the context of this study because adoptees are driven to re/make severed connections with their Asian birth cultures in ways that differ from methods used by non-adopted Asian Americans. The greatest example of this is that Korean American adoptees have had to build presence and recognition for themselves within Asian American communities, whereas non-adopted Asian Americans have not necessarily had to do so to be counted as "Asian American."

Of working with first-generation, Hye Wol gestured to the Korean cultural phenomenon of "Korea's lost children" to describe the challenges embedded in relating to this particular subset of Korean Americans. For Hye Wol, "Korea's lost children" refers to older generations' perceptions of adoption as a national and cultural shame. Kim has written on this aspect of Korean culture through discussions of international media coverage during the 1988 summer Olympics in Seoul, in which South Korea gained a reputation as a nation whose primary export is children (32). Kim noted that this criticism, in addition to record profits from overseas adoptions in 1960 through 1975, ultimately spurred the Korean government to stymie overseas adoptions and pass a series of legislative acts in the late 1990s and early 2000s to incentivize domestic adoptions. Evidence of Korea's national guilt over its capitalization of adoption for postwar reconstruction is not only evident in the aforementioned changes in adoption policy, but is also evident in its media and pop culture, such as in the case of a 2004 Korean reality show called *Foster Mother of Love* (translated to the English press

[39] Kimberly McKee has defined the transnational adoption industrial complex (TAIC) as "a neocolonial, multi-million-dollar global industry that commodifies children's bodies" and has noted that it "reflects the intersections and connections of the Korean social welfare state, orphanages, adoption agencies, and American immigration legislation" that have and continue to facilitate adoption between Korea and the US.

as *Celebrity Foster Mother*)[40]. It can thus be viewed as the Korean equivalent of American readymade relations for adoptees.

I offer this brief history of the "Korea's lost children" phenomenon in Korean culture to show how such a perception, especially when held by older generations of Koreans and Korean Americans, can result in unexamined inhabitance of readymade relational structures between older generations of Korean Americans and Korean adoptees. These relational structures tend to position Korean adoptees as pitiable and as objects of charity. This phenomenon thus provides important context to Hye Wol's and KAD Midwest's strategies for building and sustaining partnerships with first-generation members of Korean American communities in Midwest City. For example, Hye Wol noted that:

> [With the first generation] there was a desire to take care of adoptees. It's kind of like a 'Korea's lost children' kind of thing. And I think that, for KAD Midwest, we wanted to be really intentional with the Korean community about how we want to be engaged with them. And that we're not a charity case. And so, if you want to support us that's great, but we want to do stuff together.

Here, Hye Wol's story about performing connection with first generation Korean Americans in the community highlights how the latter's attitudes of wanting to "take care" of adoptees embedded in readymade relations between Koreans and adoptees set the terms for how they're supposed to relate to one another; i.e., Koreans are supposed to pity adoptees, which further infantilizes and alienates them, i.e., "we're not a charity case." While she was not specific on the details of her and other

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[40] Eleana Kim explains that *Foster Mother of Love* originally aired in 2004 as a reality television show that "featured famous female stars who served as temporary caregivers to an infant for two weeks before the child was sent to its new adoptive family" (249). She notes that the show was started by the Mission to Promote Adoption in Korea (MPAK), a California-based Christian organization founded by a Korean adoptee to promote domestic adoption in Korea as opposed to transnational adoption. Kim describes as a show that has "capitalized on this national shame, giving the national guilt trip a makeover through its top-billed movie starlets" and shows how this show continues to feed into adoption as a short-term solution to social inequities, particularly those that exist for single, unwed mothers (250).

leaders' efforts to revise these readymade relations, a lens of relational literacy suggests that these efforts—the performance of conversations/hangouts, formal speaking events, etc.—work to disidentify with and revise them in the interest of Asian American and, more widely, immigrant coalition.

In the previous chapter, I noted that Hye Wol described feeling "weirded out" by being among other adoptees when asked about her initial experiences engaging with KAD Midwest. She cited one of the reasons for this as: "I had started to experience Korean Americans expressing guilt to me over adoption. And I had been unfamiliar with [this] before, that Korean Americans who are not adopted feel sorry for adoptees." Here, Hye Wol describes the strangeness and alienation of being made an object of pity by those outside of herself, the result of which made her feel what she described as "less than." She explained that she struggled with understanding what this meant for her at the same time she was struggling with other questions that her isolating college experience left her with. Overall, she characterized such struggles as "very confusing," as she attempted to figure out "'who are these people [adoptees] and are they like me?'" This confusion left Hye Wol in a vulnerable state that, it can be inferred, incited a sense of guardedness and caution in her initial interactions with KAD Midwest. After all, who should she listen to most—the Korean Americans she had met who seemed to be communicating that there was something tragic about her existence? Or the adoptees she just met who looked and seemed like her, but whom she couldn't yet get a read on?

Alex, too, described similar challenges in engaging the local Korean American community from an organizational standpoint. Her story went like this:

> That's another thing I've got to mention: adoptees in Midwest City, we've always had a really good relationship with the Korean American community [here]. I think part of that, initially, was a lot because [name redacted]. That obviously is a big piece

> because we had support from all those organizations as well as the Lion's Club. And then I applied for all these Korean American scholarships and got a couple. It turned out one of the people in charge [of those scholarships] was a faculty member at [school name redacted] and when I went to go visit him, he recruited me for all this other stuff. It was through him and through that church that KAD Midwest currently still has events. It's a really big church organization. They've got a lot of resources and were very open to getting us involved. But it also took a lot... I think that's where I did most of my work, in diplomacy because, initially, I wasn't comfortable advertising events at their church. I was really upfront with them and Koreans aren't always used to that. But, you know, a lot of us have a history of being evangelized.

Here, Alex explains her initial reservations in developing partnerships between KAD Midwest and a Korean American professor at her school. She identifies these reservations as stemming from readymade relations that construct adoptees as gifts and "poor orphans" in need of Christian charity[41] ("a lot of us have a history of being evangelized").

> I remember being so impressed with how much they listened to us and were willing to go with our comfort level. I think for me that was probably one of the more... what I would identify as a success, but one that isn't as measurable or identifiable. I remember bringing a bunch of adoptees over to this professor's house. And he invited some people from his community and we were all over 25 and several of us

[41] These tropes in relation to adoption are largely due to American evangelical Christian organizations and publications that promoted adoption from Korea to America to be a moral, Christian act. Missionaries Harry and Bertha Holt were among the most visible in this regard, as they were the first to adopt eight Korean orphans in the 1950s. Through encouraging and helping other Christian couples adopt from Korea, they started Holt International, one of the most prominent adoption agencies who now facilitate adoptions not only of children from Korea to wealthy receiving nations, but also children from other countries like China, Vietnam, Colombia, Thailand, Philippines, Haiti, and Bulgaria.

> had been to Korea multiple times. And they initially kind of approached us like, 'So what do you want to learn about Korean culture?' And we were like, 'We know about Korean culture, let's talk about *adoption*.'

In the above excerpt, Alex describes being listened to as an adoptee by the members of the Korean American church that her professor invited her and KAD Midwest to speak with. Importantly, she mentions church members' initial instinct was to act as arbiters of Korean culture to adoptees, which, while not intrinsically unhelpful, seems to imply an assumption on their part that what adoptees need (and perhaps want) most was to be more Korean. Alex continued:

> And I remember one of the people who had gathered at their house was like, 'Oh my god, oh my god.' And I'm like, 'We're not here to blame, but it would be nice if we could have an open conversation about it, and we don't expect you at all to be comfortable with it.' I remember the professor who I had developed a relationship with, he was just like, 'It's really hard for us to talk about.' And I remember then they started sharing how adoptees always invariably get placed into this like 'the other' category by Koreans, right. All of the sudden then they start talking about multiracial Koreans and their kids, Korean kids marrying white individuals. So yeah, to me that was probably one of my more successful pieces; something I feel like I actually was involved with.

There are several things of significance to note in this story, the first being that Alex and KAD Midwest resisted interpolation into objects of pity and charity by performing their insistence on the validity of their lived experiences through story and their value to Korean Americans and racial equity more broadly. In the process of resisting, they also performed relationality between Korean Americans and adoptees by affirming Korean Americans' critical role in the recognition and elevation of adoptees' stories and advocacy work. Through this resistance, the adoptees redefined

(read: revised) the terms of engagement as dictated by the oppressive structures of readymade relations, which resulted in a mutual recognition of some of the similarities Korean American adoptees and Korean Americans share as members of the Korean diaspora in America, particularly similarities regarding race and culture. The meetings and conversations between them can thus be seen as performances of disidentification through the sponsorship of relational literacy in order to revise the readymade relations put forth by the "Korea's lost children" phenomenon.

I quote Alex at length here because her story performs some of the inner workings between relational literacy and accountability. Specifically, Alex cites her relationship with one of the earlier leaders of an adoptee group that had disbanded as that which facilitated further relationships with Midwest City's local Korean American community. She also cites her relationship to academia (at the time she was a doctoral student studying behavioral psychology) as another way she personally came into contact with the local Korean American community via application for a scholarship. Furthermore, through her relationship with the Korean American professor who provided one of the scholarships she earned, she and the adoptees of KAD Midwest were able to establish relationships with him and a contingent of Midwest City's Korean American population using the agency of their stories to advocate for more nuanced and inclusive understandings of "Korean Americans" that accounted for Korean adoptees. In other words, the interview functioned as an opportunity for her to enact the first and second practices of relational literacy to recursively reflect on and generate historically informed insights on the relationships that had made relational accountability between the Korean American church members and KAD Midwest possible. In doing so, she sponsored for me a key element of Winddance Twine's model of racial literacy as cultural strategies that identify and resist readymade relational structures and provide resources (adoptees' stories) that teach others how to support adoptees.

Similarly, Hye Wol's previous testimony suggests that the leaders of KAD Midwest have had to develop and perform specific rhetorical/cultural strategies for engaging first-generation Korean Americans given the "Korea's lost children" phenomenon. The ways they have worked to accomplish this are through advocacy, community expansion, and revised understandings of what it means to "care" for adoptees. For example, in following up on her statements about adoptees not being a charity case, Hye Wol said, "We recognize that 'to care for adoptees' is to care for all of the issues that we face. And that includes the ways laws and policies haven't protected us and wanting to change them." Here, she demonstrates how to dismantle ways of caring that reduce adoptees to objects of pity and charity to ways of caring that center adoptees as experts of their own experience and as agents of equity and change. For instance, Hye Wol elaborated:

> I think that the reason I bring that up is because I think that shifts the narrative a little bit with the larger Korean American community because we're leading advocacy work for our community. And so, we're inviting people to partner with us, but we're not necessarily saying we're on the receiving end of somebody else's generosity, or that classic adoptee state of being where you feel forced into being responsive to others. We're saying we want to lead this work and if you want to lead it with us and you want to [do it] the way that we believe is right, you're welcome to.

That adoptee-led work for community advocacy "shifts the narrative" within the larger Korean American community indicates that, through advocating for adoptee rights, Korean adoptees are necessarily advocating for Korean Americans more broadly. For Korean Americans to recognize and join in this work means a fundamental shift in narratives of "Koreanness"—a fundamental revision to readymade relations—that widen the scope of what it can mean to be Korean and Korean American.

What's more, when I asked her about the process(es) through which she and other leaders have worked to form relationships with Midwest's City's Korean American communities, Hye Wol replied, "I don't think there's a magic pill or anything. I think that it's just an intentionality and a willingness to talk about hard things. . . . I think…in order for us *to be successful and have authentic relationships, we have to be centered in our own stories*" (emphasis mine). Here, her insistence that adoptees be centered in our own stories in spite of the pressures of racial isolation and readymade relations suggests that, through the intentional performance of storying of our lived experiences and participating in the hard conversations they evoke, adoptees can both individually and communally be agents of change by performing disidentification through the sponsorship of racial literacy that revises racial isolation and readymade relations. And, as she and Alex emphasize in their reflections, these revisions are not useful to only adoptees; they are also useful to Korean Americans (and Asian Americans more widely) in that they promote coalitional connections between similarly minoritized groups that can, in turn, increase the impact of political advocacy for issues that face these groups, such as racism, discrimination, immigration, xenophobia, and citizenship.

Performing Disidentification by Sponsoring Relational Literacy through the Facilitation of Relationships Between KAD Midwest and Other Korean Adoptee Organizations

The fourth theme in participants' stories regarding their performance of disidentification through the sponsorship of relational literacy via KAD Midwest is their development of relationships with other Korean adoptee organizations, such as those who had come before KAD Midwest in Midwest City and those that exist nationally and internationally. In the stories that follow, I show how KAD Midwest originated through an act/performance of relational accountability and how such accountability has been built into its infrastructure and passed down through the generations of leadership.

Through Alex's story in the previous chapter, I briefly touched on how KAD Midwest was not the first Korean adoptee group to be formed in Midwest City and that there had actually been several organizations that had existed and disbanded prior. Alex's stories in this chapter regarding the founding of KAD Midwest in relation to groups that had come before made clear that her performance of accountability to those relations is likely a key reason KAD Midwest has been so successful as an organization. In moving to Midwest City and trying to start KAD Midwest, Alex intentionally connected with former leaders and members of some of the Korean adoptee groups who had disbanded prior to her arrival. While not all were forthcoming with why their groups had broken up (often out of a concern for talking badly about others), Alex described having an overall positive experience learning about the histories of these relations:

> I had a lot of reservations about not wanting to overstep my boundaries and create something [that was] essentially disrespectful to [the previous leaders], who I really looked up to and who had been around for a long time. And I was new to Midwest City, so I wanted to be mindful of that. And then [redacted], who [had run a group that broke up], she had a really poor experience. She wasn't interested in joining us but I give her a lot of credit because, thinking back, she basically was like, 'you know, I don't think this is for me but I think it probably will work out well based on where you are and your momentum. And she essentially gave us her blessing, which I think made me feel all a lot more comfortable.

This story demonstrates Alex's performance of relational literacy as well as how she, as a founder, has built relational literacy into KAD Midwest's organizational structure. For instance, in this story, she acknowledges and signals her respect for the adoptee groups that had come before through an historically informed orientation to KAD Midwest's establishment as always already in relation to the disbanding of those groups. As such, she uses the interview as an occasion to recursively reflect

on KAD Midwest's founding and disidentify from neoliberal notions of success that pit organizations against one another in competitive relations that are profit-driven and zero-sum. What's more, she honors and is accountable to her relations with those who came before by actively seeking out the collective knowledge of their experiences and inviting them into the fold. Put another way, her and the other founders' desire to establish KAD Midwest was not predicated on an ego-driven individualistic pursuit, but on a desire for KAD Midwest to most effectively serve the adoptee community of Midwest City.

It is worth noting here that this instance of relational literacy has been taught and passed down through the generations of KAD Midwest's leadership, as all four participants in this study (that together comprise both past and present leaders) took care to mention this history in their stories of founding and running KAD Midwest. I argue that this exemplifies how relational literacy has been built into KAD Midwest's organizational structure. Next to Alex, Michelle, who was not a co-founder but who joined the group upon its inception, went the most in-depth on this history:

> There were two or three other Korean adoptee groups that existed simultaneously and eventually fizzled out for different reasons. There were some tensions between them. And so KAD Midwest actually is not the first adult Korean adoptee group in Midwest City and in some ways has built on the legacy of those previous organizations. [KAD Midwest] tried to learn from some of the mistakes and the challenges that they faced.

The tensions Michelle mentions here seemed to have been rooted in the different groups' foci, as she later elaborated that, "one more so wanted to focus on the social element and the other one I think really wanted to be more like, hard-hitting and possibly take some political stances that people maybe did not agree with." In other words, one group sought to focus solely on connecting adoptees to one another, while another group sought to focus on the politics and policies facing

Korean American adoptees (e.g., barriers to citizenship). Thus, it seems that KAD Midwest and its programming as performances of disidentification represent an intentional merging of the philosophical and political divides between these early groups—a theory that is consistent with earlier sections' discussion of the organization addressing the social *and* the political—and that part of the organization's sustainability might be attributed to this critical and relational understanding of its history among the generations of its leadership.

Beyond developing and sponsoring relational literacy through performing relationality with past adoptee groups in Midwest City, participants' stories also indicated that KAD Midwest is performing/sponsoring relational literacy through the development of relationships with other national and international Korean adoptee organizations. One of those international organizations is the International Korean Adoptee Associations (IKAA)[42]. IKAA itself sponsors relational literacy on a global scale through its function of connecting Korean adoptee leaders to one another across national borders. A look at scholarly and non-scholarly works by Korean adoptees in other Western receiving nations like Sweden, Denmark, Australia, and more suggest racial isolation is also a defining condition of existence for Korean adoptees transnationally. For instance, Ben said of IKAA:

> Their whole goal is to connect the different organizations. It's like a network of adoptee organizations. [Like] how KAD Midwest locally is a way to connect individuals within the community, IKAA [connects] groups with each other across the world. And I think there's some benefits to that too. One example recently is we talked about at a KAD Midwest meeting about safety at events. I was curious, well,

[42] IKAA was founded in Europe and America in 2004 to connect Korean adoptee community organizations transnationally. They hosted the first Gathering (a conference by and for Korean adoptees) in 2004 and, since then, have coordinated with regional Korean Adoptee organizations to host yearly adoptee conferences. Every third year, the IKAA Gathering takes place in Seoul, South Korea, with the most recent occurring in August of 2019.

> what do other groups do? And immediately like there's like 10 groups I can reach out and ask them the same question. Like having that network of all those other experiences ready. You can just reach out and they'll respond pretty quickly. It gives you the sense too that, as a group, you're not alone necessarily; there's other groups out there as well that have existed you know as early as 1986, the group out in Sweden.

That IKAA serves as an umbrella organization connecting various Korean adoptee organizations around the world indicates a global recognition of the importance of adoptee community. Moreover, IKAA can be understood as a type of genealogy particular to Korean American adoptees. It is a symbolic (and at times physical) space that privileges adoptee-to-adoptee relations, thereby providing an extensive, global network of support for adoptees to draw on in performing community engagement to revise racial isolation. Moreover, as evidenced by Ben's comment above regarding safety at adoptee events, the adoptee leaders of IKAA treat one another's embodied experiences (such as those regarding safety at adoptee events) as knowledge that they can access and adapt to their own contexts. While these contexts vary, they share the common goal of empowering adoptee organizations around the world to build local and regional adoptee communities in their areas and, in that way, promote the performance of disidentification through the sponsorship of relational literacy to revise racial isolation for Korean adoptees globally.

In fact, KAD Midwest itself was originally formed by three co-founders (including Alex), who met at an IKAA sponsored mini-gathering in Las Vegas in 2008. Realizing that there weren't any current adoptee organizations in Midwest City, they attended a session at the conference that was geared toward teaching adoptees how to form community groups in their local regions. Alex shared that the session itself taught mostly "pragmatic points" like how to start a nonprofit and

navigate the paperwork. Additionally, attendees were advised to learn about past groups in their regions, of which Alex recalls:

> I remember specifically my friend Sarah was running [the session] from Washington, and she's like, 'I think one thing that I would just recommend to everyone who's wanting to start a group is that you all learn about the history of [adoptee] groups in your cities.' And she looked directly at us, at Midwest City, and we were like 'Yeah, yeah, we know.' To see what worked and what didn't work. And looking back, I think that did help us to not jump into things headfirst and to be a bit more mindful of some of the ways we connected with folks. Like making sure that we made an effort to connect with and involve [the leaders of past adoptee groups in Midwest City].

Given the context of Alex's story at a conference session designed to equip prospective adoptee leaders with the resources necessary to start an adult adoptee organization in their regions, I argue that IKAA can be seen in this instance as performing/promoting a sort of *relational literacy*—or an orientation toward adoptee community that is accountable to how relationships that might be lost to the past can and do shape relationships in the present.

Performing Disidentification by Sponsoring Relational Literacy to Cultivate the Next Generation of Adoptee Leaders

The fifth theme in participants' stories regarding their performance of disidentification by sponsoring relational literacy through KAD Midwest is their intentional cultivation of the next generation of adoptee leaders, an act that involves establishing genealogical links among adoptee community leaders. In the prior sections, I have shown how participants' stories demonstrate that KAD Midwest itself as well as its programming can be understood as performances of disidentification and simultaneously as enactments of the sponsorship of relational literacy. I posit here that cultivating the next generation of adoptee community leaders is further evidence of the

organization's work to revise racial isolation and readymade relations. For example, though she no longer serves on the executive board, Michelle has noticed this trend and described it in terms of a shift in practice resulting from KAD Midwest's advancing organizational lifespan:

> One thing I don't think was a goal originally, but I feel like has become more so is leadership development of people within KAD Midwest. When it first started, it was all sort of chaotic and we were scrambling to [get people] to join the board. It wasn't necessarily as thoughtful or as planned. I think that's changed a bit.
>
> [For example], the transition from Hye Wol being president to Ben being president felt to me more intentional than some of the transitions I was on the board for at the beginning where it was sort of like, 'Oh so-and-so is leaving, who wants to be president?' Like, 'Oh shoot, they're leaving in a month, what do we do?'

Ben's focus on KAD Midwest further emphasizes this intentionality:

> I think it's important to think about the next generation of leaders. Like, as soon as I come in, I need to be thinking about the end from the beginning. One of my goals coming into this role as president is succession. Just always thinking about the next generation. I think it's important to be thinking that, by the time I leave the board, who else is going to be coming in? Always thinking about who in the community could step up.
>
> And just getting this kind of fresh rotation of leadership. I really thought of that because I had my own personal experience with it and seeing other people like Hye Wol and how she was doing this for so long. Maybe she didn't want to; maybe she came in with the same thought, 'No, I'm only going to do it for two years or whatever.' I think that's very important as well—to always be thinking of who else can potentially come in and who we could hand off the torch to because this is no

> one's job. No one's getting paid to do it. Unless people want to stay in it, that's fine, and we can certainly find ways to accommodate them staying involved somehow. I think that is also why we formed the Advisory Board.

Michelle speculates in the above that, because KAD Midwest has had the time and put in the work to establish itself, it is now possible to be more intentional in their mission of performing disidentifications/cultural productions that revise racial isolation and readymade relational structures. Specifically, they can now provide the structures and resources necessary (e.g., role differentiation on the executive board, the Advisory Board, more members who have benefited from KAD Midwest in ways that motivate them to give back through assuming a leadership role, strong relationships and relational foundations with the local Korean American community and other inter/national adoptee organizations, etc.) to sustainably scaffold and mentor the next generation of adoptee community leaders. Ben's understanding of the importance of such a task is evidenced in the relational lens through which he analyzes the value of training leaders. In other words, not only does KAD Midwest have the cultural resources to perform this work, but for him it is also critical to be mindful of the time commitment and emotional labor leaders of adoptee community put in to make adult adoptee organizations successful, as they do so on a strictly volunteer basis (often while working high-powered, full-time jobs).

Co-founder Alex similarly mentioned the value of training the next generation of adoptee leaders but framed the matter, like Ben did, in terms of relational accountability. For example, Ben framed it in terms of being relationally accountable to other leaders (e.g., honoring what it takes for someone to face the challenges that come with such a leadership role while also balancing a full-time job and her own family). Alex, on the other hand, frames it in terms of relational accountability to members. In particular, she said:

> One of the things I learned not to do was this idea that you can be in charge forever and that's good for everybody. I [personally] don't think it would be. Like, it doesn't need to be me anymore. There're other people who can do it and do just as good a job, if not better, especially since they know the community. I think it probably helped that the three of us who started KAD Midwest were in those roles of leadership for more than two to three years. It brought in new faces and new ideas, prevented too much unnecessarily authoritarian power.

Alex's recognition that there should always be a fresh rotation of folks in leadership to avoid "too much unnecessarily authoritarian power" is significant in that it is likely a major contributing factor to the organization's sustainability over the years. In accordance with relational literacy, new leaders bring new capabilities and with them new possibilities for the organization's development and efficacy at revising racial isolation and readymade relations for Korean adoptees. Furthermore, the sentiment echoes Hye Wol's and KAD Midwest's missional approach to leading adoptee community in that, if the mission is to "find a strong, shared, cultural and specifically adoptee citizenship identity," then the organization's leadership should reflect that.

Conclusion: Stories of KAD Midwest Leadership and What They Can Teach Us

In this chapter, I presented participants' stories regarding their leadership of KAD Midwest through a lens of relational literacy. In doing so, I found that the organization as well as its programming can be understood as performances of disidentification that function as uniquely Korean American adoptee community cultural productions. What makes these disidentifications particularly relevant to Korean adoptees is that they use relational literacy to perform/sponsor racial literacy and strategies for managing and resisting and revising racial isolation and readymade relations. Their work toward this end falls into five specific themes: (1) the facilitation of members' relationships to one another, Korean culture, Korean American culture, and Korean American

adoptee culture; (2) the establishment of programming spaces that are as safe as possible for adoptees; (3) the revision of "Korean American" and "Asian American" racial/ethnic categories; (4) the facilitation of relationships between KAD Midwest and other Korean adoptee organizations; and (5) the intentional cultivation of the next generation of adoptee community leaders. Through these themes, I observed that participants' stories about leading KAD Midwest demonstrated that racial isolation is less a static condition of physical environment and more an ongoing process, the dynamics of which are always in flux according to context. In other words, in a racist society, racial isolation is not something one can get out of once and for all—rather, it is something that must be continuously and recursively re/navigated.

I saw this specifically through the ways participants' stories extended two of the three key findings of Chapter 3. The first of those findings was that racial isolation can occur even when one *does* have access to people with whom they share a race (ethnic/cultural racial isolation) and other people of color (race-based racial isolation). For example, Hye Wol's experiences encountering the "Korea's Lost Children" phenomenon when initially engaging first-generation members of Midwest's City's Korean American communities highlights how differences between race and ethnicity matter. Alex's and Hye Wol's stories about forming coalitional and accountable relationships of support and advocacy with Korean Americans show that the development and performance of racial literacy is crucial to understanding said differences—particularly racial literacy as developed through story. They simultaneously show that racial literacy and story are crucial to revising adoptees' racial isolation from Korean Americans and the readymade relational structures (Korea's Lost Children phenomenon) that isolation upholds. That Alex and Hye Wol faced the exigence for engaging racial isolation with local Korean American communities some time after their initial movements beyond racial isolation and readymade relations (discussed in Chapter 3) furthermore suggests that racial isolation is not static and monolithic, but rather that it is processual

and dependent on context. Put another way, racial isolation can take many forms and is something that must thus be constantly re/negotiated/performed using story, relationality, and relational accountability both individually and communally.

The second and final finding from Chapter 3 that the stories in this chapter extend was that disorientation is often a common response to moving beyond racial isolation and readymade relations. Though this chapter focused mostly on disidentification, the leaders' stories make clear that such disidentifications are often produced as a result of adoptees' experiences of disorientation regarding their adoptee identities. In such cases, it is not the leaders who experience the disorientation; rather, it is those for whom the cultural productions are made, e.g., adoptees. Ben's stories about being a friendly presence who helps newcomers navigate connections with other adoptees, Korean culture, as well as Korean American and Korean American adoptee cultures signify that leaders' own experiences with disorientation in the initial stages of their own journeys informs their cultural productions (organizational structure, programming, advocacy). In this way, leaders' experiences with racial isolation *continue* to impact their work as community leaders in that they strive to provide their constituents with resources, some of which include themselves/their time and attention. Again, this suggests that racial isolation—whether their own racial isolation or that of their constituents—must be continuously reworked using story, relationality, and relational accountability.

To conclude, this chapter focused on the roles of recursive reflection, racial literacy, and disidentification in the development and performance of relational literacy in the context of participants' leadership of KAD Midwest. I used relational literacy to show how participants' storied experiences leading adoptee community through KAD Midwest's formal and informal programming are disidentifications that sponsor racial literacy through the seeking and accessing of new sets of relationships (e.g., relationships with other adoptees, Korean culture, Korean American and Korean

American adoptee cultures, and local Korean American communities). My analysis highlights how relational literacy can continuously revise racial isolation and readymade relations in ways that produce and accord value to a uniquely Korean American adoptee culture. Participants' stories particularly illustrate the roles of story, relationality, and relational accountability in practicing/sponsoring relational literacy and, in doing so, reveal the centrality of the role of race and adoption in Korean adoptees' lived experiences and identities. In the next chapter, I present the findings and implications of this dissertation study for the discipline of writing and rhetoric, the subfields of cultural rhetorics and Asian American rhetoric, and the field of adoption studies.

CHAPTER 5: RELATIONAL LITERACY, KOREAN AMERICAN ADOPTEES, AND WHAT THEY MAKE POSSIBLE

> "I write to help make difficult relationships better."
>
> —Tony E. Adams, "Post-Coming Out Complications" (64)

> What is it like to be cut off from a past, to be born as if there is no past? What obligation do your parents bear to expose you to the ways of the old country? To bequeath memory unto you, where none existed before? To unfold life's lessons in the same patterns, the same strokes and catechisms, that another set of parents in another time and place might have used? . . . A self-indulgent pose, I know: I have a history, I have blood parents, I have a kind of access to the past that an adoptee does not. How can I make our situations equivalent? I can't. I don't. Though I suffer slightly from glaucoma of the memory, I do not labor in the darkness that shrouds the adoptee. If I chose to, I could reverse the creeping blindness.
>
> — Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*

Throughout the last four chapters, I have posited relational literacy as a theoretical framework that both guided and emerged from my interviews with four leaders of an adult Korean American adoptee community organization in the Midwest. In Chapter 1, I explained how literacy and literacy sponsorship can be understood as the establishment and/or restriction of new sets of relationships by sponsors that un/intentionally bring the sponsored in contact with—or withhold—new ways of meaning-making that enable the sponsored to better navigate and resist oppressive systems. I thus defined relational literacy as the ability to seek and access new sets of relationships to

gain and create new kinds of knowledges and modes of identification that are historically informed and relevant to an individual's or group's lived experiences with marginalization. I asserted that it is achieved and sponsored according to three key literacy practices[43], and that it is a means through which people can revise readymade relations or relationship structures that sponsor readymade identities and foster dependency of the sponsored on the sponsors. I then illustrated how readymade relational structures and racial isolation have occurred through assimilative and colorblind processes in Korean American adoption to show why relational literacy is necessary and how it has emerged from and been enacted via adoptee-to-adoptee relationships, i.e., adoptee kinship.

In Chapter 2, I showed how I assembled a cultural rhetorics methodology of story and relationality for this study by drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in cultural rhetorics, Asian American rhetoric, and adoption studies. I then showed how I used this methodology to determine my methods and introduced KAD Midwest, the adult Korean American adoptee community organization at the center of this dissertation. In Chapter 3, I showed how the stories of my four adoptee leader participants, as well as my own stories as a researcher in relation to theirs, to illustrate the role of recursive reflection, racial literacy, and disorientation in the development of relational literacy. In doing so, I showed how racial isolation precipitated participants' movement beyond racial isolation through the forging of relationships with other adult Korean adoptees. Similarly, in Chapter 4, I highlighted how the stories of my four adoptee leader participants, as well as my own, can be understood as performances of disidentification that sponsor relational literacy for the organization's constituents.

[43] The three literacy practices that make up relational literacy include: (1) ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of one's ever evolving relationships with people, places, objects, and ideas; (2) the generation of critical understandings of present realities, positionings, and instances of marginalization as they relate to critical histories and attendant disorientations; and (3) participation in the enactment of systemic change that revises isolation and readymade relations through practices that are relationally expansive and accountable to the ways individuals and communities have been differently positioned by systems of power and control.

In this final chapter, I present the findings and implications of this study for the discipline of writing and rhetoric and ultimately argue that my model of relational literacy can also be used to look at other forms of social isolation and relational advocacy, with careful attention to the readymade relations, histories, and revised relational structures that are specific to a given context of historical systemic oppression and marginalization. I then explain how this study builds on work in the interdisciplinary fields of Asian American rhetoric, literacy in composition studies, cultural rhetorics, and adoption studies. I conclude by presenting the limitations of this study and indicate ways future research can build on the foundation of relational literacy provided by this dissertation.

Relational Literacy and the Shifting Complexities of Racial Isolation

In this section, I revisit the research question presented in Chapter 2 and begin the task of answering it in accordance with the insights provided by participants of this study. As racial isolation is often a prevailing condition of adoption from Korea to America (Chapter 1), the question that drove this dissertation was: **How do experiences with racial isolation shape the leadership practices of adult adoptee community leaders?** While adoption studies scholars have defined racial isolation as "having little to no contact with people of other races" (Park Nelson 85) and have conducted ethnographic studies with adult adoptees to determine its impact (Kim; McKee; Palmer; Park Nelson), none have yet done so in the specific context of adult adoptee community organizations. This study thus builds on current understandings of racial isolation to theorize relational literacy as a model for interrogating and negotiating it. In particular, in analyzing participants' stories through a lens of relational literacy, I found that: (1) racial isolation can occur among people of the same race/positionality; (2) disorientation can occur in the initial stages of intentionally building relationships with other adoptees as a result of racial isolation; and (3) racial isolation is not only a matter of physical environment but also of ever-shifting emotional,

intellectual, and spiritual states. In what follows, I explain the implications of each of these insights for Asian American rhetoric, cultural rhetorics, and adoption studies.

Racial Isolation with Same Race/Positionality

Data analysis demonstrated that racial isolation can occur even among people of the same positionality. In the case of Korean American adoptees, this means racial isolation can occur even when adoptees' readymade relations (i.e., White adoptive families) and the oppressive structures that constitute them give adoptees the option to build relationships with other Korean adoptees and people of color. In terms of having access to other Korean adoptees while growing up, this was particularly salient in Ben's story. He did not elaborate on this facet of his upbringing beyond a few brief mentions, but there are several possible reasons for why his racial isolation persisted in spite of having access to other adoptees like him.

One reason might be that, on a daily basis, Korean adoptees face a tremendous amount of pressure to assimilate into the White American cultural norms in which most of us are raised. Studies that center adult adoptees have extensively shown that adoptees reported coping with this pressure by dissociating from anything that might mark them in the eyes of their peers as Asian or Korean (Kim; McKee; Palmer; Park Nelson). This dissociation can be both passive (i.e., avoiding relationships with other adoptees and Asian Americans) and active (i.e., verbally rejecting relationships with other adoptees and Asian Americans). Given this, it possible that, in spite of having access to other adoptees while growing up, Ben may not have engaged with them in an effort to fit in among family and friends by avoiding stigmatization of his racial difference.

Another reason may have to do with racial literacy and whether or not authority figures develop and/or teach it. Sponsors (e.g., White adoptive parents) cannot sponsor racial literacy for those they sponsor (e.g., their transracially adopted children) if they do not first work to develop it themselves. As explained in Chapter 3 through Guinier, Sealey-Ruiz, and Winddance Twine, the

development of racial literacy by adoptive parents necessitates a critical understanding of how racialization and racism can impact the racialized and entails the development of cultural strategies that empower adoptees to strengthen their relationships to themselves, other adoptees, Korea, Asian Americans, and the Korean diaspora. Without racial literacy, the sponsorship of such cultural strategies will, at best, be incomplete and, at worst, nonexistent.

Furthermore, in Chapter 4, Hye Wol's and Alex's stories about engaging racial isolation with local Korean American communities through story, relationality, and relational accountability show how racial isolation can occur even among people of the same positionality. Though Korean American adoptees are racialized as Korean/Korean American and Asian/Asian American more broadly, Hye Wol's description of negotiating what she calls "Korea's Lost Children" phenomenon with first-generation Korean Americans in Midwest City show how narrow conceptions of race and ethnicity can result in readymade relations amongst those who are similarly positioned in terms of race. Overall, Hye Wol and Alex used story (particularly stories of their lived experiences as adoptees) and relational accountability to revise the readymade relations that continue to racially isolate Korean American adoptees from Korean Americans and vice versa.

While the above illustrates how racial isolation can still occur when one has access to people of the same racial and ethnic positionality, Hye Wol's story showed how racial isolation can still occur when one has access to other people of color but not adoptees. Hye Wol grew up in a racially diverse area with access to a variety of people of color, a fact she cites as having helped her develop a "strong Asian American racial identity." However, her follow-up point that "[being] culturally [Asian/Korean/adoptee has] been kind of a different kind of journey" seems to indicate the importance of distinguishing between the development of a racial identity vs. that of cultural identity. The two identities do indeed share some overlap in that they tend to be conflated, but Hye Wol's story here confirms Park Nelson's claim that Korean adoptees are "in the unusual position of

developing out racial identities separately from our cultural identities" (18) in that they must negotiate their Asian racialization with their White cultural upbringings and any desires they may have to also develop their Korean and Korean adoptee cultural identities. Racial isolation is thus more complex than simply a matter of physical environment, as one can have access to people like them but still be emotionally, mentally, and spiritually isolated due to a lack of access to racial literacy.

Racial Isolation and Disidentification

The second major finding this study elucidates about racial isolation is that disidentification as an experience of disorientation can occur in the initial stages of intentionally building relationships with those who share one's positionality. For Korean American adoptees (adults in particular) this means that, when adoptees feel ready or are willing to develop relationships with other adoptees, they can experience disorientation as a response. As Hye Wol's, Michelle's, Alex's, and my stories demonstrated in Chapter 3, this disorientation can take the form of excitement, relief, and joy (Michelle, me); but it can also—and simultaneously—take the form of wariness and uncertainty (Hye Wol, me); cause tensions with self and others (Michelle); and cause fear/concern of loss (Alex). Sarah Ahmed's concept of disorientation as a potentially productive "failure" to adhere to normative orientations and expectations[44] (i.e., White, straight, male) illuminates the potential in the experience of disorientation in spite of and due to the discomfort it causes:

> When we are orientated, we might not even notice we are orientated: we might not even think 'to think' about this point. When we experience disorientation, we might notice orientation is something we do not have. . . . It is by understanding how we

[44] According to Ahmed, "bodies that experience disorientation can be defensive, as they reach out for support or as they search for a place to reground and reorientate their relation to the world" and that the potential lies in "how the subject seeks to (re)ground themselves" (158).

> become orientated in moments of disorientation that we might learn what it means to be orientated in the first place. (5-6)

For adult Korean adoptees accustomed to being oriented to Whiteness due to their upbringings, interacting with other Korean adoptees for the first time can cause disorientation because it requires one to relate to others much differently than they're used to doing. In other words, because readymade relations rely on racial isolation as a mechanism for achieving assimilation of the sponsored, they operate by decentering and erasing the complexities of adoption and race. Thus, forging relations with those that explicitly visibilize and center the complexities of adoption and race (i.e., with other adoptees) can be disorienting as it can prompt us to re/consider who we are, who we aren't, what we know, what we don't know, and why.

Michelle's story further illustrates how this disorientation can cause tensions not only with oneself, but also with one's existing relations. In Chapter 3, Michelle described the particular challenge of developing her new adoptee identity in relation to her already established identity as a practicing Christian. In this case, she struggled with a lack of understanding from her church community regarding her adoptee identity and simultaneously struggled with a lack of understanding from this new adoptee community regarding her Christian identity. While I could not identify with Michelle's specific positionality as a practicing Christian, I could indeed identify with the tension developing an adoptee identity as an adult can engender in one's prior relations. Scholars working with adult Korean adoptees have reported similar findings (Kim; McKee; Palmer; Park Nelson). Park Nelson has specifically noted:

> …the act of claiming their Korean adoptee identity as liberatory, in that it is taken in defiance of the assimilationist ideals of colorblindness and whiteness within their white families and communities; many adoptees describe a diminishing relationship to family during and after the expansion of their Korean adoptee identities. (13)

There are many reasons why adoptees' relationships to family and, as Michelle demonstrates, other communities like church can diminish when they explore/claim a Korean adoptee identity. In some cases, it can be because adoptive parents feel guilt and defensiveness. In other cases, it can be due to adoptive parents' implicit or explicit racial biases (McKee). Whatever the reasons, this tension has been shown to exist due to the pressure adoptees feel "to pick a side," or to be either White or Asian. It is my contention that the pressure to pick a side is rooted in readymade relations. As readymade relational structures are reproductions of the culturally hegemonic relational structures between nation states (Korean dependence on American aid), the perseverance of their power hinges on a binary rationale (you are either White or Asian, not both) that can put adoptees at risk of damaging and/or losing their only social networks.

The stories shared in Chapter 4 further illustrate how adoptees use story, relationality, and relational literacy to account for constituents' experiences of disorientation in their initial movements beyond racial isolation and readymade relations. The data suggests that such movements occur through participation in KAD Midwest's formal and informal programming, which itself is a form of disidentification as cultural production. Given leaders' own experiences with racial isolation and readymade relations and the disorientation they felt in these processes (Chapter 3), Chapter 4 highlights how these experiences informed leaders' cultural productions (programming) though programming content as well as through the cultivation of adoptee-only spaces.

Re/Experiencing Racial Isolation

Finally, Alex's story in Chapter 3 shows how disorientation from experiencing adoptee community for the first time can persist even after the initial stages of building relationships with other adoptees. In spite of the fact that she had become somewhat familiar with adoptee kinship and its powers and potentials, Alex expressed concern over co-founding KAD Midwest because she feared the possibility of losing her friendships with the other two co-founders. This seems to suggest

that racial isolation is not solely a condition of one's physical environment (i.e., living in predominantly White communities without access to people of color or other adoptees); rather, it suggests racial isolation is also the result of ever-shifting emotional, mental, and spiritual states, all of which are fluid and context-specific.

To further illustrate this claim, consider my own experience traversing deeper into the possibilities adoptee community makes available. In fall of 2018 I applied for a homeland tour to Korea and submitted paperwork to initiate a birth search. At that point, I had been actively involved in adoptee community for five years. Yet, experiencing return and reunion were completely new to me and have caused several moments of disorientation and upheaval in my life since. Only through my relationships with my friends in KAD Midwest was I able to process these moments of disorientation and upheaval and re/orient myself to account for these new experiences. In sum, as adoptees continue to journey into the various realms that open up to them as a result of engaging adoptee community and claiming a Korean adoptee identity, they can expect to continuously re/experience racial isolation as a recursive process that requires engaged reflections over time to holistically incorporate into their sense of Self and world.

Putting it All Together: Relational Literacy and Racial Isolation as a Recursive, Communal Process

I now explain how the aforementioned findings of this study answer the research question and show how the model of relational literacy emerged from participants' stories. Recall that the question this dissertation set out to answer is: **How do experiences with racial isolation shape the leadership practices of adult adoptee community leaders?** The findings discussed in the previous sections suggest that, in general, the leaders' past and ongoing experiences with racial isolation are ultimately what drove them to initially found and lead KAD Midwest and are what continue to drive them to lead (and remain associated with) the organization. More specifically, the findings suggest that the fact that racial isolation is less a condition of physical environment and

more an ongoing process contingent on contexts that are, more often than not, ever shifting. The participants at the center of this study evidenced this both in their stories of initially moving beyond racial isolation and readymade relations as well as in stories of their leadership practices (i.e., their sponsorship of relational literacy through disidentification).

What participants' stories show in particular is that adoptee leaders both perform and sponsor relational literacy for other adult adoptees by using and promoting racial literacy[45] as a means for adoptees to individually and communally revise readymade relations. Through planning, executing, and reflecting on KAD Midwest's formal and informal programming, they sponsor racial literacy as a skill for negotiating the ongoing, contextual effects of racial isolation. I specifically found that, through participants' stories—both in the act of telling them in the context of our interview as well as in the insights they sponsor via racial literacy—the leaders demonstrated relational literacy by engaging its three key practices: (1) ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of one's ever evolving relationships with people, places, objects, and ideas; (2) the generation of critical understandings of present realities, positionings, and instances of marginalization as they relate to critical histories and attendant disorientations; and (3) participation in the enactment of systemic change that revises isolation and readymade relations through practices that are relationally expansive and accountable to the ways individuals and communities have been differently positioned

[45] Recall in Chapter 3 that I explained racial literacy in the context of adoptees as "as a skill and practice in which adoptees recursively explore (both individually and communally) the effects of systemic racism on their experiences and representations in US society. In alignment with Sealey-Ruiz, adoptees with this skill are able to discuss and critically think through the implications of American racism, which in turn enables them to adopt an antiracist stance (as those raised in the dominant racial group) *and* resist a victim stance (as racialized adoptees). In alignment with Guinier, they do this through an orientation to race as (1) contextual, not universal; (2) in relation to power and therefore an interplay between the structural, personal, and interpersonal; and (3) indelibly connected to variables of class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, age, and geography. In alignment with Winddance Twine, this orientation to race and the racial literacy that results from it enables adoptees to then sponsor racial literacy—and thereby relational literacy—for other adoptees through the provision of cultural strategies that empower adoptees to strengthen their relationships to themselves, other adoptees, Korea, Asian Americans, and the Korean diaspora."

by systems of power and control. By performing these moves, they model/sponsor them, which I show through an enactment of relational literacy via my own stories in relation to theirs.

Learning from Adoptees: Scholarly Implications

In this section, I explain how this study's contribution of relational literacy as a theoretical frame and practice to the discipline of rhetoric and writing can inform scholarly praxis, particularly in regard to working with community literacies and racial isolation. I also explain how relational literacy productively expands Asian American rhetoric, cultural rhetorics, and adoption studies. conclude with a discussion of the limitations of this study and suggestions for future study.

Relational Literacy in Writing and Rhetoric, Asian American Rhetoric, and Cultural Rhetorics

Though this study has focused on relational literacy in the context of Korean American adoptees, I posit that it can be used as a theoretical frame for more widely studying the un/doings of neocolonial oppression. My study confirms Pritchard's assertion that "literacy is central to establishing one's links to a historical precedent, creating a framework that embraces a multiplicity of identities to form and affirm those identities" (49). More specifically, it shows how one can use literacy practices[46] to establish links to a historical precedent, particularly histories that have been erased by readymade relations in the reproduction of culturally hegemonic relations. Relational literacy can thus be applied to a multiplicity of subjectivities and identities. The model's flexibility comes from its orientation to relationships, relational accountability, and story as central to thinking, knowing, and doing as well as from its orientation to oppression as partially achieved and maintained by isolation. While I focused explicitly on racial isolation in this dissertation, race is only one way of many through which people experience isolation. For instance, heteronormativity

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[46] Here I am referring to the three central practices that make up relational literacy: (1) ongoing and recursive engaged reflections of one's readymade relations; (2) the use of racial literacy to generate critical, historically situated understandings of one's ever-evolving relations and attendant disorientations; and (3) disidentifying with readymade relations and enacting/sponsoring systemic change that revises racial isolation and readymade relations.

similarly erases histories of queerness and demands assimilation through the isolation of queer bodies; ableism erases histories of dis/ability and demands assimilation through the isolation of dis/abled bodies; patriarchy erases histories of gender plurality and demands assimilation through the isolation of non-male, non-gendered bodies; and so on.

In addition, the findings of this study expand the scope of Asian American rhetoric in two key ways. The first is that adoptees are establishing a wide range of relationships to produce Asian American rhetoric. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Asian American rhetoric has been defined as a "rhetoric of becoming"[47] that "draws upon discursive practices both from the European American tradition and from Asian, as well as other ethnic and worldly traditions" (5). Yet, the drawing upon discursive practices from Asian rhetorical traditions is particularly complicated for Asian American adoptees because they often lack connections to their histories and birth cultures and, thereby, vital pieces of themselves due to racial isolation and readymade relations. Participants' stories as enacted through relational literacy demonstrate that adoptees are establishing a variety of relationships—other adoptees, Korean Americans, Asian Americans, scholars—to draw upon a variety of discursive rhetorical traditions in the absence of direct connections to their histories and birth cultures. Through relationships that are reciprocal and accountable, the leaders of KAD Midwest are constantly engaging in the communal production of a uniquely Asian American adoptee rhetoric.

This study further shows that a key part of Asian American adoptee rhetoric is the productive expansion of the categories of "Asian American" and "Korean American." In most cases, these categories do not consider adoptees, as evidenced in both Chapter 3 (specificities of adoptee experience that make racial isolation possible even among people of the same race) and Chapter 4 (Korea's lost children phenomenon). The stories shared in this dissertation indicate that

[47] Mao and Young define a "rhetoric of becoming" as "a rhetoric that participates in [the] generative process [of performativity], yielding an identity that is Asian American and producing a transformative effect that is always occasioned by use" (5).

Korean adoptees' interests lie less in becoming what many adoptees refer to, often with hints of shame, as "*Korean* Korean," or ethnically Korean, as the circumstances of their adoptions through forced diaspora prevent them from ever achieving this designation. Rather, their interests appear to lie more so in engaging and thereby developing what it means to be somewhere in between.

I argue that this is important to Asian American rhetoric because it lends new dimension to the at times essentialized categories of "Korean," "American," and "Asian American" upon which Asian American rhetoric has thus far been predicated. This is not to say that Asian American rhetoricians do not recognize the vast heterogeneity within the category "Asian American" because they do; this much is evident in Mao and Young's insistence on Asian American rhetoric as "a rhetoric of becoming," which they have defined as "a rhetoric that participates in [the] generative process [of performativity], yielding an identity that is Asian American and producing a transformative effect that is always occasioned by use" (5). In other words, for them, Asian American rhetoric is always emergent, as it is always contingent on ever-shifting rhetorical situations and, thus, cannot be essentialized. What I want to suggest, though, is that Asian American rhetoric has not yet substantially engaged the limitations and possibilities embedded in what it means to be "Asian American," "Korean," or "American" when, due to circumstances like transnational transracial adoption, you are generally not recognized as legible in any of these categories. Adoptees are never "Korean enough" for their Korean or Korean American counterparts, are never "American enough" for their white American counterparts and are never "Asian enough" for their Asian American counterparts.

It is important to note here that many Asian Americans, particularly second- and third-generation Asian Americans, report experiences of liminality similar to those experienced by Asian American adoptees. For example: they face racism and the rhetorical erasure of their experiences of

racism via the model minority myth[48] and they grapple with lost connections to their families' cultural origins via expectations of cultural assimilation. However, as Ben's, Hye Wol's, and Michelle's stories suggest, the differences in these experiences of liminality are critical. While non-adopted Asian Americans might struggle with injuries incited by racism and the double injury of the simultaneous erasure of those injuries, they still see their phenotypical makeup reflected in their families and the medias their families might have access to based on connections they might maintain to the homeland. Similarly, non-adopted Asian Americans may also struggle with maintaining connections to their cultural origins due to expectations of cultural assimilation in America, yet those connections are less obscured by complex systems of power like the transnational adoption industrial complex. I do not mean this meant to diminish the challenges Asian Americans face, nor do I mean to suggest that adopted Asian Americans "have it harder" than non-adopted Asian Americans. My purpose is rather to engage these similarities and differences to note that the differences are important to consider in the context of this study because adoptees are driven to re/make severed connections with their Asian birth cultures in ways that differ from methods used by non-adopted Asian Americans. The greatest example of this lies in my aforementioned assertion that Korean American adoptees draw on conflicting rhetorical traditions through direct recognitions of their lack of access to and deep understandings of those traditions via adoptee kinship and its modes of connectivity.

In terms of cultural rhetorics, this study can serve as an example of how to build and enact a cultural rhetorics methodology that engages decoloniality in neocolonial contexts. While Korean adoptees do not grapple with coloniality in terms of genocide and the forcible possession of land,

[48] In her 2014 book *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, Ellen D. Wu traces the invention and evolution of the model minority myth, often applied to Asians in America, particularly East Asians. She defines "model minority" as "a racial group distinct from the white majority, but lauded as well as assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically nonthreatening, and *definitively not black*" (3).

they are a prime example of the most recent evolution of coloniality (i.e., neocoloniality) in that they are the result of how globalization and capitalism exert and replicate new forms of cultural hegemony. Thus, relational literacy can be a model for further developing and recursively reflecting on how community literacies work to revise the ways people are interpolated into isolation and relational configurations with unequal power dynamics under such conditions. While the connections between modes of colonization and Korean adoptees have not been spelled out in detail in this dissertation, it is a, this is a future area of development in my longer research program.

Finally, given its expansion of current conceptions of racial isolation among adoptees, this study's explicit focus on leadership in the context of an adult adoptee community organization also has implications for adoption studies. On one hand, this study has yielded a deeper understanding of racial isolation as an ongoing process contingent on context as opposed to a static condition of physical environment. It specifically shows how regional adoptee organizations like KAD Midwest work to sponsor racially literate cultural strategies for negotiating racial isolation as a process. While previous studies have touched on regional adult adoptee organizations (Kim; Park Nelson) they have yet to center these organizations in their foci. This dissertation study addresses this gap by revealing the rhetorical workings of organizational programming as they occur through the establishment and sponsorship of accountable relationships.

Limitations and Further Journeys

While this study highlights relational literacy as a means for accountably addressing racial isolation and readymade relational structures, its insights are limited by sample size and geographical location. For this study, I interviewed four leaders, one of whom was a founder. Future studies might thus include more leaders and triangulate the findings to see if the patterns of racial isolation and sponsorship identified here occur among a larger sample size. In increasing sample size, future studies should also try to more holistically account for a variety of experiences of adoptee identity by

recruiting participants from a wide range of positionalities, i.e., race (hapa[49] Korean adoptees), gender (this study only featured on male-identifying participant), sexuality (this study did not feature queer-identifying adoptees), dis/ability (this study only featured neurotypical adoptees), age (this study featured adoptees in their 30s and thus did not account for earlier generations of adoptees or more recent ones), etc.

This study is also focused solely on a Korean adoptee organization in the Midwest. While it may not account for the same kind of diversity that can be found on the coasts, the Midwest is an important site for the study of Korean American adoptee leadership for several reasons. On one hand, KAD Midwest is one of the most established and active Korean adoptee organizations nationally and transnationally. On another hand, its predominantly White racial makeup is representative of the conditions of racial isolation most adoptees are raised in and form adoptee community to resist. As racial demographics vary according to space, place, and histories of immigration and marginalization, the unique racial dynamics of the Midwest may yield different results as opposed to adult adoptee organizations on the coasts and in the south. Furthermore, it would be interesting to hear the stories of adoptee organization leaders in international contexts to explore similarities and differences in leadership practices and the rhetorics they produce.

Eric Liu: Revisited

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I told a story about how the epigraph by Eric Liu was a starting point to my personal "journey" out of racial isolation as a Korean American adoptee. It is only fitting that I close this particular project with further reflection on this quote given all I have learned through my relations and this study in particular. In Chapter 1, I noted that the significance of this quote to me was that it was the first thing I had ever read by a non-adoptee that explicitly called Asian American adoptees to the proverbial table. In some ways, it still remains one of the few

[49] Adoptees who, racially, are part Korean and part another race, usually Black or White.

texts I know of that do so. When I think back to times when this text was the most important to me, it was in the second year of my doctoral degree in a Visual Rhetorics course. One of the major class projects was to create an image using visual rhetoric. Mine ended up investigating how images function to re/produce normative notions of family, how such notions work within the context of the US & South Korean relations to construct transnational transracial adoptees as objects of nationalist charity, and how those re/productions impact adoptees themselves.

For this class project, I created seven images, each made up of a gilded frame of family photographs featuring me and my adoptive family that, on the surface, looked like "normal" furnishings of a middle- to upper-middle class household. To expose the complex, violent, and colonial histories of Korean adoption, I disrupted these framed photographs with graffiti-looking scrawl on the walls with excerpts from Eleana Kim's *Adopted Territory*. I also placed DIY-looking paper scraps on the frames so they looked taped on, and on those scraps of paper I wrote letters to my younger selves in the pictures. The final image was a photograph of myself with nine other Korean adoptees—a photo taken in 2016 on a day I mentioned in an origin story in Chapter 2, the day after I first met Ben and Hye Wol at the KAAN conference. This was an important picture to include at the end, as it signified the ways adoptees are remediating popular, oppressive notions of adoption (colorblindness, adoption as love, adoptees as gifts) through the forging of relationships and communities with one another.

I titled this image project "Labor in the Dark," a phrase borrowed from Liu's quote in the epigraph because, at the time, I conceived of the work they were doing as exactly that—work they were seeing through, against all odds, without help or direction from anyone else. Yet, what I know now through my relationships with the leaders featured in this dissertation is that KAD Midwest had been founded in 2008 to operate through a sense of relationality and relational accountability that, over the years, has been built into its structure and programming. What's more, I learned through

them and those I have met through them that the first Korean adoptee organization was Korea Klubben, established in 1990 in Denmark by Korean Danish adoptees. I further learned that Also-Known-As (colloquially referred to in KAD circles as "AKA NY"), the premiere Korean American adoptee organization on the east coast, was established in 1996 and followed by the establishment of the Association of Korean Adoptees – San Francisco (colloquially referred to in KAD circles as "AKA SF") in 1997. By the time I would read Liu's memoir in 2012, Korean American adoptees had been organizing and gathering for 16 years. Today, they have been organizing and gathering—sponsoring relational literacy—for 24 years.

And though adoption from Korea to America peaked in the 1980s and has been on a steady decline ever since, there is still so much more we have to learn and teach one another and others. For instance, in our interviews, all of the participants mentioned looking ahead to what the future might hold for KAD Midwest, noting in particular that they will continue to be a beacon for Korean adoptees everywhere by constantly evolving to meet whatever needs we may have, such as how to parent as adoptees, how to organize and revise unethical citizenship laws and immigration practices, and to continue expanding our relational literacy through relationships of community and support with up-and-coming adult transnational transracial adoptees in America like Chinese adoptees, Haitian adoptees, Ethiopian adoptees, Guatemalan adoptees, and more. All of this is to say that, through the process of research and community literacy, it is no longer accurate to say that transnational transracial adoptees labor in the dark of racial isolation and readymade relations. Our stories are varied, they are multiple, and they are pedagogical. They are, overall, a key piece of the American story and important to consult in matters of racial equity and social justice.

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