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Featured Artist

Living Betwixt and Between: The Liminal in Transnational, Transracial Adoption

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Anthropologist Victor Turner is perhaps best known for his work on liminality,¹ a concept born out of Arnold van Gennep's work in 1909 on *rites de passage*.² The term is used to express moments of transition or in-between-ness. In this essay, I argue that growing up in the United States as a female [assigned female at birth, or AFAB],³ Chinese adoptee with White⁴ adoptive parents may be viewed as a liminal experience. This liminality is driven by the tension of being raised by parents whose race (White) is different from my own (Asian) and in a country (the U.S.) that is different from my country of birth (China). Recognizing the complexities of the terms race, nation, and ethnicity, I begin by defining more precisely what it means to be a transnational, transracial adoptee. I then express how this identity is revealed in my painting. My goal is twofold: to reach fellow adoptees and individuals living in liminal spaces who might be able to connect to my experience and the nuances of my art, and to connect more broadly with all readers to show how the transnational, transracial adoptee experience can shed light on the American monoracial system and raise questions related to ethnic-racial identity formation among adolescent adoptees.

Transnational, transracial adoptees are individuals from one nation who belong to one race, who have been adopted by and raised in families of another race in another nation. In some literature, the phrase "intercountry" or "international" is used in place of transnational, but at their core, these terms

1 Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*, eds. Louise Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster, and Meredith Little (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1987) 3–19.

2 "Arnold van Gennep: French Anthropologist," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 31 Jul. 2019, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arnold-van-Gennep>>.

3 I wrote this piece in several drafts, including one in 2018 and another in 2019. Between drafts, my thinking shifted in various ways, and I note these changes through italicized text. Here, I write "assigned female at birth" to indicate my shift in thinking about my gender identity.

4 When I initially wrote this piece in 2018, I decided to capitalize the term "White" to align with other capitalized racial labels, such as Asian, Black, and Latinx. Upon reviewing this same piece in 2019, I have considered the implications of not capitalizing the term "White." I have grown concerned that capitalizing the word suggests the supremacy of whiteness, which is not the message I intend. Ultimately, I have decided to maintain the original formatting in order to maintain parallelism, while recognizing the fluidity of language.



refer to the adoptee's crossing of arbitrary national borders. In recent years, the term "transracial" has become controversial. Rachel Dolezal helped to popularize the term in 2015,⁵ when she claimed to be transracial in a Today Show interview, considering herself to be Black even though her biological parents are White.⁶ The type of transraciality discussed in the adoptee community is very distinct from the way Dolezal employs the term. Specifically, while transracial adoptees are of a different race from their parents, this is an ascribed difference rather than a chosen one. In other words, unlike Dolezal, who actively chooses to lay claim to a race both different from her parents and different from the race that society would impose upon her given her phenotype, transracial adoptees are passively ascribed a race by society based on phenotype, and that race is different from the race of their parents. Inherent in Dolezal's transraciality is that she has the ability to fluidly choose her race as Black, without regard to historical oppression of Black individuals; inherent in adoptee transraciality is that adoptees are assigned a race (i.e., they are racialized), and this race happens to be different from their (adoptive) parents' race.

Upon being adopted, transnational, transracial adoptees are forced to create new identities for themselves. As Pamela Anne Quiroz highlights, they become "*neoethnics*, people whose identities have literally been re-created through the act of adoption and who typically do not experience direct links to their culture and ethnicity of origin."⁷ In the artwork, I examine myself as a neoethnic through the lenses of race, nationality, and culture.

The family painting addresses the discovery and exploration of this complex racial, national, and cultural identity. In the painting, I rely on such artifacts as a family photograph and a globe to examine my origin story. Specifically, with the use of a broken mirror and various mirrored reflections, I aim to comment on the fragmentation of race and culture that scholars such as Quiroz have studied in the transnational, transracial adoptee experience.⁸

I note that I am racially Asian, interpreting race as something "ocular" and "corporeal" that is mapped onto the body.⁹ I also see that I am of American nationality, interpreting nationality as being

5 Syreeta McFadden, "Rachel Dolezal's Definition of 'Transracial' Isn't Just Wrong, It's Destructive," *The Guardian*, 16 June 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/16/transracial-definition-destructive-rachel-dolezal-spokane-naacp>>; Richard Pérez-Peña, "Black or White? Woman's Story Stirs Up a Furor," *New York Times*, 12 June 2015, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/us/rachel-dolezal-naacp-president-accused-of-lying-about-her-race.html>>; Dana Ford and Greg Botelho, "Who Is Rachel Dolezal?," CNN, 16 June 2016, <<https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/16/us/rachel-dolezal/index.html>>; Justin Wm Moyer, "Rachel Dolezal Draws Ire of Transracial Adoptees," *Washington Post*, 17 June 2015, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/06/17/rachel-dolezal-draws-ire-of-transracial-adoptees/>>. Rachel Dolezal is the former president of the NAACP in Spokane, Washington, and a former African studies instructor at Eastern Washington University. For years she passed as Black. In 2015, her (White) parents publicized childhood photographs of their daughter to news outlets, revealing that Dolezal is White. In the aftermath of these photos, Dolezal has claimed to be transracially Black, upsetting both the Black and the transracial adoptee communities.

6 Alan Yuhas, "Rachel Dolezal Defiantly Maintains 'I Identify as Black' in TV Interview," *The Guardian*, 16 June 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/16/rachel-dolezal-today-show-interview>>.

7 Pamela Anne Quiroz, "Adoptive Parents Raising Neoethnics," in *Families as They Really Are*, eds. Barbara J. Risman and Virginia Rutter (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015) 435–436.

8 Quiroz.

9 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2015) 39–40.



a member of a certain nation-state, which in my case is the United States of America. Recognizing, as Omi and Winant, that the term “American” is often incorrectly equated with Whiteness, I clarify that I am not only of American nationality, but I am also of White culture: I was raised in a family of racially White individuals who taught me White cultural norms.¹⁰ While I am not certain how strangers and acquaintances interpreted my race throughout my upbringing, I believe that my nuclear and extended family tended to subscribe to colorblind ideologies when interpreting my race, meaning that my Asianness in contrast to their Whiteness was never mentioned. Hrapczynski and Leslie find that “when [adoptive] parents were inattentive to the importance of race and how it structures people’s experiences, they appeared to be less likely to teach their racial minority child about his or her heritage as a means to instill cultural pride.”¹¹ This phenomenon seems to hold true for my family, as perhaps their colorblindness served to erase, or at least diminish, discussions of race. Consequently, my parents may have provided fewer opportunities to connect with my Chinese heritage growing up, leading me to feel more connected with White rather than Asian culture. At the core, I see myself as having been afforded white Bourdieuan cultural and social capital in spite of perhaps being perceived by others as non-White.

Different aspects of the painting reflect this tension between my Whiteness and my Asianness. The yellow globe in the painting is strategically placed to show the United States of America on the outward side and China in the mirrored reflection behind; together these are meant to suggest that I am from China and the United States. I live in Victor Turner’s liminal space, in which one is “at once no longer classified and not yet classified.”¹² My phenotype and country of origin have made me racially Asian and a person of Chinese heritage, but my immigration to the United States and upbringing in a White family have made me a person of American citizenship and of White culture. Due to a combination of race, nationality, and culture, I find that I am “betwixt and between” being Asian Chinese and White American. I note that the notion of living in between worlds is not solely limited to the transnational, transracial adoptee; this experience may resonate with those who self-identify as multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious, multicultural, or with some other identity altogether. Regardless of the combination of identities that creates one’s liminal experience, studying these liminal experiences is fruitful because it can complicate dominant conceptualizations of race and of ethnic-racial identity formation. In the United States, monoraciality is privileged and assumed — one is simply Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Asian, White. However, transracial adoptees — and multiracial children — complicate this system by suggesting that an individual can belong to multiple racial groups. Transracial adoptees expose the arbitrary nature of categories of race because their identities fall between [*or outside of*] such monolithic labels.

Transracial, transnational adoptees also offer curious, meaningful examples in studies of ethnic-racial identity formation. In my painting, one mirror is my self-portrait: a visual representation of the

10 Omi and Winant.

11 Katie M. Hrapczynski and Leigh A. Leslie, “Engagement in Racial Socialization among Transracial Adoptive Families with White Parents,” *Family Relations* 67.3 (2018): 362.

12 Turner 6.



introspective work I do (along with many other transnational, transracial adoptees) to understand my identity. Looking at myself in the mirror forced me to consider the intersectionality of my identities and urged me to realize the relative visibility of each one. My Asian phenotype labels me as Asian but does not necessarily reveal my White socialization. Racial socialization may be defined as “the broad category of behaviors parents engage in to transfer knowledge and values about race to their children,” which include “cultural socialization” and “preparation for bias.”¹³ My parents taught me, either implicitly or explicitly, White cultural norms and values, and they did not explicitly prepare me to experience racial bias. Again, my experience is not wholly unique; Baden, Treweeke, and Ahluwalia find that “by the time TRIAs [transracial and international adoptees] reach later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, many of them associate with being White. Research suggests that approximately two-thirds of TRAs [transracial adoptees] do not identify with their own racial status.”¹⁴ These authors make precisely the case that transracial adoptees experience cognitive dissonance between their phenotypes and their cultural upbringing.

My (adoptive) parents have been central in my life, so their inclusion in my art, through a family photograph, is essential. Aside from the fact that they have provided me food, clothing, and shelter for nearly my entire life, they have also provided me unconditional love from the moment I was placed in their arms. My mother, Amanda,¹⁵ stayed home with me for five years before I went off to kindergarten so that I could grow up with my mother, rather than with near-strangers in daycare centers. To actualize this caretaking arrangement, my father, Ed, worked two jobs and took out an equity line on our home that has taken years to pay off. Once I entered school, both Amanda and Ed shuttled me to and from my numerous extracurricular activities, including dance, gymnastics, violin, and track team practices. Throughout college, I would call my parents at least four times a week, and more often than not I called them every day. They remain my rocks in times of hardship and my cheerleaders in times of triumph. Often, my connection with Amanda and Ed seems otherworldly, as if it were fated and inevitable for me to be with them. One of my close mentors met my parents over lunch and, at a later date, remarked that the connection I have with my parents is “something special” and truly unique. [*I do push back against this narrative of having found my inevitable parents. This language of finding a “forever family” can be damaging. By suggesting that this is the family I was meant to be with, my biological family is completely pathologized and erased. The underlying message is that I should have been abandoned and placed for adoption in order to find my ideal family. The narrative of forever families focuses on the joy — mainly that of adoptive parents — that comes with adoption, ignoring the trauma of adoption and specifically the trauma of my initial experiences with abandonment. All that said, I know that my love for my adoptive parents and their love for me is incredibly strong.*]

13 Hrapczynski and Leslie 355.

14 Amanda L. Baden, Lisa M. Treweeke, and Muninder K. Ahluwalia, “Reclaiming Culture: Reculturation of Transracial and International Adoptees,” *Journal of Counseling & Development* 90.4 (2012): 387.

15 Pseudonyms are used for my parents.



It is sentiments like the deep connection I have with my adoptive parents that make it even more difficult for me to consider the fact that I have birth [*also called biological or first*], parents.¹⁶ In other words, thinking about my birth [*biological or first*] parents sometimes seems like an affront to my adoptive parents and all the effort they put into raising me. It is as if, by wondering about my birth [*biological or first*] mother, I am suggesting that my adoptive mother did not do her job correctly. Although that is not the intention, it would be difficult to convince my mother to read the situation differently. [*At the same time, I have learned throughout my life that my adoptive mother can be open-minded, and I have faith that I could convince her to view my curiosity about my birth/biological/first family as a positive sign of my growth.*] I am compelled to complicate the narrative that my adoptive parents and I deserve to be together, for I fear that encouraging such a narrative suggests adoptions are miraculous, divine interventions when this is not the full truth of my story of loss. I thus arrive at a crossroads: How can I both hold my love for my adoptive parents and continue to have questions about my birth [*biological or first*] parents? How can I reconcile the fact that my adoptive parents are essential, in that they gave me the gifts of love and belonging to a family unit, and that my birth [*biological or first*] parents are essential, in that they gave me life? I represent this tension in the painting through a detailed rendering of my adoptive family's portrait, followed by a much less detailed rendering of the same portrait in a broken mirror. This blurred image is paired with the reflection of China on the globe to suggest the unknown parts of myself, of my birth [*biological or first*] parents, and of my origin story that were left behind in China.

No doubt there were moments of pain and sorrow as I created this painting, but I emerge more sure of myself and of my identity. Inspired by the writings of Maria Root,¹⁷ I affirm that I need not separate who I am into neat piles of disparate identities. I am a product of blended worlds and cultures. I am a whole person. I offer this painting to others as a way to critically examine the complexities of identity formation for those living in the liminal. ■■

16 The Adopted Life, "Birth-Mother vs. First-Mother? A Shift In Adoption Terminology," weblog post, 19 Apr. 2017, <<http://www.theadoptedlife.com/angelablog/2017/4/19/birth-mother-vs-first-mother-the-shift-in-adoption-terminology>>. I am coming to understand the nuances of referring to the parents to whom I am genetically connected as birth, biological, or first parents. This article discusses sentiments within the adoption community to refer to this set of parents as first parents or first family, to avoid reducing these parents solely to their reproductive role in my existence.

17 Maria P.P. Root, ed, *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996). Root has created a Multiracial Persons Bill of Rights that affirms one's ability to identify how one chooses and to not have to choose between two or more races. This resonated with me in that it suggested I do not have to choose between the Asian race and White culture of my transracial adoption; it allows space for both and neither to be true at the same time.



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