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"I'd Rather Have Something than Nothing"
Presence and Absence in the Records of Transracial, Transnational Adoptees

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Article abstract

In the last decade, archival scholars have begun to deeply reflect upon the experiences of individuals and communities as they interact with administrative and bureaucratic records. They have found that there is a significant gap between the emotional experiences of records activators and the preparedness of archival repositories to address these experiences. Emerging from these realizations is a call for archivists to better understand the experiences of the personal in the bureaucratic and to design and take up reparative, caring, and rights-based frameworks to respond to these previously unaddressed needs. Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted as part of the author's master's thesis, this article maps out connections between transracial, transnational adoptee experiences and ideas about the archival imaginary. In addition to acting as a space for participants to share their stories – which directly demonstrate the ability of records to both create and collapse space for unanswerable questions – this work seeks to take up existing calls to archivists and recordkeepers to consider the impact of the bureaucratic on the personal and to recognize the urgent necessity of addressing these experiences as we move forward into more caring practice.

"I'd Rather Have Something than Nothing"

Presence and Absence in the Records of Transracial, Transnational Adoptees[1]

MYA BALLIN

ABSTRACT   In the last decade, archival scholars have begun to deeply reflect upon the experiences of individuals and communities as they interact with administrative and bureaucratic records. They have found that there is a significant gap between the emotional experiences of records activators and the preparedness of archival repositories to address these experiences. Emerging from these realizations is a call for archivists to better understand the experiences of the personal in the bureaucratic and to design and take up reparative, caring, and rights-based frameworks to respond to these previously unaddressed needs. Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted as part of the author's master's thesis, this article maps out connections between transracial, transnational adoptee experiences and ideas about the archival imaginary. In addition to acting as a space for participants to share their stories – which directly demonstrate the ability of records to both create and collapse space for unanswerable questions – this work seeks to take up existing calls to archivists and recordkeepers to consider the impact of the bureaucratic on the personal and to recognize the urgent necessity of addressing these experiences as we move forward into more caring practice.

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1   In order to celebrate and highlight the work of adoptees (not limited to transracial, transnational adoptees) present in the literature cited in this article, I have endeavoured to emphasize their contributions, where and when I was able to identify them through their writing, by bolding their names in the relevant citations.

RÉSUMÉ Dans la dernière décennie, des archivistes ont commencé à réfléchir profondément aux expériences des individus et des communautés dans leurs interactions avec des documents administratifs et bureaucratiques. Ils ont remarqué qu'il existe un écart important entre les expériences des utilisateurs qui activent les documents et les volontés des organisations archivistiques de prendre en compte ces expériences. Plusieurs énoncés émergent de ces réalisations. D'abord, un plaidoyer pour mieux comprendre les expériences personnelles dans les environnements bureaucratiques et pour développer des paramètres réparateurs et de bienveillance est mis en lumière. Ces composantes permettent d'envisager un cadre de référence fondé sur les droits humains afin de répondre aux besoins non considérés des personnes concernées. Se basant sur des entrevues semi-structurées menées dans le cadre du mémoire de maîtrise de l'autrice, cet article met de l'avant des connexions entre les expériences transraciales et transnationales de personnes adoptées et des idées provenant des énoncés théoriques archivistiques de l'imaginaire. En plus de servir de plateforme pour que les participants puissent partager leur récit – démontrant de manière explicite comment des documents ont à la fois la capacité de créer et de déconstruire des espaces pour évaluer les questions sans réponse –, cet article cherche à prendre en compte les incitations des archivistes et gestionnaires de documents à considérer l'impact des procédés bureaucratiques sur la vie personnelle, en plus de reconnaître l'urgence d'évoquer ces expériences alors que nous nous engageons dans une pratique davantage bienveillante.

My past was invented, implanted, and accepted.
I'm more real than you are because I know I'm not real.

– Sun Yung Shin, *Unbearable Splendor*[2]

Introduction

Records document absence and presence in stories of adoptees' pasts in complex ways. As Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Bibler Coutin put it, "The lack or proliferation of forms produces tensions between papers (which should authenticate a self that preexists its documentation) and the de facto experience of a self that exceeds its documentation."[3] This dynamic was at the forefront of my mind as I engaged in qualitative research exploring the experiences of adoptees through an archival studies lens for my master's thesis.[4] My research examined transracial, transnational adoptees' interactions with their records as well as the relationships that impact how they learn about their records and about how to use and access them. This article presents some key findings from this larger exploration of adoptee experiences. By exploring the narrative and documentary ambiguities experienced by transracial, transnational adoptees and the role that records play in these ambiguities, it contributes to emerging scholarship on the dynamics of archival imaginaries and the roles that archivists might play in addressing that which might seem impossible and unattainable beyond imaginary realms. Ryan Gustafsson suggests that "to be an adoptee involves a questioning that is unanswerable and hence unending, but which is nevertheless pursued."[5] This article examines how records are used both to engage in this questioning and to find impossible answers among the vaguest of clues.

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2   **Sun Yung Shin**, *Unbearable Splendor* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2016), 71.

3   Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Bibler Coutin, "Backed by Papers: Undoing Persons, Histories, and Return," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 2 (2006): 178.

4   **Mya Ballin**, "'How Do We Pronounce Our Skin in English': Records of Transracial, Transnational Adoption and Their Implications for Archival Work" (master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 2022).

5   **Ryan Gustafsson**, "Theorizing Korean Transracial Adoptee Experiences: Ambiguity, Substitutability, and Racial Embodiment," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (2021): 313.

Literature Review

Introduced to archival studies by Michelle Caswell in 2014, the concept of the archival imaginary engages with Arjun Appadurai's conceptualization of a shared imaginary, or a "constructed landscape of collective aspirations."[6] Informed by a community's past experiences of archives, archival imaginaries constitute the imagining of future records creation practices, recordkeeping practices, and archival practices to either reinforce or deconstruct existing standards. Anne Gilliland and Caswell argue that communities, fuelled by these imaginaries, have engaged in the exploration of impossible archival imaginaries[7] through the mental and physical work of creating records that do not exist, which they call "imagined records": those that are "never-to-materialize, but pregnant with the possibility of establishing a proof, a perspective, a justice that heretofore has remained unattainable."[8]

    The concept of the archival imaginary has captured archival scholars' attention as a means of examining the role of records as sources of information, truth, and validation in situations where answers are needed but no records are to be found.[9] Gilliland and Caswell argue that, "outside the realms of legal and bureaucratic evidence it can be demonstrated, time and again, that whatever society, agency, community or individual acts upon or invests in as a record, indeed functions in that context as a record."[10] Imagined records, treated as records by their creators, serve important purposes for individuals and communities affected by displacement, grief, loss, and symbolic annihilation.[11] For many, these

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6   Arjun Appadurai, quoted in Michelle Caswell, "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives," in *Identity Palimpsests: Ethnic Archiving in the U.S. and Canada*, ed. Dominique Daniel and Amalia Levi (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014), 48.

7   Gilliland and Caswell proposed this term to refer to "situations where the archive and its hoped-for contents are absent or forever unattainable." Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 61.

8   Gilliland and Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries," 72.

9   For in-depth discussions of the potential and significance of silences in the archive, see, among others, Verne Harris, "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa," *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 132–41; Rodney G.S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006): 225; Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

10   Gilliland and Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries," 57.

11   See, among others, Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, "Radical Empathy in the Context of Suspended Grief: An Affective

purposes are understood to be extralegal. On pondering the "truthfulness" of the Texas After Violence Project (TAVP) archives, where records are intentionally created for the purpose of being archived,[12] Gabriel D. Solis argues that "archives of survival seek truth, but not the 'truth' sought by repressive justice systems. The truths sought by liberatory memory work are raw, relational, revelatory."[13] In the case of TAVP, imagined records have the potential to serve emotional and intercommunity purposes, providing evidence of lives and personal truths denied by institutional reports.

The ways in which archives have chosen to address the urgency and realness of archival imaginaries have rarely attempted or succeeded in centring the needs and hopes of the individuals or communities for whom the imaginary is most potent.[14] Focusing on the records experiences of care leavers, Nicola Laurent, Cate O'Neill, and Kirsten Wright describe how "unsubstantiated stories of natural disasters such as fires or floods are used by record holders and archives to justify or explain absent records."[15] Inscribing these questionable truths into official accounts, archives and care institutions participate in the resolution of the archival imaginary in a way that compounds care leavers' already significant skepticism about the ability of the institutions and their records to be truthful and support them in the identity-forming work they hope to engage in.[16] While

Web of Mutual Loss," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.24242 /jclis.v3i2.134; Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisauskas, and Devon Mordell, "'Treat Them With the Reverence of Archivists': Records Work, Grief Work and Relationship Work in the Archives," *Archivaria* 88 (Fall 2019): 84–120; James Lowry, "Radical Empathy, the Imaginary and Affect in (Post)Colonial Records: How to Break Out of Inter-national Stalemates on Displaced Archives," *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 185–203; Hariz Halilovich, "Re-imaging and Re-imagining the Past after 'Memoricide': Intimate Archives as Inscribed Memories of the Missing," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 77–92.

12 This act goes against the traditional understanding of what makes a document an archival record. These acts can be aligned with *archive intervention*, a concept conceived by Lubaina Himid and explored in, among others, Rebecka Taves Sheffield, "The Bedside Table Archives: Archive Intervention and Lesbian Intimate Domestic Culture," *Radical History Review* 120 (Fall 2014): 108–20.

13 Gabriel D. Solis, "Documenting State Violence: (Symbolic) Annihilation and Archives of Survival," *KULA* 2, no. 1 (2018): 9.

14 In addition to the example that follows, see Jennifer Douglas and Allison Mills, "From the Sidelines to the Center: Reconsidering the Potential of the Personal in Archives," *Archival Science* 18, no. 3 (2018): 257–77.

15 Nicola Laurent, Cate O'Neill, and Kirsten Wright, "Convenient Fires and Floods and Impossible Archival Imagin-aries: Describing the Missing Records of Children's Institutions," *Archivaria* 94 (Fall/Winter 2022): 94–119.

16 The scholarly landscape of care leavers' experience of records is vast, but literature that strongly centres the voices of care leavers – either through personal narrative, direct interviewing, or use of official testimony – and

records often provide the only account of a care leaver's childhood, their contents are often lacking, and "their brevity and omissions can be deeply affecting, reinforcing care leavers' feelings that nobody cared."[17] As this article will show, the ambiguity of the truth and depth of official record accounts is something that also strongly affects adoptees.

While the situations of care leavers with regard to recordkeeping and those of adoptees are similar in some ways, they are not the same. Most literature on care leavers identifies records as essential to identity building for those without the continuous presence of someone who could narrate their childhood and family stories.[18] In the case of adoptees, there is often, although not always, at least one parent or family member present who can help to collect and later share post-adoption childhood memories as well as family stories that the adoptee can call their own. A child's adoption story is often a source of family mythologizing and storytelling,[19] and fiction and nonfiction for and by adoptees commonly explore adoptees' stories.[20] However, both care leavers and adoptees face a similar absence or limited availability of records that could answer questions they might seek to ask about their pasts. Sonja van Wichelen notes that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has defined and codified

is therefore important to highlight, particularly in the spirit of this article, includes Frank Golding, "The Care Leaver's Perspective," *Archives and Manuscripts* 44, no. 3 (2016): 160–64; Jacqueline Z. Wilson and Frank Golding, "Latent Scrutiny: Personal Archives as Perpetual Mementos of the Official Gaze," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 93–109; Shurlee Swain and Nell Musgrove, "We Are the Stories We Tell about Ourselves: Child Welfare Records and the Construction of Identity among Australians who, as Children, Experienced Out-of-Home 'Care,'" *Archives and Manuscripts* 40, no. 1 (2012): 4–14; Victoria Hoyle, Elizabeth Shephard, Elizabeth Lomas, and Andrew Flinn, "Recordkeeping and the Life-Long Memory and Identity Needs of Care-Experienced Children and Young People," *Child and Family Social Work* 25, no. 4 (2020): 935–45; Suellen Murray, *Finding Lost Childhoods: Supporting Care-Leavers to Access Personal Records* (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

17 Heather MacNeil, Wendy Duff, Alicia Dotiwalla, and Karolina Zuchniak, "'If There Are No Records, There Is No Narrative': The Social Justice Impact of Records of Scottish Care-leavers," *Archival Science* 18, no. 1 (2018): 10.

18 See, for example, Cathy Humphreys and Margaret Kertesz, "'Putting the Heart Back into the Record': Personal Records to Support Young People in Care," *Adoption and Fostering* 36, no. 1 (2012): 27–39.

19 Patricia Sawin, "'Every Kid Is Where They're Supposed to Be, and It's a Miracle': Family Formation Stories among Adoptive Families," *Journal of American Folklore* 130, no. 518 (2017): 394–418.

20 As discussed in works such as Sarah Y. Park, "Representations of Transracial Korean Adoption in Children's Literature" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009); Margaret Homans, *The Imprint of Another Life: Adoption Narratives and Human Possibility* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Kelly Jerome and Kathryn Sweeney, "Birth Parents' Portrayals in Children's Adoption Literature," *Journal of Family Issues* 35, no. 5 (2014): 677–704; and Macarena García-González, *Origin Narratives: The Stories We Tell Children about Immigration and International Adoption* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

a child's *right to know*, and the Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (the Hague Convention of 29 May 1993) has attempted to outline what that right to know looks like. However, in practice, records processes that technically comply with these requirements fail to acknowledge "that 'knowing' involve[s] more complex dynamics than a rights framework is able to capture."[21]

Inspired by an interest in considering how adoptees' interactions with their records might illuminate the dynamics of knowing and identity development that rights-based approaches to adoption records have failed to adequately imagine, this article explores ways that adoptees are supported and – sometimes even in the same moment – disappointed by the presence and absence of records of adoption. The purpose of my research, and of this article, is to explore how adoptees' interactions with records of their adoption align (or not) with the stories they are told and tell and to suggest how records – real and imagined, present and absent – reflect and contribute to adoptees' sense of identity and belonging.

Methodology

Between November 2021 and January 2022, following study approval from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board,[22] I conducted interviews with 12 adoptees. The study population was narrowed to English-speaking Chinese and Korean transracial, transnational adoptees with no limitations on the country/ies they were raised in or to which they hold a sense of belonging or connection. Participants were recruited through online communities that centre these experiences.

Once participants were identified, they each participated in two one- to one-and-a-half-hour interviews. The first interview was semi-structured and consisted of interview questions that sought to explore participants' familiarity with and experiences of their records as well as to gain an understanding of each participant's sense of personal and cultural identity/ies and what it meant to

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21   Sonja Van Wichelen, "Revisiting the Right to Know: The Transnational Adoptee and the Moral Economy of 'Return,'" *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 40, no. 3 (2019): 359.

22   The reference for this study, approved in November 2021 within the UBC Office of Research Ethics, is H21-03122.

them to be an adoptee or to have been adopted. The second interview utilized two different elicitation techniques. In the first, which was researcher-led and researcher-selected, participants were asked to prepare for the interview by reading a selection of literary accounts of adoptees interacting with, reflecting upon, and/or attempting to find their records.[23] The second technique was researcher-prompted and participant-curated object elicitation: each participant was asked to select between one and four items, imaginary or tangible, that they viewed as representative of their story or experience with adoption, which we discussed both individually and within the context of their reflections from the first interview.

While a much more in-depth exploration of my study's methodology can be found in my thesis, I would like to emphasize the roles that care, agency, and the researcher-participant relationship played in my process. My own positionality is particularly important to note here. As a transracial, trans-national adoptee, I am a member of the closed online communities in which I recruited. Although I did not know any but one of the participants for this project, the fact that I am an adoptee played an important role in the level of comfort that participants had in sharing their stories and emotions with me. As noted by Kim Park Nelson, "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."[24] Several participants indicated that my positionality as an adoptee greatly affected their interest in the study and their perception of my ethics in approaching the work, and it is something that I did not take lightly.[25] From beginning to end, my goal was to centre the stories of my participants in ways that honoured their experiences, acknowledged the potential for their stories

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23 The excerpts used in this exercise were **Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom**, *Palimpsest: Documents from a Korean Adoption* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2019), 32–41, 110–17; Shin, "Harness," in *Unbearable Splendor*, 43–50; Sun Yung Shin, "An Orphan Considers the Hand of God," in *Granted to a Foreign Citizen* (Vancouver: ArtSpeak, 2020), 43.

24 **Kim Park Nelson**, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 19. These conclusions, at least in my experience, apply not only to Korean adoptees but also to Chinese adoptees in adoption/adoptee-centric spaces, including the social forums through which I recruited.

25 I was particularly inspired by the call for ethical, adoptee-led research found in **Hollee A. McGinnis**, **Amanda L. Baden**, **Adam Y. Kim**, and **JaeRan Kim**, *Generational Shifts: Adult Adoptee Scholars' Perspective on Future Research and Practice*, The Future of Adoption publication series (Amherst, MA: Rudd Adoption Research Program, 2019), https://www.umass.edu/ruddchair/sites/default/files/rudd.mcginnis.pdf.

to provoke strong emotions, and prioritized their agency in the interviews and ultimately in the final work. For this reason, the interview protocol included a customized distress protocol[26] as well as an in-depth procedure for continued consent. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcribed interviews during the coding and analysis process and to review sections of the thesis relating to their stories and interviews before the thesis was submitted to the university. This work would be nothing without the individuals who took the time not only to share their experiences with me but also to trust me with the intimate thoughts and emotions within them, so while it was and is my goal to contextualize these stories for the benefit of the archival community, my first priority in presenting these stories is to ensure that this work is a validating and respectful depiction of participants' experiences.

Study Participants[27]

As part of the continued consent process, participants were given the opportunity to elect to be referred to by pseudonyms or by their first names, and this is reflected in how they are introduced. The level of information provided below reflects the level of comfort that each individual felt in sharing their demographics and background:

- **Jay** was adopted from Guangdong Province, China, and was raised in China, the United States, and Hong Kong.
- **Lucy** was adopted from Jiangsu Province, China, in the late 1990s and was raised in Canada.
- **Olivia** was adopted from Seoul, South Korea, and was raised in Denmark.

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26 This protocol was modelled after the work of Carol Haigh and Gary Witham, "Distress Protocol for qualitative data collection" (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University, 2015), https://www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/rke/Advisory-Distress-Protocol.pdf.

27 Although each participant's voice is included in the original thesis, some voices are absent or only marginally present within this article. This is due to variations in the level to which individual interviews explored particular aspects of records and recordkeeping experiences that emerged as overarching themes. I am choosing to acknowledge each of the individuals I spoke to here, as it is through speaking with all of them that I developed my conclusions, even if their specific accounts are not present within this iteration of the work.

- **Ma** was adopted from Anhui Province, China, in 1992 and was raised in the United States.
- **Clare** was adopted from Anhui Province, China, in 2000 and was raised in the Southeastern United States.
- **Sarah** was adopted from Guangdong Province in 1997 and was raised in British Columbia.
- **Amelia** was adopted from Seoul, South Korea, and was raised in Alaska.
- **Cams** was adopted from Guangdong Province, China, in 1996 and was raised in Florida.
- **MC** was adopted from Jiangsu Province, China, in 2002 and was raised in New York.
- **Emily** was adopted from Guangdong Province, China, and was raised on the East Coast of the United States.
- **Chloe** was adopted from Hunan Province, China, in 1999 and was raised in Southern Ontario.
- **Shelley** was adopted from Zhejiang Province, China, in 1996 and was raised in Eastern Canada.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. The first is that it attempts to characterize the experiences of adoptees somewhat broadly but incorporates only a small sliver of the overall adoptee community/ies and an even smaller sliver of the more specific and yet still enormously diverse Asian adoptee community/ies. To address the concept of records and participants' experiences of them in a collective manner, I have, to a certain extent, collapsed some of the nuances of culture and identity and do not fully engage with Jenny Heijun Wills, Tobias Hübinette, and Indigo Willing's call to "resist the urge to imagine a mono-lithic West and a homogenized Global North, uniform in its motive, history, and current policy on adoption specifically and on immigration in a more general sense."[28] With this in mind, while I attempt to characterize experiences broadly and to offer alternative perspectives where they emerged in my interviews, this

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28 **Jenny Heijun Wills**, **Tobias Hübinette**, and **Indigo Willing**, "Introduction," in *Adoption and Multiculturalism: Europe, the Americas, and the Pacific*, ed. Jenny Heijun Wills, Tobias Hübinette, and Indigo Willing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 1.

research is not a reflection of all adoptees' experiences nor a complete encapsulation of the nuances of the experiences of this project's participants.

Another limitation is that I cannot purport to be an expert in the processes of adoption, in the nuances of adoption law, or even in adoption records. While I attempted to digest and interact with a wide array of adoption literature and policy as preparatory and continuing work for undertaking this thesis, the reality is that my work, both by circumstance and by design, is rooted primarily in the records experiences of those adoptees I talked to and in my own records experience as someone who is adopted. While I will identify some of the records creation conventions that exist and have impacts on the records of Korean and Chinese adoptees, I cannot claim to have full knowledge of the processes, especially since they have changed over time. Even with this in mind, I believe that this work is valid in its findings. In fact, the lack of knowledge about the records creation and retention processes that participants and I share is perhaps a finding in and of itself – a gap in what adoptees know about the records that were created about them.

A Note on Language and Labels

It is important to distinguish between references to adoptees as a community at large and those to the specific adoptees I engaged with in conversations as part of this research. Any time I refer directly to the participants in the research, I will use the term *participants*, while *adoptees* will be used to refer to the larger community/ies who self-identify as adoptees and are described as such within scholarly literature. The term *adoptee* is not used without reservations. As Julia Chinyere Oparah, Sun Yung Shin, and Jane Jeong Trenka note, "the word 'adoptee' is problematic. 'Adoptee' is a derivative from the verb 'to adopt.' The term negates any agency for the one who is the object of the adopter – the only one assumed to act." These scholars state their intention "to reclaim this term and boldly to declare our agency and self-determination."[29] With this reclamatory purpose in mind, and in recognition of those for whom the term holds this kind of power, I choose to use the word *adoptee* in the majority of this work. In instances where discomfort or a lack of identification with the term has been expressed, other preferred terms are employed.

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29   **Julia Chinyere Oparah**, **Sun Yung Shin**, and **Jane Jeong Trenka**, "Introduction," in *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, ed. Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 15.

Discussing how Korean adoptees discursively construct adoptive and birth family identity, Sarah Docan-Morgan notes that "names have symbolic and relationally constitutive uses."[30] Naming can refer not only to how adoptees are named and choose to name or rename themselves[31] but also to the labels we use to describe our relationships to our family/ies and culture/s, including the terms *birth* and *adopted* to describe family members and places. Docan-Morgan argues,

> Using different names for birth and adoptive family members provided a discursive tool for distinguishing one family from another, and preventing confusion for listeners and themselves. Labeling and naming, in this motive, seems purely pragmatic, yet this distinction divides the adopted person's family identity in two: birth and adopted. Depending on one's audience, there may be pressure to identify one family as "real."

While participants employed their own personal labels and names to describe themselves and their relationships, attempting to honour each of their individual discursive choices rather than utilize consistent language in this work would introduce a lack of clarity that would not ultimately be productive. I wish to acknowledge that choosing to continually apply the labels *birth* and *adoptive* to describe different entities such as parents, culture, and languages in some ways reproduces the interrogative, external lens that so often asks adoptees to choose which "side" they feel they belong to. My intent is neither to make a statement about the level of intimacy or distance participants feel in their relationships to their parents, culture, and languages nor to imply that one is inherently better or more correct than another. I hope that my application of birth and adoptive labels is not alienating to any adoptee reading this work.

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30   **Sara Docan-Morgan**, "Korean Adoptees' Discursive Construction of Birth Family and Adoptive Family Identity Through Names and Labels," *Communication Quarterly* 65, no. 5 (2017): 524.

31   See Elizabeth A. Suter, "Negotiating Identity and Pragmatism: Parental Treatment of International Adoptees' Birth Culture Names," *Journal of Family Communication* 12, no. 3 (2012): 209–26; Jane Pilcher, Zara Hooley, and Amanda Coffee, "Names and Naming in Adoption: Birth Heritage and Family-Making," *Child and Family Social Work* 25, no. 3 (2015); Jason D. Reynolds, **Joseph G. Ponterotto**, Jennie Park-Taylor, and Harold Takooshian, "Transracial Identities: The Meaning of Names and the Process of Name Reclamation for Korean American Adoptees," *Qualitative Psychology* 7, no. 1 (2020): 78–92.

Findings

This research is informed by my desire to understand how records contribute to the ways that adoptees understand, imagine, and navigate their stories. For most participants, becoming aware of their records was a fairly recent experience, tied to coming into their own as adults. This process can involve many needs and desires, including needing to be able to provide or have copies of documents to submit for official business for the first time, developing a sense of one's own individual and cultural identity that is independent from one's family, making connections to activist or common-interest community groups, and wanting to find biological family. While motivations for interacting with records can vary, several trends emerged from participants' accounts that related to what these records mean when they are (re)visited by an adoptee. What follows will explore how participants perceive these records and their purpose and identify how records and their contents interact with projections and evidence of care; concepts of (ambiguous) truth; and opportunities to imagine pasts, presents, and futures.

Imagining Birth Parents, Imagining Care

In the afterlife, perhaps I will meet my ancestors.
How will I know them?
– Sun Yung Shin, *Granted to a Foreign Citizen*[32]

Throughout their childhoods, adoptees are often encouraged to tell or imagine aspects of their adoption stories. This act of narrative building is invited by adults in the adoptee's life not only for identity formation but also as preparation for addressing interrogations of their familial and cultural belonging, which typically can only be diffused through discursive strategies.[33] How adoptees are

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[32] Shin, *Granted to a Foreign Citizen*, 39.

[33] For in-depth discussions, see, among others, Sara Docan-Morgan, "Korean Adoptees' Retrospective Reports of Intrusive Interactions: Exploring Boundary Management in Adoptive Families," *Journal of Family Communication* 10, no. 3 (2010): 137–57; K.M. Galvin, "Diversity's Impact on Defining the Family: Discourse-Dependence and Identity," in *The Family Communication Sourcebook*, ed. Lynn H. Turner and Richard L. West (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 3–19; Devon R. Goss, "'People's Heads Do Not Even Go There': Public Perceptions to Transracial Familial Intimacy," *Sociological Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2018): 119; Leslie Rose Nelson and Colleen Warner Colaner, "Becoming a Transracial Family: Communicatively Negotiating Divergent Identities in Families Formed Through Transracial Adoption," *Journal of Family Communication* 18, no. 1 (2018): 51–67; Elizabeth A.

taught to imagine the tale is not always rooted in the exact details recounted in their records. April Chatham-Carpenter has found that many adoptive parents of Chinese adoptees "engag[e] a dominant birth parent narrative, personifying Chinese birth parents as loving parents who were victims of something larger, outside of their control."[34] When the content of the records is not robust enough to provide direct, narrative proof of the care or sacrifice represented in childhood versions of an adoptee's adoption story, it is unsurprising that experiencing these records may feel invalidating or disappointing. However, while explicit narratives of care are often absent from the records, this does not mean that there is no care to be found at all within adoptees' readings of the records they have. While no participants described feeling as though the records that facilitated their adoption expressed a strong sense of care from anyone other than their adoptive parents, throughout our conversations, many participants used their records to engage in projections of care from either their birth parents or other people who had cared for them before they were adopted.

Where and how adoptees were left often plays a central role in the ways they find and are taught to find a sense of their birth parents' care in their story, as it is one of the only seemingly concrete facts about their pre-adoption life that they might know. While this detail can serve as evidence of imagined care, it is also tempered by the number of unknowns.

> Shelley: My mom when she would tell me, "Oh your mom wanted
> to keep you, but she loved you and she gave you away," she would
> reference that piece of, "Oh, she must have loved you because she
> placed you somewhere where she thought you'd be found." . . . So
> part of my mom's story that she's told me, of the "you were loved," ties
> into a piece of the documents, which I don't even know if it's true. . . .
> Obviously I still acknowledge [that possibility] and hope: "Oh, it would
> be very nice if my mom did love me and did leave me in a place where
> she wanted me to be found," but also knowing that that [it might] not

Suter, Kristine L. Reyes, and Robert L. Ballard, "Parental Management of Adoptive Identities during Challenging Encounters: Adoptive Parents as 'Protectors' and 'Educators,'" *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 28, no. 2 (2011): 242–61; Sara Dorow and Amy Swiffen, "Blood and Desire: The Secret of Heteronormativity in Adoption Narratives of Culture," *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 3 (2009): 563–73.

34   April Chatham-Carpenter, "'It Was Like This, I Think': Constructing an Adoption Narrative for Chinese Adopted Children," *Adoption Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2012): 178.

[be] true, . . . I'm like, "Well, there's a chance that she still loved me, but that's not how it happened," or that did happen [that way], but maybe it was more complicated than that.

Participants expressed a desire to imagine their relationships with their birth parents, and other carers such as foster parents or social welfare institute care-takers, as involving care, and yet their records fail to substantiate a true sense of connection to these not-quite-known figures. When reading about her birth mother in her documents, Amelia said, "there's definitely a lot of, you know, feeling a lot of empathy for this woman [and her situation], but also like, not enough of a full person for me to really know how to feel that."

Many participants felt that documents confirming their abandonment or orphanhood were particularly clinical in their approach, but my conversation with Clare offered an interesting perspective on how phrasing and procedural choices reflected in these documents might indicate care for an adoptee's experi-ences. A passage in Sun Yung Shin's poem "Harness" includes an image of the author's orphan *hojuk* – a document created by adoption agencies and notarized or otherwise approved by the Korean government to establish that a child can be adopted internationally by showing her to be the only member of her bloodline. A document that frequently performs the same task of affirming orphanhood in Chinese adoption is an "abandonment certificate." These documents can give the impression of rudimentary cut-and-paste jobs; as Clare describes her response to viewing her records and the records of other adoptees, "I feel like because all of [the records] look so similar like between adoptees, it's like you could just switch out the names and you wouldn't even know." Chinese adoptees who have abandonment certificates (not all do), will typically find a statement along the lines of, "Despite our efforts, the child's parents could not be found." This story is met with a lot of skepticism, particularly when considering the amount of time a unique search would take and the number of children that were to be adopted.[35]

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35   In the year that Clare was adopted, 5,058 children were adopted from China to the US. At the height of Chinese adoptions, when the US total was up to 7,903, the total number of children estimated to have been adopted from China globally was 14,484. Although literal, physical searching seems improbable given these numbers, a known strategy for searching for birth parents prior to a child's adoption is the placement of a "finding ad" describing the child in a local police newspaper. This practice did not become standard until after 1999 and has received scrutiny from scholars regarding its effectiveness and intent. US Department of State, "Adoption Statistics by Year – China," Travel.state.gov. Accessed June 25, 2022, https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/adopt_ref/adoption-statistics-esri.html?wcmmode=disabled; Peter Selman, *Global*

I asked Clare what she thought about Shin's *hojuk* in relation to her own abandonment certificate. We had spoken, throughout our conversations together, about the idea of (un)truth in adoption narratives, and so I was curious about whether she felt that one document might come closer to presenting a factual truth than the other. She responded,

> Clare: The Korean [practice of creating orphan *hojuks*] actually make[s] me feel worse because I feel like in my case at least, [when it says] "They cannot be found," I guess it still feels like you can claim your family. . . . I mean it does feel a little bit like it could be a lie. But also, a kindness, in a way. . . . [It's] creating a space for there to be birth parents. Almost, creating that space where there's [acknowledgement] that they exist.

Records of adoption and the uncertain and sometimes known-to-be-false truths they offer are the closest that many adoptees can get to knowing their stories. While some records close doors to information that adoptees would like to have known, others – within the context of adoptees' experiences as adoptees – offer the potential to engage with the absent presence of their past.

On Truths and Untruths

It's hard not to wonder how lost these children actually were. What was done to find their parents? How many of those taken into care were given papers that described them as given up or abandoned? Papers with new names, new birthdates, and new identities, papers that turned them into adoptable orphans. Papers that enabled their adoptions to the West.
– Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, *Palimpsest*[36]

Unlike a traditional birth certificate, which substantiates on paper a bond that parents might say they feel – or are told they are supposed to feel – the moment

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Statistics for Intercountry Adoption: Receiving States and States of Origin 2004–2020 (Newcastle, UK: Newcastle University, 2022), https://assets.hcch.net/docs/a8fe9f19-23e6-40c2-855e-388e112bf1f5.pdf; Patricia J. Meier and Xiaole Zhang, "Sold into Adoption: The Hunan Baby Trafficking Scandal Exposes Vulnerabilities in Chinese Adoptions to the United States," *Cumberland Law Review* 39, no. 1 (2008–2009): 87–130.

36   Sjöblom, *Palimpsest*, 117.

their child is born, adoption records such as abandonment certificates and orphan *hojuks* inherently sever family ties, even as they simultaneously offer opportunities for their creation. The disappearance of family that is enacted by certificates of abandonment or orphanhood is resolved through the adoption records that bring adoptees into their new families, which often position the adoptive parents as akin to blood relatives, essentially documenting that new connection into existence by verifying it as legal truth. Yngvesson and Bibler Coutin argue that

> paper trails (records of birth, adoption, citizenship, etc.) do not merely document prior moments and movements but also have the potential to redefine persons, compel movement, alter moments, and make ties ambiguous. Instead of only trailing into the past, papers jut out into the future, requiring the selves who are authenticated by these documents to chart new and sometimes unanticipated courses.
>
> Paper trails, which ought to substantiate truth, sometimes plunge their referents into a reality that is incommensurable with their sense of self.[37]

Procedures of transnational adoption often use extant styles of documents and legal procedures in order to deal with the atypical experiences of adoption.[38] For example, my mother filed in California a delayed registration of my birth – a document that, in isolation, could be interpreted to mean that she had given birth to me at home and then sought to have my birth acknowledged by the state at a later date. It is hard to capture the whole of the story through legal records, and for many adoptees, there is a sense that these records were created merely for compliance and to simplify the adoption process. This is perhaps what Ygvesson and Bibler Coutin refer to as the "plunge" into an alternate reality, one that affirms one's adoption but also fails to provide the full context of the how and why and when.

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[37]   Yngvesson and Bibler Coutin, "Backed by Papers," 184.

[38]   Unlike in Anne Gilliland's example of "irregular creation and deployment of (irregular) records," where refugees subvert traditional government rules, in these situations, the government itself is condoning and perhaps even generating irregular creation and use. Anne Gilliland, "A Matter of Life and Death: A Critical Examination of the Role of Official Records and Archives in Supporting the Agency of the Forcibly Displaced," in "Critical Archival Studies," ed. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 10.

Navigating Untruths and Ambiguities

Perceptions of the truth and accuracy of records play a key role in adoptees' relationships not only to the paperwork but also to their own stories. One way this emerged was through participants' perception, from their records, of adoptees' interchangeability.

> Shelley: I was sick [and] . . . the person from the adoption agency, you know she kind of offered: "Oh, we could switch her out." I'm sure that was not recorded, because who would want to record that, right? But that is, you know, something that just creates mixed feelings that at any point in [the process], my life could be drastically different, or I may not be alive.

Being treated as interchangeable perhaps contributes to the ambiguity Shelley feels about the records she does have of the processes that led to her adoption:

> Shelley: Sometimes I feel like when I'm imagining this baby that maybe I don't feel super connected to even though it's my younger self. I feel like when I think of like my baby self, I think of my baby self as like Yu Mingxue, not me, Shelley, because at the time Shelly was not really my name.

When did Shelley become *Shelley*? Was the time before her adoption a time when she was technically an entirely different baby, with an entirely different trajectory? The work that records do is a form of boundary-ambiguity[39] resolution performed through government and adoption agency action: when records are made to establish adoptees' histories and their adoptions, they establish what is knowable about our stories and where it is that we "belong."

Records failing to answer the *why* of abandonment are at the core of many adoptees' experiences, and many participants expressed a strong desire for

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39   Pauline Boss and Jan Greenberg define boundary ambiguity as "a state in which family members are uncertain in their perception about who is in or out of the family and who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system." Pauline Boss and Jan Greenberg, "Family Boundary Ambiguity: A New Variable in Family Stress Theory," *Family Process* 23, no. 4 (1984): 536, quoted in Jason Carroll, Chad Olson, and Nicolle Buckmiller, "Family Boundary Ambiguity: A 30-Year Review of Theory, Research, and Measurement," *Family Relations* 56, no. 2 (2007): 211.

records that could provide answers. In some instances, this desire emerged in conversations about bureaucratic records and involved participants considering what untruths concerning how they came to be at the orphanage were present in their documents. Chloe expressed feeling that the story in her records reflected the general act and purpose of adoption rather than the reality of her experience; she suspected there was some "inside information" she did not know, which was not included in the official documentation. Chloe said she was also aware that the one-child policy in China would have influenced the creation of documents and the truths they might contain, which complicated her desire for the documents to be accurate:

> Chloe: It's important that it's true, the little bit that I get. Just because that is all the adoptee gets a lot of the time. But . . . I understand it [shouldn't] have to be like the full situation and detail[s] about the whole story [of my birth parents and why I was abandoned]. I don't know. . . . It kind of contradicts each other, what I'm saying, but . . .

In addition to reflecting on the role of official documentation, participants imagined that their origins could have been captured in letters from their birth parents from the time they were left. Cams' reflection on the absence of an explanatory record relates the imagined *why* record to a decision made by their birth parents and, like Chloe, considers how the historical context of the time complicates their perception of the circumstances of their adoption:

> Cams: I've spent a lot of my life trying to justify to myself the reason why I was abandoned. Because on a very broad political policy level, I was left because the Chinese Government instituted a one-child policy that penalized people and controlled reproductive rights. . . . You have all of that, and you still have the interpersonal [feelings of], "You still made the decision to give me up. And you made the decision to not give me a letter, you made the decision to not seek out a domestic adoption. You made the decision." So there are a lot of things that really are still impacting me. And knowing that I'm never going to really have the answers to those . . . it sucks.

The adoptee experience is full of dialectics like this that we must learn to navigate. Because of the nature of our pasts and our presents, we often attempt to find a balance between two truths or two identities that might feel contradictory. At the same time, as we understand why there is not more information or a more concrete and singular story we can tell, we cannot help but wish that there were records that could provide us with these unknowable truths.

Finding a Sense of Truth

Even as participants expressed doubt about the accuracy of their records' representations of what happened in the past, some found value in a record's ability to attest that anything had happened at all. Ma believes that records of her adoption are valuable regardless of whether they are true:

> Ma: I'd rather have something than nothing because it's somewhere I can at least begin to look even if they're not completely, wholly correct. Because someone had to fabricate them, you know what I mean? And that right there is then a link. Like, "Okay well, where did you get that information? How many times have you spun the same narrative with other people?" Because everything has a beginning somewhere, someone told them to do this. So I see some value, even if the documents aren't all that correct.

In my conversation with Lucy, she also brought up an important aspect of adoptees' relationship to documentary "truth":

> Lucy: I know people are upset with the uncertainty and I get why, but [also] . . . all of the memories I have of birthday parties and family are all associated with this day. . . . [If I were to learn that what I had been treating as my birthday was wrong,] am I going to say, "Oh, my new birthday is this"? If I ever somehow found out what my actual one is, I don't think I would change the celebration day. I mean, first of all, I wouldn't change any of the documents, I can't imagine the disaster that would be.

What adoptees and adoptive parents know from records is often the only truth they can move forward with. While the truthfulness of the documents might

be questioned, in order to perform family and to enable adoptees to partake in cultural touchstones like birthday parties, at some point a deliberate choice is made to choose the truth that the records offer (or suggest) and to incorporate their information into adoptees' knowledge about themselves. To use the words of care leavers Jacqueline Z. Wilson and Frank Golding, "A basic tenet of the narrative-based model of identity is that the individual must have faith in their narrative(s)."[40] Adoptees learn to navigate the ambiguity of their records through learning to trust them to be a form of truth. Once these details become truth, the reality of these records in a sense defies their ambiguity/ies. In performing family and integrating the facts of the records into their stories, adoptees and their families make truths out of unknowns and put faith in records they might, at the same time, treat with suspicion.

Owning (and Struggling to Own) a Right to Know

It's no wonder we adoptees forget that we were ever born.
We're taught that our existence began the day we met our new families.
– Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, *Palimpsest*[41]

Many of the participants I spoke with expressed a desire for information or access to certain records they did not have about themselves, while also indicating that they perceived the information to be "unimportant." As part of our second interview, Lucy decided to forgo selecting a physical document from her files and instead chose to discuss the fact that she wished she had an abandonment certificate. While she prioritized the idea of this document in our conversation, she dismissed some of the evidentiary potential of such an imagined record, saying that the actual information contained within such a document would be "practically nothing," saying that "[abandonment certificates basically say,] 'This baby was found on the side of this road on this day, her birthday is this.' That's pretty much it, right?"

While this personal information may not be essential to an adoptee, the pieces of information that adoptees cannot know or access but *wish to* represent parts of our experiences that have been made ambiguous – details that others

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40   Wilson and Golding, "Latent Scrutiny," 97.

41   Sjöblom, *Palimpsest*, 13.

might take for granted – and results in our being socialized to understand these facts, even in the context of our own stories, as insignificant. Kimberly McKee contextualizes this within the commodification of adoptees, who are rendered as objects to be acquired and for whom "key markers of self become irrelevant."[42] The attention that records do or do not pay to these details, and the ways in which they recreate these details with a sense of ambiguous truth, can result in a sense of discomfort or dissociation with aspects of our stories. Even if we are content with who we are – even if we understand the "insignificance" of these details – the ways in which they represent key components of the "normal" selves that we cannot realize linger. We might learn to think of these details as "practically nothing," and yet they can feel like everything.

The discursive decisions that surround adoption narratives are informed by the narrative and editorial decisions that emerge from the records. Whether details are recorded or not often comes down to decisions made by someone an adoptee will never meet. Sarah shared with me the physical examination record her parents received when they were informed of their match. The document reports the general health of the child and is commonly part of an adoption file. Looking at it, Sarah noted that many sections did not have documented answers:

> Sarah: It feels like the person who filled it out decided what was worth noting. There are basics [noted on the form], and then they skipped everything else, which for everyone else in that process, that's good enough, but it's definitely not done with me in mind in terms of learning about myself.

This sense that someone else made decisions for them about which details were important and which would be left unknown extends not only to the limited details provided in the documents adoptees have but also to decisions about which records were "important enough" to have been passed along to the parents or to have been created to begin with.

> Sarah: There probably are other things, other documents, but definitely at least other details that someone decided either wasn't important –

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42 Kimberly D. McKee, *Disrupting Kinship: Transnational Politics of Korean Adoption in the United States* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 28.

how could they understand what will be important to me? Of course that's not important to someone who can just ask their birth parents, "What was I like when I was first born? What time was I born? How was I when I was a baby?" It's frustrating that someone along the way decided that [certain details] weren't important to me since it wasn't important to the process of adoption.

The stories adoptees are able to tell are inherently tied to the information we are able to access. While revisiting these records often leads to more questions than answers, adoptees develop an awareness about records' authorship that helps them identify actors who have controlled what they do and do not know; in gaining this kind of awareness, adoptees might begin to question how they could be better supported and cared for through their records and by the actors who have played roles in their creation.

Adoptee Activism

What we have is a hasty and terrible photocopy, dark and illegible,
the Korean original. Yet an original of what?
Deformation, a defamation in a home country. An ill report, rumor, scandal.
A secret. We are a copy and an original.
We will make a record.
– Sun Yung Shin, *Unbearable Splendor*[43]

When I spoke to Chloe about her reading of Shin's poem "Harness," she was moved to talk about her perception of adoptee resilience and activism in the face of adversity and unknowns:

Chloe: The "we will make a record" line of the poem, I see as meaning that we'll push for documents for ourselves, whether that be to be documented properly as a citizen of the adopted country that we are in now or documented properly as part of the history of our birth country. . . . I think it shows our push for being recognized: "This happened and we are people that are here. We can't just be shoved [aside] as like 'Oh

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[43]   Shin, *Unbearable Splendor*, 46.

well, that never happened,' or that [our history is] just a tiny piece that nobody acknowledges."

What does it mean for adoptees to come together around records? For some, this has meant hosting seminars or workshops on how to make freedom of information requests to access records that might have been lost or are otherwise unavailable. For others, it has involved sharing their own stories and helping others to feel they are not alone in the face of the absence/presence of their records and the complicated relationships and stories that records both succeed in telling and fail to capture.

Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres have utilized Jeanette Bastian's framework of a "community of records"[44] to identify how genealogists use archives, what role records play in their work, and whether archivists might be included within the boundaries communities set to define themselves and their work. They conclude that archivists were not viewed to be active participants in genealogists' work.[45] Until now, archivists have been similarly absent from the community of records that adoptees' records form. Following Yakel and Torres, one might ask, What can the ways adoptees have learned to help themselves tell us about what the archival and recordkeeping community is not yet addressing in our work? If adoptees are already creating their own practices for promoting awareness of records and their uses, what might be the role of archivists or records managers in supporting this community?

One suggestion emerges from my conversations with Shelley, who is involved in several adoption groups and helps to moderate some social spaces:

> Shelley: The Internet has so many things, it can't be that complicated to have all of us together share our resources in one place, share our experiences in one place. And I do think there's been a lot of adoptees who've tried to make that happen, but it's so hard because we're all over the place, and how do you be like, "Attention all adoptees, there's this new thing out here, make sure you all go to this one place."

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44   Jeanette Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003).

45   Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah A. Torres, "Genealogists as a 'Community of Records,'" *American Archivist* 70, no. 1 (2007): 111.

Although some government sites attempt to bring information about institutional records together, there is no singular, informative resource that prioritizes the needs and interests of adoptees, makes them feel heard, and offers them opportunities to learn about records. While adoptees have, as Shelley mentioned, worked to create some of these resources as a community, it is possible that collaborative efforts between adoptees who are already doing this work and recordkeepers who have deep knowledge of the existing records landscape might make it possible to create a space that brings in organizational knowledge while also still respecting community autonomy and perspectives.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore the experiences that participants have had when activating their records.[46] It proposes that through these activations, records of adoption function for adoptees as sites of exploration that reproduce many of the difficult questions about what it means to be "in between." The ways in which adoptees use records to answer questions about their stories and to identify information that can inform their sense of belonging can be tied to a variety of existing affective and social construction theories from both archival and adoption studies contexts. These theories include those that examine interactions with social and records imaginaries and the ways in which discursive strategies used to establish family ties affect how adoptees understand and tell their own stories. In addition to helping them find answers about the details of their adoption, these records have the potential to enable adoptees to imagine the care and decisions that went into the entirety of the process of adoption. In some cases, these exercises in wondering allow for projections of care on situations that might otherwise feel callous. In others, they emphasize the perceived lack of care for adoptees by the system that facilitated their adoptions.

Adoptees' interactions with our records represent second lives in more ways than one. In some instances, the experiences we have of these materials allow us to imagine the lives and work of other people. In others, it is the records that

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46   Eric Ketelaar coined the term *activation* to mean "every interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretation by creator, user, and archivist." Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives," *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (2001): 137.

enjoy new imaginaries and new applications: where they once served to facilitate or confirm facts of adoption, they now also serve to represent the truths that adoptees have built our stories on, the truths that we might never know, and the decisions others made that have affected the lives we now lead.[47] Records and records imaginaries both dictate and interplay with the stories that adoptees know and are creating for ourselves; the stories that emerge from records interactions offer important contributions to existing discussions that interrogate and identify the duties of archivists, records managers, and archival scholars to advocate for more conscientious records creation and records access practices.

This call to archivists' sense of responsibility is especially important because these records – while tied to highly personal thoughts, hopes, and events – are institutionally created. While so many of the interactions that adoptees have with their records happen at kitchen tables and on childhood desks and in basements of family homes, the fact that there is not typically an archivist in these spaces to provide context and description is not a reason to assume that archivists cannot or should not consider these types of records experiences. Douglas and Mills note that the "oppositional distinction between the institutional and the personal . . . limits the way users and archivists alike imagine institutional archives."[48] To expand an understanding of the ways institutional archives do work even as they are released into personal custody is vital to helping our profession orient itself to the emotional needs of those for whom the records hold deep significance. Without a better understanding of how we should imagine the sites and situations where the barrier between institutional and personal might be crossed, we will never truly be "doing right by"[49] those for whom we might dedicate our work.

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[47] I am reminded here of Jessica Lapp's employment of the concept of *fabulation*, a term used to describe how individuals and communities "use supposition, storytelling, and imagination to build more inhabitable worlds." Lapp's concept of provenancial fabulation, "a practice of interrogating, challenging, and reconfiguring the archival systems that structure who and what matters enough to be made legible," is also highly relevant. Jessica Lapp, "'The Only Way We Knew How': Provenancial Fabulation in Archives of Feminist Materials," *Archival Science* (November 2021), under "Provenancial Fabulation," https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-021-09376-x.

[48] Douglas and Mills, "From the Sidelines to the Center," 272.

[49] This phrase was introduced to the archival community by Catherine Hobbs. Catherine Hobbs, "Personal Ethics: Being an Archivist of Writers," in *Basements and Attics, Closets and Cyberspace: Explorations in Canadian Women's Archives*, ed. Linda M. Morra and Jessica Schagerl (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 181–92.

These findings mirror those found in scholarship that has explored the experiences of care leavers – particularly when considering the shifts in records awareness that occur as part of the transition from childhood to adulthood and the role of records in answering questions about otherwise unknown pasts. Areas where archivists and records professionals have concluded that they might best offer support to care leavers, as well as other communities such as refugees, are important starting places for considering if and how the archival community can begin to engage in activities that support a socially just and caring experience of records for adoptees. Documents and policies such as the Charter of Lifelong Rights in Childhood Recordkeeping in Out-of-Home Care[50] and the person-centred recordkeeping framework of the MIRRA project (Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access)[51] are important advancements. So, too, is the work of Find and Connect archivists to "make visible the actions of former and current archivists and record holders" in archival description as a way of reckoning with past missteps and silences in the record.[52]

This article represents a small sliver of the conversations around adoption records that archivists should see as worth having. In addition to continuing the work to characterize the insight into the workings of archival imaginaries offered by adoptees' experiences and the power of records to both introduce and resolve ambiguities, other directions for future research that incorporates adoptees' perspectives include deeper explorations of the development of frameworks and models to describe how records are secondarily cultivated by documented (in contrast to creating) communities.[53] While empowering adoptees and acknowledging their experiences should be at the core of research that focuses on adoption, additional studies that engage and explore the

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[50] Frank Golding, Antonina Lewis, Sue McKemmish, Gregory Rolan, and Kirsten Thorpe, "Rights in Records: A Charter of Lifelong Rights in Childhood Recordkeeping in Out-of-Home Care for Australian and Indigenous Australian Children and Care Leavers," *International Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 9 (2021): 1625–57.

[51] Elizabeth Lomas, Elizabeth Shepherd, Victoria Hoyle, Anna Sexton, and Andrew Flinn, "A Framework for Person-Centred Recordkeeping Drawn Through the Lens of Out-of-Home Childcare Contexts," *Archivaria* 94 (Fall/Winter 2022): 64–93.

[52] As described in Laurent, O'Neill, and Wright, "Convenient Fires and Floods."

[53] *Cultivation* is a term employed by Eric Ketelaar to refer to the cultural process of imbuing a record with meaning. He says, "The record has to be cultivated, that is: understood cognitively, valued affectively, and conatively infused with meaning." Eric Ketelaar, "Cultivating Archives: Meanings and Identities," *Archival Science* 12, no. 1 (2012): 29.

perspectives of adoptive parents, as well as other entities that contribute to or facilitate the adoption process, could also be valuable to attempts to develop a model for recordkeeping in adoption that respects and acknowledges the needs of all involved parties.

Speaking with other adoptees about their experiences and being able to tie them directly to my own has been an incredibly validating experience for me. It has affirmed my belief that listening to personal stories about records and their affects is one way archivists can begin to concretely understand how their praxis influences real-life questions about identity, belonging, and trust in institutions. However, listening is only half of the equation. Scholars in the archival field have begun to suggest how we might perform our work in ways that are reparative and conscious of absences,[54] and yet if we do not *communicate* that this is happening within our institutions, our policy development and our influence on records creation and the roles of archivists and recordkeepers may not only get lost in the frustrations of the system but may also fail to meet the needs of those we are trying to uplift. This research has taught me that it is important to not only listen but also to reach beyond the echo chambers of archival thought, to show that experiences of records are being heard by the professional community, which has the greatest chance of influencing how the records landscape might look both now and into the future. The stories I have told in this article are a call for you, whoever you are, to elevate the records work of communities who have experienced records absences or absences within the records, and to show that their voices can and will "make a record."

[54] See, among others, Anne Gilliland, "Contemplating Co-creator Rights in Archival Description," *Knowledge Organization* 39, no. 5 (2012): 340–46; K.J. Rawson, "The Rhetorical Power of Archival Description: Classifying Images of Gender Transgression," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (2018): 327–51; Danielle Robichaud, "Integrating Equity and Reconciliation Work into Archival Descriptive Practice at the University of Waterloo," *Archivaria* 91 (Spring/Summer 2021): 73–103.

BIOGRAPHY   Mya Ballin is a PhD candidate at Monash University. She gratefully acknowledges the people of the Kulin Nations, the Traditional Owners of the land on which she now has the opportunity to learn.

Mya is interested in exploring how records inform and interplay with personal and cultural identity/ies, particularly by examining the relationships between government records and the lives of adoptees and care leavers. As part of the Real-time Rights-based Recordkeeping Governance project, her doctoral dissertation research will investigate how social contracts and professional ethics are embedded within the design of records of childhood out-of-home care and consider the role of recordkeeping analytics in regulatory frameworks that protect rights in records and promote an ethics of care.

In 2022, Mya received her MLIS and MAS from the University of British Columbia's School of Information, which is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) First Nation. While there, she had the opportunity to act as a co-guest editor of *Archivaria*'s special issue on person-centred archival theory, alongside Jennifer Douglas, Jessica Lapp, and Sadaf Ahmadbeigi.