

UNADOPT ME:

critical queer adoptee consciousness^{form/petition/application of children that will be adopted.}
and alternative family models



best info of adoptee.

预定养儿童申请表 N? 000951

abandoned baby.

orphanage name.

orphanage address.

Deputy director.

person who sent me for adoption.

of supporting materials.

name a surname, full name, incl. province + country

address: Nankong county

town

Jiao Tong Road # 35

province civil affairs bureau.

civil affairs bureau seal.

abandoned baby.

orphan

1. 类别分为 (1) 孤儿 (2) 弃婴 (3) 其他

2. 此表填写一式二份

3. 附 2 寸半身照片 2 张 (正面、侧面) 附 1 份

attach 6 x 2" color photo: child "hukou" photo copy.

printed by Jiangxi CAB.

UNADOPT ME: critical queer adoptee consciousness and alternative family models
by Charlotte Carbone

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Art, Media, and Design.
The Great Hall at OCAD University, 100 McCaul St, March 3-9 2025
Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2025

Supervised by Soyang Park (Primary Advisor)
& Julius Poncelet Manapul (Secondary Advisor)

Photo by Jaqueline Silva – ConsequencePhoto

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

My thesis explores my transracial transnational Chinese adoptee experiences through a queer critical adoption lens with a multimedia exhibition. By contextualizing adoptee experiences in relation to and in dispute with dominant adoption narratives and practices that perpetuate white saviorism, I challenge the promotion of adoption as a feel-good individual humanitarian act for overseas systemic problems. To activate and recontextualize marginalized adoptee voices and perspectives, including the trauma and oppression adoptees experience, my exhibition explores personal and collective critical adoptee counter narratives through art objects and performance including a tattoo body archive, wearable memory garment, and sensory dream installation. With interdisciplinary artistic methods and blended theoretical frameworks, I critique dominant adoption narratives to propose and explore alternative queer models of family, kinship, and belonging.

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Endless gratitude to my community and care ecosystems. My thesis art/work is a testament of survivance and a deliverance of justice, only possible because of your support during these stressful years of graduate school. You are all reminders of the dynamic ways of life beyond this academic bubble, so thank you for grounding me.

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LIST OF KEY TERMS

Adoption abolition: a framework for liberation that works towards a world where the adoption industry is obsolete by addressing the deep systemic roots of adoption's violence such as poverty, racism, and classism.

Coming to [adoptee] consciousness: the process of an adoptee reckoning with adoption's societal, historical, and political impacts while making connections with personal adoption narratives, feelings, and impacts. It is also known in adoptee communities as "coming out of the fog", but this term is not unilaterally preferred.

Ballroom: an underground subculture, community, and artistic expression originated by Black and Latino queer trans people in 1960s New York City. At balls, community members showcase and celebrate queer trans artistry and gender expression in competitive categories such as performance, runway, face, and realness.

Critical adoption studies: the critique of adoption as a complex social, legal, financial, and political institution, rather than an individual altruistic family planning decision detached from societal and historical influence.

Punking-waacking: a dance style that emerged in 1970s Los Angeles gay clubs as a form of self expression for queer racialized men. Originally known as "punking" and the originators as "punks", the style evolved to be known in the mainstream and post-2000s as "waacking". It is practiced in dance sessions, battles, classes, and parties.

Voguing: a dance style created by Paris Dupree who embodied VOGUE magazine poses in time with the music, marking the birth of ballroom in 1960s New York City.. There are two accepted origins; that voguing was created when Paris was incarcerated and/or when Paris was in a club. In the context of a ball, voguing is known as the category "performance".

QTBIPOC: acronym for queer trans Black Indigenous People of Colour, commonly used to encompass shared experiences of queer trans racialized people.

WAP: acronym of white adoptive parent.

TAIC: acronym of transnational adoption industrial complex, coined by Kimberly McKee.

PREFACE

Like the adoptee scholars who came before me, I start this excavation by contextualizing my personal experiences. I was adopted as an infant from rural China to suburban Canada by white people in the 1990s, not because of their deep connection to or understanding of China or Chineseness, but because a white middle class couple had money, fertility issues, and were too old to adopt a domestic white infant. The parental pursuit of loyal offspring to secure lineage and elderly care does not stop when biology fails. I was not “chosen” or “lucky” to be adopted, but simply the next paper orphan on the adoption industry conveyor belt who was packaged, shipped, and assembled to fulfill white imaginaries. Especially growing up with a white domestic adoptee sister who paralleled my experiences yet terrorized me constantly, it confirmed my status as a Second-Class Citizen and Exotic Accessory even as a child.

Unlike many of my Asian diasporic peers with generational knowledge access from sprawling branches of mothers, aunties, or grandmas who bestow understanding that no PhD ever could, I am a severed limb without roots to trace back. Unlike many of my Asian adoptee peers with adoptive family support and resources, I am estranged. There is no one in my life who can share stories about my childhood, let alone stories from before I was displaced from my China; I am an island. My ancestral histories, childhood belongings, and biographic information are impossibly inaccessible to the point of non-existence; my birthdate is a guess, my ethnicity is an assumption, my origin story is a Mad Libs. With no other bodies to corroborate my earliest existence, I offer this body of work and my embodiment of the work as new pedagogy and epistemology.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

“Adoption's "success" is contingent on the gratitude of the adoptee. Their affective behavior is the linchpin upholding the valuation of adoption as the best option. Those who do not are adoptee killjoys - who disrupt the notion of adoption as a happy object - the recipient of "good feelings." As killjoy, the adoptee fails to adhere to the fantasy of adoption as an act of humanitarian rescue; instead, the adoptee killjoy elucidates the failures of the adoption project, drawing attention to the ways adoption is violence and imbricated in broader systems of anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, militarism, and imperialism.”¹

- Kimberly McKee, *Adoption Fantasies: The Fetishization of Asian Adoptees from Girlhood to Womanhood*

My thesis explores my transracial transnational Chinese adoptee experiences through a queer critical adoption lens with a multimedia exhibition. By contextualizing adoptee experiences in relation to and in dispute with dominant adoption narratives and practices that perpetuate white saviourism, I challenge the promotion of adoption as a feel-good individual humanitarian act for overseas systemic problems. To activate and recontextualize marginalized adoptee voices and perspectives, including the trauma and oppression adoptees experience, my thesis exhibition explores personal and collective counter narratives through art objects and performance including a “tattoo body archive”, “wearable memory garment”, and “sensory dream installation” as worded by Soyang Park during supervising meetings.² The research methods and critical frameworks of critical adoption studies, queer theory, autoethnography, autotheory, and research-creation help mediate lived experience, scholarship, and artistic expression by critiquing Chinese adoption dominant narratives and exploring alternative queer models of family, kinship, and belonging. Chinese adoptees - the majority being Chinese girls with by white adoptive parents (WAPs) - face a unique problem of oppression due to the intersection of race and gender, as they are affected by both adoption fantasies and

¹ Kimberly McKee, *Adoption Fantasies: The Fetishization of Asian Adoptees from Girlhood to Womanhood*, (The Ohio State University Press, 2023), 4

² These discipline-specific concepts and wordings “tattoo body archive”, “wearable memory garment”, and “sensory dream installation,” are contributed by my Primary Advisor (PA) Soyang Park, Soyang Park, Supervising meeting, OCAD University, Online via Teams, Oct 28, 2024.

Asian fetishes perpetuated by the adoption industry and WAPs.³ My thesis and exhibit aim to be a driving force for Asian adoptee counter narratives with the goal of amassing counter archives within Asian diaspora studies. Towards this goal, I attempt to answer these research questions:

1. How can autotheoretical and autoethnographic research provide links between the personal and political in relation to critical adoption studies and critical adoptee authors?
2. How can writing about my experiences of systemic oppression, forced displacement, and family trauma explore the link between memory and history?
3. In what ways can artistic research-creation around individual narratives help form a collective consciousness towards adoption abolition?
4. In what ways can my exhibition invite non-adopted and non-queer people to understand queer adoptee experiences in a heart-changing and conscious-altering way?

1.1 RESEARCH METHODS & CRITICAL FRAMEWORKS

CRITICAL ADOPTION: DOMINANT NARRATIVES

In the dominant narrative of transnational adoption (also known as international or intercountry adoption), white adoptive parents are altruistic saviours of poor BIPOC children and Western adoption agencies are builders of diverse multicultural families.⁴ Transnational adoption is positioned as a win-win solution for childless couples and

³ McKee, *Adoption Fantasies*, 6-7

⁴ Susan F. Branco et al., "Out of the fog and into consciousness: A model of adoptee awareness", (International Body Psychotherapy Journal, 2023), 59

orphaned children, as adoption agencies promote the “dream of parenthood” via the adoption of orphans into “permanent homes” and “forever families”.⁵ The majority of Chinese transnational adoption is also transracial as over 90% of adoptive parents are white.⁶ This perpetuates a white saviour dominant narrative that Chinese babies need to be saved by white intervention or else they would wither away in an orphanage or on the streets, inflicting “upon [Chinese adoptees] the imperative to feel grateful to both our martyrs and our saviors.”⁷ The dominant narrative neglects critical acknowledgement of what Kit Myers calls “the violence of love”, which is how “individual, institutional, and state forms of love, yet structural, symbolic, and traumatic forms of violence created the conditions and/or became the effects of [transnational adoption].”⁸ Transnational adoption “emerged from racial liberalism, but that ideology was still attached to white supremacist, settler colonial, and imperial logics—that is, racial liberalism promoted abstract equality but was not invested in undoing or stopping structures of harm.”⁹ Furthermore, these dominant narratives are supported by research that focuses on WAPs who report on their Asian adoptee children rather than Asian adoptee adults who self-represent their lived experiences. Those uncritical of the dominant narrative utilize this traditional research, reducing Asian adoptees to happy objects of the white imagination.¹⁰ In the field of critical adoption studies - the critique of adoption histories, practices, and impacts as inextricable from social, racial, and economic systems and identifies - Kimberly McKee describes the transnational adoption industrial complex (TAIC) as a multimillion dollar industry that allows the seemingly separate organizations of governments, orphanages, and adoption agencies to work in conjunction with each

⁵ Amanda Baden, “‘Do You Know Your *Real* Parents?’ And Other Adoption Microaggressions.” (*Adoption Quarterly* 19, no. 1, 2016), 11; “The Benefits of International Adoption.” Family Connections, Jan 18, 2024. <https://www.adoptfamilyconnections.org/blog/the-benefits-of-international-adoption>.

⁶ Richard C. Tessler, *West Meets East: Americans Adopt Chinese Children*, (Bergin & Garvey, 1999); Tony Xing Tan, and Kofi Marfo. “Pre-Adoption Adversity and Behavior Problems in Adopted Chinese Children: A Longitudinal Study.” (*Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 42, 2016): 49–57.

⁷ Mason, Elizabeth Fuhan. “If She Could Speak: Birth Mothers and the Importance of Voice in Narratives of Transnational Adoption from China.” (San Francisco State University, 2022), 7

⁸ Kit Myers, *The Violence of Love: Race, Family, and Adoption in the United States*. Berkeley, (University of California Press, 2025), 163

⁹ Myers, *The Violence of Love*, 50

¹⁰ McKee, *Adoption Fantasies*

other to create an economy of commodified children.¹¹ When “adoption is seen as an individual action undertaken without any systemic or cultural influence” instead of an inherently violent system, it ignores the white saviourism, orientalism, and race evasiveness of the Chinese TAIC.¹²

CRITICAL ADOPTION: TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION

White saviourism persists beneath the perceived humanitarianism of Chinese transnational adoption, as the rescuable identities of Chinese babies attract WAPs who then become complicit in the TAIC’s violent mechanics. WAPs prefer Asian international infants opposed to non-Asian domestic children because Chinese infants are seen as “innocent victims” of government policy instead of “damaged goods” of faulty mothers.”¹³ Chinese infants are specifically desired because “[infants] kinship and cultural attachments are seen as not fully formed,” so WAPs can accept them as “one’s own” with the promise of a “clean break”; the idea that a child’s adoptability is based on being free of social, cultural, and familial ties from their birth country.¹⁴ The perceived blank slate of Chinese infants allows the construction of a white saviour narrative, yet maintains the malleability of a Chinese infant to fit WAP nuclear family ideals. Orientalism manifests in the attempts to fulfill these family ideals, with weak culture keeping by WAPs who view Chineseness as “admirably different but accessible” and therefore “culturally redeemable.”¹⁵ Coined by scholar Heather Jacobson, culture keeping is a WAP’s responsibility to continue connection with their adopted child’s homeland, as a way of developing self esteem and racial-cultural identity.¹⁶ Across Chinese adoption studies by Robert Tessler in 1999, Heather Jacobson in 2008, and Sara Dorow in 2010, WAPs often bring Chinese culture into the home through

¹¹ Kimberly McKee, “Monetary Flows and the Movements of Children: The Transnational Adoption Industrial Complex.” (*The Journal of Korean Studies*, 2016), 137–78.

¹² Branco et al., “Out of the fog and into consciousness”, 14.

¹³ Leslie K. Wang, *Outsourced Children: Orphanage Care and Adoption in Globalizing China*, (Stanford University Press, 2016), 56

¹⁴ Sara Dorow, “Why China? Identifying Histories of Transnational Adoption”, *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*. (Rutgers University Press, 2010), 289

¹⁵ Dorow, “Why China?”, 278; Wang, *Outsourced Children*, 57

¹⁶ Heather Jacobson, *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*. (Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 8

superficial imitation and consumption, however consistently absent are relationships with Chinese people besides other adopted Chinese children or Asian service workers.¹⁷ Since WAPs cannot teach Chineseness from a place of lived experience, they often culture keep based on a romanticized distant China detached from Chinese people, creating tokenized moments of racial celebration instead of complex racial awareness. This weak culture keeping can lead to race evasiveness (also known as colourblindness, but this is a retired term due to the ableism), which is when WAPs do not meaningfully acknowledge their adopted child's race and instead treat them as an "honourary white".¹⁸ Race evasion is a paradox: by choosing to ignore race, you are already acknowledging its existence and effects. In a study by sociologist Dr. Jiannbin Lee Shiao of Asian adoptees, it was found that race evasiveness, "did not eliminate race so much as it enabled [WAPs] to believe that their own racial and social status could be transferred to their Asian children ... parents essentially socialized their children to be White and to see the world from a White, rather than a race-free, perspective."¹⁹ Despite Chinese transnational adoption emerging in an era of increased multiculturalism and liberal values, the symbolic progressiveness obscures the white fallibility and structural violence of transnational adoption.

CRITICAL ADOPTION: COUNTER NARRATIVES, ADOPTEE LIVED EXPERIENCE

To unmask how adoption "policies and laws can enact less obvious forms of structural violence by providing material benefit to adoptive families instead of investing to keep families intact", critical adoption studies emerged in the 2000s, including Asian adoptee scholars Jaeran Kim, Kimberly McKee, Amanda Baden, and Kit Myers who center adult adoptees as researcher and participant.²⁰ Asian adoptee counter narratives

¹⁷ Tessler, *East Meets West*; Jacobsen, *Culture Keeping*; Dorow, "Why China?"

¹⁸ Jiannbin Lee Shiao and Mia H. Yuan. "Shared Fates in Asian Transracial Adoption: Korean Adoptee Experiences of Difference in Their Families." (Temple University Press, 2008), 192.

¹⁹ Jiannbin Lee Shiao and Mia H. Yuan. "Shared Fates in Asian Transracial Adoption", 192.

²⁰ Myers, *Violence of Love*, 5

are vital to exploring the racism, isolation, and trauma experienced by adoptees, as violence cannot be detached from adoption and therefore it must be acknowledged and confronted instead of denied and absolved.²¹ First, the racism commonly experienced by Chinese adoptees includes tokenism, fetishization, and microaggressions from WAPs and the white environments they were forcibly displaced to. Specifically, Asian adoptee girls and women are harmed by racialized preconceptions of exotic beauty and submissive nature, existing as “both a voiceless, innocent child worthy of rescue and a potential sexual threat in adulthood.”²² Both discriminated against and desired by white people, and without racial mirrors to model ways of navigating a racist society, Chinese adoptees are often left to process race-based harm in isolation. Second, the isolation of Chinese adoptees leads to disconnection from and misinformation on Asianness, culminating into racial-cultural identity erasure. According to Amanda Baden et al’s study “Parents and Their Adopted Chinese Children: Adoption and Racial Microaggressions in Diverse Communities”, while parents report that having their adopted children’s racial ethnic groups represented in their schools and communities was a priority, in practice they continue to live in predominantly white neighborhoods.²³ When Chinese adoptees are deprived of meaningful relationships with Asian people, the rare moments of racial inclusion become detached from the histories, communities, and injustices that give it meaning.²⁴ Unlike the advocacy of Black social work associations and Indigenous communities for their children to be placed in culturally appropriate homes, there was “no documented response from Asian ethnic communities as children from Korea and Vietnam, and later China, increasingly appeared in [white] adoptive homes. The silence [from Asian communities] served to reify the myth that race and racism are not salient for the model minority.”²⁵ This lack of acknowledgement further isolates Chinese adoptees, who are not only extracted from

²¹ Myers, *Violence of Love*, 19

²² McKee, *Adoption Fantasies*, 3

²³ Amanda Baden, Xian Zhang, Jessica Matthews, Ebony White, Elliotte Harrington, Andrew Kitchen, Jonathan Mazza, and Ellen Pinderhughes. “Parents and Their Adopted Chinese Children: Adoption and Racial Microaggressions in Diverse Communities.” (*Adoption Quarterly* 26, 2023): 79-80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2022.2156015>.

²⁴ McKee, *Adoption Fantasies*, 9

²⁵ Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist, “It’s Just Easier’: Reflections on the Intersections of Kinship, Race, and Ethnicity in Asian American Adoptive Families.” (*Journal of Family Social Work*, vol. 24, 2021), 4

their homeland but remain largely unclaimed by Asian diasporic communities, communities that could be welcoming and integrating of adoptees by recognizing their primordial ties to racial-cultural gathering yet often discount and dismiss adoptee as not Asian enough to be worthy of inclusion. Third, the complex trauma and poor mental health commonly experienced by Chinese adoptees is directly caused by adoption and WAP naïveté. The birth mother separation trauma inherent to child abandonment and therefore adoption becomes a reference point for all attachments to follow, as adoptees commonly demonstrate attachment and adjustment issues from adolescence to adulthood.²⁶ In connection to these deep attachment wounds, adoptees are disproportionately affected by mental illnesses such as chronic depression, anxiety, and suicidality, compounding with and related to the aforementioned racism and isolation that Chinese adoptees experience. A longitudinal study of Chinese adopted children ages 1 to 5 by Tony Xing Tan and Kofi Marfo found “comparable levels of behavioral adjustment between adopted Chinese children and children in the US normative sample”, but noted in their limitations is that all data relied solely on parental reports using a child behavior checklist.²⁷ Conversely, Margaret Keyes et al noted about adult adoptees in “Risk of suicide attempt in adopted and nonadopted offspring”, that adoptees are 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their non-adopted counterparts, and are 3 times more likely to reattempt.²⁸ Further, Annika von Borczyskowski et al noted in “Suicidal behaviour in national and international adult adoptees”, female transnational adoptees are most likely to attempt or die by suicide than their domestic adoptee or non-adopted counterparts.²⁹ The goal of establishing adoptee counter narratives is not to pathologize adoptees as damaged beyond reconciliation, but to take up space with our survivorship despite the systems working to marginalize us and our counter narratives.

²⁶ Nancy Verrier. *The Primal Wound: Understanding the adopted child*, (Gateway Press Inc, 1993), 71

²⁷ Tan and Marfo. “Pre-Adoption Adversity and Behavior Problems in Adopted Chinese Children”, 56

²⁸ Margaret A. Keyes et al., “Risk of suicide attempt in adopted and nonadopted offspring.” (Pediatrics. 2013 Oct), 639-46.

²⁹ Annika von Borczyskowski et al., “Suicidal behaviour in national and international adult adoptees: a Swedish cohort study.” (Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol. 2006), 95-102.

CRITICAL ADOPTION: ADOPTEE CONSCIOUSNESS MODEL

To take up space with adoptee survivorship, the Adoptee Consciousness Model (ACM) helps contextualize my thesis within critical adoption studies by directing it towards collective liberation. As Susan Branco et al noted in “Out of the fog and into consciousness: A model of adoptee awareness”, the ACM “moves beyond emergent awareness to describe the ongoing individual and collective movement toward social activism adoptees may encounter throughout their lifespan” by defining five non-linear touchstones: 1) *status quo*, 2) *rupture*, 3) *dissonance*, 4) *expansiveness*, and 5) *forgiveness and activism*.³⁰ Defined by Branco et al, *status quo* refers to “believing the dominant narrative of adoption which employs only affirmative or asset-based perspectives”, *rupture* means “encountering information or experiencing an incident or event that disrupts the status quo...For transracial adoptees, they may realize they are seen as BIPOC despite internal identification as White”, *dissonance* addresses “the tension or contradiction between what seems to be opposing beliefs or truths, expansiveness refers to “acknowledging the social injustices that are inherent in adoption” and learning to tolerate this discomfort, and *forgiveness and activism* is “extrapolating beyond oneself; noting systemic oppression in adoption practices and history... challenging the dominant narrative.”³¹ From these touchstones my thesis exists between *expansiveness* and *forgiveness and activism* by reconciling *rupture*, unravelling *status quo*, and honouring *dissonance*, through the “re-invention and/or re-incorporation of [my] multiple selves”, including my queer identities.³²

QUEER THEORY

The ACM can be further empowered by incorporating queer theory to disrupt adoptive nuclear family ideals based in ownership and hierarchy and explore queer family models based in reciprocity and heterarchy. To propose alternative queer family models through mediation of my family experiences (birth, foster, adoptive, and chosen family) and queer identity, I reference queer theorists José Esteban Muñoz and Sara

³⁰ Branco et al., “Out of the fog and into consciousness”, 53

³¹ Branco et al., “Out of the fog and into consciousness”, 58-59

³² Branco et al., “Out of the fog and into consciousness”, 59

Ahmed. Queer theory - the challenging of cisheteronormativity through critique of sexuality, gender, and identity - allows for the de- and re-construction of family, kinship, and belonging through the questioning of rigid gender roles and micro-economics of legally recognized family units. My thesis towards critical queer adoptee consciousness is inspired by Muñoz's description of queerness as "illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds' mapping of space... lost to a world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws."³³ It is also inspired by Ahmed's idea of queer (dis)orientations as "those that don't line up" and that seeing the world through a queer "slant" allows other objects to come into view.³⁴ Muñoz's veering away from heterosexuality's path and Ahmed's queer (dis)orientation I recontextualize by proposing queer adoptee family models that are incomprehensible to the cisheteronormative nuclear family model of legally married couples with biological children. As noted by activist Millie Boella who works to "decolonize love" by sharing polyamory education through a critical queer theory lens, dismantling the nuclear family is a key aspect of developing new kinship models and community care structures, since the nuclear family is a tool of subjugation and colonization.³⁵ To expand Muñoz's key idea of *Cruising Utopia* that "queerness is not yet here...but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality", these new queer family models are not here as official or enforceable establishments, and neither do they strive to become that, but always on the horizon as constant works in progress.³⁶ To be clear, I am not proposing adoption as a queer feminist family building tool like how liberal America positions adoption as egalitarian, but instead highlighting the crucial learnings about adoption, family, kinship, and belonging that come from the queer Asian adoptee lived experience.

³³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 72-73.

³⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: orientations, objects, others*, (Duke University Press, 2006) 107.

³⁵ Mille Boella, "Dismantling the Nuclear Family: Reimagining Care, Kinship, and Community", (workshop, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, February 14, 2025)

³⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1

AUTOTHEORY & AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Through my queer Asian adoptee lived experience, I explore links between the personal and political realms of critical adoption studies by using autotheory and autoethnography to connect BIPOC adoptee and ballroom community knowledge. Autotheory (autobiography combined with critical theory and interdisciplinary art) helps contextualize and synthesize my experiences with critical adoption studies, as exemplified by critical Asian adoptee scholars Grace Newton and Kit Myers who humanize their research by weaving in their lived experiences. By reflecting on my adoptee community experiences such as the annual *VOICES: a BIPOC Adoptee Community Multi-Day Conference* and the monthly *BIPOC Adoptee Open Mic*, I access generational, embodied, and empirical adoptee knowledge that is uncaptured by traditional academic sources. By referencing autotheory to transmute critical queer adoptee consciousness into art, I offer a “deeper understanding of adoption, not a positivistic claim to truth.”³⁷ To encompass the intersectionality of my adoptee experience, I expand on existing adoptee autobiographical research methods by equally addressing queerness theoretically, artistically, and empirically using autoethnography. Autoethnography (autobiography combined with ethnography) helps contextualize my queer adoptee experiences in the Toronto ballroom community. Ballroom is an underground subculture and community originated by Black and Latino queer trans people in 1960s New York City. Tight knit chosen families called houses would compete at balls using their highest forms of artistic expression in categories such as performance, runway, face, and realness. Houses were essential not only for walking balls, but for the everyday wellbeing of community members as they faced severe homophobia and transphobia from their biological families and general public. Ballroom became a homing beacon for QTBIPOC youth who sought belonging, safety, and affirmation of life. In the 1990s, ballroom gained mainstream visibility and popularity through the film *Paris Is Burning* and Madonna’s hit song *Vogue*, while also expanding beyond New York City and into international urban centers including Toronto. Today,

³⁷ Kit Myers, *The Violence of Love: Race, Family, and Adoption in the United States*. Berkeley, (University of California Press, 2025), 18

ballroom is a global phenomenon with community members of all lived experiences and identities, yet remains anchored around and protective of the Black and Latino queer trans people who started it all. To blend autobiographical storytelling, theoretical frameworks, and community reciprocity, I am inspired by queer Black ballroom scholars Ricky Tucker and Marlon Bailey who expertly and protectively share ballroom knowledge through their writing styles and teaching methods. Grounded by Bailey's reminder on ballroom autoethnography that "rather than being simply a participant/observer" I am a "co-performer, member, and community advocate as well as theorist and critic," I continuously center maintaining reciprocal relationships as an embedded community member in order to avoid oversharing our cultural knowledge.³⁸ Ballroom autoethnography provides an embodied, practical example of queered care systems that can be helpful in proposing alternative kinships, family, and belonging within critical adoption studies. As someone who will not procreate, my future parenthood will come to fruition in ballroom. As exemplified in ballroom houses, parenthood can be multidirectional and non-linear as ballroom parent-children relationships defy age and gender conventions, such as houses where parents are younger than their children and houses with more than two parents. My lived experience of ballroom cannot be segmented and siloed into investigations only on queerness, Asianess, or adopteeness because they are interconnected, blurring the boundaries between personal-political and identity-community beyond what the written word alone can capture and therefore in need of artistic transformation.

RESEARCH-CREATION

Research-creation is a dialogue between artistic expression and critical research that will transmute critical adoption studies into accessible and engaging forms for audiences. As described by scholar Natalie Loveless, this multidirectional method has "the capacity to impact our social and material conditions, not by offering more facts, differently figured, but by finding ways, through aesthetic encounters and events, to

³⁸ Marlon Bailey, "Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit." (*Gender, Place & Culture*, 2014), 494

persuade us to care and to care differently”.³⁹ Research-creation can also be healing for adoptees working in critical adoption studies, because of the efficacy of art therapies for adoption trauma. As described by adoptee therapist Laura Berg in “Treating Adoption Trauma with Writing Interventions”, creative expressions such as writing offer “a less confrontative approach to dealing with painful memories by allowing adoptees to project their innermost thoughts, feelings, and emotions onto characters, dialogue, plot, and imagery.”⁴⁰ Further, as described by adoptee therapist Rosellen Boucher in “Benefits of Creative Therapies with Adoption and Complex Trauma”, creative therapies are highly effective for adoptees because they “access nonverbal memories and bring forth the various aspects of trauma” including identity formation, attachment, and stress response.⁴¹ To release adoption trauma and disrupt dominant narratives through research-creation is tap into what McKee calls adoptee epistemology; “a new way of knowing that recognizes [adoptees] are experts on what it means to be adopted”.⁴² I expand on this idea of adoptee epistemology by proposing creative contributions as vital for realizing adoption abolition; a future where adoption has decayed into obsolescence. Research-creation grounds the concept of adoption abolition by manifesting critical queer adoptee consciousness in the material realm through embodied practices, allowing myself and audiences to evaluate, update, and incorporate new knowledge as we live out possibilities.⁴³ Exploring counter narratives in embodied arts such as dance “encourages whole body integration and the reclamation of bodily authority and agency,” as suggested by movement therapist Olivia Streater.⁴⁴ Critical adoption studies are mostly in academic texts and social science disciplines, therefore inaccessible in language and isolated in publishing from general audiences. However, my thesis presents a new opportunity using research-creation to expand the field beyond academics and adoptees, in order to showcase the interconnectedness of critical

³⁹ Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation*, (Duke University Press, 2019), 107.

⁴⁰ Laura Berg, “Treating Adoption Trauma with Writing Interventions,” York University, 2023

⁴¹ Rosellen Bouche, “Benefits of Creative Therapies with Adoption and Complex Trauma”, (Lesley University, 2021), 28.

⁴² McKee, *Adoption Fantasies*, 128

⁴³ Karen Barbour, “Embodied Ways of Knowing,” (Waikato Journal of Education, 2016), 235

⁴⁴ Streater, Olivia K. Nermin. 2022. “Truth, Justice and Bodily Accountability: Dance Movement Therapy as an Innovative Trauma Treatment Modality.” *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy* 17, 44

adoption studies with other marginalized communities. Inspired by interdisciplinary artists and authors Yumi Sakagawa and Fariha Roisin, my role as an artist in critical adoption studies is to offer “radical imagination where there is stagnation, dead ends, and repetition of oppression,” by fostering care, connectivity, and hope for marginalized people when there is neglect, isolation, and despair.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Yumi Sakagawa and Fariha Roisin, "How to decolonize and radicalize your creative practice towards collective liberation: a meditation and writing workshop," (online workshop, August 3, 2024)

2.0 RECONTEXTUALIZING TRANSRACIAL TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION, ENACTING MARGINALIZED VOICES

2.1 TRANSRACIAL TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION

Transracial transnational adoption is when a child is adopted by parents of a different race to a new country. The most common parent-child combinations are white adoptive parents (WAPs) from developed nations seeking BIPOC adoptees from developing nations, exemplified by China's adoption industry where over 90% of adoptive parents are white.⁴⁶ Note the intentional use of adoption "industry" opposed to "program", as a way to acknowledge the transnational adoption industrial complex (TAIC) with Honest Adoption Language (HAL) opposed to sanitizing it with Positive Adoption Language (PAL). PAL is often used by adoption agencies and adoptive parents to reduce adoption stigmas, but critical adoption scholars and social workers argue that PAL sanitizes adoption to the benefit of agencies and parents while marginalizing the voices of adoptees and birth families, so HAL emerged as a way to acknowledge the impacts of adoption instead of the ideals of it.⁴⁷ The openings of Asian transnational adoption industries are directly linked to war, economic decline, political instability, and widespread poverty, such as 1953 in South Korea following the Korean War, 1975 in Vietnam following the Vietnam War, and 1989 in Cambodia following the Cambodian Genocide.⁴⁸ In 1992 China's adoption industry opened to support the One Child Policy, not as a result of war like its predecessors, but because China needed further population control.⁴⁹ These crises resulted in a surplus of abandoned and orphaned children that the domestic population could not raise, such as China's strict parental age requirements for domestic adoption and high fines to legally keep babies

⁴⁶ Tessler, *West Meets East*; Tan and Marfo, "Pre-Adoption Adversity and Behavior Problems in Adopted Chinese Children"

⁴⁷ Branco et al, Adoptee consciousness model, 54

⁴⁸ Catherine Ceniza Choy, "International Adoption and Cultural Insecurity." In *Handbook of Cultural Security*, (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), 146

⁴⁹ Wang, *Outsourced Children*

that violate the One Child Policy. Instead of internal infrastructure overhaul, these crises resulted in the opening of transnational adoption industries. China's transnational adoption industry economically supported domestic social services, while also improving political relations and enhancing image with Western nations.⁵⁰ China quickly became the most popular Asian country for transnational adoption with 79,577 children adopted between 2003-2011, far surpassing the 14,653 children adopted from South Korea in the same period.⁵¹ Important to note, the high interest in international adoption of Chinese babies correlates to the high aversion to domestic adoption of Black children, ultimately rooting white parent adoption preferences in anti-Black racism and the model minority myth. Across multiple studies of why WAPs adopt Chinese babies, WAPs believe it would be too difficult to raise an older Black child due to painful African-American histories and negative stereotypes, and therefore reason to adopt a Chinese baby due to less painful Asian-American histories and "favourable" stereotypes.⁵² This socially constructed "inter-minority hierarchy" positions Asian children above Black children and closer to whiteness, and therefore more desirable and less intimidating for WAPs to assimilate into their family.⁵³ This Chinese adoption trend is not only linked to WAP racial preferences, but also the orphan supply created by the One Child Policy of 1979.

2.2 CHINESE ADOPTION SUPPLY, DEMAND, AND COST: THE ONE CHILD POLICY, TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION, AND FAMILY TRAUMA.

THE ONE CHILD POLICY: THE SUPPLY

The One Child Policy of 1979 slowed China's rapid population growth, but at the cost of increased abandonment and infanticide of primarily baby girls due to traditional gender roles and rural lifestyles. The policy was harshly enforced in "hot spot" rural

⁵⁰ Wang, *Outsourced Children*, 14

⁵¹ Peter Selman, "Intercountry Adoption of Children from Asia in the Twenty-First Century." (*Children's Geographies* 13, 2015), 4

⁵² Dorow, "Why China?"

⁵³ Jiannbin Lee Shiao and Mia H. Yuan. "Shared Fates in Asian Transracial Adoption", 179.

southern provinces such as Jiangxi, Hunan, and Anhui, where families needed multiple children for farm labour and had little to no sex education or family planning resources.⁵⁴ The consequences for carrying an “overquota child” in an “out of plan pregnancy” included forced abortion or sterilization of the mother.⁵⁵ If the pregnancy was carried to term, some mothers would flee to other villages to give birth with hopes of avoiding the detection of family planning officials. For mothers who stayed in their villages, midwives were on standby for the birth to quickly identify the baby’s sex and therefore determine if it was kept, killed, or abandoned. If the first baby of a household was a girl, the family was allowed to try for a boy after a specific time period. If the second baby of a household was a girl, that baby is now over quota and the family must choose to illegally raise her, secretly abandon her, or pay a large fine to legally keep her. Note that these fines were often more than a rural family’s lifetime salary.⁵⁶ Also note that land allowances for living and farming were given based on the number of boys in a household, meaning that girls resulted in a loss of land and therefore livelihood.⁵⁷ A baby boy was a practical choice for future economic security and elderly support while a baby girl was a future loss for those already in rural poverty, resulting in a surplus of abandoned healthy baby girls.⁵⁸ In response to high infant abandonments and in support of the One Child Policy, China opened its transnational adoption industry in 1992 while expanding orphanages and centralizing governance into the China Center for Children's Welfare and Adoption.⁵⁹ In 2015 the One Child Policy became the Two Child Policy, but the permanent closure of China’s international adoption industry did not come until 2024.⁶⁰ Multiple factors contributed to the industry closure such as decreased amount of adoptable babies and increased accessibility of domestic adoption, but whether the final decision was because of human rights reckonings or supply-demand issues is left ambiguous and unanswered by China.

⁵⁴ Kay Ann Johnson, *China’s Hidden Children: Abandonment, Adoption, and the Human Costs of the One-Child Policy*, (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁵⁵ Johnson, *China’s Hidden Children*

⁵⁶ Johnson, *China’s Hidden Children*

⁵⁷ Xinran Xue, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother: Stories of Loss and Love*, (Scribner, 2011)

⁵⁸ Wang, *Outsourced Children*, 37

⁵⁹ Xue, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, 97-98.

⁶⁰ “End of an Era: China’s International Adoption Program,” Nanchang Project, September 9, 2024. <https://www.nanchangproject.com/blog/end-of-an-era-chinas-international-adoption>.

TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION: THE DEMAND

Before the decline China's adoption industry, international adoption was prioritized over domestic for overquota baby girls not because of local Chinese disinterest, but because of high profits from the "neo-colonial, multimillion dollar global [transnational adoption] industry that commodifies children's bodies" based on race, age, sex, disability, and nation.⁶¹ These factors contribute to a baby's social value and therefore extrinsic cost in what McKee calls the "adoption marketplace", making China's relatively healthy baby girls a top commodity for WAPs who want a feel-good story about saving a baby from orphanage neglect while also avoiding large medical care costs.⁶² China was one of the most popular countries for transnational adoption with over 160,000 children adopted, including 82,000 adopted to the United States and 8000 adopted to Canada.⁶³ As of 2006 (just after the peak of Chinese adoption in 2005), the average cost to adopt a Chinese infant was \$14,000-\$18,000 USD, inclusive of a required "donation" or "gift" directly to the orphanage that ranged from \$1000-\$3000 USD.⁶⁴ This codified language of generosity is used by adoption agencies, orphanages, and adoptive parents to ease discomfort with the concept of buying children in a competitive marketplace, aligning with PAL rather than HAL.⁶⁵ The adoption industry became a major income source for Chinese social services, transforming orphanages into for-profit businesses.⁶⁶ The increased demand resulted in increased human trafficking as orphanages paid "finders fees" to people who brought them adoptable babies regardless if it was abandoned, abducted, or trafficked.⁶⁷ In separate studies by Heather Jacobsen and Sara Dorow, it was found that WAPs believed they were saving Chinese babies from a "worse fate" by adopting them, effectively feeding into white saviourism because of the self-serving benefits obscured by the perceived

⁶¹ McKee, "Monetary Flows and the Movements of Children", 137–78.

⁶² McKee, "Monetary Flows and the Movements of Children", 137–78.

⁶³ "International Adoptions." Statistics Canada, Oct 7 2016.

⁶⁴ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-402-x/2012000/chap/c-e/c-e02-eng.htm>.

⁶⁵ Dawn Davenport, *The Complete Book of International Adoption: A Step-by-Step Guide to Finding Your Child*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 346; Wang, *Outsourced Children*, 49

⁶⁶ McKee, "Monetary Flows and the Movements of Children", 150

⁶⁷ Xue, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, 114.

⁶⁷ Xue, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, 116.

humanitarianism of Chinese adoption.⁶⁸ Further, from an anthology of WAP perspectives, a white adoptive mother believes she “saved” her Chinese daughter “from being a woman living in rural China.”⁶⁹ This desire to perform “moral superiority and altruism through the care of the marginalized other” attracted WAPs to the healthy victimhood of Chinese babies who became profitable goods of orphanages and adoption agencies.⁷⁰ Part of this desired healthy victimhood of Chinese adoption was the assumed prenatal health and selfless sacrifice of Chinese birth mothers, as adoptability correlates to health conditions passed from a birth mother such as AIDS and fetal alcohol syndrome, which Chinese babies were unlikely to have.⁷¹ Further, it was a selling point pushed by adoption agencies that Chinese birth mothers could not contact and therefore reclaim their children, which was a common fear of WAPs.⁷² Adoption agencies effectively repackaged the trauma of forced separation and impossible reunification as an incentive for WAPs to adopt Chinese infants.

FAMILY TRAUMA: THE COST

The forced separation and impossible reunification as a result of China’s adoption industry is traumatic for Chinese adoptees and their birth families. Before an adoptive family is assembled, a birth family is broken by abandonment or abduction.⁷³ In the seminal adoption book *The Primal Wound*, Nancy Verrier argues that when an infant is permanently separated from its birth mother, this ruptures attachment and creates lasting trauma, regardless of the adoptee’s ability to consciously remember it.⁷⁴ The unconscious, instinctual, and intuitive bond between birth mother and child can never be replicated by another primary caregiver. From Xinran’s book *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother* - one of the few sources that gives voice to Chinese birth mothers - it is documented how deeply they love and grieve their lost babies. Mothers begged their

⁶⁸ Jacobson, *Culture Keeping*; Dorow, *Why China?*

⁶⁹ Lita Linzer Schwartz and Florence Kaslow. *Welcome home!: an international and nontraditional adoption reader*, (Routledge, 2013), 72.

⁷⁰ Wang, *Outsourced Children*, 148

⁷¹ Davenport, *The Complete Book of International Adoption*, 347

⁷² Dorow, “*Why China?*”, 290

⁷³ Xue, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*

⁷⁴ Nancy Verrier. *The Primal Wound: Understanding the adopted child*, (Gateway Press Inc, 1993).

families to let their baby girls live, even if it meant a life in an orphanage. Mothers were coerced into abandoning their babies by imminent threat of infanticide or false promise of where their baby would be taken. Mothers attached birth notes, embroidered clothes, and left bloodied fingerprints when abandoning their babies as a final blessing and proof of origins.⁷⁵ However, these artifacts were destroyed and birth mothers' voices marginalized, as it served the adoption industry to erase their stories in favour of a clean break. Many birth families wanted to keep their baby girls despite the greater value of baby boys, but they faced impossible choices between livelihood or illegal familyhood, fines for keeping overquota babies or fines for abandoning them, and living with the taboo of an illegal child or the secret grief of abandoning one.⁷⁶ The existence of 160,000 Chinese adoptees is not a cause for celebration or indicator of multiculturalism, but a solemn reminder of the TAIC: the extraction, displacement, and isolation of children from their native homelands, cultures, and peoples.

⁷⁵ Xue, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, 118.

⁷⁶ Kay Ann Johnson, *Wanting a daughter, needing a son: Abandonment, adoption, and orphanage care in China*, (Yeong & Yeong Book Company, 2004).

3.0 ARTISTIC PRAXIS: ALCHEMIZING QUEER ADOPTEE CONSCIOUSNESS

As part of the Adoptee Consciousness Model (ACM) touchstone *Forgiveness and Activism* - extrapolating beyond oneself, noting systemic oppression in adoption practices and history, challenging the dominant narrative - I alchemize queer adoptee consciousness into interdisciplinary artistic praxis by self-representing adoptee counter narratives.⁷⁷ The goal of counter narratives is not to become the new sole dominant narrative, as I am reminded by Branco et al of how of divisiveness in adoptee communities is “a tool of the oppressor to hinder potential actions towards liberation and social justice”, so we must “reject a framework of scarcity, acknowledging there are many ways for adoptees to collectively build adoptee-centric programs, organizations, tools, and creative works.”⁷⁸ In the words of fellow Chinese adoptee scholar Elizabeth Mason, I attempt to “eclipse the voices of those who would speak for us and for our [birth] mothers” by daring to share vulnerable experiences beyond the safe bubble of adoptee-only spaces.⁷⁹ The field of adoption studies is often limited to social work and the perspectives of social workers, framing adoptees as troubled children or traumatized adults with critiques that do not give adoptees agency but perpetuate the need for social work, therefore creating a paradox where the institute of social work and child welfare often upholds the status quo it is claims to be improving. Social work in education and practice is dominated by white women, remnant of the “profession’s history of upholding white supremacy and legacy of white saviorism”.⁸⁰ By transmuting Asian adoptee self representation of critical consciousness through artmaking and storytelling, I offer a decolonized counter narrative that shifts perception of who are adoption experts, subjects, and objects.

⁷⁷ Branco et al., “Out of the fog and into consciousness”, 56

⁷⁸ Branco et al., “Out of the fog and into consciousness”, 61

⁷⁹ Mason, Elizabeth Fuhan. “If She Could Speak: Birth Mothers and the Importance of Voice in Narratives of Transnational Adoption from China.” San Francisco State University, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.46569/20.500.12680/8c97kx615>.

⁸⁰ Asher BlackDeer, Autumn, and Maria Gandarilla Ocampo. “#SocialWorkSoWhite: A Critical Perspective on Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and Social Justice in Social Work.” *Advances in Social Work* 22, no. 2 (November 8, 2022): 720–40. <https://doi.org/10.18060/24986>.

3.1 UNADOPT ME POSTER: ORPHANAGE FILE PAGE 1



Figure 1: UNADOPT ME exhibition poster with the artist sitting on the floor in front of it.

The large exhibition entrance poster features the first page of my orphanage file with the title *UNADOPT ME* superimposed, reappropriating the adoption industry call-to-action “adopt me”, which is commonly featured on advertisements for adoptable children and pets. Also featured in this blown-up image are my handwritten English translations of the original Chinese, only made possible because of the meticulous yet gentle interpretation process with my Chinese femme peers Tongxin Gao and Ellie Lee. Revisiting my documents that archive the violence of the TAIC was disturbing and

distressing, and I shiver to write about the process over a year later. As a protective measure and disruption to academia's tendency of coaxing out marginalized trauma, I will not divulge all the translations, but I will share an anecdote about the process:

November 21 2023, sitting in my living room with Ellie and Tongxin.

ELLIE: These are all the vaccines you got as a baby.

**She points to a specific line on page 6 of 8.*

TONGXIN: Do you have a scar on your arm?

CHAR: Yes, on my left bicep, it looks and feels like a dent.

ELLIE: Can I see?

**I show Ellie and Tongxin the scar on my bicep.*

CHAR: I always thought it was just a birthmark

**Ellie and Tongxin converse in Mandarin with each other*

ELLIE: We have the scar too, because of a specific vaccination for all Chinese babies at the time.

**Ellie and Tongxin show me similar vaccination scars on their arms.*

The room falls quiet as we look at each other with our rolled up sleeves.

We eventually return to translating.

Like this anecdote, the *UNADOPT ME* poster is a painful return to homeland that I share with discernment. Like this poster, the *UNADOPT ME* artistic process is a fragile excavation that attempts to reprocess deeply personal trauma not for the white gaze of pity but for feeding the insatiable queer Asian adoptee desire to know yourself.

Form/petition/application of children that will be adopted.

预送养儿童申请表 No 000951

basic info of adopter.

被收养	姓名	鲁文莲	性别	女
	出生日期	96.10.1	入院日期	96.10.3
人情况	类别	弃婴	健康状况	健康
	福利院名称	江西省南昌市社会福利院		
送养人	福利院地址	南昌市翠明街支路35号		
	院长姓名	鲁爱光	儿童监护人姓名	鲁爱光
提供证明材料数	弃婴证明	监护证明	同意送养证明	
	体检表(单)	2寸彩照	其它	

abandoned baby.

orphanage name.

orphanage address.

Deun/director.

person who sent me for adoption.

of supporting materials.

name of orphanage, full name incl. province & country

address: Nankang county

town

street

child's guardian.

provincial civil affair bureau.

civil affair bureau seal.

abandoned baby.

notes:

1、类别分为弃婴(儿)、孤儿、*orphan*

2、此表填写一式二份;*fill out 2 forms*

3、附2寸彩照6张和儿童户口底册影印件一份。

attach 6 x 2" color photo.

child "hukou" photo copy.

printed by Jiangxi CAB.

Figure 2: Scan of orphanage file page 1 of 8 with handwritten English translations.

3.2 ORANGE ORPHAN: TATTOOING MY BODY ARCHIVE



Figure 3: ORANGE ORPHAN (2025) Orange peels, black tattoo ink, mold



Figure 4: ORANGE ORPHAN (2025) Orange peels, black tattoo ink, mold



Figure 5: ORANGE ORPHAN (2025) Orange peels, triple black tattoo ink, mold, plastic frame



Figure 6: ORANGE ORPHAN (2025) Oranges, black tattoo ink, glass jar, isopropyl alcohol



Figure 7: ORANGE ORPHAN (2025) Oranges, triple black tattoo ink, glass jar, isopropyl alcohol



Figure 8: ORANGE ORPHAN (2025) on day 1 vs. day 31

ORANGE ORPHAN is a series of tattooed and preserved oranges that transform my orphanage file into a living body counter archive of adoptee embodied knowing. Inspired by Julietta Singh's perspective on the human body as an impossible, deteriorating, messy archive that subverts the idea of external, legitimate, written archives, I mark the oranges as my body with my orphanage file as an act of counter archiving withheld information in a way that can never be removed.⁸¹ The peels are flayed in frame and whole oranges are embalmed in a jar like the display methods of taxidermied animals, conveying how transnational adoptees are treated as experiments, specimens, and curiosities. In 2014 I received a copy of my orphanage file with only six translated phrases from an eight page document, as my WAPs never pursued a full translation despite possessing a copy since my adoption. The tattoos are key text samples from my now fully translated file; 弃婴证明 abandoned baby certificate, 未发现其亲生父母 biological parents were not found, 鲁文莲 Lu Wen Lian, 左先天性白内障 left congenital cataract, and 送养地: 加拿大 place of adoption: Canada. These texts complicate my origins rather than affirm them, as orphanage paperwork was a formality to ensure a streamlined adoption. There are no other sources to corroborate date of birth, or a further papertrail to suggest a birth parent search was actually conducted as it is so claimed. While the orphanage file is my official legal origins, it does not mean it is true. To process this ambiguity I tattooed, peeled, and ate over 200 oranges, considering what texts to preserve, challenge, and reincorporate through this new tattoo ritual. Originally I learned to tattoo at ALTF4 Studio as an apprentice to the studio owner Tony Wong. An integral part of a tattoo apprenticeship is practicing tattooing on skin-like mediums such as oranges before moving up to real people's bodies. Tattooing is the injection of ink into the skin; an act of individual markation yet can also denote a group belonging such as with the earliest Indigenous origins of tattooing, and therefore a reciprocal process of claiming and being claimed.⁸² Oranges are not only a practical

⁸¹ Singh, Julietta. *No Archive Will Restore You*. 1st edition. Brooklyn, NY: punctum books, 2018. 27

⁸² Tattooing was originated by Indigenous peoples across the world who used tattooing to mark social status, coming of age, sacred stories, accomplishments, divine protection, and lineage on their bodies, such as the Māori people of so-called New Zealand and the Inuit people of so-called Canada. Tattooing as both an individual act and collective connection continues today in modern tattoo cultures.

medium for my tattoo training, but a personal and cultural connection. Personally, oranges have been the main export of my hometown Nanfeng since ancient times.⁸³ Culturally, oranges are commonly featured in Chinese celebrations and family altars such as during Lunar New Year. Ironically, upon finishing all the text tattoos and displaying them in my exhibit, a Chinese peer noticed a typo. This accidental oversight illustrates the simultaneous intimacy and estrangement between myself and my documents, as I can memorize the characters but struggle to understand the text and subtext. To build on this duality, the oranges are both art objects and scientific specimens, evoking the juxtapositions of perishability-permanence, beauty-macabre, and decay-growth in their organic materiality.

Before ORANGE ORPHAN (2025) was PEELS (2023), where I also exhibited tattooed orange peels of my orphanage file but instead of wet moldy decay I created a dehydrated brittle leather. These dehydrated peels were flayed and splayed on a custom body form using T-pins, again invoking methods of taxidermy for butterflies in shadow boxes. Initially I intended to continue with dehydrated peels in order to improve text readability and pursue themes of fragility because of the brittle materiality, but for every one dehydrated peel there were ten moldy peels. As noted by my secondary advisor Julius Poncelet Manapul, the mold symbolizes erasure of over time, so I decided to embrace the organic materiality as storytelling instead of an obstacle. The mold eats away the peels and the solution clouds the oranges, rendering the text illegible, much like the way memory fades over time to the point where we cannot place the details but know something was there. This living body archive slowly becomes undead. The organic decay of disintegrated residue is my memory and origins, where the absence of information becomes the presence. My oranges and origins are permanently sealed away, the “facts” irretrievable and inaccessible yet I carry them forward in my body.

(Cate Lineberry and Sonja Anderson, “The Worldwide History of Tattoos: Ancient ink exhibited religious faith, relieved pain, protected wearers and indicated class”, *The Smithsonian Magazine*, Oct 18 2023. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/tattoos-worldwide-history-144038580/>)

⁸³ Also known as tiny tangerines, honey mandarins, nanfengmiju, 南丰蜜桔



Figure 9: PEELS (2023) tattooing process



Figure 10: PEELS (2023) exhibited in group show by IAMD cohort at Open Space Gallery

3.3 SLEEP UNWELL: MYLAR BED, DREAM IMAGES

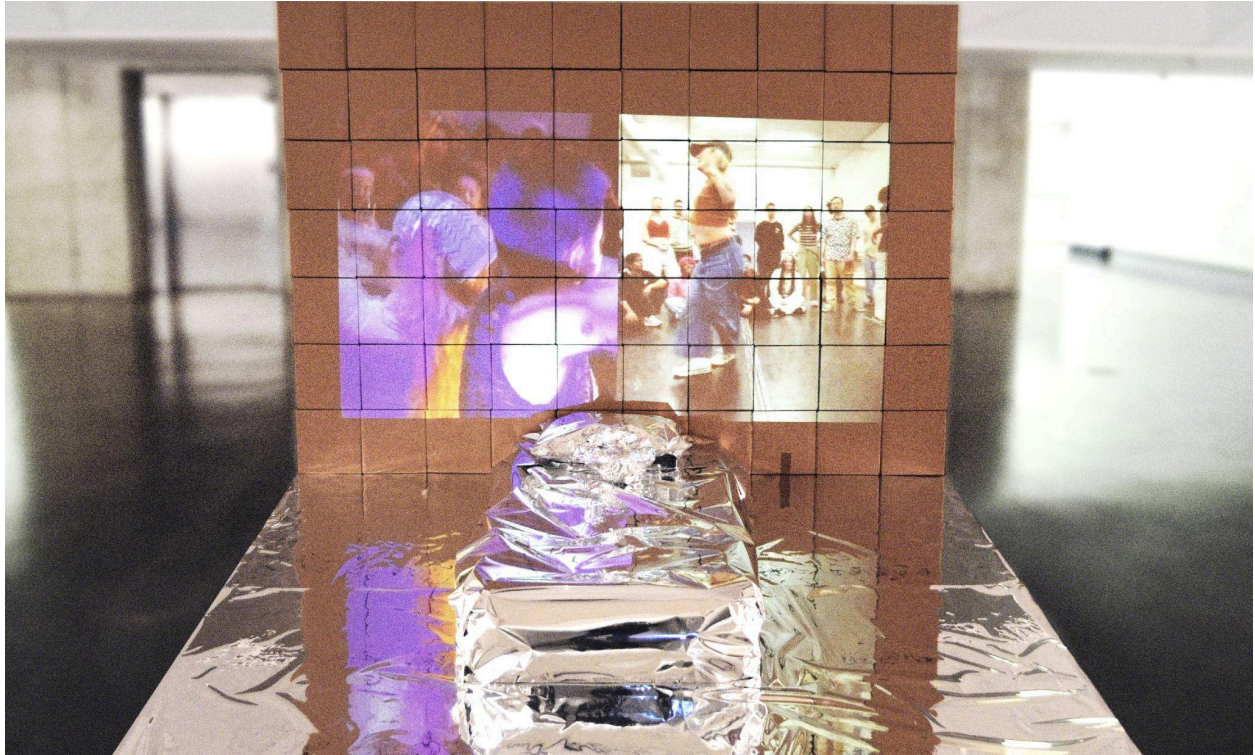


Figure 11: *SLEEP UNWELL* (2025) mylar, cardboard, video projection featuring dance battle footage



Figure 12: *SLEEP UNWELL* (2025) mylar, cardboard, video projection featuring speculative mothers



Figure 13: *SLEEP UNWELL* (2025) the artist laying down holding mylar teddy bear



Figure 14: *SLEEP UNWELL* (2025) side view



Figure 15: SLEEP UNWELL (2025) featuring the artist seated with speculative mothers



Figure 16: SLEEP UNWELL (2025) featuring the artist seated with dancing community

SLEEP UNWELL is a “sensory dream installation” that proposes a way forward from my inaccessible, irretrievable origins by exploring alternative families and embodied healing.⁸⁴ The mylar bedroom scene with projected dancing dream images creates an uncanny environment by blurring reality-dream and childhood-adulthood.⁸⁵ The bedroom - a place where we seek deep rest and connection beyond conscious realms - is defamiliarized to express the traumatic homelife of transnational adoptees like myself. The mylar’s harsh reflective surface, disruptive crunching sound, and sharp synthetic touch juxtapose the cozy sanctuary of a childhood bedroom. This alarming contrast is to engage the senses and connect the audience to my childhood that was outwardly normative but covertly, deeply painful. My most peaceful moments as a child were bedtime, not because my room was my sanctuary, but because sleep was an escape from my painful existence as a queer Chinese adoptee. I escaped through sleep and dream, as I couldn’t imagine surviving this childhood until adulthood. As a child, I attempted suicide three times, and in response my adoptive parents outsourced care to white therapists and threatened to institutionalize me if I didn’t “get better”. I survived this “care” by sleeping longer and deeper, with a flicker of hope found through online glimpses at ballroom and street dance. *SLEEP UNWELL* was first conceptualized and exhibited in summer 2024, with a similar aesthetic but a different intention and invitation. Originally mounted in a small dark room with projected footage of one night’s sleep, I explored the bedroom as a place of safe-unsafe, intimate-estrangement, and private-surveilled relations. The standalone piece in an enclosed space gave a haunting feeling, both inviting and deterring visitors to come closer to the night vision footage and surreally sterile mylar bed. Simultaneously in process but not in exhibition, I was exploring speculative family portraiture by aging up my face through digital painting as a way to find my mother and grandmother’s faces. By projecting these portraits, I gave my

⁸⁴ Soyang Park, OCAD University, Online via Teams, Oct 28 2024

⁸⁵ In addition to the conceptualization of “sensory dream installation”, my PA Soyang Park contributed the overall visual concept from her idea of combining two previous works: *SLEEP UNWELL* (previously conceived and exhibited by me in Summer 2024) and my dance-dream process work (previously conceived by me but unnamed and unexhibited). (Soyang Park, OCAD University, Online via Teams, Sep 10, 2024).

ancestors a clear face and danced with them as an embodied way of knowing and feeling closer to them.

In this remounted *SLEEP UNWELL*, I project my current dance practices above the head of the bed as a realization of my childhood dreams of belonging and safety. Dance is central to my relationships and wellbeing, as it allows “the restoration of bodily authority through satisfaction, completion and pleasure”, and therefore the dream images shared activity.⁸⁶ The dream images feature myself dancing with community and ancestors as a way to show belonging that once felt impossible, such as the speculative fiction of Chinese ancestors. Due to my extreme displacement from ancestors and homeland, I speculate my matrilineal family with original portraiture based on my face, because my face is my mother’s regardless if I can verify the resemblance. Surrendering to the reality that my ancestry is impossible to perfectly trace, I choose to affirm my primordial cord to China through critical speculation and artistic affirmation by dancing with my mothers. Other dream images feature myself dancing with community at balls, battles, and sessions, as I attempt to counter archive queer ephemera.⁸⁷ Muñoz describes queer ephemera as “the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures” in order to “stand against the harsh lights of mainstream visibility and the potential tyranny of the fact.”⁸⁸ The energy of these queer dance spaces are the ephemera, fleeting moments of joy and connection that cannot be fully captured only experienced in real time. The bond of birth mothers and chosen family to adoptees and queers is often denied and delegitimized by these “harsh lights of mainstream visibility” and “tyranny of the fact” that Muñoz speaks of, so we must affirm ourselves and our bonds with ephemera.

⁸⁶ Streater, “Truth, Justice and Bodily Accountability”, 36

⁸⁷ The dream images feature myself as dancing at the following events in order of appearance. Lovers Lane Ball, Feb 2023, Toronto : Studio North Waacking Class by Bacardii and assisted by Char, Apr 2023, Toronto : Funky Vibrations 3v3 Battle, Apr 2024, Toronto : Cozmic Love Waacking Performance, Oct 2023, Toronto : FLEUR IT Waacking Battle, Mar 2023, Toronto : Bentway x TDT Artist Residency Shareback, Sep 2023, Toronto: Queertopia Kiki Ball, Sep 2024, Ottawa : Jellicle Kiki Ball, Jun 2024, Montreal : The Gauntlet 1v1 All Styles Battle by Toronto Krump League, Feb 2024, Toronto : Studio North Waacking Class by TQ and Char, Jul 2024, Toronto : GUESS Arms Control Concept Video with Sticky, Aug 2024, Toronto : Old Way Session by Deep In Vogue, Jan 2024, Toronto : Mulan Kiki Ball, Jul 2024, Toronto : ONE NIGHT ONLY Waacking Concept Video, Aug 2024, Toronto.

⁸⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65

Queer ephemera, like dreams, are windows into futures we keep grasping at. The fragmented, overlapping dream images intentionally rebuke a rational chronological order or storyline as a way to invoke what I call queer adoptee time: a non-linear cyclical sense of time born from queer adoptee childhoods of severe trauma and loneliness. Inspired by Muñoz's idea of queerness as constant becoming, where "we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now," I alchemize QTBIPOC care systems and family models that defy pragmatic politics that seek equality within white cisheteronormative society.⁸⁹ *SLEEP UNWELL* connects my local community and speculative family with the shared affirmation that we belong to each other.

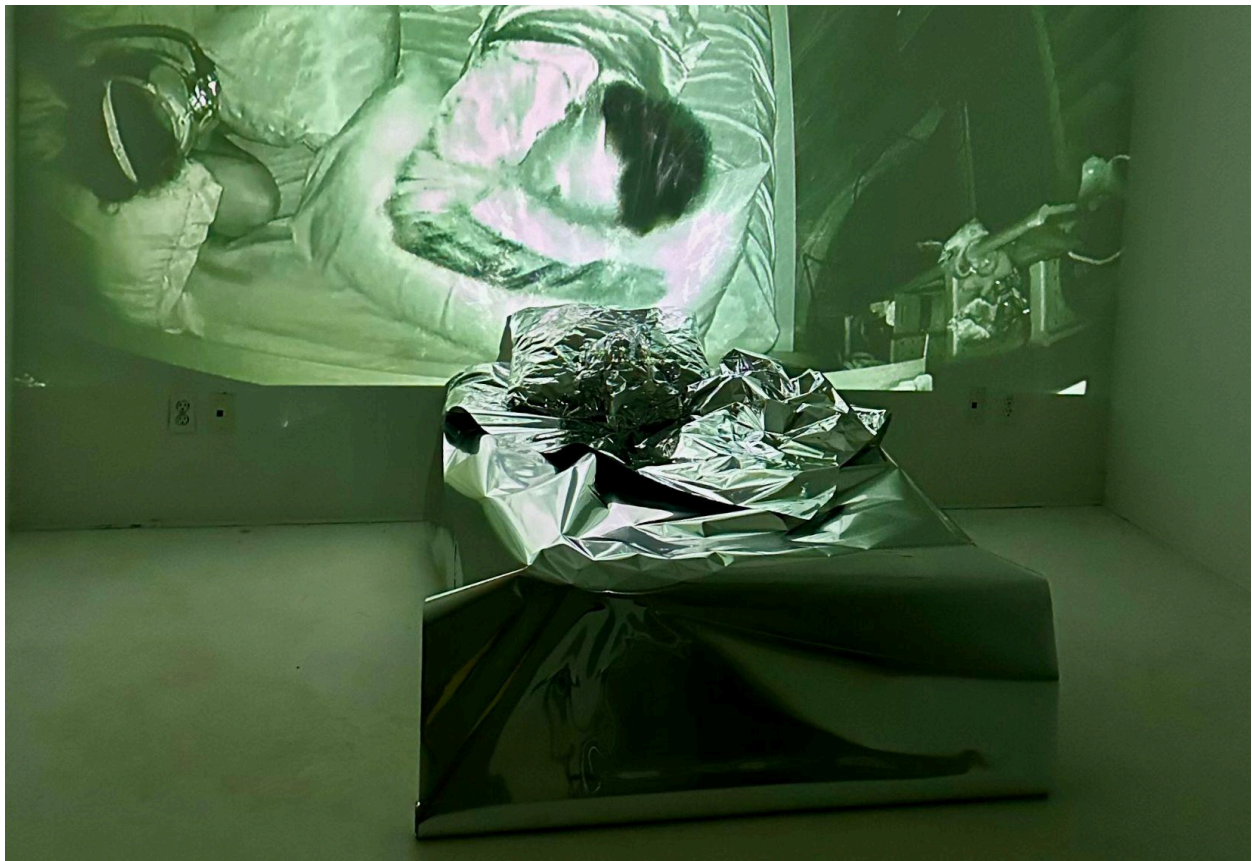


Figure 17: original *SLEEP UNWELL* (2023) mylar, video projection featuring footage of one night's sleep

⁸⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 22



Figure 18: original SLEEP UNWELL (2023) mylar, video projection featuring footage of one night's sleep



Figure 19: untitled digital painting based on self photography exploring speculative family portraits



Figure 20: untitled process work exploring speculative family portraits



Figure 21: untitled process work exploring speculative family portraits

3.4 MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE: POETIC PAIRS



Figure 22: MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE (2025) cotton, photo transfers, wooden frame



Figure 23: MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE (2025) mine/my mothers mouth



Figure 24: MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE (2025) cotton, photo transfers, wooden frame

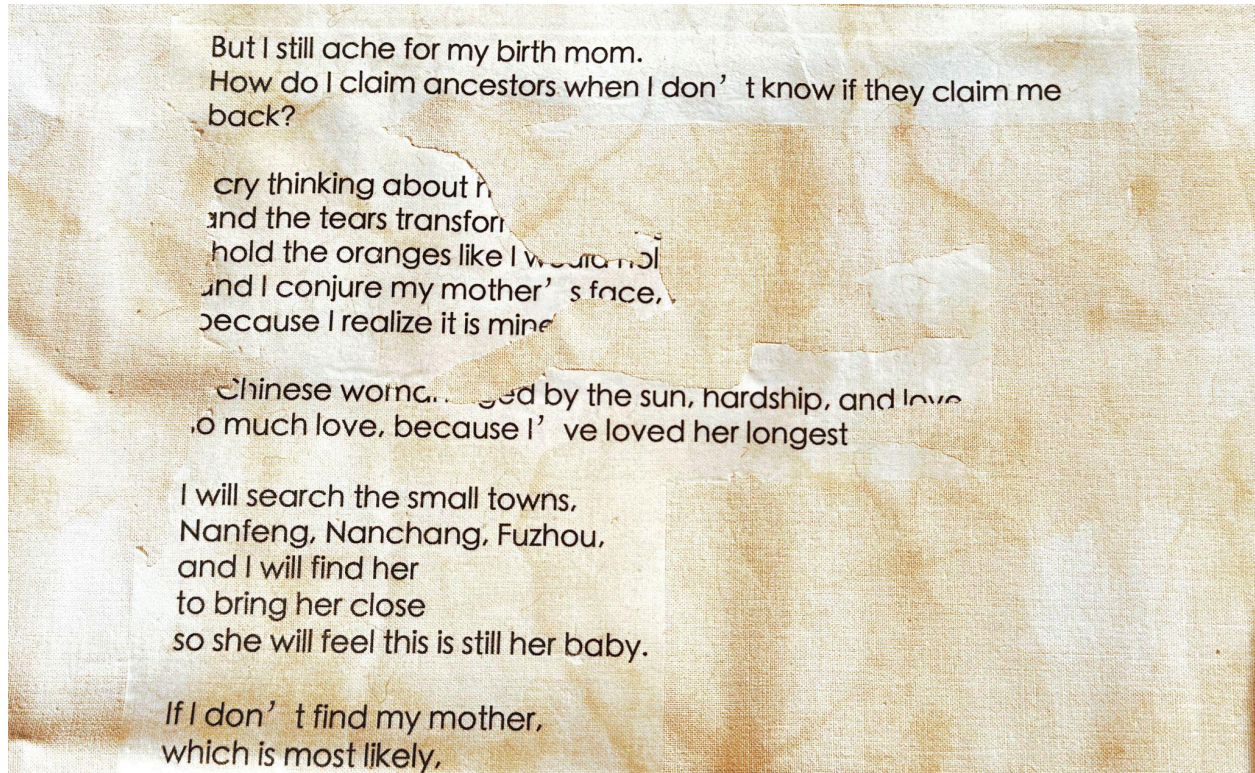


Figure 25: MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE (2025) speculative critical poetry

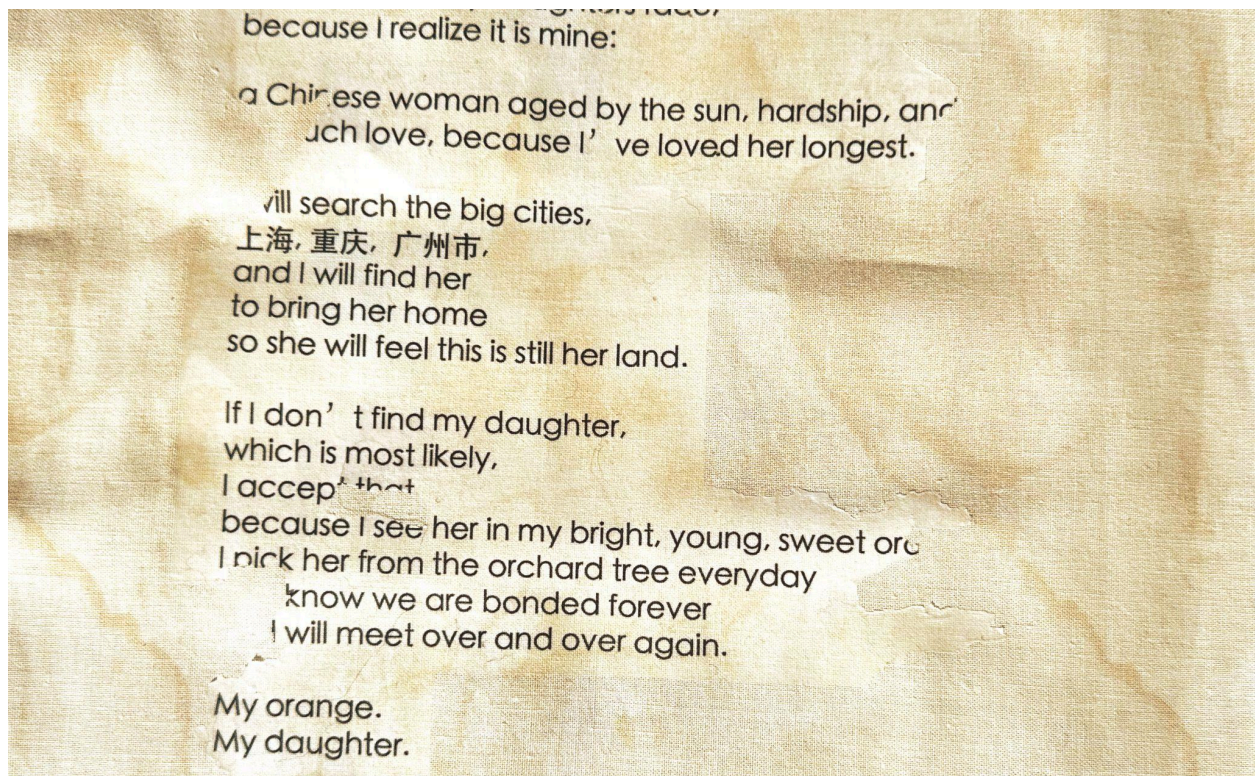


Figure 26: MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE (2025) cotton, photo transfers, wooden frame

MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE is a pair of speculative poems and portraits about the innate connection between myself and my unknown birth mother, exemplifying the adoption paradox where the deep absence of birth parents becomes their presence. The poem stanzas and closeup photography parallel each other in the tradition of Chinese couplets, as my birth mother and I reconcile and affirm our relationship despite the TAIC separating us forever. The poems' text is ripped up and the photographs' features are cut out, evoking the extreme absence of objective origins, ancestry, and generational knowledge that I experience. The poems are counter narratives and the photographs are speculative portraits that accept ambiguity and internal knowledge, instead of chasing objectivity and external verification of "facts". Like the dream images of *SLEEP UNWELL* that embrace my face as my mother's, the closeup photography features our facial freckles, wrinkles, and contours yet remain unverifiable because of missing visual information. Inspired by Singh's concept of the "ghost archive", I search for what is not there in conscious memory or legal documents by creating works "marked by absence instead of presence, of longing instead of belonging."⁹⁰ In the same ghostly realm, this work explores Myers' concept of birth parents as "ghostly kin" and "present absence" rather than a "haunting specter" from the dominant narrative who conjures discomfort and threatens adoptive parents' sense of ownership.⁹¹ Dominant narratives often feature the fairytale-like journey where an adoptee travels to their homeland or reunites with their birth family to learn their "true" origins, such as documentaries *Somewhere Between* and *Found* or fictional dramas *Seoul Searching* and *Joy Ride*. Expanding to adoptee self-representation, it is still common to center homeland travels and birth parent searches such as the memoirs *All You Can Ever Know* by Nichole Chung and *Older Sister. Not Necessarily Related* by Jenny Heijun Wills. However, my work does neither as I surrender to the impossibility of recovering lost connections and instead conjecture what could, would, and should be. If no external body can neither prove or disprove my origins, then I will write, speak, and materialize my own story as an act of reclamation. Through *MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER*

⁹⁰ Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 96

⁹¹ Myers, *Violence of Love*, 172

IS AN ORANGE, I empower the marginalized voices of myself and my birth mother through critical speculation, adding our stories to the counter archives.

At the earliest stage of ideation, I planned to write, illustrate, and narrate a series of zines, as I was inspired and motivated by two specific adoptee-led workshops at the *VOICES* conference; *Zine Making* with Cam McCafferty and *Poetry as Liberation* with Katelyn Durst Rivas.⁹² With these empowering storytelling tools to express critical adoptee perspectives, I experimented by creating a fully handwritten and illustrated zine as my proposal for UNADOPT ME (see appendix). I continued on this path, and drafted multiple zines that told expanded stories similar to the final text of *MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE*, but the form did not feel right yet. Simultaneous to this drafting process, I attended *BIPOC Adoptee Open-Mic Nights* hosted by adoptee poet Ryan Jafar Artes, and they opened the space by saying that when we can't speak our story, we can make it into a poem.⁹³ Those words hit me, as I realized I was stuck with my writing because it was subconsciously becoming a neatly packaged narrative and exposition for outsiders opposed to a liberating process for myself. This is when I tossed out the drafts of linear storylines and Chinese adoption histories, following my emotional instincts as an artist rather than my pedagogical know-how as a teacher. By embracing speculation for myself instead of explanation for others, I tempt people to know adoption and adoptee differently than the formats and tropes that already exist. The freestanding folding screen was inspired by my previous work-in-progress *BLOODLINES*; a screen tied together by red threads and personal photographs that is activated through dance as a way to externalize and reembody my connections with Chinese people. The screen was symbolic of a specific story of my Chinese foster mother, but with *MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE* I reuse the screen as a practical divider for visitor experience. As visitors stand on either side of the screen reading the poems, it is to invoke my feelings of being both so close yet so far from my birth mother as we live parallel lives and deaths.

⁹² Cam McCafferty, "Zine Making," Workshop at *VOICES: a BIPOC Adoptee Community Multi-Day Conference*. Portland, OR, July 2024 : Katelyn Durst Rivas, "Alchemizing Abolition through Poetry," Workshop at *VOICES: a BIPOC Adoptee Community Multi-Day Conference*. Portland, OR, July 2024.

⁹³ Ryan Jafar Artes, "BIPOC Adoptee Open Mic," (online event via Zoom, Jan 7, 2025)



Figure 27: BLOODLINES (2024) thread, photos, floor tiles, folding divider screen



Figure 28: BLOODLINES (2024) closeups of thread and photos in the folding screen

3.5 ANNOTATED BOOKS: MY VOICE IN DIRECT REPLY



Figure 29: ANNOTATED BOOKS (2025) custom laser cut acrylic box, books, file folders



Figure 30: ANNOTATED BOOKS (2025) custom laser cut acrylic box, books, file folders, reader



Figure 31: ANNOTATED BOOKS (2025) custom laser cut acrylic box, books, file folders

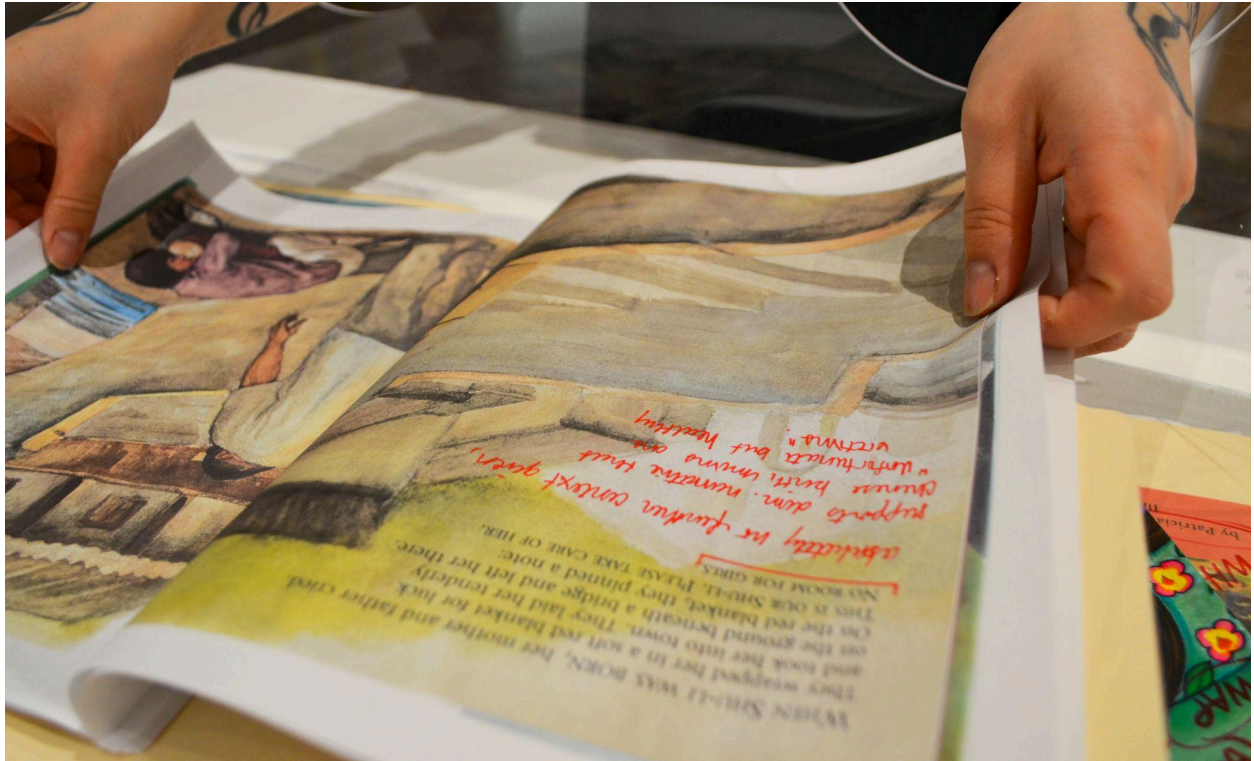


Figure 32: ANNOTATED BOOKS (2025) custom laser cut acrylic box, books, file folders, reader

SHEILA TEMPLE

the situation marvelously, and talked Konnor into going with him to a local hospital's adolescent unit. We followed the officer and Konnor in the police car, and then admitted Konnor to the unit as he cried and begged us not to leave him.

His words forever branded to our memory were: "If you were going to bring me to such a place, why did you even adopt me?" As we were walking to our car outside the hospital after midnight that night, we looked up and saw Konnor watching us through the hospital window, still crying (and begging). Rick has several times described leaving Konnor there in the dark that late night as the hardest thing he has ever done as a parent. We went home together, without Konnor, and cried all night, and all the next day.

The program required that Konnor not have visitors for seventy-two hours. However, we were allowed to call and talk to the nurses about how Konnor was doing. Rick called morning, noon, and night, each time asking the nurses to give Konnor a message of our love.

After seventy-two hours passed, we were able to visit Konnor. During the first visit, he refused to look at us, or hug us. Rather, he only answered our questions with one or two word responses. The second visit was better, and on the third visit, we participated in a therapy session as a family and were allowed to take Konnor home. It was the first anniversary of his Gotcha Day, which made it a VERY special night. We went out to his favorite Chinese restaurant for dinner to celebrate.

Figure 33: ANNOTATED BOOKS (2025) scanned page from CHINESE TAKEOUT by Sheila Temple

ANNOTATED BOOKS debunks dominant narratives and enacts marginalized adoptee voices and through a selection of Chinese adoption children's books in a baby incubator with my written annotations.⁹⁴ Originally *ANNOTATED BOOKS* was purely a research process and was not meant to be exhibited, but with the encouragement of my primary advisor Soyang Park it became a work of its own. This challenged my ideas of what is a finished work and how to tell a story across multiple works beyond a written exhibition guide or didactic. Exposing dominant adoption narratives in this messy, raw annotated form allowed audiences to follow along my journey of confrontation in their own time. To annotate directly on these fictional books is to release the story's power over adoptees with critical replies and fact checks. The seven featured books - *Chinese Take Out*, *My Family is Forever*, *Our Baby From China*, *Motherbridge of Love*, *Waiting for May*, *Just Add One Chinese Sister*, and *Finding Joy* - are all written by white adoptive parents. As part of my literature review, I read every Chinese adoption book available at libraries and bookstores to understand the general public's access to Chinese adoption narratives. Disappointingly but not surprisingly, not a single book was written by a Chinese adoptee. These popular reads render adoptees as voiceless, an example of the real life suppression of adoptee voices as we are infantilized well into adulthood and denied as the experts on our own lives. Using critical adoptee scholar Baden's adoption microaggression framework, these books can be classified as *microfictions*; narratives that are "altered purposefully, or even accidentally, resulting in adoption stories and pasts that veil or withhold information from adoptees."⁹⁵ The positive adoption language, orientalist characterization, and white saviour perspective of the books "minimizes the disruption of the adoptees' first family and the adoptees' pre-adoption experiences", maintaining *status quo* as described by Branco et al in the Adoptee Consciousness Model (ACM).⁹⁶ As described by Mason, because of the "absence of official historical records and accounts, narratives about transnational and transracial adoption from China hold important power for their ability to construct, reify,

⁹⁴ The exhibition of these annotated books is from my PA Soyang Park's idea of exhibiting process work as a work of itself, as the annotated books were my development materials towards original creative writing until her reframing of them. (Soyang Park, OCAD University, Online via Teams, Oct 28, 2024)

⁹⁵ Baden, "Do You Know Your Real Parents? And Other Adoption Microaggressions," 8

⁹⁶ Branco et al, Adoptee consciousness model, 15

and legitimize certain perspectives and beliefs.”⁹⁷ This is exemplified by non-adopted educators such as Lina Sun who argue that “high quality” Chinese adoption children's literature is defined by “book awards” and “professional journals”, failing to acknowledge the powerful biases of WAP authors and invisibility of adoptee self-representation in the genre.⁹⁸ The baby incubator repositions the books as precious innocent infants, like the perception of Chinese orphans that make them desired commodities.⁹⁹ Audiences are invited to engage page by page via the incubator’s hand holes, daring them to breach the dominant narratives and grapple with the subtext of white saviour adoption fiction. Upon closer inspection, the seemingly happy children's books contain the violent systems and violated bodies of adoption, as called out in my annotations. Chinese adoptees are emerging critical adoption writers, scholars, and artists, as education access and critical consciousness coalesce during a global digital era. We cannot rely on carbon copying Korean adoptees strategies for galvanizing adoptee counter narratives, and must forge our own path as Chinese adoptees.¹⁰⁰ *ANNOTATED BOOKS* is a step towards this, provoking reflection on discrepancies between Chinese adoption fiction and Chinese adoptee reality as a way of cultivating an altered consciousness towards liberation and empowerment.

⁹⁷ Mason, Elizabeth Fuhan. “If She Could Speak: Birth Mothers and the Importance of Voice in Narratives of Transnational Adoption from China.” San Francisco State University, 2022.

<https://doi.org/10.46569/20.500.12680/8c97kx615>.

⁹⁸ Lina Sun, “Babies without borders: Representations of transracial Chinese adoption in picture books.” *Multicultural Education* 23, no. 2 (2016): 55-59.

⁹⁹ The baby incubator display concept was contributed by my SA Julius Poncelet Manapul who explored how the exhibition display method could be a meaningful addition to the content. (Julius Poncelet Manapul, OCAD University, in-person at 205 Richmond W, February 10, 2025).

¹⁰⁰ China's adoption industry opened in 1992, therefore the oldest adoptees are 33-35 years old. The majority of Asian adoptee scholarship is by Korean adoptees, as the Korean adoption industry opened in 1953, resulting in an older cohort who laid the foundation of critical Asian adoption studies.

3.6 CHINESE VESSEL: CYANO MEMORY



Figure 34: CHINESE VESSEL (2025) cotton, cyanotype featuring TKBA Awards Ball #8 Cosmic Circus



Figure 35: CHINESE VESSEL (2025) cotton, cyanotype featuring TKBA Awards Ball #8 Cosmic Circus



Figure 36: CHINESE VESSEL (2025) cotton, cyanotype featuring TKBA Awards Ball #8 Cosmic Circus



Figure 37: CHINESE VESSEL (2025) cotton, cyanotype featuring TKBA Awards Ball #8 Cosmic Circus

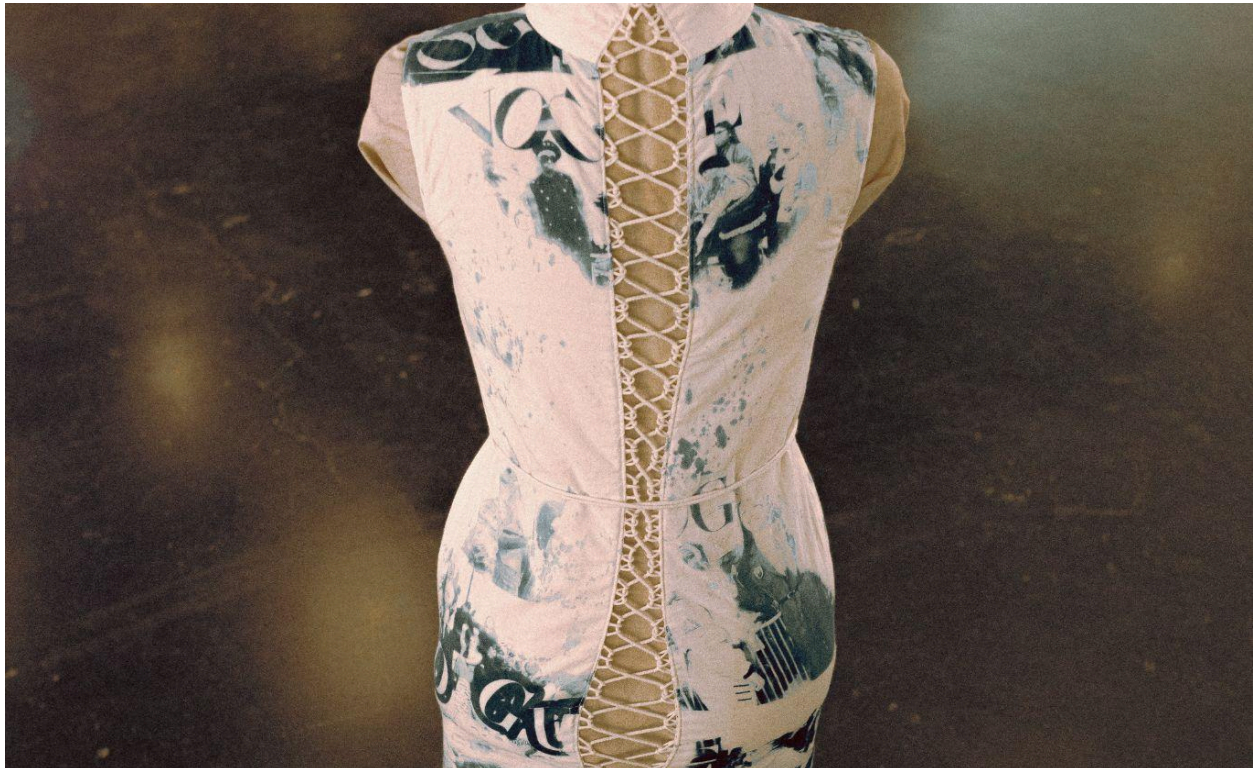


Figure 38: CHINESE VESSEL (2025) cotton, cyanotype featuring TKBA Awards Ball #8 Cosmic Circus



Figure 39: CHINESE VESSEL (2025) cotton, cyanotype featuring TKBA Awards Ball #8 Cosmic Circus



Figure 40: CHINESE VESSEL (2025) aged cyanotype print after one month of wearing and wrinkling



Figure 41: CHINESE VESSEL (2025) aged cyanotype print after one month of wearing and wrinkling

CHINESE VESSEL is a “wearable memory garment” that expresses queer chosen families through reconstructed ballroom photography, linking personal memory, community history, self empowerment, and collective liberation.¹⁰¹ The cyanotypes - monochromatic blue prints created by UV sensitive chemicals - feature my photography of my local ballroom community, the community that is my support system in the absence of a traditional nuclear family. The blue-white colours and silhouette are reminiscent of Chinese porcelain vases and traditional qipaos, transforming my body as a complex container of queer Chinese adoptee ancestry, history, and culture. The candids of our end-of-year ball feature the superimposed VOGUE typeface in homage to the origins of ballroom; where pioneer Paris Dupree embodied VOGUE magazine poses in time with the music and created voguing. These alternative magazine covers decenter the cult of celebrity as worthy of remembrance and reverence, and instead recenter the true hearts of creative culture that remain largely unrecognized and uncompensated for their contributions: ballroom. To photograph our balls is a commitment to documenting, treasuring, and archiving our stories in a society that seeks to demonize, deny, and oppress QTBIPOC existence and resistance.

CHINESE VESSEL is a love letter to ballroom, as the community has helped heal my adoption trauma by redefining transracial familyhood. As I am re-adopted by house parents of diverse racial-cultural backgrounds and re-homed into a nomadic “homeplace” independent of a specific physical location, a new family model alchemizes¹⁰². The transracial and multiracial familyhood of ballroom works because race is not evaded, but intersectionally understood, critiqued, and embodied through the radically queer Black art of ballroom. The old adage “you can’t choose family” is rendered false, as ballroom allows the mutual choosing between house parents and house kids for legacy and lineage, including the option to leave the house. As described by Ricky Tucker, ballroom is “the invisible creating visibility for themselves” in the face of

¹⁰¹ Soyang Park, OCAD University, Online via Teams, Oct 28, 2024

¹⁰² The specific concept and wording of “homeplace” refers to bell hooks’ homeplace; homemaking as a site of resistance and restoration for Black people. hooks, bell. “Homeplace (A Site of Resistance).” In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1990.

societal disenfranchisement and familial disownership.¹⁰³ Ballroom's QTBIPOC community members, embodied practices, and complex kinship are a disruption to the institute and ideals of family, and therefore a challenge to the foundational values of the TAIC. I wear *CHINESE VESSEL* at ballroom community events to further imbue it with intangible queer ephemera and wrinkled fabric trace, atop the historical cyanotype archive of past balls. So it is partially incomplete in its gallery display because it is not worn on my body but worn by a mass produced dress form. On the dress form it is an empty ghostly vessel, but when I don it, it is (ful)filled. It is not a costume grasping at Chinese and queer aesthetic references, but a second skin specific to its maker that evokes a divine protection through ancestral spirit. Like the nature of memory and storytelling, the cyanotype blue will gradually change in colour as the chemicals continue to re/process with washing and wearing over time, possibly fading altogether, but like the molding *ORANGE ORPHAN*, we will know what is there because we were there, regardless if this memory tool remains intact. And so, the story of *CHINESE VESSEL* continues, as my families and communities of ballroom engage this work in my thesis exhibition.

¹⁰³ Ricky Tucker, *And the Category Is...: Inside New York's Vogue, House, and Ballroom Community*. (Beacon Press, 2021), 21.



Figure 42: CHINESE VESSEL (2025) now in completion with the artist's embodiment



Figure 43: CHINESE VESSEL (2025) now in completion with the artist's embodiment

4.1 ADOPTEE MULTI-REALITY: ELEMENTS AND EVENTS



Figure 45: UNADOPT ME side view with the artist laying on SLEEP UNWELL with ORANGE ORPHAN in the background.

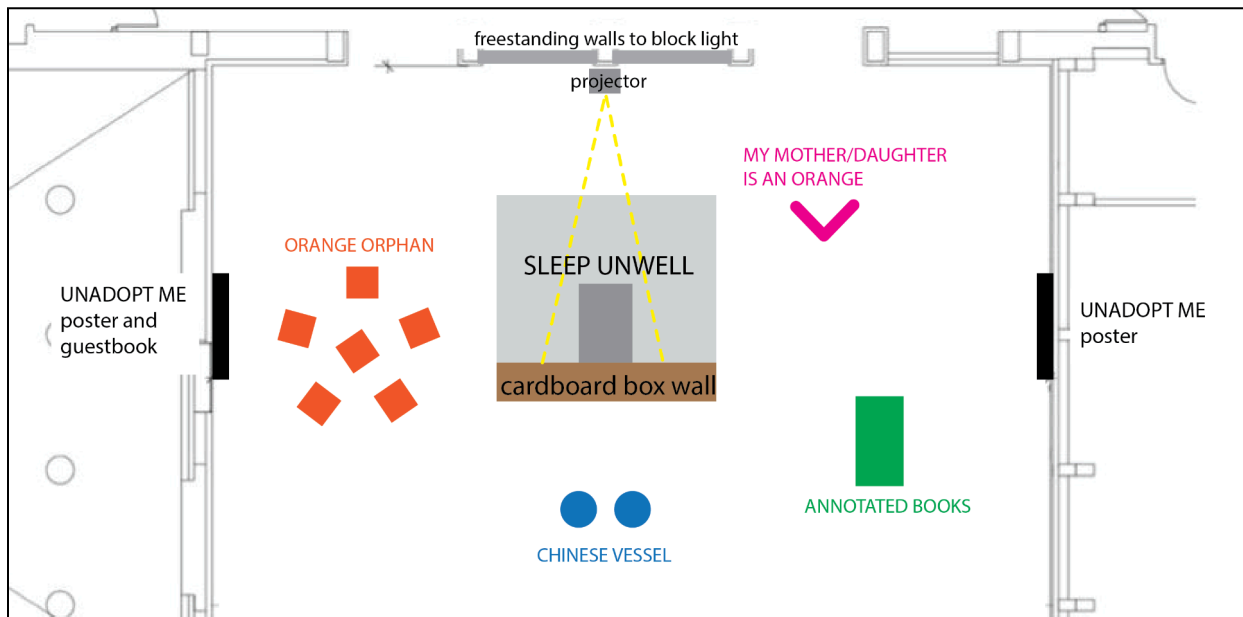


Figure 46: *UNADOPT ME* final layout plan in the Great Hall at OCADU

My thesis exhibition titled *UNADOPT ME* was open to the public from March 4-8 2025 at OCADU's Great Hall and featured all aforementioned works for daily viewing and a live performance during closing celebration, manifesting what I call my adoptee multi-reality. The exhibit was anchored around a freestanding wall of 70 stacked cardboard boxes, a practical need for *SLEEP UNWELL*'s video projection but also a symbolic choice to further convey themes of displacement and impermanence. The cardboard box is a familiar symbol of a moving day or online purchase, invoking the transactional and commodifying nature of the TAIC's sale and movement of children across borders. The layout invites non-linear exploration of the works, as they are connected by my non-linear queer Asian adoptee counter narrative. The enlarged first page of my orphanage file with the superimposed title *UNADOPT ME* serves as the exhibition poster, accompanied by an artist biography because it was important to provide clear positionality. During the exhibition I offered two artist walkthroughs, one for QTBIPOC community and one for BIPOC adoptees, creating safer spaces for critical group discussion outside of general public visiting hours. These focus groups helped mediate what adoptee activist and poet Ryan Jafar Artes calls "finding the edges of safety", which is to test the disclosure depth of difficult experiences with trusted

communities before sharing with broader audiences.¹⁰⁴ The general public live performance and artist talk on Friday March 7 featured myself reading my poem from *MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE* and fielding audience questions.

4.2 PRE-EXHIBIT: INTENTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

The intention of *UNADOPT ME* is to engage audiences with an artistic critical queer adoptee consciousness in a way that changes their hearts and alters their consciousness around adoption and how they may be complicit in upholding the transnational adoption industrial complex (TAIC). The exhibition is not just for other queer Asian adoptees, but for the range of identities and communities that can connect to the central themes of family displacement, abandonment trauma, community (un)belonging, and counter narratives of the minor voice. The general public is not an adoptee majority, therefore the general understanding of adoption comes not from lived experience but from dominant narratives perpetuated in literature, media, and politics. I do not seek heated debates in point-for-point rebuttals with visitors committed to dominant narratives, but I do hope to spark the deep internal work of incorporating new information that contradicts what we thought was true about adoption. *UNADOPT ME* does not strive to be liked, but to be simply witnessed and provoking in its unapologetic nature as a critical queer adoptee counter narrative. The live performance and audience engagement are an integral part of this work since my body is material as much as oranges, fabric, and mylar are. In Newton's article "The trauma and healing of consciousness", she describes coping with the ambiguous adoptee trauma of the severed cord to collective [racial-cultural] memory that obscures "our place in a line of intergenerational trauma".¹⁰⁵ Through an embodied and emotional lens, being witnessed allows for this ambiguous trauma to reprocess through my body as tears of anger, sorrow, and love. These visceral experiences help clarify my role within the collective and how I can contribute. Further, it reveals the power of emotional visibility and vulnerability as fuel for sustaining self and community advocacy.

¹⁰⁴ Ryan Jafar Artes, "BIPOC Adoptee Open Mic Night," (online workshop, January 7, 2025)

¹⁰⁵ Newton, "The Trauma and Healing of Consciousness", 4

4.3 POST-EXHIBIT: OUTCOMES AND RESPONSES, A CONVERSATION WITH MY ADVISOR (SY) AND MYSELF (CC)

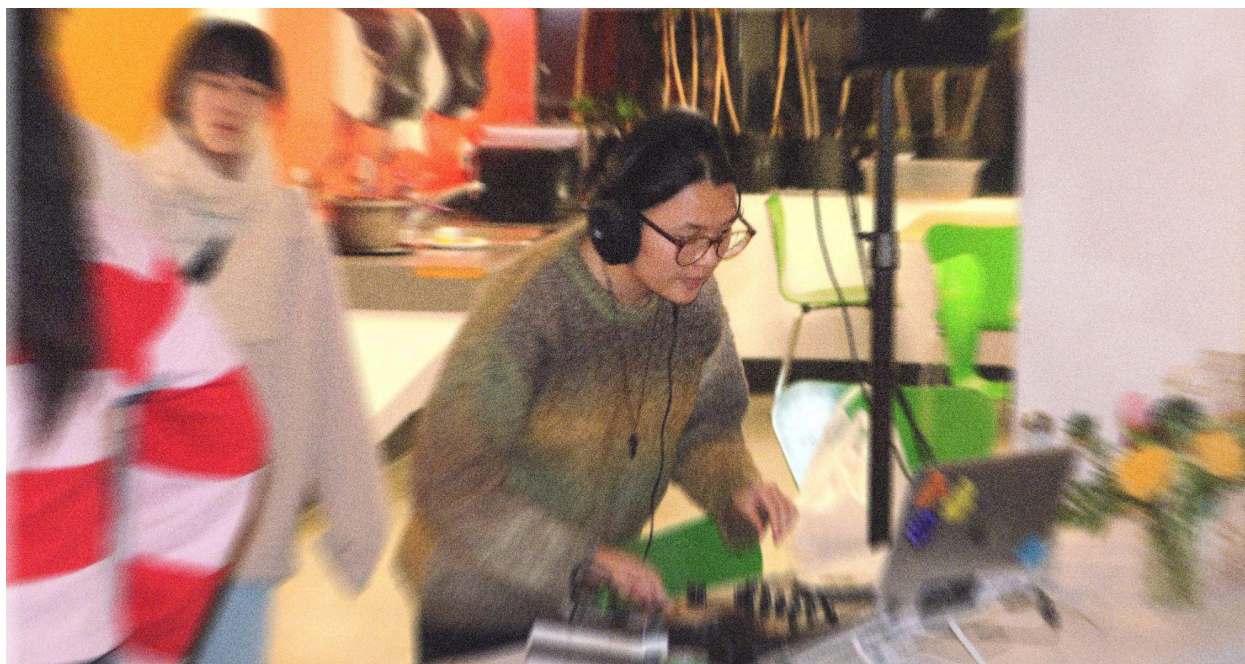


Figure 47: UNADOPT ME closing celebrations on March 7 2025 with DJ CLAIRE



Figure 48: UNADOPT ME closing celebrations on March 7 2025 with community dancing

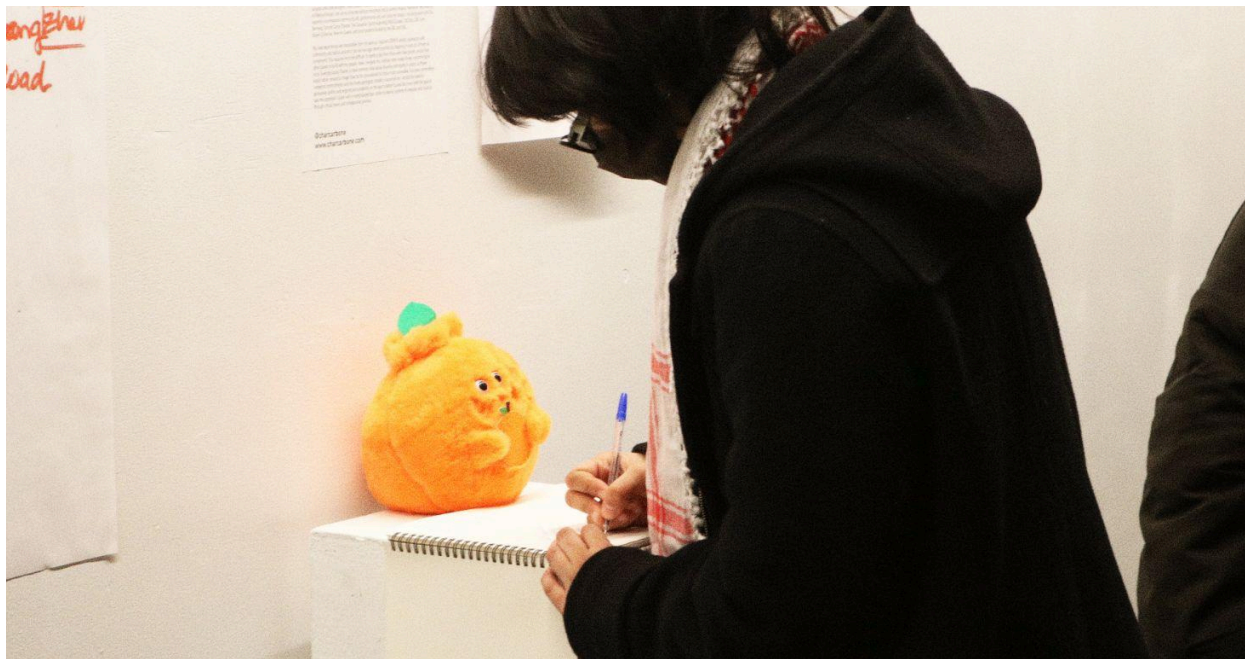


Figure 49: UNADOPT ME closing celebrations on March 7 2025 with guest book signing



Figure 50: UNADOPT ME performance and artist talk by Charlotte Carbone on March 7 2025

SY: How did you feel when you finally materialized your ideas into an exhibition?

CC: Tired [laughs]. But also fulfilled and hopeful. To finally realize a project that has been two years in the making, based on a lifetime of queer Asian adoptee experiences is cathartic. As an artist, there is a sliver of fear that no one will care about your work, but with UNADOPT ME so much value had already come from the process, that the outcome with audiences did not worry or sway me. If I complete my due diligence and have community support throughout my process, I will be satisfied with my work. And the community support was overwhelming, like with the well attended QTBIPOC and adoptee specific walkthroughs of about 20 people across these niches. People travelled from out of town, they blocked it in their calendars months in advance, they came bearing flowers and gifts; overwhelmed by this love. As someone who defaults to feeling like a last resort, feeling disposable at the slightest inconvenience, I am always deeply touched when people show up for me.

SY: What were your favorite moments in this process? The most difficult?

CC: My favourite part of the process was creating CHINESE VESSEL; photographing my community, processing the cyanotypes, sewing the dresses, and wearing them. There was so much joy, connection, and care at each step, such as my studio mate Jules offering cyanotype tips on sunlight exposure and my ballroom girl Princess Poppers Siriano offering suggestions for photography equipment. At times it was an isolating process, as I took large steps back from community to focus on my studies, but these moments reminded me of the supportive forces in my life. As for the most difficult [laughs], honestly, spending the most money ever spent on my artistic practice. A reminder that I am an orphan; I have no parents, no “default” family, no generational wealth or emergency bail outs. With every dollar I spent on materials, books, or equipment, I constantly reminded myself that this was an investment. To work as a solo artist on a solo exhibit with no immediate payout was a challenging sell to my working class designer mindset. I’ll just end with this; don’t look at my credit card statements.

SY: How did you feel when narrating your autobiographical stories, poetry, and ideas to the public during the closing event on March 7th?

I need to address this right off the top; ballroom was grieving, and still is grieving the death of our beloved community member Kuriosity Pink Lady. The March 4th exhibit opening was the day he died, so denial, sorrow, and anger were all very present during the March 7th closing. In grief, I tried to channel the raw emotions into my poetry reading and artist talk. Originally I planned a full production - recorded audio, costume changes, movement choreography, lighting cues, orange peeling - but I realized I did not need a spectacle nor was I in a headspace to do it. I simply needed to activate my story with my voice and body. So I stripped back the performance to a live reading of my poem, no distraction or abstraction, just the bearing of emotions. I cried on-off the entire night, the grief was overwhelming. But to grieve is to love, and I would never change how much I love my community and my family.

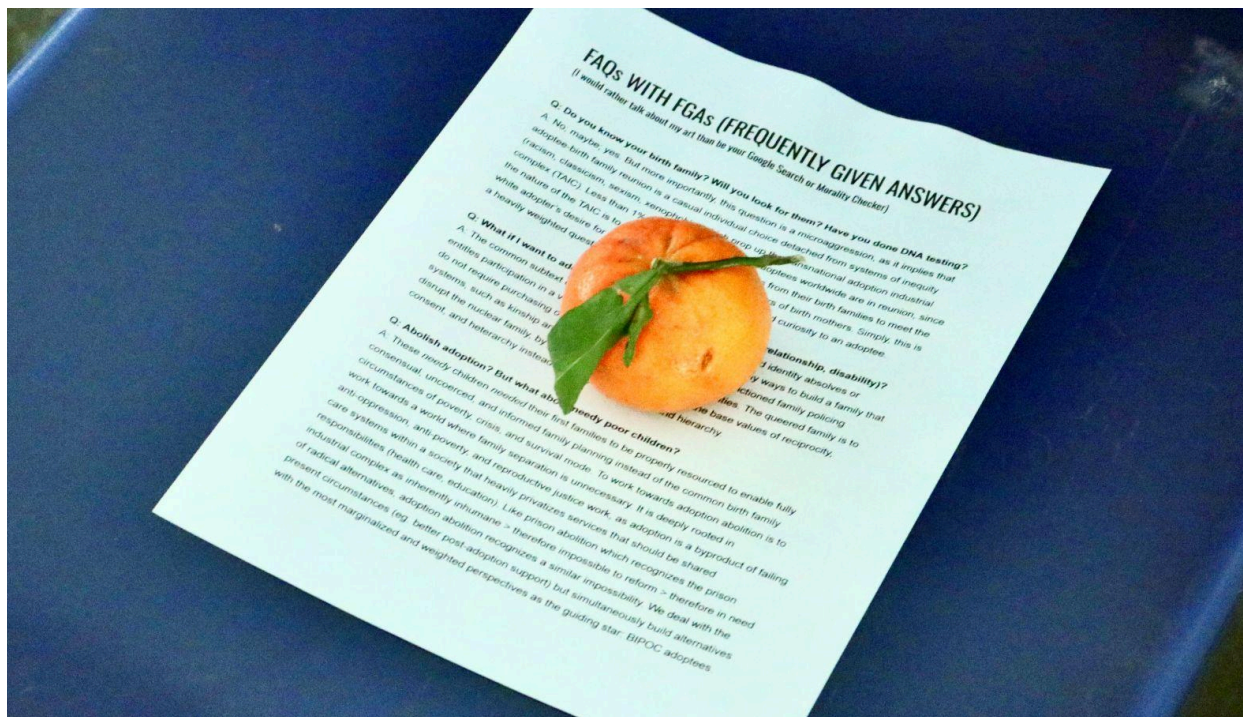


Figure 51: Adoption FAQ audience handout and orange snack (see appendix for full handout text)

SY: What was the most interesting and/or unexpected response from audiences during this exhibition and events? What did you learn from them?

The most interesting, or rather surprising, response was from this old white lady in the closing night audience. To contextualize, every audience member got an info sheet with critical adoption readings and adoption FAQs with my frequently given answers. This included, “do you know your birth family?”, “what if I want to adopt because I can’t conceive”, and “abolish adoption; but what about needy poor children?”, all questions I encountered and did not want to entertain further because they are microaggressions. But this white lady had the nerve to ask these exact questions, while holding the info sheet. The caucasity of it all! But because I am so generous with my emotional labor and deep expertise, I still answered them. What I learned from this is that critical adoption will never be for people unwilling or unable to read a handout, let alone actively listen to an adoptee. I wish these people well, but not near me, unless they pay me premium consultation rates [laughs].

SY: How do you feel that your thesis project has addressed your objectives (personal and social level) on a scale from 1 to 100, 1 being not at all addressed and 100 being completely addressed?

I largely accomplished what I set out to do with my thesis personally and collectively, so a 99. The -1 point is because I have many ideas idling in my mental parking lot that were unable to come to fruition due to external factors, but that is life as a working artist. Such as holding community workshops during the exhibit or exhibiting in a more appropriate off-site location, I simply didn’t have any time, money, or energy to pursue these at a respectable level of execution.

SY: What would you do differently if you were to present this exhibition again elsewhere after graduation?

I would directly engage my Chinese adoptee and ballroom communities in the remounting process, opposed to only at the end exhibition. I would try evolving works further with community collaboration, such as *CHINESE VESSEL 2.0* featuring multiple ballroom photographers or *ORANGE ORPHAN 2.0* featuring other Chinese adoptee's orphanage texts. I see so much power and longevity there. I added a guestbook to my exhibit (as per your suggestion, thank you), and one of the most common comments was that people felt less alone after experiencing my work. So, combating loneliness by fostering connection in process and product is front of mind for the future of this work.

SY: Any other comments, thoughts, or feelings?

CC: Vulnerability is the strength of my art. Aha; another adoption paradox.

5.0 CONCLUSION: ON LIBERATION

UNADOPT ME is beyond indulgent self-representation, but a radical counter narrative and archive of queer adoptee community, familyhood, and embodied knowledge. Counter narratives offer a deeper understanding of Asian adoptee trauma, not for the attention economy that sells trauma as consumable entertainment and social cache, but because the trauma, grief, and pain of adoptee consciousness must be acknowledged in order to feel joy, love, and connection.¹⁰⁶ Adoption is a byproduct of failing care systems within a society that heavily privatizes services that should be shared responsibilities. To prioritize a child's needs is not to extract them from birth families and homelands, but ensuring birth families are properly resourced in order to enable fully consensual, uncoerced, and informed family planning and parenting decisions. Adoption abolition is to work towards a world where this type of organized family separation is unnecessary, and it is deeply rooted in anti-oppression, anti-poverty, and reproductive justice work.¹⁰⁷ Like the current movement of prison abolition which recognizes the prison industrial complex as falsely concerned with welfare, inherently violent, beyond reform, and in need of radical alternatives, adoption abolition recognizes a similar pathway. Adoption is inseparable from violence, and therefore irreformable because "ethical adoption" led by the TAIC is an impossible oxymoron. *UNADOPT ME* provides a thick theoretical and social critique of the TAIC, but also demonstrates practical alternatives in family building through the artistic expression of how I cultivate queer chosen family. We must deal with the present circumstances as the TAIC continues to operate, but simultaneously build alternatives with the most marginalized and weighted perspectives as the guiding star; BIPOC adoptees.

To my fellow BIPOC adoptees reading this right now, know that our art/work is powerful and transformative regardless if it's understood or celebrated by outsiders. My work always feels in-process because queer adoptee consciousness is a constant becoming, yet I hope this freeze frame of who I am today helps you find liberation too.

¹⁰⁶ Newton, "The Trauma and Healing of Consciousness."

¹⁰⁷ Collective of Child Welfare Survivors, "Taking a Life: Abolishing Adoption in Canada & Elsewhere" (online public talk, April 24, 2024). <https://youtu.be/eGIYz5mnqvc?si=uzUwXyGL4XQyDubc>

5.1 LIMITATIONS

The research scope of *UNADOPT ME* does not directly address how Chinese transnational adoption intersects with and relates to disability, religion, or Hong Kong adoption, as I cannot comprehensively address these with my lived experience alone. First, transnational adoptees are disproportionately disabled than the general population. Disability is connected to the abandonment and the adoptability of a child, as disabled children are considered a burden on local Chinese resources and in need of outsourcing care to white adopters. Disability justice is also intertwined with adoptee justice, as both groups fight for body autonomy, access to appropriate healthcare, and to not be infantilized. Second, the white saviourism of the TAIC can be directly connected to the religious doctrine of white Christian adoptive parents and receiving countries. Christianity is strongly pro-adoption as it promotes saving orphans and foreigners. Many adoption agencies are steered by these Christian values, including the ever popular Holt International which touts itself as the “pioneers of international adoption” since launching Korean transnational adoption in 1955.¹⁰⁸ Many adoptees express the added layer of religious trauma from evangelical Christian WAPs and neighborhoods they were displaced to. Third, Hong Kong adoptees have distinctly different circumstances and experiences from mainland China adoptees. Hong Kong’s adoption industry operated from 1950-1970s, predating the floodgates of mainland China adoption in 1992.¹⁰⁹ It is important to distinguish between these experiences to avoid erasure or conflation among Asian adoptee scholars and scholarship. All of these limitations warrant further investigation that includes collaboration with fellow adoptees who hold deeper insight of these intersections.

¹⁰⁸ Holt International, “Uplifting Children, Strengthening Families”, n.d.
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¹⁰⁹ Choy, “International Adoption and Cultural Insecurity”, 153

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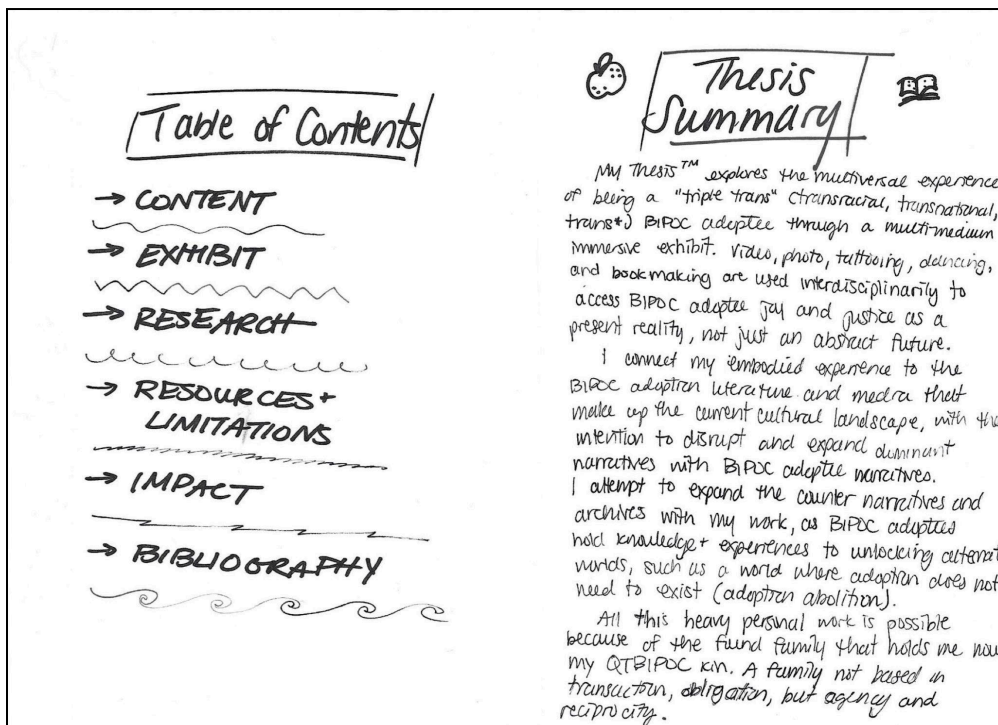
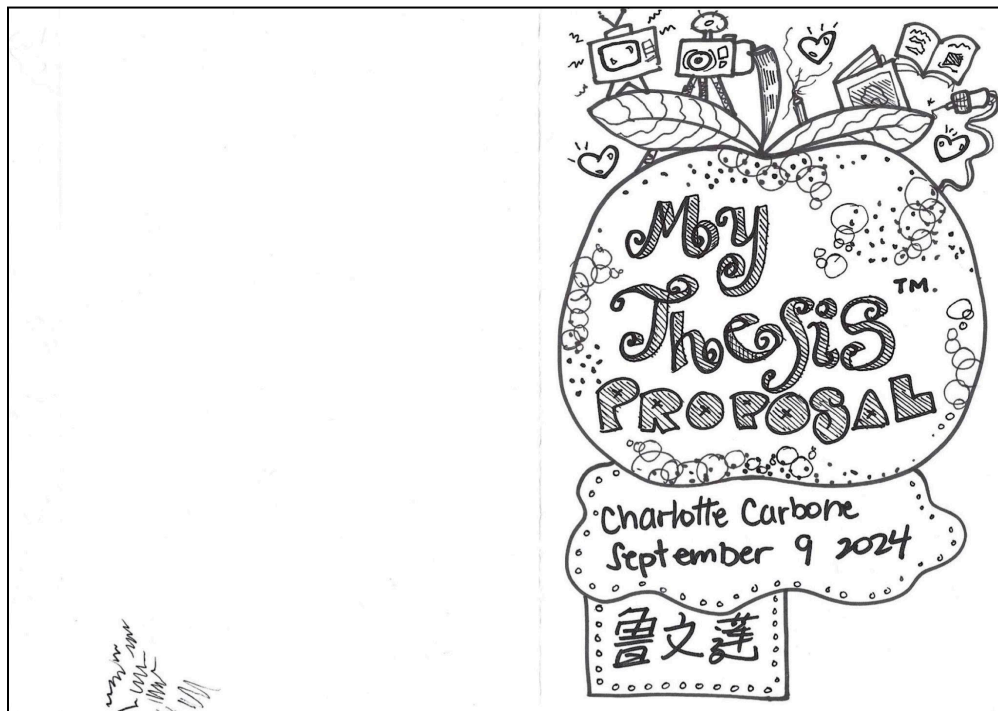
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APPENDIX



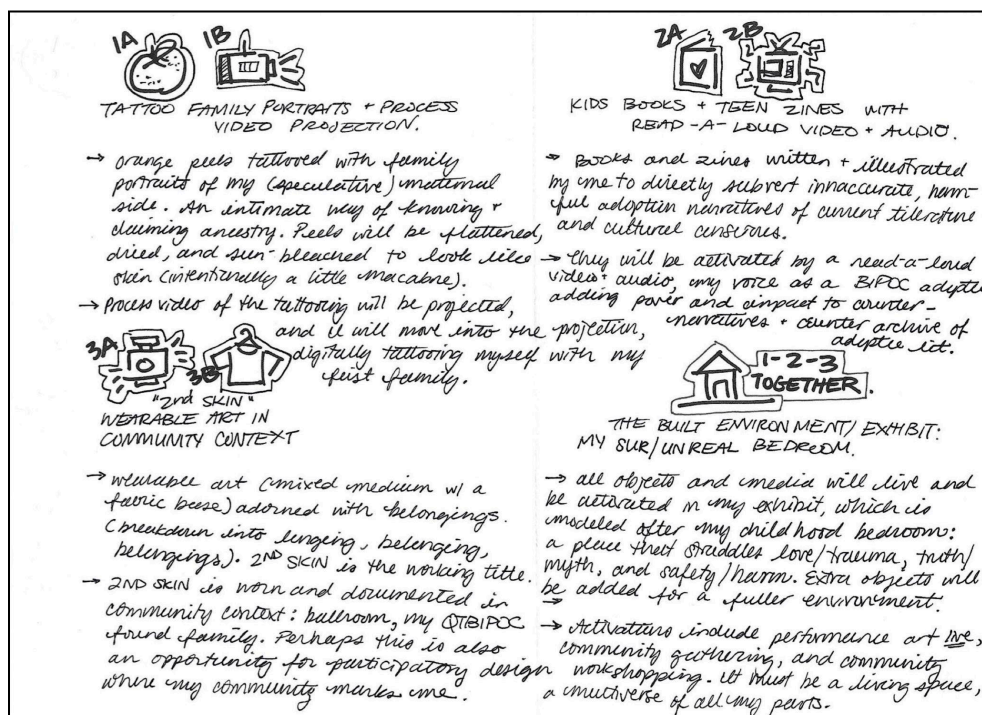
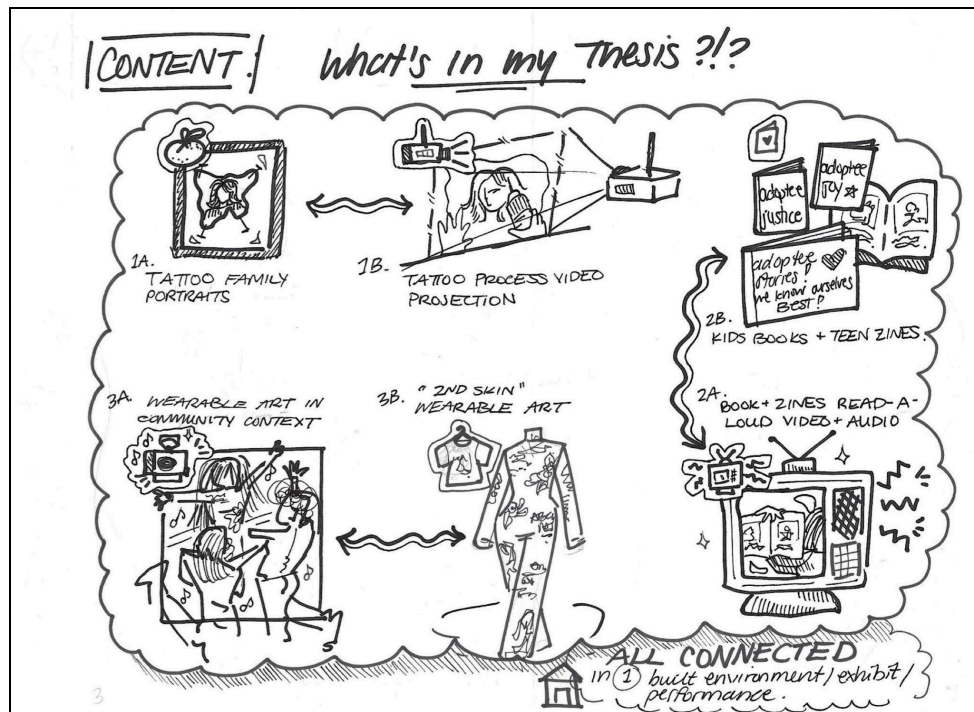
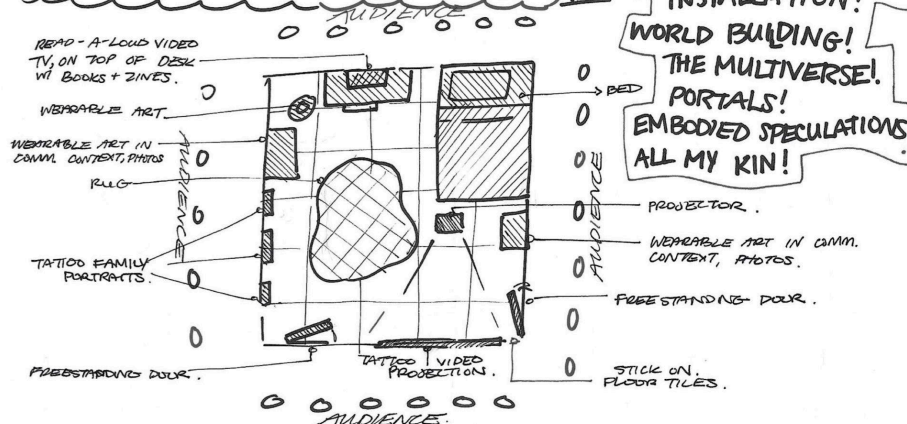


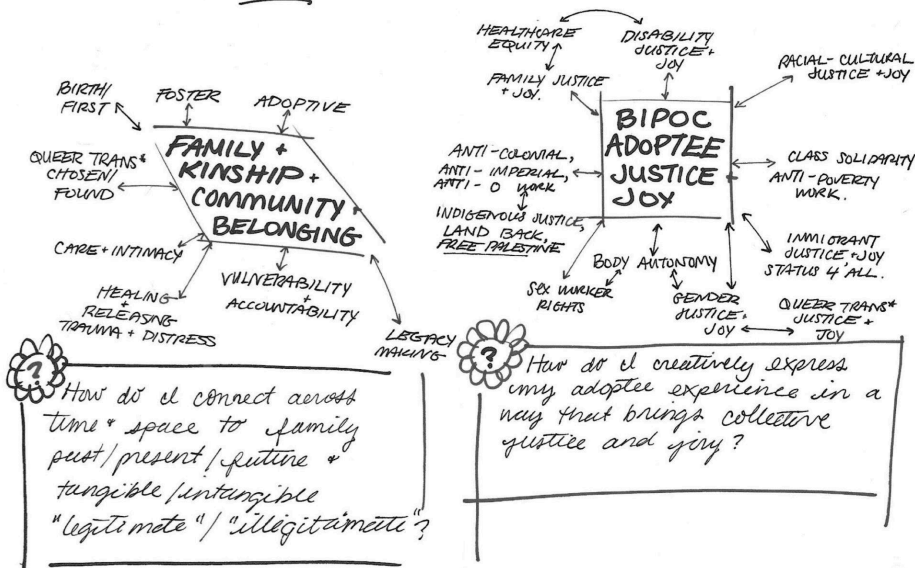
EXHIBIT: How am I sharing my thesis ?!/?

MY SUR/UN-REAL BEDROOM



* NOTE: The Great Hall @ 100 McCaul
is tentatively booked for my exhibit.
5 day run w/ 5 performances/activations.

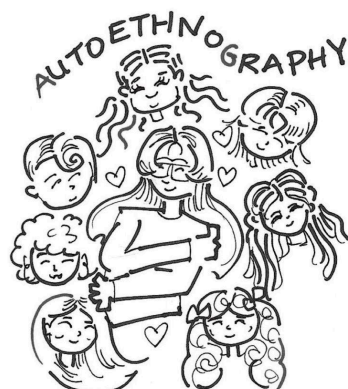
RESEARCH: What themes/questions does my thesis address ?!/?



RESEARCH: How will I learn, what methods + frameworks?!?



"the body keeps the score".
My story exists beyond the conscious + intellectual, I need to access the trapped unknown in my sub/unconscious and body-memory.



"Nothing about us, without us".

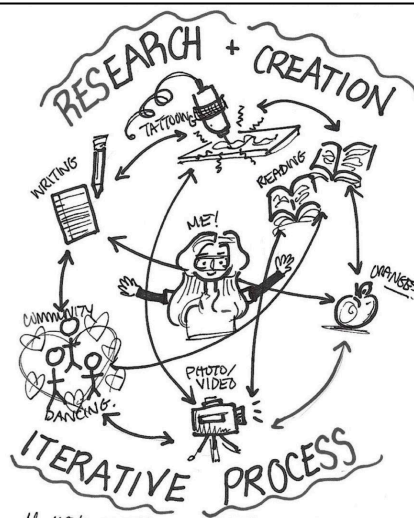
Nothing is "self-made". I bring my communities with me, always:
BIPOC adoptees, QTBIPOC (ballroom).
My story must be understood in relation to others as I explore my current forms of family/love/care.

Archival Docs.



Lit. Review.

I need a deep understanding of existing literature and media about BIPOC adoption in order to write it with my own work. I want to quantify and codify the popular mainstream narratives, in order to defend why BIPOC adoptees' narratives are crucial. I want to challenge and disrupt both the content and the format of "legitimate" "credible" adoption "research".







I work across and between many mediums and ideas, so it is important I follow the tangents of ideas that come up with research-creation. (and sometimes destruction). I embrace a non-linear process, the messy web of circling around and back to my works. I embrace the soft structure: tangible outputs but room to play.

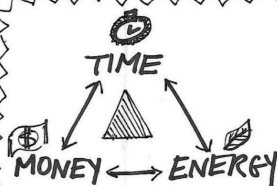
RESOURCES + LIMITATIONS

: what do I need to make my thesis happen?!?

Resources

-  Materials. Tattooing, book + zine making, exhibit set dec, oranges
-  Equipment. Tattoo machine, camera, tripod, SD cards, hard drives + file storage, TV monitors, projectors.
-  Space. Exhibition, studio for making + dancing + gathering.
-  Knowledge. Books, online journals, PA+SA, community, conferences, authors, artists, technicians, my family.

Limitations

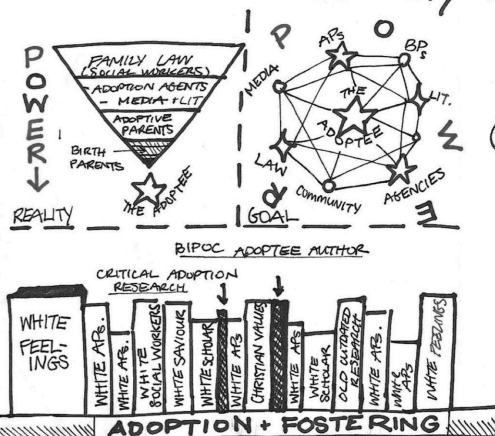


The Triangle of Adult Responsibilities

- ① I maintain a 40-50 hr. week with work + school + life. my time is finite and precious. I am not a machine.

- ② I am a full-time student, therefore cannot work full time. Without a full-time income, no generational wealth, money is an extremely present variable for how to execute my thesis. For a real \$\$, my 2023 income tax was \$26K. That's Toronto's poverty line.
- ③ My body is tired, aging, and disabled. It needs 7+ hrs of sleep, to charge my social battery, to turn off my brain. Nothing is worth burnout. At the core, I need to enjoy the work I do, and that means REST.

IMPACT: the "so what" factor, what does my thesis contribute?!?



The adoption industry and media landscape is dominated by whiteness. Those with the most power to shape BIPOC adoptee lives are not adoptees themselves, but social workers, private agencies, adoptive parents, and governments. I challenge, "what if the adoptee was centered" instead of at the bottom of decision making.



I envision new realities where adoption becomes obsolete, because all parents are seen as deserving and are supported to raise their children. I dream that all families are together, never separated or relinquished, because agency is given, not coerced choice.

IMPACT: I have the "courage to be disliked" (and attacked, probably) for my thesis.

 BIPOC adoptees are at the center of multiple intersecting injustices; our voices silenced, our work censored, and our experiences dismissed. It is because our radical existence challenges power on multiple planes; within families, systems, communities, corporations, and government. BIPOC adoptee experiences are unsettling by nature, because our existence started from some of the most dire circumstances. I use my thesis as an opening to these crucial counter narratives, as a path to collective liberation, justice, and joy.

 **DOMINANT NARRATIVE**

Adoption makes families ...

Adoption is based in love / good Christian values....

Adoption is the solution to abortion, adoption saves lives....

BUT..

BIPOC-ADOPTEE ENTERED NARRATIVE

- adoption separates families to make other families possible
- adoption is for-profit / based on values of those who keep the profit
- adoption ≠ abortion solution.
- Body autonomy + reproductive justice is the anti-dote to both which exist as coerced choices.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Themes

TRANSRACIAL + TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION

~~~~~

BIPOC ADOPTEE MEMOIRS

~~~~~

CRITICAL ADOPTION SCHOLARSHIP SOCIAL WORK.

~~~~~

RACIAL JUSTICE

~~~~~

QUEER FUTURITY

~~~~~

QUEER FAMILY + KINSHIP

~~~~~

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH METHODS.

Citations



* see attached reading list. *

Figure 52: Thesis proposal zine from September 9 2024

<p>My name is 文菊 and I am a mother. I live in 南丰 with my family who has grown oranges for generations. When I was young, I had a baby, surrounded by village mothers who wished for me to be a mother too but they all quietly worried, “What if it’s a girl after all” It was a girl. □abandonment □murder □黑孩子 Those were the options and I got just one, but none of them I wanted. The family planning police came to my home and they told me, “She will be adopted by a wealthy Chinese family in the city. She will be raised like a princess because of your sacrifice.” I will never know if that is true and I doubt it is, but regardless of where she was taken, they ripped my baby from my arms and I screamed. I would rather have died. Today I am 50 years old caring for my oranges caring for my son, my grandson caring for my land. All my blood. But I still ache for my baby girl. How do I treasure her when I don’t know if she treasures me back? I cry thinking about her, and the tears water the oranges in our orchard. I hold the oranges like I would hold her right now and I conjure my daughters face, because I realize it is mine: a Chinese woman aged by the sun, hardship, and love, so much love, because I’ve loved her longest. I will search the big cities, 上海, 重庆, 广州市, and I will find her to bring her home so she will feel this is still her land. If I don’t find my daughter, which is most likely, I accept that because I see her in my bright, young, sweet oranges. I pick her from the orchard tree everyday and know we are bonded forever and will meet over and over again. My orange. My daughter.</p>	<p>My name is Charlotte and I am a daughter. I was supposed to live in China with a family who was never forced to separate. When I was young, I had a burden of expectation, surrounded by suburban whites who wished for me to be a white too but they all clearly worried, “What if it’s Asian after all” It was Asian. □assimilation □isolation □racism Those were the options and I got them all, but none of them I wanted. The white saviours came to my orphanage and they told me, “You won’t be a poor unwanted country girl anymore. You’re so lucky that we were meant to adopt you.” I will never know if that is true and I doubt it is, but regardless of why I was taken, they forced this story into my psyche and I couldn’t scream. I would rather have died. Today I am 30 years old caring for my stories caring for my wife, my cats caring for my community. Not my blood, but we all bleed. But I still ache for my birth mom. How do I claim ancestors when I don’t know if they claim me back? I cry thinking about her, and the tears transform the oranges in our kitchen. I hold the oranges like I would hold her right now and I conjure my mother’s face, because I realize it is mine: a Chinese woman aged by the sun, hardship, and love, so much love, because I’ve loved her longest I will search the small towns, Nanfeng, Nanchang, Fuzhou, and I will find her to bring her close so she will feel this is still her baby. If I don’t find my mother, which is most likely, I accept that because I see her in my speckled, wrinkled, tangy oranges. I pick her from the kitchen table everyday and know we are bonded forever. and will meet over and over again. My orange. My mother.</p>
--	---

Figure 53: MY MOTHER/DAUGHTER IS AN ORANGE poem plain text.

FAQs WITH FGAs (FREQUENTLY GIVEN ANSWERS)

(I would rather talk about my art than be your Google Search or Morality Checker)

Q: Do you know your birth family? Will you look for them? Have you done DNA testing?

A: No; maybe; yes. But more importantly, this question is a microaggression, as it implies that adoptee-birth family reunion is a casual individual choice detached from systems of inequity (racism, classicism, sexism, xenophobia) which prop up the transnational adoption industrial complex (TAIC). Less than 1% of the 160,000 Chinese adoptees worldwide are in reunion, since the nature of the TAIC is to permanently separate adoptees from their birth families to meet the white adopter's desire for a "clean break" and soothe their fears of birth mothers. Simply, this is a heavily weighted question that should not be asked with morbid curiosity to an adoptee.

Q: What if I want to adopt because I can't conceive (eg. queer relationship, disability)?

A: The common subtext of this question is checking if a marginalized identity absolves or entitles participation in a violent system (it does not). There are many ways to build a family that do not require purchasing or possessing children through state-sanctioned family policing systems, such as kinship arrangements and polyamorous modalities. The queered family is to disrupt the nuclear family, by redefining familial bonds within the base values of reciprocity, consent, and heterarchy instead of ownership, control, and hierarchy.

Q: Abolish adoption? But what about needy poor children?

A: These *needy* children *needed* their first families to be properly resourced to enable fully consensual, uncoerced, and informed family planning instead of the common birth family circumstances of poverty, crisis, and survival mode. To work towards adoption abolition is to work towards a world where family separation is unnecessary. It is deeply rooted in anti-oppression, anti-poverty, and reproductive justice work, as adoption is a byproduct of failing care systems within a society that heavily privatizes services that should be shared responsibilities (health care, education). Like prison abolition which recognizes the prison industrial complex as inherently inhumane > therefore impossible to reform > therefore in need of radical alternatives, adoption abolition recognizes a similar impossibility. We deal with the present circumstances (eg. better post-adoption support) but simultaneously build alternatives with the most marginalized and weighted perspectives as the guiding star: BIPOC adoptees.

Figure 54: UNADOPT ME adoption FAQ audience handout in plain text



the end.

UNADOPT ME: critical queer adoptee consciousness and alternative family models
by Charlotte Carbone

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