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## Someone Else's Child: A Co-Constructed, Performance Autoethnography of Adoption from Three Perspectives

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### Abstract

Through a framework of reconciling the other, this collaborative autoethnographic performance co-constructs the adoption experience from three perspectives in three different families: a mother struggling with the ethical and emotional implications of the transnational adoption of her daughter; an adult reflecting on her childhood as an adoptee feeling loved, but different; and a woman who met her biological sister at age 28 after her parents revealed a lifelong secret. To develop individual adoption narratives, we applied autoethnographic tools of interactive interviews with family members, reflective writing, and document review (Ellis, 2004) of photos, letters, emails, and calendars. During one school year, we met monthly to discuss relevant literature, share and critique each other's methods and writing, and identify the common themes in our three, diverse experiences. The result of the iteration of the individual and group processes is a script that weaves together our adoption stories, the discoveries of ourselves, and how, after negotiating feelings and identities, we reconciled the other through positive, loving relationships.

### Keywords

autoethnography, transnational adoption, identity, race, ethnicity, belonging, family narrative

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# Someone Else's Child: A Co-Constructed, Performance Autoethnography of Adoption from Three Perspectives

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Through a framework of reconciling the other, this collaborative autoethnographic performance co-constructs the adoption experience from three perspectives in three different families: a mother struggling with the ethical and emotional implications of the transnational adoption of her daughter; an adult reflecting on her childhood as an adoptee feeling loved, but different; and a woman who met her biological sister at age 28 after her parents revealed a lifelong secret. To develop individual adoption narratives, we applied autoethnographic tools of interactive interviews with family members, reflective writing, and document review (Ellis, 2004) of photos, letters, emails, and calendars. During one school year, we met monthly to discuss relevant literature, share and critique each other's methods and writing, and identify the common themes in our three, diverse experiences. The result of the iteration of the individual and group processes is a script that weaves together our adoption stories, the discoveries of ourselves, and how, after negotiating feelings and identities, we reconciled the other through positive, loving relationships.

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## Introduction

“Saying you’re adopted demands a conversation” (Ballard, 2013, p. 234<sup>1</sup>). We would add that adopting a child internationally is also a great conversation starter. So is telling someone you met your older sister for the first time at age 28, after she had searched for her biological parents and found yours. This project began as a conversation among three colleagues with a common interest in global health and intercultural competence. After discovering we shared the adoption experience from three different angles, we decided to engage deeply in this “conversation” together to investigate and narrate our experiences, both individually and collectively, search for common themes, and share our stories and outcomes with others.

Although they make for great conversation, our adoption narratives are not unique. Michelle, born in the late 1960s, grew up as an adopted child in a family where she felt unwavering love. Although she knew she was adopted, she never had a desire to search for her biological parents because, simply put, she already had parents. In fact, people always told her how much she looked like her mom. Now she wonders: “Was the perceived similarity because of physical appearance, or could it have been based on behaviors (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, communication style) that I naturally acquired from my mom and emulated?”

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<sup>1</sup> The words of a Vietnamese adoptee, age 32, who grew up in Australia.

A few years after their biological daughter was born, Christina and her husband decided to adopt a child from Guatemala. This turned out to be more difficult than they anticipated, both logistically and emotionally. Christina spent seven months in Guatemala waiting with their new daughter, Deanna, then age two, to be released with the paperwork necessary to bring her back to the United States. As Deanna has grown into her teens, Christina struggles with feelings of guilt about the adoption and concern for Deanna's identity. She asks: "Why should I get to raise this child and not her birth mother? Why am I in this place of privilege? How does it feel for Deanna to be a Brown kid growing up in a White family? How can we be sure she has what she needs to develop a strong, healthy identity?"

Robin, born in the mid-1970s, grew up with loving parents and a sister who is five years younger. Her family is quite close, so it was a shock when her parents revealed to their two daughters that they had a third sister, Kim, who is seven years Robin's senior. The secret came out after Kim, who had been adopted at birth, searched for and found her biological mother and, as it turns out, father (Robin's parents). At age 28, and suddenly the middle sibling in a trio of look-alikes, Robin couldn't stop thinking: "What was going on with my parents when Mom got pregnant? How did she and Dad feel about giving up the baby? Did they think about her all those years? How did they manage to keep this huge secret?"

Daughter, mother, sister... we all experienced *the other*, from different perspectives, because of adoption. Through autoethnography (e.g., Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2004), we uncovered and composed our diverse stories. By way of regular meetings, collaborative writing review, conversation, and reflection, we co-constructed a performance that illuminates the commonalities and divergences of our adoption experiences.

### **Adoption and Autoethnography**

Autoethnography applies qualitative methods, particularly narrative inquiry, to examine the researcher's own lived experience within its sociocultural and political context (Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2004). In short, "Autoethnography takes self-narrative from the domains of storytelling and memoir into that of the creation of data and it leads to new knowledge and/or new understanding of areas of old knowledge" (Andrew & Le Rossignol, 2017, p. 226). Existing qualitative research on the adoption experience includes various autoethnographic accounts, primarily exploring transnational adoption and racial-ethnic differences between parent- or adoptee-authors and their families.

One such example is the work of Ballard and Ballard (2011), who are the parents of two biological daughters and an adopted son from Vietnam. The first author -the father- also was adopted from Vietnam and grew up in a White, U.S. family. The Ballards' autoethnography took the shape of a series of real and imagined dialogues with their young children through which they collectively explored the special meaning adoption holds for their family. These conversations included an animated narrative of the father's adoption story, a humorous account of a time when the two daughters pretended to be abandoned children selling pumpkins and suggested that their parents adopt them, and an imagined future dialogue with their infant son about his orphanage in Vietnam and the emotional moment when they all first met. Perhaps both the impetus and conclusion to Ballard and Ballard's (2011) inquiry was that, "each family has its own unique story, one that is irreplaceable and cannot be replicated. It begins with a narrative inheritance, those identity themes that have come before and given shape to who we are now" (p. 81). The authors suggested that, especially in an international family, narrative inheritance plays a key role in shaping the identities not only of adopted children, but of their parents as well.

In a similar collaborative fashion, Schwartz and Schwartz (2018) offered a co-constructed, autoethnographic account of transracial adoption through a framework of post-

colonialism and transformative learning. The authors are a White, U.S. adoptive mother and her Black, adult daughter who was born in Haiti and adopted at age nine. In their inquiry, Schwartz and Schwartz (2018) situated international, transracial adoption as a continuation of White privilege and colonialism wherein well-meaning, White European and U.S. parents effectively force children of color to migrate from the Global South based on little more than a glorified “consumerist choice” (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2018, p. 43). Through a two-year process of data collection, dialogue, and grounded-theory analysis, Schwartz and Schwartz ultimately centered on how racial identity learning emerged for both mother and daughter in the transnational, transracial adoption context. For the mother, the process of transformational learning took the form of “critical self-examination” (p. 50) that resulted in recognition of her White privilege, shame from participating in oppressive structures, and a burning desire to “label myself as both a social activist scholar and antiracist ally” (p. 50). As for the daughter, the self-reflection inherent in autoethnography forced her to confront race and her own complex racial identity. She concluded, “I am aware and now I cannot go back to color blindness” (p. 50).

Sidhu (2018) and Wall (2012) also offered post-colonialist, autoethnographic accounts of transnational adoption from their perspectives as adoptive mothers (Sidhu identified as a non-White, Southeast Asian migrant in Australia; Wall is Canadian and adopted a child from Romania). While Wall’s (2012) work focused on her own realization of the colonialism and exploitation inherent in international adoption, Sidhu (2018) took things a step further, positioning autoethnography as a post-colonial method and quoting Gannon (2006): “Autoethnographic writing inverts binaries between individual/social, body/mind, emotion/reason, lived experience/theory” (Gannon, 2006, p. 476), and adding “colonial/post-colonial present” (Sidhu, 2018, p. 2180).

Wall (2012) used autoethnography to critically examine her perspective on international adoption and come to terms with it. She ultimately called for further questioning of dominant discourses surrounding the ethics of international adoption and how these play out in practice. Sidhu (2018) described her experience as “an example of a spatial politics in which the forces of race, ethnicity, skin colour and wealth determine who has the right to cross borders” (p. 2186). She ultimately questioned how said factors drive decisions regarding “suitable parents,” “adoptable children,” and what truly determines “the child’s best interest” in the adoption process.

Although all of the aforementioned studies shared similar frameworks (e.g., post-colonialism) and the general autoethnographic method, how they presented their outcomes varied, from critical reflections on the social-political contexts surrounding international adoption (Sidhu, 2018) to reflections on personal transformation (Schwarz & Schwartz, 2018) to family conversations among parents and their young children (Ballard & Ballard, 2011). These examples illustrate the diversity of autoethnography, as well as its power to situate personal experience within larger structures of society, culture, and political discourse (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Thus, for all of these authors, critical reflection is the method of discovery in the journey to self-actualization. We frame our own adoption stories in much the same manner, using autoethnographic methods and, in our case, co-constructing the results into a performance that tells the tale of adoption from three perspectives in three families: daughter, mother, and sister.

### **Method: Collaborative Autoethnography and Performance**

In our initial conversations about how to approach “the adoption project,” autoethnography quickly surfaced as the ideal methodological vehicle through which to explore and tell our stories. Working both individually and collaboratively through monthly meetings

over the course of an academic year, we discovered and composed our unique adoption narratives while simultaneously weaving them together. The result is a performance that illustrates the autoethnographic process and our stories. Because we worked together to integrate our stories into a single performance, we classify our method *collaborative autoethnography* (Chang et al., 2013).

We needed a way to express our shared and collective autoethnographic process and findings that would allow us to share our individual stories and also to integrate them. Because the project itself had emerged from conversations, and our process also took place through conversations, we determined that the most authentic and dynamic way to communicate this research would be through performance. Thus, we adopted the arts-based methods of ethnodrama or ethnotheatre (Saldaña, 2011; Salvatore, 2018); that is, we used our data - interviews, written reflections, photos, and records of our own conversations- and turned them into a script in which the characters are ourselves and the scenes are the multiple meetings and conversations that carried us through the collaborative autoethnographic process. Composing the script and, ultimately, performing it at *The Qualitative Report Conference* (Danzak, Gunther, & Cole, 2020) enriched and deepened our process of discovery, allowing for common themes to come to the surface that, in turn, became part of the script itself.

## **Data**

Conversations we had during our collaborative meetings helped us discern what types of data would be available to each of us, and how these data could enrich our individual narratives. For example, when Christina was wondering about when exactly she began to feel like Deanna's mother, Michelle suggested that she look through family photos to trigger memories of events that may have influenced this transition. Thus, gathering and examining data was, in part, a collaborative process as well. It should be noted that we took extensive notes -including dialogue- as a record of each of these meetings and thus, the meetings themselves also became data. In addition to the meeting notes, the following data informed our work.

### ***Document Review***

All three of us examined photographs, letters, emails, and calendars. Michelle found the single photograph of her as an infant, taken when she was in foster care and given to the parents that adopted her, as well as the beautiful white dress she wore when she went home with her parents. Christina rediscovered a short poem about adoption scribbled on a piece of paper for her by an adult adoptee she met at a party years ago. Robin looked at photos, emails, and calendars, and spoke with both of her sisters to assemble a timeline of Kim's initial contact with her parents, early connections with her new sister, and their first live reunion.

### ***Interactive Interviews***

A big question for Robin centered on her mother's experience of giving up a child and her parents' years of secrecy following the adoption. To explore these questions, she conducted interactive interviews (Bochner & Ellis, 2016): two with her mom, and one with her dad. The interviews took place during phone conversations Robin regularly had with her parents (especially her mom) on her drive home from work. In this way, the interviews were informal, embedded in quotidian chats about whatever was on her mom's mind (e.g., a new book she was reading, the gameshow, *Jeopardy*, or what she was making for dinner). To record the interviews, Robin connected her phone to the car speakers and audio recorded on her laptop.

The interviews were interactive in that they were truly conversations, evidenced by her parents also asking questions (e.g., “That must have really been a shock to you guys. How did you feel?”). Additionally, during transcription, Robin extensively commented, questioned, and reflected on her parents’ discourse, writing these thoughts and questions directly into the transcripts. This process facilitated follow-up conversations with her parents to clarify details and invite expansions on their story and perceptions. It also helped Robin process her own memories and feelings of the events leading up to her family’s first reunion with Kim. Finally, to engage even more deeply with the transcripts, Robin integrated the three conversations into a dialogic narrative in which both of her parents’ voices tell their story, together.

## Writing

As we gathered and explored data, we examined our adoption experiences deeply through self-reflection and analysis. Individually, we worked through these reflections, in conjunction with our memories and data, to develop what we hoped would be compelling and evocative written narratives (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). As Custer (2014) pointed out, autoethnographic writing is at once creative and transformational; it is a powerful process that requires vulnerability and can have therapeutic impacts on the author/researcher. Constructing our individual autoethnographies, we all faced questions about our past, relationships, and shifting understandings of concepts like family, identity, belonging, race, and ethnicity.

As we developed and shared our writing with each other, our regular meetings came to serve a dual purpose: (1) to compare and contrast our experiences to integrate our stories and uncover and elaborate on common and diverging themes; and (2) to listen and support each other in our journeys of discovery about our adoption experiences and reactions to them.

## Ethics

Methodological texts on autoethnographic research bring to light possible ethical issues that may arise in this type of research. For instance, Andrew and Le Rossignol (2017) discussed the roles and means of acquiring consent of others whose “stories and dilemmas are part of our own stories” (p. 227), considering the question, “Whose story is it anyway?” (p. 227).

Similar issues arise about the author her/him/themself. For example, in a methods paper on her experience conducting an autoethnography of her experience as the mother of an internationally adopted child, Wall (2008) expressed that she felt “persistent anxiety” (p. 41) about her self-representation in the text. She considered issues of agency and authenticity, as well as tensions regarding her development of empathy for her daughter’s birth mother and new perspectives on her own identity as a result of the autoethnography.

Although we did not pursue a formal IRB review, to address ethical issues in the present research, we ensured that the people whose lives were included in our stories understood what we were doing and provided oral consent. This was especially important for Robin, in which case the voices of her parents and sisters formed a large part of the story. Her parents, who had kept the adoption of their daughter a secret for 35 years, had to understand the purpose and methods of the research project and where “their story” could end up. Robin had various conversations about this with her parents and two sisters. Once the script was developed, Robin sent it to her family members to read, ask questions, and provide feedback. Although her mom requested a minor adjustment (which we made and she approved), everyone was supportive of the project and willing to contribute their memories and perspectives on the story.

In contrast to Robin, Christina chose not to discuss this work with her daughter because of Deanna’s current developmental stage and process of identity construction. Christina determined that Deanna would view her mother’s anxiety and feelings of guilt regarding her

adoption as rejection, which would be more harmful than allowing Deanna to give consent. Christina noted that it is unlikely that Deanna or anyone in her social circle will come across this autoethnographic work, ultimately offering some sense of anonymity. Finally, Christina chose carefully what she disclosed about Deanna's life so as not to violate Deanna's own story, which is ultimately hers to tell.

In Michelle's case, her story focuses on her relationship with her parents. Since both parents are deceased, she could not request consent. However, it is Michelle's belief that her parents would have fully supported her autoethnographic inquiry and the resulting story.

## **Result: The Performance<sup>2</sup>**

### **Characters**

- *Christina, adoptive mother and Instructor and Director of the Health Science Program and Director of Global Health Programs*
- *Michelle, adopted child and Assistant Professor and Director of the First Professional Degree Nursing program*
- *Robin, reunited sister and Professor of Communication Sciences & Disorders*

### **Setting**

*Christina's office at a mid-sized university in New England, where the three characters work and meet regularly about the autoethnography project. Characters sit in chairs around Christina's desk. Christina has a laptop; Robin has a notebook. Coordinated with our stories, selected photographs of our families are projected behind us on a screen.*

### **Scene 1: September**

Christina: So, what kind of adoption paper are we going to write? What's the connection between our three different perspectives? What are we going to learn about ourselves through this project? We need to include a framework to teach others – or at least a general theme.

I remember feeling so guilty when we first adopted Deanna, because I just felt like I was raising someone else's child. I don't have that feeling anymore, but... Michelle, did you ever have that feeling, that you were someone else's child?

Michelle: No... but being on the kid-end of what you're describing, I sensed that there was something different about me and my relationship with my parents. I knew my parents were my parents—I knew that they loved me—but something felt different. That said I always felt love: that my mother's love for me was unwavering.

Robin: So, I grew up as the older sister of two: it was always me and Jill... until my late twenties, when we found out we had another sister, Kim, who had been adopted. Kim is 7 years older than me. Suddenly, I turned into the middle sister because we had this new "other" sister and we couldn't wait to get to know her.

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<sup>2</sup> The performance was presented by the authors at *The Qualitative Report Conference*, 2020, in Fort Lauderdale, FL.

Christina: Okay: It sounds like we're all dealing with the theme of being, knowing or feeling "the other." I had "another's child"; Michelle was "the other" in her family growing up; and Robin met "the other" sister later in life.

Robin: How about we represent our stories through autoethnography? Have you guys heard of it? I read a great book by Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I* (2004). Basically, you research your own life—you're both the researcher and subject of your research. You can conduct interactive interviews with family members, explore artifacts like photos, letters, or journals, and reflect on your memories. Then, you write a rich, evocative narrative about it. Maybe we could each write our adoption autoethnographies, explore how they intersect, and present them as a performance!

Michelle: From what I know about autoethnography, it's all about epiphanies. Christina, from what you've shared with us about your experience, your epiphany is that it wasn't the right thing to adopt internationally because you felt like it was colonialism all over again.

Robin: What's my epiphany?

Michelle: It's not something you need to know now; it will come from the process.

### ***Scene 2: October***

Christina: As I started writing, I was thinking, "I'm writing about how, back then, I felt like I was raising someone else's kid... but when exactly did she become my kid?" Working on this project has clarified for me that it wasn't one specific moment per se. It built over time. Because now, she's every bit a piece of me

I remember I was at a dinner party years ago, and we had recently adopted Deanna—she was almost three. We met this man who had been adopted internationally. He told me, "My mother said she walked into a room, and I walked up to her, and she knew immediately I was her child." He wrote down a poem and gave it to me. I've saved it all these years:

*Not flesh of my flesh  
Nor bone of my bone  
But still miraculously my own.  
Never forget for a single minute  
You grew not under my heart  
But in it.*

It wasn't that I didn't see Deanna as my child. But for a long time I felt like, "This is someone else's kid." I always wondered, "What would her birth parents think about how I'm doing this or how I'm doing that?" I held on to the poem all these years because I knew it was going to be meaningful to me. I just pulled it out a couple days ago.

With Sophia, my biological daughter, when her heart is breaking, my heart is breaking. It's always been like that. Now it's the same thing with Deanna: when her heart is breaking, my heart is breaking. I didn't always feel like that, though. I always loved her from the moment I saw her photo... but it wasn't the same. When we first got her, I was a super stressed-out mom. I was trapped in Guatemala, with two kids and no social support. One kid was throwing tantrums and the other, age 7, was like, "What the heck just happened to me?"

Now, I think of Deanna's birth parents and think, "Thank you for giving me this gift, and for wanting a better life for this child." And I find myself feeling guilty, because I'm so happy. "Why should I get to keep this child?" I wonder. "Because of where I was born? The privilege I have? Why am I able to raise her and her birth mom is not?" I want to tell Deanna's birth mom that she's SO great...but it's not my place. That's for Deanna to do when she's older, if she decides to.

And I have fears about that, too! What happens if she reaches out to her birth mom? What if her birth mom sees it as an opportunity to get financial support? Right now, Deanna is having all these worries about why her birth mom abandoned her— why she did what she did. She's having dreams about being left behind by me and Sophia. It makes my heart ache.

Michelle: I never had any of that. Good friends would ask, "Why don't you search for your biological family? Don't you want to know who's out there?" But I felt like I already had my family even though other people thought I was missing something... like there must be some void in my life. And then after I had my own children, it made me cherish being adopted even more, knowing that the hard decision my birth mother made was a sacrifice that led me to into the hands and hearts of my parents. How much luckier could I get that someone had to make a difficult decision that ended up blessing me?

Robin: Interesting to hear you talk about your birth-mom's choice. From what my mother has said, she didn't think she had a choice. In our early conversations, she insisted that she did what she had to do and moved on with her life: she "didn't dwell on it." Still, more recently she has shared that she went through a period of depression, "a feeling of emptiness," for months after Kim's birth. I can only imagine how hard and painful this must have been for her. In the end, her strong belief that a child should grow up with two parents gave her the peace of mind that she had made the right decision.

### ***Scene 3: November***

Christina: So guys, I figured it out! When I knew that Deanna was my child.

Robin: Tell us!

Christina: We were on vacation in the Bahamas. Deanna was five or six and Sophia was nine. Every morning, Deanna would finish breakfast, take a run on the trapeze, and then go to the kids' club. She was in her element. Then, every afternoon, at the end of the day, we'd pick her up. Well one day, we went to get her and she wasn't there. NO one knew where she was, and I felt my heart start to beat hard and fast. I was terrified. Fred got security. I ran up and down the beach asking if anyone had seen my small Guatemalan child. Sophia looked around the resort. After 20 minutes or so, we met back at the pool. I was in full-blown panic by that point. Suddenly, Sophia points and yells, "There she is!" She was on a balcony playing Legos with another child. I was FLOODED with relief, along with the sudden realization that Deanna was mine. It was almost like an awakening. I literally thought, "Screw it: She's MY kid."

### ***Scene 4: December***

Michelle: So, I was thinking I'd try to come up with themes from my writing. So far, the first one is, "The Day You Were Born." Because people always talk about that: "Ahhh, the day you were born."

I know the day I was born... to someone I don't know. When I hear people talk about their days, for me, it's like a blank chapter in my life story that I don't know anything about. I spent the first months in foster care, and I only have one cherished baby picture. All I know is that one baby picture, and that, apparently, I was allergic to rice cereal. But then I found out that wasn't even true, so I literally have no details about my first several months of life. I've wondered so many things: What was I called? Did I have another name? What made me happy? Who saw my first smile? Who nurtured me? Did anyone nurture me? Who tended to my needs? I don't have an original birth certificate—my birth certificate has my parents' names on it—but who was I prior to my adoption? Children are born with a legacy, with parents, grandparents, etc., but I've always felt like I was born with a blank slate. All I have is that baby picture, the dress I came in, and an alleged rice cereal allergy.

I did come home in a beautiful white dress. I still have the dress on a shelf in my closet. Because that dress is where my “official” story began. I say my life was a blank slate, but truthfully, my “memory” of that first chapter is that of being wanted. I have a vision etched in my mind of my mother walking around a room filled with bassinets. And as she walked by mine, she paused and said to herself, “This is my daughter.” The feeling of being chosen—literally being a chosen child—gave me a sense of security and of being wanted. I felt luckier than other children because my parents sought me out: their daughter. That sense of belonging despite being “the other” was as strong then as it is now.

I remember being in the back seat of my mother's car with my brother (who is also adopted), and his friend. My mother and the friend's mother were in the front, and I was being teased. The friend was really annoying me and, I assumed, everyone else, too. So, I turned to him and said, “Yeah, well your mother's stuck with you: She HAD to keep you when you were born. MY mother had a choice and chose ME.” My mother laughed, and in my very kid-like outburst she also realized that I was very aware, and had a strong sense of knowing I was wanted and loved.

### ***Scene 5: January***

Christina: Not to jump in here before Robin shares her “other” perspective, but it kind of aligns with what you were saying about “knowing” you belonged with your parents thanks to how they made you feel. I assume it helped that you look somewhat like them, right? What happens when a child looks nothing like their adoptive parents, though? I worry about what it's like for Deanna, as a brown kid, growing up in a White family? What's her identity? She talks about it a lot.

Right now she's exposed mostly to White culture, but how do we introduce her to other cultural-ethnic experiences so she can decide who she is? Can we minimize different cultural expectations and manage them? Deanna just spent a week at an Alvin Ailey dance camp, so this is pretty fresh. There's a ton of diversity there. She also just announced she's “the whitest Black kid” because she likes Starbucks!

Michelle: Oh my goodness, SO many factors in identity construction. Sure, skin color is one, but so is where you were raised; the decade; your family's finances. So many things. And let's talk about the fact that people look like other people in their family. People always told me I looked like my mother, but what I think they were really seeing was the connection between us. So maybe it's not just similarities in appearance, but also behaviors. That begs the question, what do familial behavioral similarities look like when parents and child have similar behaviors but different skin tones?

Robin: That's so interesting, because when Kim was born, the only thing my parents knew about her adoptive parents was their "nationalities" (or should I say, ethnic origins?), which were the same as my parents' – Italian and Scandinavian. Like back then it was so important that the baby "look like" the parents.

Christina: My mother said to Deanna, "You're just like your mother when she was your age!" And I thought, "That's cool!" Deanna will even make some facial expressions that are just like Sophia's.

Another memory: I remember our first visit to Deanna in Guatemala before we brought her home. We were at a hotel, and there were a bunch of white parents adopting brown babies -this is where the colonialism comes in. I met a man who was adopting his second child. He said, "You just wait: Very soon you're going to forget she's not your biological child."

### ***Scene 6: February***

Robin: My "other" perspective goes back to what you two were talking about before... about resemblance and such. Because when my sister Jill and I met our "new" sister, Kim, for the first time, we were struck right away by how much we all looked alike! When she came to visit us in Florida, strangers would come up to us and say, "You three are such cute sisters!" and we'd say, "We just met!" But it kind of felt like we'd always known each other. We bonded right away.

Michelle: Bonding! Bonding. When does bonding happen? I know women who are pregnant who are bonding with their baby when they are carrying their child. And the other parent can also experience bonding, even without being pregnant. Adoptive parents can too... it's the anticipation. You start the bonding before you even meet the child.

### ***Scene 7: March***

Robin: Well my mom never bonded with Kim, or at least that's what she said. She carried the baby in secret—she never even told her own father—and when she gave birth, alone in the hospital, she never saw the baby. It was 1967, and being pregnant and not married was a huge scandal for my Italian-American, Catholic mom. I never really thought about this, but she told me in one of our interviews that she knew she wouldn't have the financial means to raise a child. She had no college or career goals, and like many women that grew up in the 1950's, she wanted to get married and be a stay-at-home mom.

I looked up some statistics and found out that the late 60s, when Kim was born, was when adoption was at its highest rate ever in the United States, and single motherhood was at its lowest (Johnston, 2017). That's around the same time Michelle was born, too.

Now... our dad was also Kim's dad... so in case anyone's counting, my mom got pregnant two years before they got married. At the time, he was separated and getting divorced from his first wife, and neither of my parents thought it was guaranteed that they would end up together. So they gave the baby up. For my mom, it was the only option; in my interview with my dad, though, he expressed some regrets... like, maybe they should have tried to keep the baby. I just keep wondering what it would have been like to grow up with two sisters, one older and one younger. My life would have been totally different.

Another thing I've thought about is how my parents kept the secret for all those years. When my mom was pregnant, my dad only told one friend, and my mom said only her mom, sister, and brother knew. After everything happened, they never told anyone. Really: NO ONE.

In separate interviews, they both said that if Kim had not contacted them, they never would have told us.

My mom says she only started wondering what had happened to the baby she gave up after Jill and I went to college and my parents moved to Florida. She prayed, asking God to let her know whether the baby had had good parents. It was around that time that Kim called her.

So, the secret came out and holy crap, I was not the oldest in my family but the middle sister. Jill and I spent hours on the phone getting to know Kim, sending pictures back and forth. Jill and I were trying to figure out what we had in common. Kim wanted to know all about our family: grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. And we all wanted to know more about our parents' story. This project has really helped me figure all that stuff out.

### ***Scene 8: April***

Robin: So, what are our themes? Seems like they've expanded!

Christina: Identity.

Michelle: Bonding, and the physical versus behavioral similarities in families.

Robin: Choices -or lack thereof-, and family secrets.

Michelle: Being different, "the other."

Christina: Reconciling "the other" within ourselves and our families.

Michelle: And... love. The presence of love is what reconciled me.

Christina: Yes: I became Deanna's mother because my love for her grew.

Robin: Kim said she had never felt a love before like what she felt when she was reunited with Jill and me. It was like we all fell in love with each other that week. I think that is my epiphany.

### **Discussion: Our Reflection**

Conducting a collaborative autoethnography has certainly been a transformative experience for all of us. We performed our story (using the script above) for an audience of likeminded researchers at *The Qualitative Report* conference in January 2020 (Danzak, Gunther, & Cole, 2020), and it was a very powerful and emotional experience. Based on the feedback we received, this was the case not only for us, but for the audience as well. As researchers, we feel fortunate that we took the opportunity to delve into our diverse adoption experiences through the methodological lens of autoethnography, co-construct our individual narratives, and collaborate to develop a shared narrative script. As friends, we are grateful that we shared the process and supported one another through it.

### **Methodologically Speaking**

Although we had heard or read about autoethnography to varying degrees, actually doing it was new for all of us. However, the process itself provided meaningful opportunities to learn and appreciate this qualitative research method. Immersed in the journey, we trusted one another and allowed ourselves to be vulnerable and discovered parts of ourselves that were

present but we were not fully aware of. The self-discovery led to a greater awareness and clarity to our experience with adoption and about our own families and identity.

In addition, the collaborative autoethnographic approach and resulting performance were innovative ways to explore and present commonalities and differences of an experience that many people share yet may not have reflected upon with intention. As Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang (2010) contended, autoethnography is not “self in a vacuum” (p. 3). Instead, autoethnography should connect the self with others who have had the same experience (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Others with diverse experiences also can benefit from the knowledge that was uncovered through our self-discovery. Similar to the collaborative autoethnographies of Ballard and Ballard (2011) and Schwartz and Schwarz (2018), a collaborative approach and the integration of multiple voices in our resulting performance allowed us to co-construct a richer story with a more variegated perspective than we would have been able to construct using individual self-reflection alone (Hernandez et al., 2017).

### **Trustworthiness**

Due to the personal nature of autoethnography, trustworthiness can be a concern in the data collection and interpretive process. Because we chose a collaborative approach to constructing our stories, we were able to check our data collection and interpretation methods amongst one another, as well as to guide the interactive interview procedures for Robin. Chang (2008) described the iterative process as lending credibility to autoethnography. The present project had many iterations, which we processed through our monthly meetings. Each iteration of our individual stories and the collective script were reviewed and revised by each of us individually, then collectively discussed and -in terms of the script- read and rehearsed numerous times as we prepared to perform it at the conference.

Additionally, the capacity to be vulnerable is a crucial part of autoethnography construction (Chang, 2008). Because the three of us have worked together and known each other for many years, we were able to create the safe space needed to be vulnerable enough to share the deepest, most personal parts of our stories. Our individual reflective writing, data interpretation, and for Robin, interactive interviews and continued conversations about the project with her parents and sisters also helped us deepen our perspectives to uncover memories, feelings, and experiences that shaped our narratives.

### **Emergence of Themes**

From the initial meeting when this project was born, we wanted to find a framework or, at least, a series of themes to unite our experiences. It took months for the framework of “the other” to emerge as we researched, wrote, reflected, and shared our stories in regular meetings. Various themes became evident as we discussed our stories and found we could relate to a feeling or thought despite having diverse individual experiences. These common themes, in addition to “the other” are the ones mentioned at the end of the script: Identity, bonding, physical versus behavioral similarities in families, choices, family secrets and, finally, love. It seems strange to us now that love did not immediately reveal itself as the common thread.

The themes that emerged from our process are similar to those present in other autoethnographies about the adoption experience. For example, Christina’s guilt about perpetuating colonialist practices by adopting her daughter from Guatemala, in tandem with her personal growth in understanding her daughter’s -and her own- racial identity parallel Wall’s (2012) realizations, as well as Schwartz and Schwartz’ (2018) discussion on transracial

identity and transformational learning. In fact, like the Schwartz mother, Christina applies what she learned from Deanna in her work daily as the Director of Global Health Programs, where she educates and prepares students to engage in healthcare experiences in the Global South with self-awareness, cultural humility, and respect. In the same way the Schwartz daughter suggested that she can no longer be color blind, neither can Christina. Instead, she addresses Deanna's distress about being the only Brown member of a White family by asking Deanna how that feels rather than suggesting all skin colors are beautiful.

Similarly, Michelle's memory of "feeling special" as an adoptee reflects Ballard and Ballard's (2011) stories in which their biological children express a desire to be adopted so that they could also "be able to tell a cool story like that!" (p. 73). For Michelle, adoption was viewed as being chosen and wanted, and as a powerful experience of being loved.

For Robin, the process of autoethnographic inquiry highlighted Gannon (2006) and Sidhu's (2018) emphasis on breaking binaries. Robin's initial shock and excitement of learning she had a long-lost sister was coupled with a sense of pain for her mother's loss. However, digging deeper into her mother's experience through interactive interviews led Robin to realize that her mother had accepted that giving up her baby was the only option, and had moved on with life because it was the only thing she *could* do. Indeed, after the adoption, Robin's mother married Kim's father and, with him, raised two daughters in a loving family. Thus, the binary of loss versus fulfillment that Robin initially assumed for her mother was shown to be not the case.

Further, in search of "the real story" of her mother's secret pregnancy and her sister Kim's adoption, Robin sought to ascertain a missing piece of her "narrative inheritance" (Ballard & Ballard, 2011). On the other hand, Michelle's story evidences that the importance of narrative inheritance is not limited to families with international adoptees. Indeed, although her skin color matched that of her parents, Michelle felt that she was missing the legacy of her family heritage, and instead compared her own infancy to a blank slate.

One construct that has been interesting in telling our story has been the realization that many people share, in some way, the experience of adoption. It seemed that whenever we reached out for advice about the script or the methodology or mentioned that we were working on "an autoethnography of adoption," the person we were talking with would respond with, "Oh, I have an internationally-adopted daughter," or, "by the way, I was also adopted." These perspectives of colleagues or acquaintances, while always unique, compelling, and captivating, often possessed the common threads of "the other" and "love," just like our story. If "saying you're adopted demands a conversation" (Ballard, 2013, p. 234), it is our hope that our conversation will continue to connect with others, opening doors to further reflection and deeper understanding of the experience of adoption from many perspectives.

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### Author Note

Robin L. Danzak, Ph.D., is an associate professor of communication sciences and disorders at Emerson College, in Boston, MA. Adoption is a new research topic for Robin, who usually explores multilingual language, literacy, and the relationships among writing, culture, and identity of bilingual adolescents and adults. Through collaborative, qualitative/mixed methods, Robin engages participants in authentic text composition to promote language and literacy skills, self-expression, and participation.

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