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INTRODUCTION

Introductory Preface

Special issue Between Two Worlds presents the experiences of Guatemalan adoptees though their own voices. The organization Next Generation Guatemala and the guest editors Carly Tagen-Dye and Gemma Givens planned and executed every part of the process, from the call to the final version. The finished product includes reflections, conversations, conference presentations, virtual panels, videos, creative works, novel excerpts, and university coursework, thus providing an individual and collective outlook.

Maya America presents this special issue as a stand-alone primary document to further an understanding of the life experiences of Guatemalan adoptees and to encourage the inclusion of irregular adoption as part of the Maya diaspora and as an integral part of the migration of peoples from Central America. Indeed, it is striking to see Maya heritage adoptees, raised in various parts of the world, add to the concept of "Maya America.”

Izabel Lopez Raymundo, born in Nebaj, Guatemala, and adopted to Belgium, created the cover art for this special issue. “On the left, a sleeping baby against a tree, in front of Lake Atitlan, in a garment in the color of Guatemala. On the right, that child, older, on the other side of the tree.”

The journal Maya America features essays and literature about past, contemporary, and emerging experiences and challenges in the Americas. As borders are spanned geographically, socially, and psychologically, the journal opens spaces for thoughtfulness and discussion, and proposes collaboration and change.

To contribute or correspond with the journal, contact us at https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mayaamerica/

Managing Editors for Issue 4/1: Alan LeBaron and Inbal Mazar
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Guest Editors for Issue 4/1: Carly Tagen-Dye and Gemma Givens
Adoption from Guatemala and introducing the Next Generation of Guatemalans

Gemma Givens

ADOPTION FROM GUATEMALA

From the first international adoption on record in 1968 to the last in the early 2000s, an estimated 35-48 thousand children were adopted from Guatemala to at least 20 countries (identified by Next Generation Guatemala). When and how did adoption from Guatemala become an irregular practice? How was it stopped, and what happened to the practice of adoption from Guatemala in the years after it was closed? For an historical and academic discussion of adoption from Guatemala, we recommend the webinar “History of (Irregular) Adoption in Guatemala,” sponsored by Next Generation (YouTube 2022), with expert presentations by Professor Rachel Nolan (Boston University) and Professor Carmen Monico (North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University). From Professor Nolan we learned the timeline of adoption in Guatemala from the 1970s through 2007, including when adoptions began to be facilitated irregularly in the 1980s. Professor Monico described adoption in Guatemala after the moratorium in 2008 and the landscape of Guatemalan adoption today. For the purposes of our discussion, we defined irregular adoption as any adoption that involved changed names of the child, social worker, family members, birthdays, birthplaces; or adoptions that involved coercion, bribery, falsified deaths, kidnapping from birthplace or from the internal armed conflict.

History of (Irregular) Adoption in Guatemala
For the sparse collective history there is on adoption from Guatemala, there is even less on what happened to those nearly 50 thousand children. Where did they go? Who did they become? How do you classify generations of Guatemalan born citizens (who still retain this birthright) forced into the diaspora? Unlike “migrants”, adoptees were not taken from Guatemala by their birth parents, to navigate birth culture in the context of a second environmental culture. Instead, adoptees make up generations of full-blooded citizens of one country who are raised entirely in the culture of another country. This next generation of Guatemalans comes to light as they begin to explore identity and culture, search for biological loved ones, and bring their skills and talents learned from their adopted country to their country of birth.

NEXT GENERATION GUATEMALA

When I started Next Generation Guatemala in 2012, the first messages I received from fellow adoptees echoed similar experiences including, “I’ve never met another adoptee from Guatemala before,” and, “I thought I was the only one.” Ten years later, our community group has connected over 800 adoptees from Guatemala in 20 countries around the world. Within our shared community space, we’ve been able to share the full spectrum of our experiences being transracially adopted with peers who have lived through the same. Most importantly, we have lifted the stigma and shame occasionally internalized and associated with being adopted, and replaced it with pride in, and solutions for, our unique journey and identities.
It takes courage to reconnect with the history, language, culture, and birth families that we’ve spent our entire lives without, especially when the path back to them is either incomplete or unavailable to us.

The following writing and work of this issue is an introduction to that courage, offering a glimpse of two worlds existing within one person, and the journey (struggle) to integrate each. There are as many expressions of this complexity as there are adoptees from Guatemala. Each story is both Guatemalan and the identity of the countries we were adopted into.

Gemma Givens, co-editor
Founder, Next Generation Guatemala
Adopted from Guatemala to California, U.S.A.
An Introduction to Between Two Worlds: Entre Dos Mundos

Carly Tagen-Dye

I met my mother for the first time this past summer. She was in a grainy black and white photograph on my adoption papers. On her face was my same mushroom nose and almond eyes. Her long dark hair fell behind her frame, sharp bangs protecting her forehead. She wore the same brooding look that I recognized as my own natural resting face.

As I held my birth mother’s picture in my hands, which I realized was the closest I’d ever been to touching her, I saw who I came from, finally, after twenty-one years. Two decades of life, and only then did I understand where my origins lay.

I didn’t have access to my adoption papers until I was a young adult. This wasn’t due to any legal reasons, but because I’d never known they’d existed. In my first life, my name was Maria Celeste Cos Castro. I was born in Guatemala City, the capital of my homeland in Central America. My mother is from Patulul, a small municipality in the Suchitepéquez department of Guatemala. She was illiterate, and working as a maid, as well as selling food on the streets at night. She had another daughter from a previous marriage, my older half-sister. My presumed father was a Salvadoran citizen.

I took in all that information, realizing it was the beginning of myself. It was the self that, upon being placed for adoption, lived the first few months of her life in foster care until she was paired up with an American family and taken on a plane to the United States. It was the self that was raised by two mothers in a secular Jewish household in and around Washington, D.C. It was the self that once hated the color of her skin, the arc of her nose, the thick black hair that set her apart from everyone she knew in her small corner of the nation’s capital. It was the self that saw Spanish, her unknown indigenous languages, as garbled foreign tongues. It was the self that learned that coming to America meant losing all sense of who she was supposed to be, that it meant throwing away Maria and becoming Carly.

I’ve always known that I was a child of two countries. Guatemala was on my face every time I looked in the mirror, every time I glanced at family photos and saw one person who outwardly stuck out. My birth country, though, for so many years, was nothing more than a desolate place in my mind; an unknown land that I consistently rejected growing up. It was a country that I didn't claim and felt no connection to, except when I wished I’d been born white and American, and frustration was my only thread connecting me to my homeland. All I knew was the assimilated version of myself, who grew up immensely loved, yet in circles where my culture was never acknowledged, where the people I’d come from were only figments of my imagination.

When I found Next Generation Guatemala on Facebook a few years ago, I felt as if a portal had been opened up, and I was finally being led back home. Up until then, I had never seen so many people who had shared my experience in one place before, even if, for the time being, it was solely an online gathering. There was a community of Guatemalan adoptees who were grappling with many of
the complex feelings brought on by assimilation and familial separation, and who were in different phases of their self-discovery journeys. There was a community of people just like me; people who were all from the same country, who were all trying to find their place.

From 1996 to 2008, Guatemala was one of the main countries supplying babies for international adoption.1 Though adoption from the country has officially ended, all of us who left as children remain. Most of us are now adults. We have been raised and are in search of what home looks like after we have left ours and started our own lives elsewhere. The question, now, is not about preparing new Guatemalan adoptees for life in the aftermath of this rupture; it is about nurturing those of us who have experienced it and are looking to what’s next.

When Gemma Givens, founder of Next Generation Guatemala, reached out to me in the summer of 2021 about partnering with Maya America to create an issue of the publication solely dedicated to Guatemalan adoptee stories, I jumped at the opportunity. Our goal with this issue was to rewrite the narrative of Guatemalan adoption in our own voices, from our own perspectives. As many contributors in this issue allude to, the adoption narrative is often focused on the adoptive parents, or the scholarly research surrounding the topic, and not necessarily the adoptees themselves. The idea of a whole issue dedicated to us felt radical. We are rewriting the narrative of not only what it means to be an adoptee, but what it means to be Guatemalan, American, Canadian, European, and all our other adopted nationalities. This collection of essays, interviews, film, poetry, and research is pulled from our vastly different experiences growing up all over the world, but still holds threads that connect us: a loss of language, a loss of identity, and learning how to embrace the new ones that were birthed, if we want to at all.

One common feeling that we share is loneliness. Many of us have the experience of being the only Guatemalans adopted into our families, and the only Latin people in the communities around us. Also, we know what it feels like to be surrounded by people that look like us, but do not know how to relate to them. We have had to learn what it means to navigate being Latino in the United States, being Guatemalan in Europe, and being Indigenous in our birth country, when we return. We have done this while consistently having our story overlooked, whether that was by people telling us that we were supposed to be grateful for having been adopted, or by never seeing ourselves represented in the Guatemalan or Latino narrative. We done this while still experiencing the great love and appreciation we have for our adoptive families, or, in other cases, navigating that journey without such support.

Seeing all these incredible voices culminate into one issue reminded me how important it is for adoptees, and Guatemalan adoptees, specifically, to have a space to all our own. This issue expresses the urgency of having our stories told, because when they are left out, all the intricacies of our experiences disappear too. All the joy that we have experienced, all the pain, and all the new, complex and beautifully unique selves that have sometimes failed and sometimes grown and thrived in the meantime. While some may still consider us the “lost children of Guatemala,” the ones who were “given up” or “rescued,” we are able to be more than expected. After editing this issue, I can see the many instances in which we have been found. There is home within each other and our aching,
and there is home within our resilience. We are rebuilding a place for ourselves by sharing our stories with the world.

There is still so much I don’t know about myself. I don’t know where my biological family is. I don’t have memories of my homeland, and often feel the loss of all the years spent away from it, wondering who I would’ve been if I had stayed. Yet, I have also gained so much in recent years: through new knowledge, through education, and through the support of my community of fellow Guatemalan adoptees. I have gained strength through our collective feelings and goals. I think back to that young girl who didn’t know what she was; that young girl who tried to turn away from her Mayan roots, from her brown skin and black hair, from the reality of her origins. For as much as there was the narrative of sadness, and political, economic, and familial strife, there was beauty in la tierra de primavera eterna, where her language was spoken, where bright colors and marimba rang true, where she came from.

All of us, in one way or another, are trying not to forget that place, and those children, either.

I am honored to have had the opportunity to edit this special edition of Maya America, and to have worked with this incredible team of writers, artists, and organizers to uplift the voices of our community. This collection of writing about Guatemalan adoption from the perspective of those who’ve lived it is the first of its kind, but, hopefully, far from the last.

Carly Tagen-Dye
Guest Editor, Maya America
Adopted from Guatemala to Washington, D.C.
ABSTRACTS

“Mi batalla interna: ¿Cuál es mi cultura?”

Leah Wall

In “Mi batalla interna: ¿Cuál es mi cultura?,” Leah Wall writes in Spanish about her experience of returning to her birth country of Guatemala after ten years. Wall describes the identity issues she experienced growing up in America, and how different Western culture was from Guatemalan culture, discussing the “internal battle” she has felt about both. Wall concludes that she doesn't fit in in either culture, yet still wants to learn about Guatemala. She highlights that returning to one’s birth country can be both educational and complex, and that the experience doesn't necessarily end one’s journey with their identity.

“New Beginnings: A Psychological Self-Reflection”

Samuel "Will" Levine

Will Levine chronicles his journey as a Guatemalan adoptee and his struggles with mental health by analyzing different periods of his life through a psychological lens. The author discusses how his early childhood in a privileged American family led to issues with identity development, and how events like divorce, and alcohol and drugs, led him to act out as a teenager. As a young adult, the author struggled to find a community, but eventually sought treatment for his substance abuse and decided to continue his higher education. The author expresses the importance of support systems, and concludes that support, along with the analyzation process of his own journey, has helped him feel more at home within his identity.

“Grasping One's Identity as a Guatemalan (Adoptee) in Switzerland”

Antonio Giannico

Antonio Giannico writes about the difficulty of creating an identity as a Guatemalan adoptee in Switzerland. The author examines Switzerland as a haven for immigrants and examines his identity as an immigrant through adoption in relation to his environment. Giannico also details his reckoning with his indigenous roots. The
author showcases the cultural loss that results from adoption, and the importance of sharing stories about the Guatemalan adoptee experience in Europe.

“Race and Transracial Adoption: Why the discussion of race and culture within transracial adopted families is important early on in childhood”

Glenna Gobeil

Glenna Gobeil shares a research paper she wrote at Quinnipiac University. Using academic texts and novels, like *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng, a novel which touches upon transracial adoption, Gobeil critiques the “color-blind” parenting style and reveals how such parenting can affect the transracially adopted child. Gobeil interviews three transracial adoptees, recording how the color-blind parenting style, or lack thereof, had consequences. The author concludes by stressing the importance of discussing race early on in transracial adoptive households, since not doing so negatively affects the adoptee’s perspective of identity and belonging.

“Avocado: Fruit or Vegetable?”

Leah Wall

Leah Wall shares experiences of feeling caught between her Guatemalan birth culture and the American culture she was raised in. Wall tracks her personal story trying to find a community within Latin organizations at her school, and how supportive Latin people, like a Mexican American friend, have helped her find a place. Wall shows how having a supportive environment, as well as the acceptance that she has two identities, can make the complex space created from transracial adoption more manageable.

“Untitled”

Maggie Linzey

Maggie Linzey discusses how both her biological Guatemalan heritage and her adopted Irish heritage, intertwine in an untitled poem from her self-published collection *Identity*. The author’s work discusses how she balances being Guatemalan and identifying with Irish culture and heritage, arguing that transracial adoptees can embrace both parts of themselves.
“The Artist's Family Watches ‘Diego Visits His Birth Family in Guatemala 2020’” and “Extract from a conversation between three Guatemalan adoptees 2020”

José Mario Dellow

In the video piece “The Artist's Family Watches ‘Diego Visits His Birth Family in Guatemala’” (2020), José Mario Dellow shares a YouTube video with his adoptive family where an American adoptee from Guatemala reunites with his birth family. The artist’s family reflects on how this connects to their story. In the video project “Extract from a conversation between three Guatemalan adoptees” (2020) Dellow talks with two other adult Guatemalan adoptees about their shared experience of being adopted to the United Kingdom, and how they have navigated race, privilege, and identity. Dellow argues for a more open and in-depth examination of transracial and international adoption from adoptees themselves and shows how conversation can be both an informative and healing process.

“I, volcano: of earth and fire...”

Sophie Villers

Sophie Villers explores feelings of being emotionally torn between places of belonging. Seeing pictures of tourists on vacation and pictures of historic armed conflicts gave her a dual vision of Guatemala. Villers analyzes a trip back to Guatemala showing how despite her complex and limited knowledge of her birth country, there is still an opportunity to learn and find community.

“Contemplation” and “The Quetzal Bird”

Thomas LaPorte

Thomas LaPorte uses the form of creative nonfiction to talk about his experience as a Guatemalan adoptee. In “Contemplation,” he writes about being put up for adoption by his mother, and the emotional effects that has had on him. He discusses his experience of losing his adoptive parents, and how connecting back with his Guatemalan heritage as a young adult inspired him to start writing a novel about Mayan gods and the Guatemalan Civil war. He looks to his heritage to answer the question of how to turn loss into renewal. In “The Quetzal Bird,” the author uses a short form
to describe the quetzal, the national bird of Guatemala, and how it endures both freedom and longing in relation to Guatemala. LaPorte writes on the wide array of feelings that Guatemalan adoptees feel in relation to their homeland and upbringings, and how writing is a way to work through them and return home.

“Beneath the Surface”

Juan Antonio Elvira Calito

In this excerpt from his novel _La nuit des Nahuatl_, originally published in French, Juan Antonio Elvira Calito utilizes the genre to examine the reality of Guatemala from a young person’s perspective. The excerpt, entitled, “Beneath the Surface,” details the current political situation in Guatemala, and the complexity of viewing one’s birth county with a critical eye. Through the character of Jose, the author writes about the civilians’ critique of the Guatemalan government, their hope for serenity amongst political turmoil, and the experience of trying to love a complicated country.

“Truly Guatemalan:’ The Search for Identity among Adopted Guatemalans”

Gemma Givens

Gemma Givens shares her early journey with identity as a child, and how she searched for a community within her California environment to connect to her indigeneity. The writer details how her struggle with finding a community led her to search for her biological mother, and to spend time in Guatemala, learning Spanish and reconnecting with her culture. Finally, Givens discusses how these experiences led her to found Next Generation Guatemala, a group that serves the Guatemalan adoptee community. Givens’ work stresses the importance of having people share the Guatemalan adoptee experience with other adoptees, and how this is beneficial to wellbeing.

“Reunited: An Interview with Tori Briggs and Garrett Marcks”

Carly Tagen-Dye

Carly Tagen-Dye talks with Garrett Marcks and Tori Briggs, two biological siblings adopted from Chiquimula, Guatemala to different parts of the United States, who found each other through a DNA test and the Next Generation Guatemala Facebook group. Marcks and Briggs discuss the joys of reuniting, and the challenges they faced
about not knowing their birth family prior to doing so. Both interviewees express how important it has been for their sense of self as Guatemalans to be in contact and form a relationship with a biological sibling, and that the positive results of this search could be beneficial to other adoptees.
PART ONE: THEME ONE

The Shortcomings of Transracial Adoption

This section focuses on the shortcomings of transracial adoption, from an analytical and personal point of view. Writers express how transracial adoption led them to consider race, class, privilege, and identity within the context of their adoptive families and birth heritage. We open the issue with a piece by Leah Wall, which shows how transracial adoption often leaves adoptees uncertain about their true culture. Will Levine does a deep dive into his life as a transracial adoptee from Guatemala, and how it affected his career, mental health, and wellbeing into adulthood. Antonio Giannico reflects on being a Guatemalan adoptee in Europe, and how his view of adoption has led him to analyze immigration and European standards on what a migrant should look like.
Mi batalla interna: ¿Cuál es mi cultura?

An original essay by Leah Wall

Tenía dieciséis años cuando volví a casa por primera vez en diez años.

Mi avión aterrizó y el piloto anunció:
—¡Bienvenidos a Guatemala!

Miré por la ventana con nerviosismo. Finalmente estaba en casa.

Yo me estaba quedando en un pueblo al oeste de la capital que se llamaba Antigua con una señora que se llamaba Julia.

El viaje en taxi pasó rápido y no recuerdo mucho sobre él. Todo parecía muy diferente a lo que estaba acostumbrada en los Estados Unidos, sin embargo, el pueblo se sentía familiar, como un hogar extraño. Antigua era un pueblo pequeño, pero tenía mucha cultura, naturaleza e historia. Todas las calles estaban hechas de adoquines. Casas con muchos colores bordeaban las calles. Por eso, las calles parecían como un arco iris.

Cuando el taxi llegó a la casa de Julia, el taxista me ayudó con mis maletas.
—¡Disfruta tu estadía y bienvenida a casa!— dijo el taxista.

La casa grande de Julia estaba en las afueras de la ciudad, cerca del mercado local. Se sentaba en la esquina de la calle y era de un amarillo desteñido que me recordaba a un limón. La puerta era triple de mi estatura y estaba hecha de madera oscura. Yo la golpeé y una mujer la abrió y me recibió con una sonrisa. La Señora Julia tenía más o menos sesenta años. Llevaba pantalones negros y una camisa negra y blanca de rayas, como una cebra. Tenía pelo corto y plateado.


—Hola Señora Julia, mucho gusto.
—Ven dentro con tus maletas y te mostraré dónde está tu cuarto.

Julia me ayudó con mis maletas y hablamos un poquito, aunque hablé con ella con un español chapurreado. Esto no le molestó y ella me animó a hablar más. Julia era muy agradable y me recordaba a mi abuela.

—¿Qué vas a hacer hoy, Leah?
—Quiero explorar el centro de Antigua: la plaza.
—Camina con mucho cuidado, las personas malas pueden reconocer quien no es de Guatemala y van a darte problemas. No lleves mucho dinero ni tu teléfono.

No pensé en esto. Aunque nací aquí, soy extranjera: una “gringa”. Aunque me molestó, traté de no pensar en ello y decidí que no me importaba. Todavía fui a la plaza.

Cuando empezaba a llegar cerca de la plaza, escuché música. No conocía este tipo de música, pero era tan linda. Cuando estaba más cerca de la plaza, vi a las personas que estaban bailando en un tablado en el centro de la plaza. Las personas que vi se parecían a mí. Los bailarines llevaban ropa de colores asombrosos tradicionales de Guatemala. Las mujeres tenían vestidos tejidos con diseños intrincados. También, su pelo largo y negro estaba trenzado con cinta, que más tarde supe que era un estilo tradicional llamado tocoyales. Los hombres llevaban vestimenta muy colorida y parecían como caballeros con sus sombreros blancos.

Me asombré. No sabía que mi cultura era tan linda, en realidad no sabía mucho sobre mi cultura guatemalteca. Cuanto más miré, más me di cuenta de que no sabía mucho de mi cultura, especialmente de mi cultura indígena. Quería llorar, pero no podía. Me quedé durante toda la actuación. Cuando terminaron, comencé a caminar de regreso a la casa.

Cuando salía de la plaza, un vendedor callejero me hizo una pregunta.
—Señorita, ¿quieres visitar un templo de los mayas? —preguntó en inglés— ¡Las guías turísticas pueden hablar inglés!
El vendedor callejero creía que yo era una turística, no una chapina. En ese momento, me di cuenta de que era una extraña en mi país de nacimiento. Decidí que necesitaba hacer algo para este problema. Regresé a la casa de Julia con determinación, no con tristeza.

—Julia— pregunté—¿puede enseñarme sobre Guatemala?

—Sí, por supuesto.

Tuvimos una conversación muy larga e hice muchas preguntas. Aprendí mucho sobre mi cultura. Cuando regresé a Chicago, había aprendido mucho sobre Guatemala.

Fui adoptada de Guatemala cuando tenía seis meses. He vivido en los Estados Unidos toda mi vida. Por eso, no sé mucho sobre mi historia ni mi cultura. Tengo dos culturas opuestas: mi cultura guatemalteca y mi cultura estadounidense. Tengo una batalla interna constante entre mis dos culturas. No encajo en mi cultura guatemalteca, ni en mi cultura estadounidense, pero, estoy tratando de aprender más sobre mi cultura guatemalteca. Continuaré educándome sobre mi país.
Introduction

Before we begin, I want to introduce myself: my legal adopted name is Samuel “Will” David Levine and my birth name is Christian David Coxaj. As a Guatemalan adoptee in the United States, I recognize the importance of putting myself out there and building community. Because of this, I am writing to share what I have gone through and learned as a result. Note that any event or story I share in this reflection is from my perspective and is intended to find meaning from my experience.

Over time, I have been drawn to storytelling and self-reflection, which has driven my desire to meet and work with people. From experience, recognizing the past, and moving forward with new understanding and clarity, can be vital to therapeutic progress. It is also common in cultures to use storytelling to help process historical narratives. Given my educational background in History and Mental Health Training, it makes sense to tell my story in this form.

In this story, I will share my recollections from the major events in my life with self-reflective therapeutic commentary. My hope is to help others that have gone through similar experiences to relate and find meaning and hope from my experiences. The personal narrative will move chronologically through different time periods of my life, which will be broken up into sections. In each section, I will also reflect on core lessons I learned during that time period.

Early Childhood

Adoptive families have the difficult task of helping form the identity of their child and helping them transition into a new life. Being adopted at six months old, I had the experience of not having a working memory of my birth family or the transition from Guatemala to America. Attachment theory focuses on the importance of creating bonds between mother and child and serves as a forecaster for future relationship building. This change in motherhood may have influenced future relationships and a more transient phase later in my life.

My parents’ economic standing allowed me to experience opportunities and use my qualities to build the skills I would need to succeed later in life. I was always inquisitive and had a desire to be unique. This may stem from the confusion about being adopted and a response to being different from the rest of my family.

Being imaginative was important in my growth and development and showed in my different interests. I was happy to create entire worlds and scenes in my head including fantasy worlds, creating games (both physically and imaginative), and real-world scenarios where I was a famous athlete. Living in my own world probably acted as a shield from my family life. At the time my family went through a tumultuous time throughout my first decade of life.
Escapism is a common coping mechanism that allows people to navigate trauma. Curiosity and inventiveness were personality traits for me. Naturally, when feelings of isolation would occur due to adoption or loneliness, I would use escapism to help minimize negative emotions. As a child and adolescent some people would describe me as aloof and a little naive. This all can be explained through my escapist coping mechanism and desire to play the “perfect child” role.

My siblings all had their challenges and were at various stages of their lives. My sister was twenty years older and trying to establish her adult life. My brother was seven years older and was entering adolescence when I was young. In the background my parents’ marriage was growing tense, which would result in divorce in my adolescent years.

Emotional intimacy is often viewed through the lens of physical touch and verbal communication. In school, I learned the importance of non-verbal intimacy. Although my parents were not as emotionally expressive as some, what they supplied were acts of service and action-oriented support. Whenever I was interested in anything or needed extra support. My parents, even post-divorce, would make sure that I had the necessary opportunities to succeed or get what I needed. Many people do not get this, so I feel fortunate. Even more importantly, I learned the importance of acts of service which would come to define my path out of despair.

My adoptive family was financially stable and supportive. Despite this, I still faced issues with identity development and mental health. Early on, I learned to lie to protect my image as a perfect child. This led me to push aside other’s wellbeing to uphold this image. There were instances where I lied and bullied others to maintain this image, but a more troubling habit also occurred. I have never told anyone publicly, but my ultra-patriotism led me to develop racist behaviors that I never understood.

Early on, my focus was to assimilate and integrate into the culture I was being raised in. Midcoastal Maine was not diverse so making connections to my birth culture was difficult. My parents tried to make connections through music, history and giving me opportunities to speak Spanish. At the time, I did not want to explore my birth culture as I was still in the assimilation stage. It was not until I started my recovery journey and began looking to the past that I developed an interest in my Guatemalan culture.

Adaptability and curiosity are often viewed as positive attributes, but it can become a double-edged sword. My desire to fit in led to extreme behaviors which enhanced feelings of insecurity and cultural confusion. Because I was a brown person, I thought it was funny to act out in obscene ways. I would do the heil Hitler march. I called a Black friend the n-word. I would constantly put girls in my class down and act out spontaneously. In the name of adapting, I swung so far the other way that I had become disturbingly cruel. At the time, I did not have the emotional skills to deal with these conflicting emotions.

At the same time, these attributes would later allow me to be successful in my career and personal life once I found the right direction. For me, I had just enough support to make it through and, given opportunities I had because of my adoptive family, I made it through with minimal consequences. My teachers and coaches helped me develop esteem and skills that helped me remain active and interested. Financial support gave me every opportunity to explore what I found interesting. This included going to camps, museums, cultural events, buying books or finding
coaching/mentorship. Now I recognize the importance of this support, and, despite the lack of emotional connections, I was fortunate to have a caring family and community to help me.

Adolescence

My childhood experience set the stage for the challenges in my teenage years. This era was difficult because of identity development and confusion in parenting relationships. It is common for people with trauma to normalize their difficulties to remain functioning. In family theories, it is regular for families to normalize traumatic cycling for the same reason. This is about a desire to move forward and normalize the most dysfunctional patterns because that is all one knows.

It is necessary to provide context around the cycles and commonalities that my other siblings (who were biological to my parents) went through as well. Both my brother and half-sister had tumultuous adolescent years with behavior and substance use difficulties. This can also be traced back throughout our family history. I also recognize that although there were difficulties, my adoptive parents also gave us opportunities to become productive adults. Despite all our various struggles, we all ended up surviving and becoming well-rounded individuals.

It is still difficult to figure out how much of an effect my parents’ divorce had on me at the age of eleven. My parents tried to help me process the event by finding me a counselor. Thinking back on this time, I do not remember my parents fighting. I hear anecdotes from other family members about how frustrated they were with each other, but it is difficult to remember anything. Maybe I was protecting myself, or maybe I was just oblivious, but the divorce surprised me when they told me.

Surprisingly, the biggest immediate effect was frustration due to splitting time with each parent. This arrangement was tough early on because I would spend half a week with my mom and the other half with my dad, who lived significantly further away from my school. My mother also had the habit of moving from place to place, which disrupted my routine so adapting became a norm for me.

Frustration grew toward my dad because of the long commute and his relationship post-divorce. I had always looked up to my dad, and this new version of him caused a strange rift in my mind. On the outside, as always, I acted as if everything was alright. Youngest children can have the tendency to be happy-go-lucky, and to attempt to become peacekeepers.

This period set the stage for my substance use and lack of healthy coping mechanisms as I masked my struggles. On the outside, I was a decent student with many friends, a supportive family, and qualities that made “on paper” success look easy. Inside though, I felt fake and shameful because I really didn’t know myself.

I was hesitant to try alcohol and drugs, but once I realized that I could create an identity by being a “heavy” drinker, I took to it. It went from an occasional partying to an everyday habit within a year. It got bad enough that I sought out heavy drinkers from other schools to avoid a reputation at my school. My choices put me in dangerous situations including drinking and driving all over the state, getting beat up, being lethargic in school, and growing substance dependency. Eventually I would start drinking and using with my friends from my own school, but not until I got kicked out of the other circles.
After identifying adverse childhood experiences towards the end of grad school, it made sense to me how susceptible I was to substance use. Being adopted, a minority, a child of divorce, and someone lacking emotional outlets and going through traumatic events, I was a clear target. During my study of alcoholism and substance use I learned that the field is moving in the direction of looking at substance use from many different lenses. This can include biological, social emotional, ancestral, socio-political, and adverse life experiences.

Indigenous North American people have a history of substance dependency. Biological, historical, and psychological research has revealed that indigenous people are susceptible to substance abuse when introduced. Up to this point, I had not felt much different from my peers, but I also was consistently drinking so I normalized the behavior.

One of the most critical factors in my substance use was the identity confusion that I was feeling about my place in life. Up until this point, I wanted to be the perfect child and be seen as successful in integrating wherever I went. A shift occurred, as often does in teenage years, where I began to rebel, take more risks, and explore. Meanwhile, I wanted to maintain a perfect image while feeling fake and guilty, which caused me to become more silently rebellious. I would tell my parents different stories so I could go out behind their back. There was a growing crisis within me because of my deviancy. The other major component of this identity split was that I was never able to fit into a box and I desperately wanted to fit. I questioned every quality of mine, including sexual orientation, race, family alignment, religion, and friendships. Friend groups became disposable and led to trouble finding true community.

I had difficulty finding community after I left the nest and entered the world post-high school. Making friends was difficult in college, which led to isolation. Being six hours away from home in Western Vermont, excessive drinking became the norm. I recognized how alone I felt and no longer had other heavy drinkers and users to compare myself. A cycle began where the anxiety heightened because I was losing more friends. I would cope by using and pushing more people away.

A temporary solution to my anxiety was to find a spiritual path. In my second year of school, I found a mentor who opened up to me and allowed me to explore a spiritual path. Buddhist philosophy and East Asian spiritual practices aligned with my belief systems at the time. Growing up, I did not have a particular faith that I believed in or that my parents exposed to me. Being able to self-discover allowed me to be open to spiritual principles, which led me to embrace Eastern philosophies. It also led to having at least one or two people in my corner.

It’s important to address how important it is to have supportive people in one’s life. In almost every stage of my life, I had at least one person who I was able to feel comfortable with, and who allowed me to have hope and vision. As a child I had coaches and teachers that were very thoughtful, caring, and consistent mentors. In high school, I had a teacher, Mr. Shepherd, who gave me space to be myself. Even if I did not open up to him about the struggles I was facing, allowing me to feel supported kept me balanced throughout high school. In college, I had my philosophy professor who taught me the spiritual path that kept me steady when life was challenging. It was these little acts that kept me from completely nosediving and destroying my life.
Emerging Adult

Meditation practice, being more regimented with my substance use, and talking with my mentor, Dr. Hagan, were all helpful in keeping me productive. Despite this I still had the identity crisis that lowered my self-esteem and heightened anxiety. In school, I was improving and starting to find some direction. The last step was to be willing to ask for help and be willing to accept it. There was a lot of pride wrapped up in my image and accepting help would be seen as failure. In our country, this sentiment is common. For men especially, this can be harmful to mental and physical health.

Eventually this caught up to me on the night of June 13, 2011, when I found myself hospitalized again with alcohol poisoning. In 2006, I had my first hospitalization due to a night of drinking with a friend of mine. Up to this point, I had been able to keep my drinking somewhat hidden from my family. With this last incident, it was time to admit that I was out of answers. I went to seek treatment.

Many families get used to a status quo, no matter how dysfunctional or harmful behaviors might be. Being able to step out of these cycles and recognize the need to reassess is important for family health. Our family had struggled with emotional recognition and had some denial about the traumas that everyone had gone through. The treatment gave both me and the family a chance to recognize this and move forward in a new direction.

I was given an opportunity to go to a comprehensive treatment center due to my family’s socioeconomic status. Getting world-class treatment is a luxury for which truly I am grateful. Not only did I get to go to a primary treatment center for thirty days, but I also went to another six months of treatment following that in Port Townsend, Washington. There, I was able to connect with other young men trying to get healthy as well. Working in teams has always been a strength of mine and being around others with similar experiences helped set the stage for my sobriety and drive going forward.

Recognition of common peril and the feelings surrounding trauma and mental health challenges is difficult for many individuals. Finding people with relatable stories and group processing is the basis for group counseling and peer support programs. This is the basis for many recovery programs and helpful in supporting new lifestyles. Coupling this with the importance of peer interaction in young adulthood, I made a supportive treatment plan for me to build upon.

After going through treatment and finding a footing in recovery, I made the decision to return to my college in Western Vermont. It was a difficult decision to return to the place where I hit rock bottom but, ultimately, it was beneficial to my life trajectory. There, I made two decisions that helped shape my outlook and motivation.

First, I started connecting with other young people in recovery. Doing this provided me with a community, for the first time, that I could relate to. Through bonding and encouragement amongst peers, I felt part of a common solution.

The second important lesson was to begin to delve deeper into my Guatemalan history and heritage. Up to this point, I had a vague interest in knowing what Guatemala was like. In early recovery, unpacking my life was becoming more natural and I took a big step by researching my birth heritage. Diving headfirst, I decided to investigate women’s roles in the Guatemalan conflict of the latter half of the 20th century. This helped me recognize the importance of non-traditional heroes, as well as the
conflict between Guatemala and America. The combination of learning about the complicated history of my birth country and my adoptive country jump started my career path.

**Relationships and Identity**

Relatedly, my more intimate relationships have been a struggle for me in adult life. Having gone through divorce and abandonment at a youthful age, maintaining relationships and trust has been difficult. My sexual orientation was always more fluid given that I had intense friendships, close connections with people and open mindedness to new experiences. Until recently, I did not realize that being more fluid in the definition of orientation was a choice. Between my studies and the partnerships that I made during the pandemic; I have become more comfortable living somewhere in the middle.

Love and sexuality, over time, have historically been focused on definitions and more rigid categories. In more recent times, society has been more willing to look at alternative forms of relationship and sexuality. Mainstream culture tends to still focus on the more traditional views of monogamy and strict definitions, but as we move into a new era, younger generations have been more willing to take different perspectives on the matter. There will always be push back when it comes to major cultural shifts. Thankfully, I have always looked at this matter on a spectrum and have come to recognize the complex factors defining myself.

Never wanting to fit in a box, I had always tried to be open-minded about where I would find love. While my relationship history was defined by heterosexual relationships, I had deep emotional attractions to all genders. Creating deep relationships with people has been important for me regardless of gender identification. For a long time, developing trusting relationships with women was difficult for me, so I formed special bonds with my male friends. As an adult, I got closer with all my friends, but failed in romantic relationships with women. Instead, I have put that same energy into my friendships and had romantic friendships built on trust.

Although I still believe in more traditional partnerships, my perspective has changed around the future of my relationships. No longer deciding to define my orientation has given me the freedom to be open to all types of relationships. This includes platonic romantic relationships, more traditional relationships, and everything in between. While my physical attraction is hetero-leaning, romantic and emotional attraction is open for me. Giving myself this leeway allows me to be calmer around the future of my romantic and sexual future.

**Initial Career**

After two years in recovery, and the completion of my undergraduate education, it was time to start life on my own. Up until then, I was able to rely on my adaptability and the financial cushion that my parents provided. Once fully on my own, I struggled to keep motivated, and quickly found myself depressed because I was unable to find immediate success in the work world. Meanwhile, I was stuck in Western Vermont without the community that I had with my peers and recovery circles. I had to surrender and move back to my hometown, which was the reset I needed. I took what I learned from early recovery and dove into service. I shared my story at meetings, took meetings into detox
centers and made new connections in the area. This prepared me for my future endeavors but complicated my mental state and shook my self-confidence for years.

Trying to start a life is challenging for most individuals, but for me, it was a slow process. In America, the expectation to find a career, start a family and buy a house was an ideal that was a rite of passage for middle class families. This expectation can be dangerous, especially when it is more difficult to reach for young people. This expectation was something that weighed on me, even though I knew that my journey was different. Many other young people do not have the luxury of having a familial safety net to help meet these expectations. Fortunately, my recovery and intuition allowed me to analyze and recognize that my path was allowed to progress at its own pace.

Because of my interest in working with young people and shaping the education system, it seemed predestined that I would end up in education. Without a specialization or interest in business, I was unsure where to go at first. There were some education jobs that I felt under qualified to apply for, so I settled for part time work in after-school teaching. It got a foot in the door, but it led to underemployment for the first few years of my adult life. In today’s work climate it is difficult to prepare emerging adults for what direction to take and how to navigate complex economic barriers. When immediate success doesn’t happen, it can affect an individual’s self-confidence.

At this point I made the decision to leave my job to pursue a new direction. I found a job as an after-school substitute. Though it was still underemployment, it allowed me to receive a benefits package and full-time employment. Substituting also allowed me to experience different school dynamics and populations in the Seattle area. Through this, I was exposed to the inequities between different schools and areas of the cities. Seeing firsthand how more wealthy schools got extra support, such as extracurricular offerings and community services, while schools in low income and minority-populated areas cycled through teachers and administrators was tough to see. Due to my background, I worked harder for these students, especially because I was a minority that was fortunate to have benefits that many others did not.

There was a sense of guilt and “fakeness” when I compared myself to others who were struggling. The mindset that I was “saved” through my adoption, as well as the fact that I didn’t speak Spanish when working with Latin American students, increased guilt. While this was a motivator, it also made me uncomfortable among other people that looked like me. Not being able to speak Spanish when trying to work with families made me feel even more guilty, especially when trying to meet the needs for these families.

Having self-awareness like this is both a benefit and a struggle when handling inner turmoil. After early recovery, I thought that I would be OK without therapy, since, on paper, I was functional and moving in an upward trajectory. I let these feelings simmer while I moved forward in my life.

In career counseling there have been many theories of how a person decides what journey to take. There are social, biological, psychological, ecological, skill and opportunity factors that influence everyone. Being able to navigate these factors is tricky and shifts with experiences. While many do not find the “perfect” career (if that is possible in the first place), finding the right fit is important for many.

For a few years I found stability and gained the necessary skills to be who I am today. As I grew in my job, I ran into roadblocks that prevented me from feeling fulfilled. Between the identity
crisis, underemployment, guilt, and stagnation in my trajectory, I started looking to move on. This contemplation stage lasted for a couple of years before I started looking at going back to school. This led me to the next major stage in my life.

**Career Shift**

After finding my footing in my nonprofit and education career, I found myself wanting more. Nonprofit management was a legitimate choice since I knew how to work better within teams and bring people together towards a common goal. Alternatively, I found meaning through work with students and wanted to stay in education as well. Being a teacher no longer interested me, as the planning and classroom management skills were not my forte. It was the self-awareness and desire to go deeper with myself, and with students, that led me to enter counseling school.

When making this decision, I still had a lot of doubts about my ability to succeed. It felt like I was taking a chance on this being the right path and I was not sure of the probability of success. As I continued my career, however, I found that my beliefs adjusted as I continued to face challenges in the world. I was interested in addressing the inequities of the education system and the opportunity gap, through my experience and the experience of others. Focusing my admissions essay on this gave me the motivation and desire to be a part of this new opportunity.

After acceptance to graduate school, I had a much-needed moment of relief. When starting this new chapter to become a school counselor, the graduate faculty told us that we would emerge as different people after completion. While I did buy into that statement, I didn’t realize how much that would mean. All those personal feelings of doubt, guilt, identity confusion, separation and duality arose. Navigating the complex emotions of a mental health program was more difficult than academic work.

Seattle University preached to us about the importance of supporting our students with resources and emotional support. I was used to having to learn on my own and adapt to make it through life’s challenges. Being able to support students with resources, guidance, emotional, and educational support was important on all levels.

Doing the internal work in becoming a counselor gave me the clarity around identity that had plagued me throughout my life. As an adoptee, race and relationships were always a point of contention. By diving deeper into my internal processes, I started leaning into intersectional identities that recognized my complex background. By embracing being both Guatemalan and American, I formed a more secure identity. Despite the complex history of United States and Guatemala relations, adoptees can have a special connection to both countries. It is this belief that led me to find Next Generation Guatemala.

In October of 2020, I spoke about my experience of being an adoptee in recovery and began my efforts in finding more with experiences like mine. Starting in my recovery circles and expanding to other adoptee support organizations, I continued my love of finding community. With my story and experiences, I can help build connections for myself and others to create a foundation for more adoptees and organizations working with adoptees.

Creating necessary support is crucial to adolescent development, and much of the work I do is based around creating that for my students to succeed. Support can range from basic needs, social-
emotional help, advocacy, empowerment or simply being able to talk with someone. My struggles in adolescence gave me motivation for my work today and shaped the person I am.

Conclusion

Reviewing the events of my life has made clear the impact that adoption, environment, and circumstances have had on shaping my journey. Being able to process the events of a person’s life is a powerful therapeutic tool and has become a more developed technique in the counseling world. By writing my story, I can recognize different cogs that helped me become who I am today and recognize the reason for my choices. Storytelling is also an important cultural tradition in many diverse backgrounds. Utilizing this tool to help my future clients and myself is important for personal growth.

Understanding my journey and being at peace with the fortunate opportunities I have as an adoptee is vital to my long-term mental health. By leaning into my mixed identity, I have found more comfort in the uncertainty and intersections. Some of my struggles have been about not fitting into a community, and through creating my own communities and being willing to open up about my own struggles, I break free from self-doubt.

However, there is always more work to do. There are times when I doubt myself or feel guilty again, or when I have trouble with family relations. As I look towards the future, though, there is hope. I hope that my story can help others who may be struggling with their adoption journey and look forward to trudging this road with others who are searching like me.
Grasping One's Identity as a Guatemalan (Adoptee) in Switzerland

An original essay by Antonio Giannico

When asked to submit something for this project, I saw an opportunity to share my story, but also to express my opinion on adoption and how it has evolved throughout the various stages of my life. First, I want to give a bit of context to help readers understand my perspective. I was born in Guatemala in 1995 and adopted two years later by an Italian-Swiss family. I arrived in Switzerland at 18 months and I'm still living there now. I grew up speaking French and Italian at home and don't have any siblings in Europe.

Growing up, and throughout my teenage years, being adopted was not a big deal for me. What I mean is that when I introduced myself to people, I mentioned that I was adopted but I would not share details and wouldn't identify as a Guatemalan. Interestingly, I would stress my identity with these exact words: “I am Swiss and Italian.” As I have an Italian name, people would not ask further questions about me and my story.

Here, I need to emphasize that I grew up in a very multicultural city with a huge migration tradition. Therefore, the white Swiss type was, and still is, the minority. I believe now that it’s the reason people would not be surprised by my story, especially because the people around me were mostly friends of my parents and were of an Italian-Swiss tradition. So, I believe that they didn't feel entitled nor comfortable questioning my statements.

This makes me think that somehow, I was conscious that I was different to other little kids with an immigration background, but I didn’t thematize. It was not something I wanted to talk about. Looking back, I have always been struggling with identity. Only a few years ago, I wasn’t ready to open the conversation, or better said, I didn’t know how to begin questioning things, both out of fear of betraying my two countries but also my parents.

It was just before the COVID-19 pandemic that I decided to contact a Belgian association that does research to find birth families in Guatemala. The wish to discover my story in-depth grew on me because I had found out recently that during the civil war in Guatemala some adoptions were made in illegal and irregular manners. I was born at the end of those hostilities, and part of me wanted to be sure that the documents I had were correct. What began as a search for answers to this simple question turned out to be completely life changing. I slowly started to become interested in Guatemala, in its culture and history. I started listening to music in Spanish, following other transnational and transracial adoptees on social media. I am also currently planning a trip there.

Now, as a young adult, I feel more comfortable identifying as Guatemalan, although I prefer to use the Indigenous Guatemalan terminology. I re-discovered that I am, in fact, Indigenous when I took a DNA test. I did it to be sure that the story my parents from Europe told me as a toddler was correct. It was such a relief when I received the results. To some it might seem senseless to know this kind of information, but to me, it’s been part of a process that is still ongoing in my life. In fact,
everything I do right now is part of a healing process to find peace. This is not to say that I’m not happy but doing what I do now brings me a feeling of joy that I never thought I could experience.

Sometimes I wish that I had known about my past earlier. I wish my parents could have helped guide me on my path. I do not mean to say they hide stuff from me or that they didn’t do their best, because I believe they did. It’s just that, in this process, one can feel very lonely at times. I wish I could have had a few Guatemalan adoptees in Switzerland closer to me to share some stories and experiences that only they could properly understand. Unfortunately, this is still not the case now. I met a few Guatemalan non-adoptees in Switzerland, but I could see very fast that the connection I was looking for simply was not there. I guess it has to do with the fact that, geographically-speaking, Guatemala and South America are very far from Switzerland. Writing about that also makes me reflect on the fact that recently, leaving the town I grew up in and moving to another city that is more typically Swiss and white, makes me miss Guatemala even more.

It’s funny how I use the expression “miss,” as I don’t remember anything from my time in Guatemala. I’ve come across some Latinx individuals in the past, and they would address me in Spanish. I remember this encounter with a Mexican woman in a restaurant. She immediately spoke to me in Spanish, and I felt something that I never felt as a child: a mixture of happiness and bitterness. Bitterness, because even though I can speak Spanish now, the accent I have makes me remember that I didn’t grow up in Guatemala. It reminds me of the huge cultural loss I experience daily because of adoption.

I hope this reflection can and will help other adoptees from Europe and Switzerland. To all the adoptees out there struggling with the sentiment of guilt about betraying parents, family, your country and its institutions. I understand you. I still go through these moments every now and then, but I’ve seen and felt how the process to reconnect with my own story and culture of origin changed my life. I can tell you that it is worth it.
PART TWO: THEME TWO

Colorblindness/Color-Awareness

This section focuses on how race and culture, and how colorblindness and awareness, have affected the lives and sense of identity for transracial adoptees. Emphasis is placed on race, and how transracial adoptees view race and heritage in their adopted countries. Glenna Gobeil presents research about the importance of embracing birth culture in transracial adoptive families. Maggie Linzey embraces both her biological and adopted cultures in an untitled poem from her book *Identity*. We have film excerpts from José Mario Dellow, which places the adoptee voice at the center of cinematic narrative and showcases how adoptee culture has been integrated into the lives of his family and friends. Sophie Villers reflects on the racism she faced in childhood, and Thomas LaPorte begins the journey of incorporating Guatemalan culture into his work.
Race and Transracial Adoption: Why the discussion of race and culture within transracial adopted families is important early on in childhood

By Glenna Gobeil

Written for the undergraduate course Sociology of Race & Ethnicity at Quinnipiac University, Spring 2020

Introduction

During the winter break of this year, I read the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng. Though the abstract of the novel focuses on perfectionism within a white-upper class family, another emphasis of the story is within interracial adoption. Through the story, the protagonist helps a young Chinese woman, Bebe, in rural Ohio, regain custody of her infant May Ling. At the time of the infant’s birth, Bebe panics and doesn’t think she has the financial security to care for her child. She decides to send the baby to the local fire department who then gives the baby to a white couple, the McCollough’s. After a matter of months, Bebe realizes that she wants her baby back but the white family fights for the same custody of the child.

The birth mother’s defense attorney argued that the baby should be brought up by her biological mother. In addition, the child would do better growing up with a parent that inherits the same race as her own. When the white family is questioned by the birth mother’s attorney, some of the topics that were brought up in trial relate to the baby’s name change, the way in which the family would raise the Asian-American baby, and how they would immerse their child into her culture. When May Ling is first brought into the McCollough’s house, the couple decides to change her name to Mirabelle. Based on the other character’s observations, throughout the story, the McCollough’s provide May Ling with everything she will need. The couple is financially successful, belonging to the upper-middle class. The defense they use, to gain custody of May Ling, is that they would provide her love and financial stability. Unlike May Ling’s birth mother, Bebe, they have the wealth to provide the baby with private schooling, a home, and a family structure that gives the child a father and a mother. From the eyes of the jurors, the obvious answer was to give the child to the McCollough’s and that is exactly what happened.

The main priority of the trial was to find the best fit parents for May Ling. Even though the couple would be able to provide her with everything she needs in life such as an education and a home, they will lack understanding of her identity and culture. The McCullough’s changed the name of their infant to make it to their liking and didn’t even think about immersing May Ling into her culture until they were asked about it in court.

This story isn’t surprising to me and resonates with my own adoption story. I am also an
adopted child belonging to a white family who was given away specifically because of the financial burden my birth mother was undergoing. Like May Ling, my name was changed later in life, I did not have the time to learn much about where I came from or where my ancestors were from originally.

Though my parents have given me the ability to learn my native language, read about my culture, and allow me to visit my birth country, they never felt obligated to enforce this on me. In the story, the McCollough’s explain that they will eventually allow May Ling to visit China and learn more about her culture but only when she is ready. From the beginning of the novel, it is obvious that the McCollough’s have no means to immerse their child into her culture because it isn’t of their own and because they don’t believe it is necessary. Unlike May Ling, the McCollough’s cannot relate to their child on race and the difficulties this may bring her in the future.

A parent’s priority is to take care of their child. Though the main hope for an adopted child is that they are cared and loved for, immersing children into their culture was not enforced in my adoption nor in the fictional adoption of May Ling. Discussing race and one’s place in a socialized nation wasn’t done in my household and wasn’t going to be done in May Ling’s scenario either. An assumed difficulty based on my own experience is that the parent cannot relate racially or socially to their own child which leads them to dismiss the whole discussion.

By my parents not discussing race and where I came from early on in my life, it became hard for me to identify myself. Though I identify as Hispanic there are times where I question this category because I was not brought up in a Hispanic household or with people who speak the language of my native country. I also lack any understanding of my culture or of some of the experiences Hispanics undergo in this country as of right now. I also consider myself protected by my parents in social situations because of the privilege they hold based on their social and racial status.

The research question I am answering is ‘What are the challenges transracial adopted families face when families do not discuss race with their children?’. The research I want to conduct is on the importance of discussion on race and culture within American transracial adopted families early in childhood. Though I have no preconceived knowledge on how to discuss race early on in childhood, I want to investigate the effects. Also, I want to figure out which parenting styles aim to help their child understand their identity and which do not. The research I will conduct will also include an interview process in which I ask teens in the United States what their parents’ methodology on race discussion was and how this affected them.

Short Literature Review

The United States has had a long history of viewpoints on transracial adoptions. Starting in the Post-World War II Era, primarily white American families adopted orphaned children from Japan (Killian & Khanna, 2019). It wasn’t until the 1960’s and 1970’s when non-white, American-born children were sought placement in white families, that transracial adoption gained public opinions. It was at this time that an anti-transracial adoption movement gained attention, led primarily by African American and Native American leaders who opposed the practice. They believed that white parents “lacked the skills, insights and experience necessary” to parent children who were perceptible to racial marginalization (Gaber & Aldridge, 1994, as cited in Killian & Khanna, 2019). An opposing viewpoint, promoting transracial adoption, came from the Northern American Council on Adoptable Children
that argued that every child has a “right to a loving, ‘forever’ family of his or her own” and that transracial adoption was a better alternative than foster care (Simon & Alstein, 1981). These two points bring up the pros and cons of transracial adoptions. Though children can have more opportunity and a better livelihood from their adoption, the leaders from the anti-transracial adoption movement that existed, during the 1960’s and 1970’s, make a valid point that parents may not have the skills to take care of a child who has the potential to feel secluded because of their race. Parents play a role in their child’s racial socialization, and in transracial adoptions this experience can be difficult to handle.

Though race is considered a social construct, it influences everyday life. According to sociologist Colleen Butler-Sweet, “One’s race is a defining characteristic, and racial identity is a powerful social category that both shapes social interactions and impacts life chances” (2011). Psychologists Alfred W. Boykin and Forrest D. Toms (1985) identified the three socialization processes important for children susceptible to racial marginalization: socialization in mainstream society, socialization into the child’s ethnic culture, and preparing children for social bias (Boykin & Toms as cited in Killian & Khanna, 2019). These processes can be pivotal for the child’s understanding of identity and place in social structure. Though Boykin and Toms find these concepts necessary to a child’s development, not all adopted parents follow this construct. Studies categorize parents into two groups based on the initiatives they take to understand their child’s marginalization which most are commonly referred to as the color-blind and color conscious (Killian & Khanna, 2019). The color-blind parent ignores the “concept of race, minimizes social indifferences, or claims that paying attention to race delegitimizes minority groups” (Killian & Khanna, 2019). The color-conscious would rather recognize race as a factor when understanding the identity of the child and understand that whites hold a place of privilege (Goar et. al, 2017).

Color-blind parents might claim to see no difference between themselves and their child, as a means of asserting their child’s belonging in the family. On the contrary, the color-conscious parent would recognize their child as being a different race than their own and develop a different way of expressing their child’s belonging into the family by still identifying the differences. This parent may take the initiative to make their child understand their racial identity and culture from their birthplace. The research defining color-conscious and color-blind parenting helped me distinguish two types of parenting in adopted families. With the information that was provided to me from my sources, I was able to construct the idea of interviewing young adopted adults on their adoption experience.

Methods

The three interviews that were conducted for research were done within a 24-hour period and communicated via Facetime on Thursday, March 19, 2019, at 12:00-2:30 PM. Prior to March 19th, I reached out to the three interviewees two days before, to make sure they were still willing to take part in the interview. I initially had four interviewees lined up to participate, but one of them could not join due to a family emergency. I met each of these interviewees from a private school we all once attended within the last twelve years. The first two of the interviewees identify as female and are 18 years old. The last interviewee identifies as male and is 19 years old.

The main objective for the interviews was to hear how adoptees from color-conscious and color-blind households deal with social distinction, racial discussion, and identity. Before asking the
interviewees the questions I had for them, I explained what the terms color-blind and color-conscious mean using the research I found. I then asked each participant the same 7 questions. I made sure to not ask them any follow up questions because I wanted to make sure each participant answered the same questions.

Interviewees one, two and three gave yes and no answers to some of the questions I asked while they extended their responses to some of the other questions. To give a more in-depth analysis of what they were saying I either paraphrased or sourced the participant within the text. I wanted to hear the adoptees' experience from multiple vantage points and chose these three candidates because they differ in a multitude of ways.

For example, interviewee three was critical to this process because he supplied a male advantage point for interracial adoptees while interviewees one and two gave the female points of view. I chose young adults for the interviews.

**Research & Interviews**

Research on transracial adoption indicates the challenges the practice has on the adoptee. Some studies report that transracial adoptees “score lower on racial identity measures, struggle with self-esteem, and are less well-adjusted than children into same-race families” (Hamilton et. al, 2015). Other studies suggest that despite these challenges, transracial adoptees grow up well-adjusted and comfortable with their racial and ethnic identities; and they are as successful in their families as children placed in same race families (Hamilton et. al, 2015). Based on the observations from the earlier studies, it is not transracial adoption that leaves children at a loss of identity but rather the experience they undergo that determines their well-being. Therefore, their chance of growing up in a color-blind verses a color-conscious household determines their sense of belonging and comfort with themselves. To investigate further on how color-conscious and color-blind parenting works within adoptive American families, I interviewed three different young adults who belong in transracial households and asked them how their parent’s parenting style affected their sense of identity.

Prior to asking them questions, I explained the meaning of color-conscious and color-blind parenting. I also asked them to tell me their age, when they were adopted, and from which country they were adopted. I continued by asking each of them the following questions:

1. Would you identify your upbringing as color-blind or color-conscious?

2. What is the race of your parents?

3. When was the first time you and your parents had the discussion of race?

4. Do you consider yourself to have good self-esteem?

5. If you answered no to the previous question, would this have to do with your race?
6. Was there a time where you and your parents could not understand a social situation that you were in?

7. Do you feel comfortable identifying the race you appear to be in social or educational situations?

The first interviewee is an Asian American from Phoenix, Arizona, and was adopted at 14 months from China. She identified her upbringing as color conscious. The interviewee's father is Asian, and her mother is white. The first time her mother discussed race with her was when she was in pre-school and tried to explain to her why the other classmates thought it was unusual that she was a different race than her mother. The interviewee does consider herself to have good self-esteem because she feels “supported and uplifted by her family and friends” (Participant 1, personal communication, March 19, 2019). The interviewee doesn’t recall a specific time in which her parents could not understand a racial situation that involved her. She says, “I think the fact that my father, who is from Malaysia, went through a similar experience of myself, made it easier for him and my mom to understand my difficulties.” In response to the last question, the interviewee feels comfortable identifying as Asian American in social settings.

The second interviewee is from Wayne, Pennsylvania, and was adopted from Guatemala at six months old. She labels her upbringing as color-blind and says that her father and mother are white. When asked the third question, she responded saying, “My parents and I never really talked about race, but I do remember when I was in lower school, I lied to my friends and told them that I keep in touch with my birth mother in Guatemala. A parent eventually told my mom, and she [my mom] asked me, with tears in her eyes, if I was unhappy and if it bothered me that she didn’t appear the same as me. At that point, I felt bad about the entire situation, but I don’t remember what ever happened after that [discussion]” (Participant 2, personal communication, March 19, 2019).

The interviewee identifies as having good self-esteem, but said it took her some time because she suffers with bi-polar disorder. When asked the sixth question, she said, “I think the hardest struggle for my parents and I, as of right now, is understanding politics. My father’s side of the family is very conservative, and I don’t think he quite understands how it makes me feel when I hear some of the viewpoints the people he supports say ” (Participant 2, personal communication, March 19, 2019). Regarding the last question, the interviewee says she is comfortable identifying as Hispanic or Latina.

The third interviewee is from Broomall, Pennsylvania, and he was adopted from China at 18 months. The third interviewee was raised in a single-parent household by a white mother. He identified his mother’s parenting style as color-blind. Interviewee three says that the first time his mother talked about the discussion of race was when he asked where he came from. His mother explained to interviewee three that he was adopted from China and brought to the United States.

In response to having good self-esteem, interviewee three responded saying “Self-esteem is something I never had. I almost feel like I never did enough to live out my mom’s expectations. High school was difficult for me because I was going through a lot of different things...an identity crisis, a tough course load, and overall, just a lot of pressure to get into a good college” (Participant 3, personal communication, March 19, 2019). When asked about how race played a role in low self-esteem he
said, “Well, my mom worked a lot when I was a kid and for most of my childhood, I just wanted attention. When I was four or five years old, I remember telling my mom that I wanted to live somewhere else. I think it was at this moment that she felt some sort of pain and decided she needed to do more” (Participant 3, personal communication, March 19, 2019). He says that a time in which his mom did not understand a racial situation was when he was trying to explain part of his loss of identity to his mom.

He wanted to know what region of China he was born in and had the curiosity of visiting China by himself. Though his mother did not oppose any of his wishes, she couldn’t understand why he wanted to know about a culture he was not brought up in. The third interviewee feels comfortable identifying as Asian.

Out of the three interviewees, one interviewee identified their upbringing as color conscious while the rest identified their upbringing as color-blind. The first interviewee identified as having good self-esteem while the others either had poor self-esteem or struggled with it earlier in their life. Each recognized the differences in their race from their parents early on in life. The first interviewee discussed her race with her white mother in pre-school while the second and third interviewee were confronted by the discussion during elementary school.

Unlike the second and third interviewee’s, the first interviewee has a parent that belongs in the same race category as herself. In her interview, she says that this did have some effect on her mother’s understanding of her racial experiences because her father could explain it to her white mother as well. For the two other interviewees that have white parents, they said that their first discussion of race began in argumentative situations with their parents. For example, the second interviewee said that the first time her and her mother discussed their interracial adoption was when she lied about knowing her birth mother. The third adoptee had a similar conversation with his mother after saying that he would rather be back in his home country. Because both children were adopted within months after their birth, they would not have known what their life would have been like back then. However, they both use this as reasoning for explaining a conflict they faced in youth.

Despite the differences of growing up in a color-blind or color-conscious household, all three of the interviewees identified by a particular race. Even if they questioned their identity and self-esteem during their youth, they all were certain that they belonged to a specific race category.

According to psychologists Frances Aboud and Laura E. Berk, children understand concepts of the theories of race from an early age. Between the ages of 15 and 18 months, infants begin to differentiate images of themselves from others, indicating a beginning physical self-other distinction (Berk, 1991, as cited in Hollingsworth, 1997). By the age of 3 years old, a “categorical self” begins to develop, in which children make concrete descriptions of salient dimensions on which people differ (Hollingsworth, 1997). Spencer believes that by the age children reach the stage of ‘categorical self,’ race dissonance may occur. It is at this time children may express preferences for and assign desirable qualities to items such as dolls or other material objects that exhibit an object’s race without showing any negative self-concept or low self-esteem (Berk, 1991, as cited in Hollingsworth, 1997). By eight to eleven years old, children undergo the period of the “psychological self” in which they can understand judgements of themselves from a social scale (Berk, 1991, as cited in Hollingsworth, 1997).

A child’s understanding of their racial identity formulates as they get older. As Berk and
Spencer explains, children at the age of three can differentiate people based on appearances and show a preference towards a desirable quality of a person or object without showing low self-esteem. However, by the time children reach the age of eight, they are already able to understand racial judgements of themselves and of others. According to Hollingsworth, “the extent to which identity imbalance occurs seems to depend on whether their socialization allows them to develop accurate ethnic identification and ethnic identity” (1997). As adopted children age, the loss of identity can be apparent in households where color-blind parenting is practiced but can be understood in households where color-conscious parenting is practiced.

If children can find desirable qualities of a person or object by racial appearances by the time, they are three, adoptive parents should be teaching their children that their preferences extend to their child’s own race. This could later help the child’s self-esteem issues as they age. By the time the child is eight years old and undergoes the stage of the “psychological self,” they are then able to identify who they are and realize their differences amongst their community.

**Conclusion**

When transracial adoption was first introduced in the US, commonly held concerns with the adoption was that white parents did not have the capabilities to raise their child with the awareness of their race. Unfortunately, that concern is still a problem for transracial families today. Based on the interviews I conducted, only one interviewee was definite that they grew up in a color-conscious household while the other two interviewees believed their upbringing was closely defined as color-blind. Interviewees Two and Three said that the reason they define their household as color-blind is because they never had a serious conversation about race early on in childhood, their parents ignored racial differences amongst their child, and they felt as if their parents made unconscious decisions about an acknowledgement to their race. As a result of these problems, interviewees Two and Three had less self-esteem and mental health than Interviewee One. Though there is no handbook given out to parents who are undergoing a transracial adoption, parents need to realize that the discussion of race is important and necessary in the child’s upbringing because it helps children understand where they fit in a racialized world. Therefore, color-conscious parenting is the best way to deal with race and begin a discussion about it to acknowledge the racial differences with the child and handle conflicts that are a result of racial confusion.
References


Avocado: Fruit or Vegetable?

An original essay by Leah Wall

I am an avocado. No, I am not green, nor do I taste good with chips. I am an avocado in the way in which I belong in the world. Avocados are an awkward food: they are technically fruits, but no one considers them to be fruits as people are more likely to view them as vegetables. I am an avocado. Although I outwardly look Latina, I sometimes feel as though I am not “Latina” enough to fit in this category. My experience being a transracial adoptee has put me between two very different worlds: I am too Latina to be considered white, but too white (in a cultural sense) to feel at home in the Latinx community. I live in a limbo between two very distinct groups, which allows me to relate to different people, but also separates me further from the world. My difference of being adopted has isolated me from my white family and other Latinos, yet it has allowed me to relate to people I never thought I would, such as people who also feel out of place and in between different groups.

Sometimes I feel like a stranger in my own family, something I would never admit to my parents in fear of disappointing them. I cannot remember when this feeling started but it has been there for as long as I remember. I love my family, with all my heart, but sometimes I think they forget I am not white. For context, my mother’s side of the family live in Alabama and are Republicans. There is one moment that will always stick out to me. It was just after the 2016 election and Trump had promised to build a wall to prevent Mexican and Central American immigrants from coming into America, referring to them as rapists and thugs. Most of my mother’s family voted for Trump, and I still try not to think about it. Once, my father and I were visiting Alabama to attend a football game, and after the game my whole family and I were talking about what a good win it was for our team. My cousin commented “Yeah the second win of the week!” referring to Trump winning the election. I was shocked. I knew my family in Alabama were Republicans, but I didn’t think they were going to vote for Trump. My father and I looked at each other surprised but we didn’t say anything. A little while later we were all talking about where to get dinner and that same cousin suggested a “Mexican” restaurant called Taco Casa (it does not serve traditional foods and was founded by an American). My jaw dropped. I wondered how someone who voted for Trump, a man who spoke about Mexicans in such a racist way, could say he loved the food of those he voted against. I spoke up and said that if we were going to eat Mexican food, I would rather support a business run by those who were Mexican. My aunt looked at me in shock and asked me why I was being so picky. Since that day I have not been able to look at my family who voted for Trump the same way. I feel isolated every time we go to Alabama for Christmas as I wonder how they could support a man that goes against my skin color, my sexuality, and my whole being. I do love them dearly, but I know I will never feel as though I am an actual part of the family because, although I was raised in a white household, I will never have the privilege of being white nor of being able to deeply relate to my white family. Although I have been around my white family my whole life, there is a difference in how much of “me” I can be. I do not
feel comfortable speaking to my white family about microaggressions, racial issues, or realities I experience as an interracial adoptee. I cannot be my full self around my family because of this, not in fear that they would reject me, but in fear of how different our experiences are and how they would not understand the struggle of being Latina in today’s world.

In 2016 I was accepted at a magnet high school in Chicago and decided to attend. I was delighted to hear that it was majority-minority and that Hispanics/Latinos made up 40% of the population. I thought this would allow me to fit in, not stand out. I was wrong. At that time, I knew nothing of my culture and little to no Spanish. In October during my first year of high school I attended the homecoming dance with a few friends. The songs that first played were basic line dances that everyone knew from middle school, and I had fun dancing these in the crowded gym. However, as the night continued, Latin music started to play. Everyone around me seemed to know how to dance to these songs and what the lyrics were. They were screaming the lyrics and moving their feet to the pulsing beat, as if they had been doing this all their life. I remember standing there self-consciously, feeling like a fish out of water not knowing what to do. The awkwardness I felt seemed to run throughout my body and with every step I fumbled and every rhythm I missed, I could feel the divide between me and the other Latinos widening. I was embarrassed, even ashamed, though my situation of being a transracial adoptee explained perfectly well why I did not know these dances. This feeling of isolation continued throughout my high school life. Most of my friends were Latino, and when they spoke to each other in Spanish slang I could not understand what they were saying. When they referenced childhood shows or telenovelas they all knew, I had nothing to say and pretended I understood. Sometimes when I had enough confidence to speak Spanish around other Latinos in my school, I was told I “sounded white.” Eventually, I found a group of people who accepted me, did not judge me, and were excited to teach me Spanish. While today I feel more confident identifying as Latina, it is still sometimes hard to relate to others within that community.

However, people who drift between categories are more common than I thought. I met my best friend in my sophomore year of high school. She is Mexican American and identifies strongly with her Mexican culture. I learned most of my Spanish slang from her and she helped me feel comfortable in my identity, because she was so sure of hers. Or so I thought. It was the summer before our junior year, and she had just come back from Mexico. I was staying over at her house for a sleepover and her mother had just cooked us dinner. Her mother called us for dinner, and we ate a delicious pork stew called pozole. I began to ask her about her trip to Mexico. She told me amazing stories of visiting her mother’s hometown and meeting many relatives. However, people treated her as a foreigner. For instance, her cousins made fun of her accent, and some people called her “the American”. She felt a little out of place. I realized in that moment that my best friend also floats between various identities: her Mexican identity, her American identity, and her Mexican American identity. Since she was so confident in how she related to these different groups, I had never considered the possibility that she too sometimes felt as though she did not fit into a category. I finally understood that she dealt with issues concerning identity too. She had also finally grasped what I meant when I told her how I constantly questioned how I fit within the Latinx community. These realizations brought us even closer together.
During this past year at Tufts, I had to continue addressing my issues concerning identity as I tried to find my place in the Latinx community on campus. I am glad to have found people I can talk to about my complex experiences. During Thanksgiving break I met someone who is now one of my closest friends. One winter night we were having a deep conversation about how we feel we fit into different communities. I explained how I did not feel “Latina” enough to fit in with the Latinx community at Tufts and how I was nervous to join ALAS (the Association for Latin American Students) Zooms in fear of being rejected because I was raised by white parents and did not speak Spanish very well. When I said this, she looked at me surprised and relieved and said “I completely understand what you are saying. That’s why I haven’t joined the Zooms yet.” I was baffled. She went on to explain how her experience being Mexican American is different from what she believes most go through. My friend identifies ethnically as Latina/Hispanic and racially as white. She believes she does not fit in with the Latinx community or the white community, and that she is stuck between them, never fully accepted. She also explained that her parents came from an urban middle-class background in Mexico, a background she believes to be very different from most Latinx immigrants. In her words, her parents were viewed as strange in Mexico, and even stranger in the United States. I remember her saying “I do not know the dances, the songs or the slang that everyone else knows, as my parents did not raise me in the traditional Mexican household.” In that moment I saw myself in her. I was once the girl who did not know much about Hispanic culture and although it took me a long time to learn, I sometimes still feel as though I am putting on a show. She is not adopted from Guatemala, and I am not white, yet we have both moved between white and Latinx identities and spaces throughout our whole lives. I remember telling her that I thought she was comfortable in her Mexican identity, as she spoke Spanish perfectly and was raised in a Hispanic household. At the same time, she thought I felt the same way in my Latina identity as I now know some dances and slang. We had both finally found someone who understood what it was like to have a confusing background: to be an avocado. It was almost funny how we both believed the other was confident in our Latinx identity, although we were both insecure. She and I have very dissimilar backgrounds and experiences in the world, yet we were able to find comfort in each other. We are caught between different identities. We are both avocados.

Although my background as an interracial adoptee has made it hard for me to connect to my white family and other Latinos, it has allowed me to connect with other people who feel different: other fruits who are viewed as vegetables. Until recently I assumed that transracial adoptees were the only individuals who felt stuck between two vastly different worlds. Now I realize many people experience these problems. I may stick out in white spaces and in Latinx spaces. I may still struggle with my identity. However, my complex background has allowed me to relate to other in-between individuals who I never thought would understand me. It seems there is a category of people who don’t fit into categories.
My heart belongs to two places,
For I was raised on meat and potatoes,
Bagpipes at funerals, and Celtic anthems,
But my skin reminds me I come from elsewhere.
Where the language is magic,
The land endless.
Both have my heart, my longing,
And now I know I can have both and remain
True to who I am.
The Artist's Family Watches “Diego Visits His Birth Family in Guatemala 2020”

An original video by José Mario Dellow

I showed my family a YouTube video about Diego, a boy who goes to find his birth family in Guatemala and recorded their reactions.

Channel 4’s Gogglebox is one of my favorite artworks of all time. I wanted to see if I could do what that program does. I also wanted to have a chat with my family about adoption, but it can be quite hard to bring up. I wanted to hear their thoughts and record them.

I am still unsure if Diego’s family did the right thing to take him to Guatemala. I wonder, perhaps the difference between the westerners and the Maya family is so massive that, perhaps, it’s unfair on everyone.

To watch the video, please visit Next Generation Guatemala’s YouTube channel.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_E0zXeaYGaw
Extract from a conversation between three Guatemalan adoptees

2020

An original video by José Mario Dellow

Two other Guatemalan adoptees and I, all in our mid-twenties, chatted about how it feels to be adopted. A bit of a spoiler: the photographs in the video are taken from the album my dad made me when I was little. They are all photos of my biological and adoptive family (lots of adoptive parents do this for their kids— I call it my “archive”).

The interviews were an excuse for some group therapy. I took the parts I found most interesting and put them into a video because I think the combination of the voice recording and pictures is quite powerful.

To watch the video, please visit Next Generation Guatemala’s YouTube channel.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIjriCkqT2Q
I, volcano: of earth and fire...

An original essay by Sophie Villers
Translated from French by Amber Sweat

From as young as I can remember, whenever I met a new person, I always started by saying: "Hello, My name is Sophie and I am adopted ..."

As though my adoption completely defined me. But above all, as if I had to justify my presence here..


I knew racism very early. Too early.

In primary school, I often came home in tears because children (and later, adults) had made fun of me. The insults, they showed around 10 years old. I often cursed being so different. Not belonging to the physical criteria of social acceptance.

But I had a powerful ally :-) My mama was always by my side... Teaching me to defend myself with humor... Sarcasm... And above all, never to give in to those who wanted to hurt me. "Don't give them that pleasure, Sophie".

This period built my character. My pride. But above all a solid shell, even until today, very difficult to break through.

When I was 13-14 years old, by pure provocation, I decided to "play" with this appearance which disturbed me so much... If I really had to disturb, it might as well be for good reason, no? ;-) I
accentuated my belonging to a foreign culture... Piercings, bindis, henna tattoos, dreads... Everything... Everything, except what was really part of my culture of origin... Basically, it’s clear that I rejected my country of heart AND my country of birth… But I think above all that I was lost between two cultures... Two stories.. Two mothers... Two identities.. TWO Sophies.

Mama always wanted to give me all the information she could gather about my country of birth. I was thus showered with television documentaries, books, articles, meetings... As if for her, it was a necessity that I know where I came from; that I fully appropriated the place where I was born..

Now that I’m an adult… I understand her approach and I thank her.

But I admit that, at the time, I quickly reached oversaturation. Seeing idyllic images worthy of the most beautiful tourist documentaries, and then seeing images of the armed conflict... Everything was getting confused in my head... It was too hard. How could such a duality exist?

In fact, this duality also lived in me.. In my head, in my heart, in my way of being and of thinking... This question: “Who am I?” always tortured me... I felt so different and misunderstood... And terribly alone.

I thought that trying to understand where I came from, why I had been put up for adoption, trying to find the woman who gave birth to me would allow me to understand... To understand myself… When I think about it... I very quickly asked myself questions about my origins.. Who I could look like.. This need to identify with someone..

I was 5 years old when I asked my first questions... 8 years old when my mail first flew to one of the addresses given in my adoption file... 13 years old when one of my numerous envelopes came back... 14 years old when I threw everything away…

My heart could no longer hope to be disappointed. Again and again…
The “Who am I?” then turned into "Who could I be?” …

For many years, I lost myself trying to match an ideal that was and will never be mine. The fear of failure and of being incompetent in the eyes of people made me become a demanding person with others but especially with myself... And when I was not up to all these expectations... I punished myself by hurting myself physically..

I found myself faced with the loss of loved ones.. And this strange feeling of guilt for still being myself in this world.. This world that seemed so hostile and foreign to me.. I dove headfirst into everything that allowed me to destroy myself... To forget this pain that lived in me permanently..

My adolescence is a dark and extremely destructive period. And unfortunately, not only for myself. I went far in my self-destruction mechanisms…

If certain periods of life have been hard or, at the time, seemed insurmountable... I don't regret it, and I only want to remember the positive and the constructive. I now know where I don't want to go anymore. That I'm the only one who can help myself and be able to define and become who I had decided to be…

But before starting this work, I had to, above all, make peace with my story… My countries...

I very quickly understood that to appease myself, I had to go back to where it all had started to reconnect with my roots... But each time my mother offered me the trip... I refused. Every time she suggested that I take Spanish lessons, I refused or rather, when I accepted, I gave up very quickly… It was never the right time. And often, I wondered if only one day I would be ready to go back there…

I was 24 when I finally returned to Guatemala...
This return to my land was lifesaving.

All those years when I thought I was crazy.. Where I felt out of place... Where some people made me feel different and deliberately excluded me because of my skin color and where I came from... Everything, absolutely everything made sense when I started walking down these streets facing the volcano... It was THIS volcano that made me realize that I was in my place... This boiling in me.. This passion, this anger, this rebellion, this everything!

And when my Spanish teacher and friend asked me after a week: “But are you sure you were raised in Europe? You look like a Latina... You're Guatemalan!”, I knew... Her sentence pierced my heart. Everything made sense and everything was in its place.

The beginning of this realization was extremely violent.. Because, again, I got lost.. The show of questions started again.. “Who am I?”, “How am I going to find myself after this trip?”, “What keeps me on this earth?”, “How to manage reconciling my 2 identities without hurting anyone..?”, ... And then... My miracle happened…

My son.

The arrival of my first child was my greatest blessing.

This beginning of pregnancy, experienced in my native land, made me realize and feel all the emotions that my mother had to go through when deciding to put me up for adoption after carrying me for those 9 months..

I realized that once again my fears were threatening to guide me.. The fear of repeating what my mother had done... That I would not feel capable of raising my son... That I would abandon him ..

But in fact, it was quite the opposite.
As soon as I knew that this little being was growing inside me, I felt a wave of love surge through me. I realized that all this love... I had restrained it until then... Unconditional love does exist. And the anger against my mother that I had never admitted to myself disappeared. Suddenly, it's like a vicious cycle stops. I finally allowed myself to dream of something else... And above all I allowed myself to accept that I could be happy... Without being afraid that everything would end suddenly.

The pregnancy was hard to live through... Just like the following ones...

But the arrival of my children was a real blessing... I, who did not recognize myself in person, had in front of me little beings who looked like me, each in their own way...

I've said it before but I'll say it again here...

Their existence allowed me to realize... That I too existed.

I then put aside my research... My desire to know the truth...

To find someone.

I had them.

But...

Even when you find some peace in your life, the questions that were present before resurface at one time or another. In a form that you had not considered. For me... They came back brutally... Violent and destructive.

I was not prepared to have to bring out my adoption file one day... But with all the information received, I couldn't stay with all these questions anymore... Because here... It's my identity but also that of my biological mother that were questioned. I who had closed the file for good, I felt almost obliged to go back in search, deep down. Of what?? For what?? And then above all. Did I really
want to know?? I then realized that I was no longer as alone as before (If indeed I was ever really... Alone).. This whole story also had an impact on my loved ones... My mom ... My sons..

They too deserve to know the truth. It's part of their story.

I took over my file... But I didn't do it alone. My new journey has been strewn with magnificent encounters. Adoptive and biological parents, artists, anthropologists, committed journalists, psychologists accompanying in the search for origins, people working in the humanitarian field...

Some people in my entourage also proved to be so promising and supportive...

But above all I met people in the same situation as me.. Sometimes searching. Sometimes having found their family.. Sometimes at peace with this story of adoption and not wanting to know anything more than: my family and my place are here in Europe. Each course, each life choice must be respected. And I confess that... I am deeply grateful to have met all these people. Each allowed me, in their own way, to understand in a different way the questions that had always bothered me...

In fact.. This path does not have to be strewn with anger, resentment , regret or even sadness... This journey towards truth and justice does not have to be a fight against or a struggle... For me, it took on the appearance of resilience, tolerance but above all forgiveness... I have been filled with hatred for too long.. With anger.. With fear.. I refuse to fall back into my old destructive demons ...

Not everything has to be in opposition…

It is with humility that I admit I don't know everything about my country… Its culture, but above all its history. The armed conflict holds an important place... But it is above all the consequences that this has generated which are to be known, made aware and integrated...
Today, I choose to take the path of knowledge and communication. The moments of meetings, sharing, and exchanges have become essential for me. I refuse to be reduced to a ready-made story in people's heads... My story will not be that of you who is reading me now, nor that of another adopted person... And it is perhaps by discovering each other's stories, we can break this circle. So that we don't perpetually repeat the mistakes of the past.

My adoption does not completely define me…

It made me who I am…

But now I understand…

I am Sophie, mother of my 3 wonderful children, social worker, daughter of Viviane and the one who gave birth to me... Happy to have become Belgian... But so proud to be Guatemalan. I don't have to choose who I am or what I should be.

I am who I am.

This is what all this story has taught me...
Moi, volcan: de terre et de feu...

An Original Essay by Sophie Villers

Aussi petite que je me souvienne, quand je rencontrais une nouvelle personne, je commençais toujours en disant:
« Bonjour,
Je m’appelle Sophie et je suis adoptée »…
Comme si mon adoption me définissait intégralement.. Mais surtout comme si je devais justifier ma présence ici..

Très vite j’ai éprouvé ce sentiment de déranger avec ma couleur de peau.. Mes yeux bridés.. Mes cheveux noirs comme le charbon.. Eux ? De la bonne couleur de peau.. Blanche.
J’ai connu le racisme très tôt.. Trop tôt..
En primaire, il m’arrivait souvent de rentrer à la maison en pleures parce que des enfants (et plus tard, des adultes) s’étaient moqués de moi.. Les insultes, elles, sont arrivées vers 10 ans.. J’ai souvent maudit d’être si différente.. De ne pas correspondre aux critères physiques d’acceptation sociale.
Mais j’avais une alliée de poids :-) Ma maman a toujours été à mes côtés... A m’apprendre à me défendre par l’humour.. Le sarcasme.. Et surtout, à ne jamais craquer face à ceux qui voulaient me faire du mal.. « Ne leur fait pas ce plaisir Sophie ».
Cette période a construit mon caractère.. Ma fierté.. Mais surtout une solide carapace, aujourd’hui encore, très difficile à percer..
Quand j’ai eu 13-14 ans, j’ai décidé de « jouer » de cette apparence qui dérangeait tant par pure provocation... Si je devais vraiment déranger, autant que ce soit pour de bonnes raisons non? ;)

J’ai accentué mon appartenance à une culture étrangère... Piercings, bindies, tatouages au henné, dreads.. Tout y est passé.. Tout, sauf ce qui faisait réellement partie de ma culture d’origine.. Au fond, il est clair que je rejetais ET mon pays de coeur ET mon pays de naissance… Mais je pense surtout que j’étais perdue entre deux cultures... Deux histoires.. Deux mamans... Deux identités.. DEUX Sophie.

Maman a toujours voulu me donner toutes les informations qu’elle pouvait récolter sur mon pays de naissance.. J’ai alors été abreuvée de documentaires télévisuels, livres, articles, rencontres… Comme si pour elle, c’était une nécessité que je saches d’où je venais ; que je m’approprie entièrement l’endroit qui m’avait vu naître..

Maintenant que je suis adulte.. je comprends sa démarche et je l’en remercie..

Mais j’avoue qu’à l’époque, je suis vite arrivée à saturation.. Voir des images idylliques dignes des plus beaux documentaires touristiques et ensuite, voir des images du conflit armé... Tout s’embrouillait dans ma tête... C’était trop dur. Comment une telle dualité pouvait exister??

En fait, cette dualité vivait aussi en moi.. Dans ma tête, dans mon cœur, dans ma manière d’être et de penser...Cette question: « Qui suis-je? » m’a toujours torturée... Je me sentais tellement différente et incomprise… Et terriblement seule.

J’ai cru que tenter de comprendre d’où je venais, pourquoi on m’avait mise à l’adoption, tenter de retrouver la femme qui m’avait mise au monde me permettrait de comprendre... De me comprendre..
Quand j’y pense.. Je me suis très vite posée des questions sur mes origines.. A qui je pouvais bien ressembler.. Ce besoin de m’identifier à quelqu’un..

J’avais 5 ans quand j’ai posé mes premières questions... 8 ans quand mon premier courrier s’est envolé vers une des adresses renseignée dans mon dossier d’adoption.. 13 ans quand une de mes nombreuses enveloppe m’est revenue... 14 ans quand j’ai tout envoyé balader...

Mon coeur n’en pouvait plus d’espérer pour au final être déçu. Encore et encore..
Le « Qui suis-je? » c’est alors transformé en « Qui pourrais-je être? »... 

Pendant de nombreuses années, je me suis perdue à force d’essayer de correspondre à un idéal qui n’était et ne sera jamais mien.. La peur de l’échec et d’être incompétente aux yeux des gens m’a fait devenir une personne exigeante avec les autres mais surtout avec moi-même... Et quand je n’étais pas à la hauteur de toutes ces espérances... Je me punissais en me faisant mal physiquement..

Je me suis retrouvée confrontée à la perte d’êtres chers.. Et à cet étrange sentiment de culpabilité d’être moi toujours de ce monde.. Ce monde qui me semblait tellement hostile et étranger.. J’ai plongé la tête la première dans tout ce qui me permettait de me détruire... D’oublier cette douleur qui m’habitait en permanence..

Mon adolescence est une période sombre et extrêmement destructrice.. Et malheureusement, pas que pour moi. Je suis allée loin dans mes mécanismes d’autodestruction...

Si certaines périodes de vie ont été dures ou, à l’époque, semblaient insurmontables... Je ne regrette pas et je ne veux retenir que le positif et le constructif. Je sais à présent vers quoi je ne veux plus aller.

Que je suis la seule à pouvoir m’aider et à pouvoir définir et devenir celle que j’avais décidé d’être...

Mais avant d’entamer ce travail, je devais surtout faire la paix avec mon histoire...

Mes pays..
J’ai très vite compris que pour m’apaiser, je devais retourner là où tout avait commencé afin de me reconnecter à mes racines... Mais à chaque fois que ma maman me proposait le voyage... Je refusais. À chaque fois qu’elle me suggérait de prendre des cours d’espagnol, je refusais ou plutôt, quand j’acceptais, j’abandonnais très rapidement… Ce n’était jamais le bon moment. Et souvent, je me suis demandée si un jour seulement je serais prête à retourner là-bas...

J’avais 24 ans quand je suis enfin retournée au Guatemala...

Ce retour sur mes terres a été salvateur.

Toutes ces années où j’ai cru être folle... Où je ne me sentais pas à ma place... Où certaines personnes me faisaient me sentir différente et m’excluaient volontairement à cause de ma couleur de peau et de mon origine... Tout, absolument tout prenait sens quand j’ai commencé à marcher dans ces rues face au volcan... C’est CE volcan qui m’a fait me rendre compte que j’étais à ma place... Cette ébullition en moi... Cette passion, cette colère, cette rébellion, ce tout!

Et quand ma professeur d’espagnole et amie m’a demandé au bout d’une semaine: « Mais tu es sure d’avoir été élevée en Europe? Tu as tout d’une latina... Tu es Guatémaltèque! », J’ai su... Sa phrase m’a transpercé le coeur. Tout prenait sens et chaque chose était à sa place.

Le début de cette prise de conscience a été extrêmement violente... Parce qu’à nouveau je me suis perdue... Le bal des questions a recommencé... « Qui suis-je? », « Comment vais-je faire pour me retrouver après ce voyage? », « Qu’est-ce qui me retiens sur cette terre? », « Comment arriver à concilier mes 2 identités sans faire de mal à qui que ce soit? », … Et puis... Mon miracle s’est produit...

Mon fils.
L’arrivée de mon 1er enfant a été ma plus grande bénédiction.

Ce début de grossesse, vécu sur ma terre natale, m’a fait réaliser et ressentir toutes les émotions par lesquelles ma mère avait du traverser en décidant de me mettre en adoption après m’avoir porté pendant ces 9 mois.

Je me suis rendue compte qu’à nouveau mes peurs menaçaient de me guider. La peur de reproduire ce que ma mère avait fait... Que je ne me sente pas capable d’élever mon fils... Que je l’abandonne.

Mais en fait, ça a été tout le contraire..

Dès que j’ai su que ce petit être grandissait en moi, j’ai senti une vague d’amour déférer en moi. J’ai réalisé que tout cet amour... Je l’avais bridé jusqu’alors... L’amour inconditionnel existe bel et bien. Et la colère que je ne m’étais jamais avouée à l’encontre de ma mère a disparue. Soudain, c’est comme si un cercle vicieux s’arrêtait. Je me suis enfin permise de rêver autre chose... Et surtout je me suis autorisée à accepter que je pouvais être heureuse... Sans avoir peur que tout s’arrête brutalement.

La grossesse a été dure à vivre... Tout comme les suivantes…

Mais l’arrivée de mes enfants a été une réelle bénédiction... Moi qui ne me reconnaissais en personne, j’avais en face de moi des petits êtres qui me ressemblaient, chacun à leur manière...

Je l’ai déjà dit mais je le répète ici encore…

Leur existence m’a permis de réaliser... Que moi aussi j’existaïs.

J’ai alors mis de côté mes recherches... Mon désir de connaître la vérité...

De retrouver quelqu’un.

Je les avais eux.
Mais...

Même quand on trouve une certaine paix dans sa vie, les questions qui étaient présentes avant ressurgissent à un moment ou un autre.. Sous une forme que l’on n’avait pas envisagé..

Pour moi... Elles sont revenues de manière brutale.. Violente et destructrice.

Je n’étais pas préparée à devoir un jour ressortir mon dossier d’adoption... Mais avec toutes les informations reçues, je ne pouvais pas, plus rester avec toutes ces interrogations ... Parce qu’ici... C’est mon identité mais aussi celle de ma mère biologique qui étaient remises en question. Moi qui avais classé le dossier pour de bon, je me suis sentie presque obligée de me remettre en quête mais au fond..

De quoi?? Pour quoi?? Et puis surtout. Voulais-je vraiment savoir?? J’ai alors réalisé que je n’étais plus aussi seule qu’auparavant (Si tant est que je l’ai jamais vraiment été... Seule).. Toute cette histoire avait également un impact sur mes proches... Ma maman... Mes fils..

Eux aussi méritent de connaître la vérité. C’est une part de leur histoire.

J’ai repris mon dossier... Mais je ne l’ai pas fait seule. Mon nouveau cheminement a été parsemé de magnifiques rencontres .. Des parents adoptifs et biologiques, des artistes, des anthropologues, des journalistes engagés, des psychologues accompagnants dans la recherche des origines, des personnes travaillant dans l’humanitaire... Certaines personnes de mon entourage se sont révélées aussi tellement porteuses et soutenantes…

Mais j’ai surtout rencontré des personnes dans la même situation que moi.. Parfois en recherche..
Parfois ayant retrouvé leur famille.. Parfois en paix avec cette histoire d’adoption et ne voulant rien savoir de plus que: ma famille et ma place sont ici en Europe. Chaque parcours, chaque choix de vie se doivent d’être respecté. Et j’avoue que... Je suis profondément reconnaissante d’avoir rencontré
toutes de ces personnes. Chacune m'a permis, à sa façon, d'appréhender d'une autre manière les questions qui me tenaillaient depuis toujours…

En fait.. Ce chemin ne doit pas être nécessairement parsemé de colère, de rancœur, de regrets ou même de tristesse... Ce cheminement vers la vérité et la justice ne doit pas forcément être un combat contre ou une lutte pour …Pour moi, il a pris l’apparence de la résilience, de la tolérance mais surtout du pardon... J’ai été trop longtemps remplie de haine.. De colère.. De peur.. Je me refuse de retomber dans mes vieux démons destructeurs...

Tout n’est pas obligé d’être en opposition…

C’est avec humilité que je reconnais ne pas tout savoir de mon pays.. De sa culture mais surtout de son histoire. Le conflit armé y tient une place importante... Mais ce sont surtout les conséquences que cela a engendré qui sont à connaître, conscientiser et intégrer...

Aujourd'hui, je fais le choix d’emprunter la voie la connaissance et de la transmission. Les moments de rencontres, de partages et d’échanges sont devenus pour moi primordiaux. Je me refuse qu’on me réduise à une histoire toute faite dans la tête des gens... Mon histoire ne sera pas celle de toi qui me lit en ce moment ni celle d’une autre personne adoptée... Et c’est peut-être en découvrant les histoires de chacun qu’on pourra briser ce cercle.. Pour qu’on ne répète pas perpétuellement les erreurs du passé.

Mon adoption ne me définit pas intégralement…

Elle a fait de moi la personne que je suis…

Mais à présent j’ai compris..

Je suis Sophie, maman de mes 3 merveilleux enfants, travailleuse sociale, fille de Viviane et de
celle qui m’a mise au monde... Heureuse d’être devenue Belge... Mais tellement fière d’être Guatémaltèque.

Je n’ai pas à choisir qui je suis ou ce que je dois être.

Je suis qui je suis.

Voilà ce que toute cette histoire m’a appris...
Twas a spell ago I was surrendered by my mother to the adoption system with hope for this young boy to find a happy home; a place of health and love and religion.

While these wild seeds bloomed in foreign land, they would struggle.

At the age of 13, I was rushed to the emergency room. Diagnosed with a disease called pancreatitis, a disease where the pancreas digests itself and becomes inflamed. At my current age of 24, a cause for the illness is still presumed to be hereditary, though there is no way of knowing without finding my lost family.

At the age of 17, I recognized I had found a home with an adoptive mother and father who loved me with all their being; I found a degree of happiness and acceptance with my adoption. It didn't last. My adoptive father, born with cystic fibrosis—a genetic lung disease which destroys the fibers of the lungs—claimed him. And just like that, my source of love splintered. I realized the hatred their god had for me. Abandoned by a birth mother. Given a chronic illness which will kill me. Witnessed my father, among many other people, die in front of me. So much tragedy.

At the age of 23, I became interested in my heritage. I tried to learn about my people, of the Guatemalans and of all they endured. I learned of the Maya and their gods—the brown skinned gods who created me of ixim (corn). The ones who understand me in the way a white god never could. And I learned to follow and trust them.

Though most of my familiarity with my country first came from viewing videos on YouTube—where some people videotaped themselves driving through Malacatán, my hometown—I developed a connection. I learned from books and from videos, eventually finding Guatemalan communities in my state of New Jersey and learning customs from their mouths.

My home country has been through much. It is to them I dedicated my master's project at Rowan University. It is to them I crafted and am crafting a novel called "The Mayan Book of the Dead," a horror fiction story which explores the reaction of the Mayan gods to the Guatemalan civil war—genocide is a more proper term—which took place between 1960-1997. So many descendants of the Maya were massacred.
It is to my Guatemalan people I pose a question: how did we brave the storm and where do we…where do I…go from here?
PART THREE: THEME THREE

Returning to Guatemala and Building Community

This section includes pieces that show how adoptees have begun the journey of returning to Guatemala, both physically and culturally, as well finding solace among others. Pieces are concerned with the ways that adoptees have reclaimed their birth heritage, while creating identities that are their own as well. Thomas LaPorte pays tribute to Guatemala and its indigenous population with a creative writing piece about the national bird, the Quetzal. An excerpt from Juan Antonio Elvira Calito’s novel Nuit de Nahuatl examines the complexity of Guatemala from the point of view of an adult. Next Generation Guatemala founder Gemma Givens shares a presentation of how her adoptee journey inspired her to build a bridge toward community. We conclude this special issue of Maya America with an interview with biological siblings Tori Briggs and Garrett Marcks, who found each other through Next Generation Guatemala, and who represent new connections to our birth family and country, and new stories waiting to be told.
The Quetzal Bird

An original piece by Thomas LaPorte

How heavenly the bird with the long tail stares; how hidden in the ambient green and ghastly gloom does the bird perch, perpetually unaware of the mystery looming behind it—the past, as it were, of a country in smoke and storm and flame and war and crime. Yet, the bird is perched, silently contemplating, silently constituting, silently considering. Bird of long and beautiful song, what future do you see for your people, the indigenous people in the once hale highlands—shall they flee or endure the storm?
BENEATH THE SURFACE

Excerpt from Nuit de Nahuatl, originally published in French by AMALTHEE, 2020

Juan Antonio Elvira Calito

Translated by Amber Sweat

1

This day would be the last. He turned a blind eye.

Half past five: up, washed, prepared. He engulfed himself in the sleeping city with a mixture of euphoria, fatigue and anxiety.

At this very hour, the Guatemalan capital flees its artificial lights to dress itself in beams. A spotlight that reveals the ugliness of its face and the thinness of its body. A body marked by abuse, spitting, scars, bloodstains…

A devastated pile of meat.

Devoured by pain and maggots.

At night, it is a tall lady dressed in a blue and white tunic. Drunk in love, luxury, and lust. A princess who dreams of marrying Prince Charming. The hours go by; and as soon as the sun rises from the hungry earth, its beams reveal.

A brutal return to reality.

Our capital is nothing but a pathetic whore. A mouth fed sperm. A path paved with bad intentions. The female character of a bad novel. Solitary and without identity. Caught in its own game. We all know what this makeup conceals; child trafficking, abandonment, rape, drugs, extortion, assassinations, racketeering...

2

Every morning, José got up early. A restless spirit in a blazing land. He nevertheless dreamed of serenity. Of healing.

Away from it all.
Far from others.

He desired Guatemala as much as he hated it.

A desire that burned him whole.

As a teenager, he had thought of leaving for Mexico. He would have crossed the border to drink from the fountain of the *American Dream*. But he had lacked courage.

The years passed. Yet nothing had changed.

Misery.

Incidents.

The tears pent-up so as to not extinguish the little hope.

In order to support the family, he dabbled in troublesome business. Everyone knew; however, it was not to be talked about.

3

*In the constituent assemblies, we blow hot air.*

*There, speeches tinged with humanism are delivered.*

*Our deputies (this word – by the way – comes from the word “whore”) grew up in golden palaces, rinsed their fingers with silk handkerchiefs, ate on porcelain plates, wore out their pants on American school benches, and complain about daily violence while boarded up in their secondary or overseas residence. Nonetheless, they think they can understand us.*

*Do they have the slightest clue what the Guatemalan people go through every day of their fucking existence?*

4

At the time, José wanted to change the course of things. His aging father had become unfit for work. His mother sold odds and ends in the central market. Without forgetting that his brothers and sisters huddled under sheets and boards waiting for the beakful. This injustice disgusted him.

In a country where everyone is corrupt, can we find the way to redemption?
A Saturday like any other.
Sitting on the edge of the field with his peers.

When a guy with an unusual physique appeared. So unusual that it was difficult to define his age: clear eyes, long hair, perfect teeth made shiny by a gold tooth. A scar crossed his face. He was wearing blue jeans. Impeccable, without a fold. Followed by a big white hat. Straight out of a spaghetti western, he spoke with quite a strong accent. Did he come from another region? Or from another country? On behalf of El Diablo, he offered them a job: dropping off a package of a few cuadradas. The patojos rejected his offer. Without insisting, the man in white turned his heels. Pigeons to do the dirty work, there was no shortage of them here!

The image of the vaquero had been engraved in José's mind. His raucous voice had resounded like the siren song in the Iliad. Having found an excuse to get away from the group, the young teenager followed the fallen angel. He had just been pulled into his own fate.

That morning, he got up at the same time.

With one goal in mind: get rid of his stock of blunts.

He left his house, crossed the street without looking, then got into a microbus to slip away towards the center of town.

For several days, he knew that he was being pursued by the rival gang for having sold marijuana in its territory. One evening when he was returning home, two mareros had threatened him. That night he couldn't sleep. Neither could his mother. She had tried to convince him. Stop all of this while there is still time! But he didn't answer. He barely looked up. Locked in his silence and its contradictions.

In this world, you couldn't achieve your dreams if you didn't have money. Suddenly a man caught his eye. An old torn up guy who shouted; his growls were meant for him. To silence him, José crossed the street to join him.

He was a poor toothless puppet.

Lean body.

Who vomited incomprehensible sentences.
A tirade interspersed with spitting and hiccups.

No time for this bullshit!

The disarticulated animal was delirious, laughing heartily.

- “Guate! Dirty whore ready to spread her legs for ten or twenty quetzals!”

Suddenly, a spurt of blood covered the old man's face. José then realized that a bullet had penetrated his skull. He staggered. A few meters away, two guys on one motorbike. Another bullet hit his chest. Then more bullets whizzed by.

The Farewell Symphony.

The motorcycle pulled away. Before collapsing on the ground, the young man's body wobbled for a few seconds. It no longer belonged to him. His face kissed the ground. Tears rolled down his cheek. He passed from life to death as one passes from laughter to tears, from one room to another, from everything to nothing.

Ten o'clock in the morning. The outside temperature is 21 degrees Celsius. The plane begins its descent. We will soon be landing at La Aurora airport in Guatemala. The stewardess asks us to fasten our seatbelts. We're losing altitude. I feel a very strong pressure around my heart, as if they took it away from me. The wheels come into contact with the ground. I cry without knowing why.

Tears of joy?

Or sadness for being torn from my land?

I'm coming back home.

Twenty years later to be exact.

I get off the plane, walk along a large corridor with a breathtaking view of the town. Stairs, customs. I fill out a form, withdraw money from an ATM. The queue. Passport in one hand, yellow form in the other. A woman asks me to come forward. One thing intrigues her. French passport. Born in Amatitlán. I explain: abandonment, placement, adoption by a French family, my brother from whom I was separated when I was two years old.
Then this address.

The location where my sister and I were placed.

My Spanish is neither Chapín nor Castilian. Doubt takes hold of my interlocutor who calls on a colleague. Their gaze goes back and forth between my face and my passport. In case I'm an impostor. A terrorist. Or even a double agent. I enter a dimly lit room where I am ordered to sit down. They open my suitcase. A hefty guy walks in. We begin a discussion in French. No problem. I speak French very well. Better than him. All clear. To finish, I leave the airport accompanied by three men in black uniforms. We come to a parking lot. They introduce me to a taxi driver. Without hesitation, this last man takes my suitcases to put them in the trunk. A few minutes later we drive through the capital in search of this orphanage.

The starting point of a checkered existence.

On the seat, a newspaper. Photos of accidents, murders attract my attention.

Which country have I just landed in?

Page 7. A 16-year-old teenager was found on the street. The police assume he is a drug trafficker. In his pockets, they found marihuana. On the neck, a tattoo. A B followed by a 1 and an 8. He was in the middle of a discussion with an old man when two guys on a motorbike came up to shoot him. Death by a bullet in the head. Then a rapid-fire to make sure they had killed their target. In reading these lines, I realize how different my life and that of this boy are. It could have been mine. My past then comes back to face me: golden youth, university of arts and humanities, theater classes, writing, adoptive parents… and now, this big brother that I know nothing about.

The taxi wanders through the capital. I open the window. I breathe deeply. Colorful buildings unfold. The blue and white flag flutters in the cloudless sky. And through this labyrinth, I continue my journey in search of this brother. With a thought for this teenager engulfed by Guatemala.

A tramp light years away.

Guatemala, my love.

Saturn devouring its own children.
DERRIÈRE LES APPARENCES

Excerpt from Nuit de Nahuatl, originally published in French by AMALTHEE, 2020

Juan Antonio Elvira Calito

1

Ce jour serait le dernier. Il l’ignorait.

Cinq heures et demie : levé, lavé, préparé. Il s’engouffra dans la ville endormie avec un mélange
d’euphorie, de fatigue et d’angoisse.

À cette heure précise, la capitale guatémaltèque quitte ses lumières artificielles pour s’habiller de rayons. Un
projecteur qui révèle la laideur de son visage et la maigreur de son corps. Un corps marqué par les sévices, les crachats,
les cicatrices, les tâches de sang…

Un tas de viande dévasté.

Dévoré par la douleur et les asticots.

La nuit, c’est une grande dame vêtue d’une tunique bleue et blanche. Ivre d’amour, de luxe et de luxure. Une
princesse qui rêve de se marier avec le prince charmant. Les heures défilent ; et dès que le soleil surgit de la terre affamée,
ses rayons agissent comme un révélateur.

Un retour brutal à la réalité.

Notre capitale n’est rien d’autre qu’une pathétique putain. Une bouche nourrie au sperme. Un chemin pavé de
Nous savons tous ce que dissimule ce maquillage : trafics d’enfants, abandons, viols, drogues, extorsions, assassinats,
rackets…

2

Tous les matins, José se levait tôt. Un esprit agité dans un pays en flammes. Il rêvait pourtant
de sérénité. D’apaisement.

Loin de tout.

Loin des autres.
Il désirait le Guatemala autant qu’il le haïssait.

Un désir qui le brûlait tout entier.
Adolescent, il avait pensé partir pour le Mexique. Il aurait traversé la frontière pour s’abreuver à la fontaine de l’american dream. Mais il avait manqué de courage.

Les années passèrent. Pourtant, rien n’avait changé.

La misère.

Les incidents.

Les larmes contenues pour ne pas éteindre le peu d’espoir.

Afin de subvenir aux besoins de la famille, il trempait dans des histoires pas nettes. Tout le monde savait ; cependant, il ne fallait pas en parler.

Dans les assemblées constituantes, on brasse du vent.

On y prononce des discours teintés d’humanisme.

Nos députés (mot – qui soit dit en passant – se construit sur celui de « pute ») ont grandit dans des palais dorés, se sont rinçés les doigts avec des mouchoirs en soie, ont mangé dans des assiettes en porcelaine, ont usé leurs pantalons sur les bancs des écoles américaines, se plaignent de la violence quotidienne bien barricadés dans leur résidence secondaire ou à l’étranger. Cependant, ils pensent pouvoir nous comprendre.

Ont-ils la moindre idée de ce que subit le peuple guatémaltèque chaque jour de sa putain d’existence ?

À cette époque-là, José voulait changer le cours des choses. Son père vieillissant était devenu inapte au travail. Sa mère vendait des bricoles au marché central. Sans oublier ses frères et sœurs serrés sous les tôles et les planches à attendre la becquée. Cette injustice le dégoûtait.

Dans un pays où tout le monde est corrompu, peut-on trouver le chemin de la rédemption ?

Un samedi comme les autres.
Assis sur le bord du terrain avec ses congénères.


L’image du vaquero s’était gravée dans l’esprit de José. Sa voix rauque avait résonné comme le chant des sirènes dans l’Iliade. Ayant trouvé une excuse pour s’éloigner du groupe, le jeune adolescent avait suivi l’ange déchu. Il venait d’être aspiré par son propre destin.

Ce matin-là, il se leva à la même heure.

Avec un seul objectif en tête : se défaire de son stock de feuilles.

Il sortit de chez lui, traversa la rue sans regarder, puis monta dans un microbus pour filer vers le centre.

Depuis quelques jours, il se savait poursuivi par la pandilla rivale pour avoir vendu de la marijuana sur son territoire. Un soir alors qu’il rentrait chez lui, deux mareros l’avaient menacé. Cette nuit-là, il n’avait pas trouvé le sommeil. Sa mère non plus. Elle avait tenté de le convaincre. Arrêter tout ça tant qu’il en était encore temps ! Mais il n’avait rien répondu. C’est à peine s’il avait levé les yeux. Enfermé dans son silence et ses contradictions.

Dans ce monde, tu ne pouvais pas accomplir tes rêves si tu n’avais pas d’argent.

Tout-à-coup, un homme attira son attention. Un vieux type démantibulé qui vociférait ; ses grognements s’adressaient bien à lui. Pour le faire taire, José traversa la rue pour le rejoindre.

C’était une pauvre marionnette édentée.

Au corps maigre.

Qui vomissait des phrases incompréhensibles.

Une tirade entrecoupée de crachats et de hoquets.

Pas de temps pour ces conneries !
L'animal désarticulé délirait, riait à pleins poumons.

- « Guate ! Une sale putain prête à écarter les cuisses pour dix ou vingt quetzales ! »


La symphonie des adieux.

La moto s’éloigna. Avant de s’écrouler sur le sol, le corps du jeune homme vacilla quelques secondes. Il ne lui appartenait plus. Son visage baisait la terre. Des larmes roulaient le long de sa joue. Il passait de la vie à la mort comme on passe du rire aux larmes, d’une pièce à une autre, de tout à rien.


Des larmes de joie ?

Ou de tristesse pour avoir été arraché à ma terre ?

Je reviens à la maison.

Vingt ans plus tard pour être exact.


Puis cette adresse.

Le lieu où ma sœur et moi avons été placés.

Le point de départ d’une existence en dents de scie.

Sur le siège, un journal. Des photos d’accidents, de meurtres attirent mon attention.

Dans quel pays je viens d’atterrir ?


Une traînée à des années lumières.

Guatemala, mon amour.

Saturne dévorant ses propres enfants.
“Truly Guatemalan:” The Search for Identity among Adopted Guatemalans (English Translation)

Gemma Givens

Presented at Indigenous Diasporas, University of California (UCLA), May 2021; La voix des adoptés Bicentenaire de l'independance du Guatemala, Lyon France, September 2021; 200 años - Centroamérica en el mundo/200 Years of Central America in the World, Berlin, Germany, September 2021

If we only know our adopted country, what does it mean to be truly Guatemalan? To represent our mother tongue, culture, and genetic history? Can we claim to be Guatemalan in the same way that we claim the identity of our adopted country?

There are between thirty and fifty thousand unique answers to these questions from Guatemalan adoptees in more than 20 countries around the world. And while there is no "one answer," I can outline the questions we ask ourselves to determine what it means to be Guatemalan as an adoptee.

INTRO - ADOPTIVE FAMILY

If you saw these _patojos_ playing, what would you think their relation to each other is? “Playground friends,” “Classmates,” “Neighbors,” “Are you paying together or separate?”—these are some of the ways the world told my sister and I that we didn’t seem to belong to our own family from the time I was small.
This is my family. They are Irish American from Dublin, Ireland, and until, I was about 15 years old, they were my only cultural and familial influence.

I was born Alejandra Yaqui to a Kaqchikel mother named Esther Yaqui from Santiago, Sacatepéquez, in 1990. I was adopted to the Givens family in the state of California and given the name Gemma. As far as official records account for, my adoption marked the end of my Guatemalan identity and the beginning of my American one.
In 2005, I told the owner of a local Native American art gallery how I had joined the Irish Club at my school. She laughed. She and her husband were concerned for the child who didn't know who she was. They became my second adoptive family, one that would teach me to be proud of my heritage as an indigenous person in a way that felt both safe and accessible to me. They showed me different ways culture and community are expressed by Native Americans across the United States.

You might wonder, why not just visit a Guatemalan community? The State of California is home to hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans, particularly Maya. At any point in time, I could have taken a train and walked into a Mam or even a Kaqchikel-speaking community. Or learned Spanish, for that matter.

I would ask you to imagine the psychology of a child whose priority is survival. I don’t match my adoptive family. Ethnically, I am other. My family does not practice Guatemalan culture nor speak Spanish. Once, my cousin couldn't remember if I was from Honduras or Guatemala. As someone hypersensitive about belonging, what I understood from that was, “we are not Latin American, we do not speak Spanish.” So, for a child trying to existentially survive, the safest bridge across the cultural void was indigeneity in English, in a way that my adoptive family could connect with, understand, and accept.

For those of us born in Guatemala and adopted and raised in the Global North, access to our past is not straightforward. For some of us, it's not available at all.

This clip from a Telemundo documentary offers some context that explains further:
So how do we answer the question, “who are we?” Maya Angelou taught us that, “if you don’t know where you've come from, you don’t know where you're going.” So how do we write our own histories with no genetic or historical context to place ourselves in? How do we sort truth from beliefs created to fill the void where facts ought to be? Finally, how does one understand all these answers as a newborn or small child who is being adopted internationally?

In 2012, I created a community organization called Next Generation Guatemala dedicated to the nearly 50,000 Guatemalan adoptees who are answering these questions. Together, we explore what autonomy means in the discussion about transnational adoption. Our journey is to reconcile both our biological and our adopted identities into one person, and our perspectives offer new insights into what it means to integrate these multiple identities in the different societies we live in.

Next Generation Guatemala has defined six fundamental areas of identity that our community strives towards throughout our lives, of which I will focus on three, with the first being relationships to our adoptive families, which I covered in the introduction. Of these six community focal points, they follow no order and are all interconnected.
● Our relationship with ourselves
● Our relationship with adoptive parents and families
● Our partners, relationships, children; our chosen family
● Search for our loved ones, reunion, connection with our biological families
● Our adopted and biological cultures and countries
● Our communities

**BIOLOGICAL FAMILY**

While in university, I looked for opportunities to visit Guatemala. The compulsion to see my genetics mirrored back to me was far stronger than my commitment to my studies. It was so strong that I did not think twice about visiting Guatemala with zero knowledge of how to speak Spanish, zero historical or cultural background knowledge, no psychological preparation for what I would find, and no social support from other adoptees from Guatemala or the accompaniment of my family.

If I could offer advice to myself today, I would suggest that I did my entire journey backwards. But the best way I can describe the pull to go anyway would be from the perspective of a child who is desperate to begin (and finish) a delayed development through their genetic equal. Simplified, you might describe it as an “emotional” pull. This pull is so poignant and deep that our identity focal
points cannot be bound by any special order. The adoptee follows what they are compelled toward, at that point in their life.

I think we all hope to be with our loved ones at the end of their lives. But by the time I found my mom, she had gone somewhere I could not follow.

The experience of being adopted connected me to the United States, Ireland, and Guatemala. But forgetting one of these connections cost me the opportunity to say goodbye.

This next point of focus is finding our loved ones and reconnecting with our birth families. Not all adoptees want or need this. For the nearly 50,000 Guatemalan adoptees whose adoptions were handled illegally or improperly, they may never find the answers to their questions, no matter how hard they try. This kind of uncertainty requires a lot of faith, forgiveness, and strength – to be able to create an identity separate from the concept of ethnicity, culture, and genetic ties, no matter how the world projects its interpretations of all these elements onto us.

CULTURE AND COUNTRY

Imagine again the psychology of a young child needing to be shown who they are. If our biological families are not available to us, or we do not wish to search for them, how do we learn to be Guatemalan? When I did a DNA test, I learned I was nearly 100% Maya - but what does that matter if I don’t know what that means?

The lack of available answers about my identity from my biological family projected me towards the next point of focus of the community: my culture and my country.
After my study abroad, I still wanted to learn from Guatemala. In the classic hybrid method, I chose a Kaqchikel language course hosted in Guatemala but sponsored by an American University. For six weeks I studied my mother tongue with native Kaqchikel speakers along with the familiar faces of the American organizers, who could also resemble my own family.

After the course, I chose to stay in Guatemala to continue answering the question of “how to be Guatemalan.” The answer came after retracing my mother's last steps in life. I moved to Guatemala City a few blocks from her last job. I was no longer the only Guatemalan person in the room. I blended in so well that nobody noticed me at all. I did my grocery shopping in the same market where she did, I took the bus every day to the area where her work was, I cycled around the city and explored the surroundings near where she lived.

I was chasing her ghost, but I needed to understand what life was like from her perspective. It was a lonely year, but also one that informed more of my identity than any Guatemalan identification document.
Who is responsible for returning the culture we lost because of being adopted? Can our adoptive parents be practitioners and teachers of our culture? Is the journey to reconnect with our culture a solo endeavor? While the answers to these questions vary in practice, what we know for sure is that our culture and heritage are at the forefront of community priorities. In a poll assessing topics of interest for discussion, sixty-nine percent of the community voted for culture and heritage over mental health.

Our relationship with the culture and the country represents a gap that Next Generation Guatemala has aimed to highlight and fill through the support of peers and with the Guatemalan organizations and individuals who have offered to teach us.
For my story, I have described three of our community's focal points, how they are interconnected, and how each informs an aspect of our identity. I hope that you can see the adoptee's different priorities when it comes to identity and understand why each adoptee's relationship to being Guatemalan is different.

CONCLUSION - WHO ARE WE “IN EXTRANJERO”

ADOPTED FROM GUATEMALA
200% COMPLETE
an op-ed by Gemma Givens and Carlos Alberto Haas

Last November, Carlos and I were trying to describe the identity of the adopted person for an op-ed. We proposed that if a complete person is equivalent to one hundred percent, the adopted person has the privilege of encompassing two hundred percent in a single identity: one hundred percent Guatemalan and one hundred percent global northerner. However, we should not limit ourselves to being grateful for this unique privilege. Not all adoptees from Guatemala want to claim a two hundred percent identity.

FUIMOS ADOPTADOS DE GUATEMALA.
ES UN HECHO.
SER PARTE DE LA NEXT GENERATION GUATEMALA ES UNA ACCIÓN.

CONTÁCTENOS
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The trauma of early childhood adoption is part of the process. The privilege of immersion is not equal to total acceptance in the two worlds to which we belong.

That we were adopted from Guatemala is a fact. But being part of the next generation of Guatemalans is action; an expression of a complex identity that, while different for all of us, is also truly and uniquely Guatemalan.

Presented at:

- Indigenous Diasporas, University of California (UCLA), May 2021
- La voix des adoptés Bicentenaire de l'independance du Guatemala, Lyon France, September 2021
- 200 años - Centroamérica en el mundo/200 Years of Central America in the World, Berlin, Germany, September 2021
“Truly Guatemalan:” The Search for Identity among Adopted Guatemalans (Spanish Translation)

Gemma Givens

Presentado en Indigenous Diasporas, University of California (UCLA), May 2021; La voz des adoptés Bicentenaire de l'indépendance du Guatemala, Lyon France, September 2021; 200 años - Centroamérica en el mundo/200 Years of Central America in the World, Berlin, Germany, September 2021

Si solo conocemos nuestro país de adopción, ¿qué significa ser verdaderamente guatemalteco? ¿Para representar nuestra lengua materna, y la cultura e historia genética? ¿Podemos reclamar ser guatemaltecos de la misma manera que somos clamamos la identidad de nuestro país adoptivo?

Hay entre treinta y cincuenta mil respuestas únicas a estas preguntas de adoptados guatemaltecos en más de 20 países alrededor del mundo. Y aunque no hay “una respuesta”, puedo mostrarles las preguntas que nos hacemos para determinar qué significa ser guatemalteco como adoptado.

INTRO - FAMILIA ADOPTIVA

Si vieras a estos patojos jugando, ¿qué pensarías? "Amigos del patio de recreo", "Compañeros de clase?" "vecinos?" " son algunas de las maneras en que desde que éramos pequeñas, el mundo nos recordaba a mi hermana y a mí que no pertenecían naturalmente a la misma familia.

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Esta es mi familia. Ellos son Irlandeses-Estadounidenses, de Dublín, Irlanda. Hasta los 15 años de edad, fueron mi única influencia cultural y familiar.

En 1990 nací y fui nombrada Alejandra Yaqui. Mi madre, Kaqchikel, llamada Esther Yaqui, era de Santiago Sacatepéquez (y representado por el vestido que llevo puesto). Fui adoptada por la familia Givens del estado de California y me dieron el nombre de Gemma. Y por lo que cuentan los registros oficiales, mi adopción marcó tanto el final de mi identidad guatemalteca como el comienzo de mi identidad estadounidense.
En el 2005, charlaba sobre mi familia con la dueña de una galería de arte indígena de los Estados Unidos. Le contaba que recientemente me había hecho miembro del grupo Irlandés de mi escuela. Le causó mucha gracia y risa. Después de esto, ella y su esposo se preocuparon por mí: la niña que no sabía quién era. Ellos se convirtieron en mi segunda familia, esa que me enseñó a sentirme orgullosa de mi identidad indígena, aún cuando no supiera de mis orígenes por completo. Me enseñaron las diferentes formas a través de las cuales la cultura y la colectividad son expresadas por los grupos indígenas en las américa.

Quizás usted se pregunte, ¿por qué no solo visitar una comunidad guatemalteca? El estado de California es el hogar de cientos de miles de guatemaltecos, especialmente mayas. En cualquier momento podría haber tomado un tren y haber entrado en una comunidad de habla Mam o incluso Kaqchikel. O en cualquier caso, aprender el Español.

Les pediría que imaginen el estado psicológico de una niña cuya prioridad es la supervivencia. No encajo con mi familia adoptiva. Étnicamente, soy diferente. Mi familia no practica la cultura guatemalteca ni habla el Español. Una vez, mi primo no recordaba si yo era de Honduras o de Guatemala. Como alguien hipersensible a la pertenencia, lo que entendí de eso fue, "no somos latinoamericanos, no hablamos español". Entonces, para una niña que intenta sobrevivir existencialmente, el puente más seguro a través del vacío cultural era la indigeneidad en inglés, de una manera en la que mi familia adoptiva también pudiera conectarse, comprender y aceptar.

Para nosotros, los que nacimos en Guatemala y fuimos adoptados y criados en el Norte Global, el acceso a nuestro pasado no es sencillo. Para algunos de nosotros, no está disponible para nada.

Este clip de un documental de Telemundo ofrece un contexto que explica más:
Entonces, ¿cómo podemos afirmar ser verdaderamente guatemalteco? La escritora y poeta estadounidense Maya Angelou nos enseñó que "si no sabes de dónde vienes, no sabes a dónde vas". Pero ¿Cómo escribimos nuestras propias historias sin un contexto genético o histórico en el que situarnos? ¿Cómo separamos la verdad de las creencias creadas para llenar el vacío donde deberían estar los hechos? Por último, ¿cómo entender todas estas respuestas siendo un recién nacido o un niño pequeño dado en adopción internacional?

En el 2012, creé una organización comunitaria llamada Next Generation Guatemala que se dedica a los casi 50,000 adoptados guatemaltecos que están respondiendo estas preguntas. Juntos, exploramos el significado de la autonomía en relación a la adopción transnacional. Nuestro camino consiste en reconciliar nuestras identidades biológicas y adoptadas en una sola persona, y nuestras perspectivas ofrecen nuevos conocimientos sobre lo que significa integrar estas múltiples identidades en las diferentes sociedades en las que vivimos.

Hasta la fecha, hemos definido seis áreas principales de identidad con las que nuestra comunidad lidia a lo largo de nuestras vidas. Estas seis áreas comunitarias de identidad no siguen un orden y también suelen estar interconectadas. Me centraré en tres. El primero es nuestra relación con nuestras familias adoptivas, que discutí en la introducción.
Nuestra relación con nosotros mismos

Nuestra relación con padres adoptivos y familias

Nuestros parejas, relaciones, hijos; nuestra familia elegida

Búsqueda de nuestros seres queridos, reunión, conexión con nuestras familias biológicas

Nuestras culturas y países adoptivos y biológicos

Nuestras comunidades

FAMILIA BIOLÓGICA

Mientras estaba en la universidad, busqué oportunidades para visitar Guatemala. La compulsión por ver mi genética reflejada de vuelta en mí era mucho más fuerte que el compromiso con mis estudios. La necesidad de encontrarme fue tan fuerte que no me lo pensé dos veces antes de visitar Guatemala con cero conocimiento sobre cómo hablar español; cero conocimientos sobre antecedentes históricos o culturales; sin preparación psicológica para lo que me encontraría; y sin el apoyo social de otros adoptados de Guatemala o del país, o el acompañamiento de mi familia. Si pudiera ofrecer hoy un consejo a la yo de aquel entonces, me sugeriría que hiciera todo el viaje al revés. Pero esta atracción es tan conmovedora y profunda que nuestros puntos focales de identidad no
pueden estar sujetos a ningún orden en particular. El adoptado sigue aquello hacia lo que se ve obligado en ese momento particular de su vida.

Pienso que todos tenemos la esperanza de estar con nuestros seres queridos al final de nuestras vidas. Para el momento en el que encontré a mi madre, ella ya se había ido a algún lugar al cual no pude seguirle.

La experiencia de ser adoptada me conectó con los estados unidos, Irlanda y Guatemala. Olvidar una de estas conexiones me impidió tener la oportunidad de decirle adiós a mi madre.

Este próximo punto de enfoque es buscando a nuestros seres queridos y reconectando con nuestras familias biológicas. No todos los adoptados quieren o necesitan esto. Y para los casi 50,000 adoptados guatemaltecos cuyas adopciones fueron manejadas ilegal o inadecuadamente quizás nunca encuentren las respuestas a sus preguntas sin importar cuánto se esfuercen. Este tipo de incertidumbre requiere mucha fe, perdón y fortaleza –para ser capaz de crear una identidad completamente separada del concepto de etnia, cultura y los lazos genéticos, sin importar la forma en que el mundo proyecte sus interpretaciones de todos estos elementos en nosotros.

CULTURA Y PAÍS

Imagine de nuevo el estado psicológico de un niño pequeño que necesita que le enseñen quién es. Si nuestras familias biológicas no están disponibles para nosotros, o no queremos buscarlas, ¿quién nos enseña a ser guatemaltecos? Cuando me hice una prueba de ADN, supe que era casi 100% maya, pero ¿qué importa eso si no sé lo que eso significa?

La falta de respuestas disponibles sobre mi identidad por parte de mi familia biológica me proyectó hacia el próximo punto de enfoque de la comunidad, mi cultura y mi país.
Después de mis estudios en el extranjero, quería aprender más sobre Guatemala. Y en el método clásico híbrido adoptado, elegí un curso de idioma Kaqchikel organizado en Guatemala pero patrocinado por una Universidad Americana. Durante seis semanas estudié mi lengua materna con hablantes nativos de Kaqchikel junto con el rostro familiar de los organizadores estadounidenses, que también podrían parecerse a mi propia familia.

Después del curso, elegí quedarme en Guatemala para seguir respondiendo la pregunta de “cómo ser guatemalteco”. La respuesta para mí vino después de retrasar los últimos pasos de mi madre en la vida. Me mudé a la ciudad de Guatemala a pocas cuadras de su último trabajo. Dejé de ser la única persona guatemalteca en la sala. Más bien nadie me notó en absoluto: hice mis compras de víveres en el mismo mercado en que ella lo hacía, tomé el autobús todos los días hasta la zona donde estaba mi trabajo, recorrí la ciudad en bicicleta y exploré los alrededores cercanos a donde vivía. Estaba persiguiendo a su fantasma, pero necesitaba entender cómo era la vida desde su perspectiva. Fue un año en el que a veces viví la soledad, pero también fue un año que me informó más sobre mi identidad que cualquier de mis documentos de identificación guatemaltecos.
¿Quién es el responsable de devolvernos a la cultura que perdímos como resultado de ser adoptados? ¿Pueden nuestros padres adoptivos ser practicantes y maestros de nuestra cultura? ¿Es el viaje para reconectarnos con nuestra cultura un esfuerzo solitario? Si bien las respuestas a estas preguntas varían en la práctica, lo que sabemos con certeza es que nuestra cultura y herencia están en la primera línea entre las prioridades de la comunidad. En una encuesta de este mes que evaluó los temas de interés para la discusión, el sesenta y nueve por ciento de la comunidad votó por la cultura y el patrimonio en contra de la salud mental.

Nuestra relación con la cultura y el país representa una brecha que Next Generation Guatemala ha tenido como objetivo resaltar y llenar a través del apoyo de pares y con las organizaciones y personas guatemaltecas que se han ofrecido a enseñarnos.

Por mi historia, he descrito tres de los puntos de enfoque de nuestra comunidad, cómo están interconectados y cómo cada uno informa un aspecto de nuestra identidad. Espero que a través de
este modelo, puedan ver las diferentes prioridades del adoptado en lo que se refiere a la identidad, y entender por qué la relación de cada adoptado con ser guatemalteco es diferente.

CONCLUSIÓN - QUIÉNES SOMOS “EN EL EXTRANJERO”

En noviembre pasado, Carlos y yo estábamos tratando de describir la identidad de la persona adoptada para un artículo de opinión.

Sugerimos el entendido de que si una persona completa se equivale a un cien por ciento, la persona adoptada tiene el privilegio de sumar en una sola identidad un doscientos por ciento; cien por ciento guatemalteco y cien por ciento norteño global. Sin embargo, no debemos limitarnos a agradecer este privilegio único. No todos los adoptados de Guatemala quieren reclamar una identidad del doscientos por ciento.

El trauma de la adopción en la primera infancia forman parte del proceso. El privilegio de la inmersión no es igual a la aceptación total en los dos mundos a los que pertenecemos.
Que fuimos adoptados de Guatemala es un hecho. Pero ser parte de la próxima generación de guatemaltecos es acción; una expresión de una identidad compleja que, si bien es diferente para todos nosotros, también es verdadera y singularmente guatemalteca.

Presentando en:
- Indigenous Diasporas, University of California (UCLA), May 2021
- La voix des adoptés Bicentenaire de l'indépendance du Guatemala, Lyon France, September 2021
- 200 años - Centroamérica en el mundo/200 Years of Central America in the World, Berlin, Germany, September 2021
Reunited: An Interview with Tori Briggs and Garrett Marcks

An Interview by Carly Tagen-Dye

In Winter of 2022, I was put in touch with Tori Briggs, a Guatemalan adoptee who currently lives in Texas with her family. After taking a DNA test, and with help from the Next Generation Guatemala Facebook group, she found what so many adoptees seek throughout their lifetime: a connection with a biological family member. Tori’s brother, Garrett, was raised in a different family and a different state, but these two siblings were finally brought together, forming a new relationship all on its own, and truly representing the next generation of Guatemala. I had the chance to talk with both Tori and Garrett about their incredible journey back to one another.

Note: This interview has been edited and condensed for readability. You can watch the recorded interview here: https://youtu.be/oHyw6r1v7DY

Next Generation Guatemala: I was curious if you two could talk a bit about your upbringings: where in Guatemala you were adopted from, where you ended up being raised, and what those environments were like.

Tori Briggs: We were both born in Chiquimula, Guatemala.

Garrett Marcks: Yup. I really don’t remember anything from Guatemala because I was a baby [when I was adopted.] I was [around] a year and a half. I was adopted by the Marcks family, my family now. I have an older sister. She is now twenty. I had a pretty good childhood. My family is super cool. [We like] trips and traveling and going places.

NGG: A lot of people [in our community] have had this experience/sense of cultural disconnect depending on where they grew up. Did you two have that experience as well? Is that what provoked the search to look for your biological family members?

G: Definitely. I think I started feeling that way around middle school. When I started middle school, I started realizing, “Oh, I'm actually adopted.” It hit me, finally. I started doing research. Then, my mom told me that I might have a biological sister in Texas. We started our search from there.

NGG: Is that how you found out about the Next Generation Guatemala Facebook group?

G: Yeah. I did a DNA test to see if Tori did one too, but it turns out that I met a possible cousin there. She told me about the Facebook group.
NGG: That’s awesome. Have [you and Tori] ended up meeting each other in person yet? Or has communication solely been over the internet or through Facebook or email?

T: We actually have met in person. We met back in November. It was really fun. It was close to the time when we found out that we were related. There wasn’t really any time to let that sink in before we met each other. I was super happy and excited to meet Garrett, but at the same time, there wasn’t much time for me to let it sink in. But it was still fun!

NGG: I can definitely imagine how that would be a very overwhelming experience. Did you meet in Texas or somewhere else?

T: We met in Texas. I’m very grateful that Garrett and his family were able to come [here] because I don’t like traveling. Flying scares me. I’m so thankful that they adjusted to coming here because I’m really bad in new situations.

NGG: How did your families react to the news? It sounds like they were pretty supportive, which is very nice to hear.

G: My mom was super supportive about the whole thing. Once we actually figured out that Tori was my sister, all of us just bawled for ten minutes straight. [Before the reunion], my mom and I stayed up every single night, searching on Facebook, Twitter, and every social media app [for my family members.] Finally, I found someone. It was really cool.

NGG: Definitely. I feel like a question that a lot of fellow adoptees have after finally meeting their birth families is how to begin the process of trying to get to know one another. I know from other people in the group that that process has been difficult for some, whether that has been through literal communication and trying to find a medium to do it, or just that weird feeling of [figuring out] what to say to somebody after [so long.] I’m curious what the process was like for you. Did that connection happen immediately? Did it take some time? How do you two currently maintain a relationship today?

G: I feel like me and Tori just connected instantly. There was no getting to know each other. We text and Facetime every once and a while. I did a similar project for my senior project about international adoption, so I interviewed Tori for this.

T: I had [actually] known about Garrett for a few years. I knew that I had a brother, but here’s the thing: in my paper, it says that our mother kept him. I didn’t know he was here [in the United States] so I wasn’t looking for him here. I don’t know. I’ve never felt this connection with a person before. Usually, I’m distant to new people, but something about knowing that he is my flesh and blood is more than I’ve shared with anyone, ever. Something about that is just so amazing.

NGG: Definitely. I can certainly imagine how special that must feel to be able to see somebody who comes from the same place as you. To connect to that, what do you think is one of the most valuable things you’ve learned from the experience of reconnecting with each other?
G: Something that I’ve learned is that I’m not the only one who’s gone through this kind of identity crisis and struggle of trying to know where I come from. I thought it was just me because I didn't really know anyone else who was internationally adopted. I thought I was the only one who was going through this. When me and Tori met up in Texas, we went for a walk and talked. She was talking about the same [things] and explaining the same feelings that I had.

T: I feel the same way. I am the only one that I know who had been internationally adopted. I didn't have any kind of support group in this area in my life. [For] my entire life being here in the United States it’s been “this is my family.” I love my family more than anything, so it’s hard to have conversations about this with [my] parents because to them, I am theirs. But to me, there is a part of me that’s missing. They may not see it, but I feel it.

NGG: I understand that feeling 100%.

T: I’m so excited to have found the Facebook group. I like going there and reading what people say. I just think, “I’m not the only one who felt that way or feels that way currently.” It’s like, “Oh I’m not by myself.” It’s great. I spend a lot of my time there.

NGG: I do too. I know, also, that in the Facebook group, a lot of people are either beginning the search of trying to find biological family members or have found them and don’t know what to do from there. Do you have any advice for someone who might be searching but doesn’t necessarily know where to start or who wants to begin that first step of reconnecting with their roots?

G: Do a DNA test if you can. That’s where I gained a lot of my information. If I hadn’t done one, I would have never found the Facebook group. I would have never talked to my cousin. I would have never ended up meeting Tori. That’s really important.

T: I agree with that. I didn't think [that I had] relatives here in the United States because I’d never heard of it. I’ve always felt like everyone was back in Guatemala. The DNA test [helped] figure out my genealogy and such. I recommend a test.

NGG: Finally, is there anything else you’d like to add?

G: [Tori and I] are meeting up again in March. Our entire family is going to go on a little vacation in Florida. I’m really excited about that.
Closing thoughts

If the reunion between Tori and Garrett was the only connection made from Next Generation Guatemala (NGG), it would have been enough to call NGG a success of a lifetime. But over the last ten years, NGG has connected over 800 adoptees from 20 countries around the world. Our members have developed friendships, supported each other’s searches for birth families, connected with genetic relatives, met in-person across the United States and Europe, traveled together to Guatemala, and gone on to create their own spaces and projects—some have even met their partners within our community! Next Generation Guatemala’s values and model of success is what’s possible through community supported mental health, healing, education, awareness, and empowerment.

Our future

Healing backwards through time and healing intergenerational trauma requires the support of as many generations of people as we can connect, not just adoptees. Our children will play a part, our parents, our communities, mentors. Our first (years long) Next Generation chapter was to identify and connect with our unique generation. Our next includes identifying and connecting our community with the resources to relearn what was lost to help merge our two worlds into one whole person.

Connect with us

In 2019, our community voted on what we wanted to learn about from a Guatemalan cultural perspective and around the topic of adoption. If you are excited about, study, or have traditional knowledge in any of these selected areas and would like to lead a workshop, webinar, or meetup with us, we want to meet you! We welcome you to support the next generation of Guatemalans.

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José Mario Dellow

I am an artist and educator from the UK. I studied art at the University of Oxford, and education at the Institute of Education, University College London. My expanded practice involves research and action in care, education, and relationships. I am also the Pastoral Lead for a progressive school in London.
Juan Antonio Elvira Calito

Juan Antonio Elvira Calito was born in Amatitlán, Guatemala in 1982. After a few years spent in a social center, he became a Spanish teacher.
Antonio Giannico

My name is Antonio and I’m 26. I was adopted at a very young age to Switzerland. I recently graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Contemporary History, and I am working part-time. I’ll be starting my master’s degree in the fall.
Gemma Givens

Gemma Givens was adopted from Guatemala to California. Her search and reunion inspired her to create Next Generation Guatemala (NGG), an organization that connects generations of Guatemalan adoptees around the world in community, culture and through their birth country. Her story has been covered by the Associated Press, Nomada Magazine, Berkeley News, and Emmy Award-winning documentary, The Lost Children of Guatemala, by Telemundo. Gemma was a speaker for the forum Volverte a Ver, Niñez Desaparecida en Guatemala, hosted by Grupo Apoyo Mutuo. Next Generation Guatemala received an honorable mention in the “New Ideas for Nonprofit Organizations” category for the 2020 Emprendete Guatemala competition.
Glenna Gobeil

Glenna Gobeil is a graduate student at Quinnipiac University studying Public Relations. She lives in Springfield, Pennsylvania and is currently an intern at a local news station in Philadelphia. Her interests include reading, photography, writing, and exercising. She hopes to one day travel across different countries in Latin America and own her own business in the food or communications industry.
Thomas LaPorte is a short story horror fiction writer who is also known for crafting a poem or two. Having been adopted from Guatemala at the age of 8 months old and brought to the United States, Thomas resides where he was raised in South Brunswick, New Jersey. Thomas is a bisexual enigma of an enigma; unpredictable, sly, playful, a wildcard of sorts—despite the crucibles he has endured. He has maintained his sanity through fiction and the imaginary. In fact, a dose of reality is the equivalent to a shot of epinephrine—which would only exasperate his panic disorder.

Thomas has pursued the growth of his narrative sharing skillset, obtaining his Bachelors of Arts in Writing Arts and Masters of Arts in Writing from Rowan University. He is currently crafting a collection of braided short stories and enjoying every minute of his writing. He hopes to one day find fame through his fiction.
Maggie Linzey

Maggie was born in Mazatenango, Guatemala. She has a passion for writing and expressing her thoughts through the written word. Raised in a heavily Irish-American family, many of her poems search for the balance between being Guatemalan and identifying with Irish culture/heritage.
Samuel “Will” Levine

Will was adopted at six months to the Levine family in Midcoast Maine, where they lived until age eighteen. They went to undergraduate school at Castleton University in Western Vermont, completing a BA in History with a focus in Latin American studies. The journey from there took Will across the country to Seattle, Washington, where they began their career in the public sector. After a few years in education, Levine returned to school to complete the master's in education in School Counseling and eligibility for mental health counseling at Seattle University. They currently work as a counselor in Tacoma, Washington.
Izabel Lopez Raymundo

My name is Izabel Lopez Raymundo, born in Nebaj, Guatemala in 1980. I was adopted at the age of four and I now live in Belgium. I am a mother and I work in image art, photography and illustration.

*Artist Statement*

The idea here is on the left a sleeping baby in a garment in the color of Guatemala, in front of Lake Atitlan and during the day against a tree. On the right, the same older child, at night against the tree but with more "European" clothes. One can imagine that the continuity of the lake represents the North and the colors represent that of New Generation Guatemala (gray sky; green, red, yellow clothes).

I would like to thank the Next Generation Guatemala team for giving me this great opportunity to create a drawing that expresses the sometimes complicated feeling that one can feel when one is adopted; two worlds that make us who we are.
Carly Tagen-Dye

Carly Tagen-Dye is a writer and editor based in New York City. A graduate from the BFA writing program at Pratt Institute, she writes fiction, nonfiction, criticism and essays. Her work has appeared in *The Augment Review, NY Press, Alma* and *The Sock Drawer*, among others. She was previously the editor-in-chief of *The Prattler*, Pratt Institute’s arts and culture magazine, and has done editorial work for *The Brooklyn Rail*, 826NYC and *Maya America Journal*.

Born in Guatemala and raised in the United States, Tagen-Dye's work aims to center Latin, especially Central American, and other underrepresented voices, as well as put language to the areas where complex identities intersect. She has completed her first book, an adult literary fiction novel about a family who immigrates from Guatemala to Delaware in the 1980’s and is currently working on a second novel.
Hola a todos! My name is Sophie from Belgium and Alejandra from Guatemala. Born in 1984, I was adopted in 1985 by an extraordinary mother. I always ask myself about my roots and my country, Guatemala. That country has always been a part of my life. I have always claimed my Maya origins and searched for the truth about my biological family. Since 2017, I’ve tried to help and inform adopted persons from Guatemala in Belgium and France, as a volunteer for the association I co-founded from 2017 to 2019. In October 2021, I joined the French association “La Voix des Adoptés” (VDA) to support people who search for their biological origins, with our official partner, La Liga.
Leah Wall

My name is Leah Wall, and I am currently studying at Tufts University, double majoring in Clinical Psychology and Latin American Studies. I was adopted from Guatemala at a very young age—an experience that has shaped who I am today. I dedicate my work to my fellow transracial adoptees.