

**THE COORDINATED MANAGEMENT OF  
A CULTURALLY DIFFUSED IDENTITY**



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Internationally Adopted People and  
the Narrative Burden of Self

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Boca Raton

*The Coordinated Management of a Culturally Diffused Identity:  
Internationally Adopted People and the Narrative Burden of Self*

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*Dedicated to my daughter, Maria Isabel, my wife, Joanna and  
my two furry four-legged muses, Snyderley and Cosmo.*

*In gratitude for my entire family:  
The Leinaweavers, Engels and Bennetts.*

*In appreciation of each participant, my dissertation chair, committee and the  
many conversation partners who have supported me through this journey.*



## AND SO I AM A STORYTELLER

And so I am a storyteller  
I was born a storyteller  
Stories were my kin  
I spun and was spun  
Self-soothing stories  
To wrap myself in  
Stories that were handed down  
Stories made and given  
Stories made for me to live in  
Stories withheld  
Stories whispered  
Stories never told  
Stories that crossed the lines  
Between fact and fantasy and fairy tale  
And back again.

Sometimes it seems to me  
As if my life is living proof  
Of that poetic Celtic truth  
Of the child within the crane bag  
Cast into the sea  
The child that slips into the crack  
Between the worlds  
To journey in the dark of the oyster shell  
The friction that creates the pearl  
This journey is as long as it is hard  
This journey is the making of a bard  
  
So I have woven myself a story shawl  
From these strands of a yarn.

(Margot Henderson, Poem, in Treacher & Katz, 2000)



## ABSTRACT

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Internationally adopted persons confront multiple challenges in constructing their identities. This study of the narrative burden of self looks at and interprets the dynamic process in which internationally adopted people develop, coordinate and manage their sense of self, identity and cultural/racial personhood. Drawing on the theory of the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), the study focuses on their use of orphaning and adoption stories to most skillfully position and tell one's origin story in concert with one's internal sense of self, and the pressures and forces found in interpersonal and intercultural dialogue. The research reveals how internationally adopted people develop and demonstrate varying levels of game mastery in managing societal scripts and oppressive frames of stigma. Through this game mastery, the research brings to view how the participants have reflexively learned to claim ownership of their stories and develop a sense of agency while fashioning self-empowering narratives out of the resources of their personal root journeys to better manage, frame and coordinate the meaning of their stories across cultural and interpersonal boundaries.



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# CHAPTER I

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## INTRODUCTION

In an era when international adoption continues to receive a great deal of attention, there is a growing need to further understand and make meaning of this historical practice and its effects upon human development and sociocultural systems. International adoption is challenging the notions of a traditional family. International adoption is even becoming framed as a vogue trend with examples of this witnessed daily in the movies, TV, literature, and the media's exposes of average families and celebrity international adoptions.

Why is studying international adoption important? In a time where there is an increase in step/blended families, families headed by gay and lesbian partners, mixed race families, single-parent households, and so on, studying international adoption creates insight into how society is constructed, families are formed, and individual identities are shaped (Fisher, 2003). As such, "normal" families are no longer just blood relationships; they are socially constructed as a matter of choice. International adoptees are the living evidence of these social changes.

To study the stories of identity development as relayed by internationally adopted people, new frontiers exist in regards to notions of global diversity and the understanding of human development within the complexities of a globalizing, interconnected world.

This research study represents a conversational turn on the topic of international adoption. It is also a parallel inquiry into how human beings, in this case internationally adopted people, construct, coordinate, and manage a sense of self, identity, and origin through narrative. More specifically, this research is an investigation and exploration into what it means to own, author and communicate one's origin story, to reflexively tell an ongoing, generative narrative that both arises out of and casts back to the crossroads of the existential and the intercultural.

Thus, the research is focused around the following question: *How do adult individuals, who were adopted internationally, manage, frame, and coordinate the meaning of their adoption and orphaning (origin) narratives across cultural and interpersonal boundaries?*

I come to this research and craft this inquiry out of personal experience: I am a person who happens to be internationally adopted. I was born in Colombia, adopted, and also an American. I am native to this terrain and draw from my own lifeworld in setting the scene for this research study. As a first-generation Colombian adoptee, I feel a duty to pay it forward to the next generations of internationally adopted people. In paying things forward, I hope that through this research I am able to bring to light new insights into the particularity of a human experience and reveal the mysteries of untold, unknown, and sometimes untellable stories held by members within this community.

### **Overview of Research Topic**

One's origin story and its episodes of orphaning and adoption are emotive subjects entangled in narrative webs of confusion, fantasy, bias, beliefs and emotions. Internationally adopted people are born into stories and become storytellers. Terms like *mother*, *family* and *culture* are not neutral statements of fact. These terms pivot upon interpretation and continually shift and overlap between boundaries of personal, cultural and social significance. International adoptees are a native species of the post-modern condition.

The narratives surrounding the experience of being orphaned and adopted make a profound difference in the development of one's identity. These narratives contribute and shape an individual's capacity for reflection, resiliency, and strength. The origin narrative becomes a wellspring for personal mythos. International adoption narratives may also hold the social scripts of others.

To this end, internationally adopted people are uniquely challenged, as the international adoption component typically forges new complexities that encapsulate an in-between-ness, or liminality, found within and around being a person who identifies with being transnational, transcultural and transracial. Thus the origin stories of internationally adopted people are woven into the fabric of a third space sphere of liminal being.

### **Historical Overview of International Adoption**

International adoption is not just an American trend. It has become an equally popular choice for citizens in many other "first-world" Westernized nations such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the

UK, Spain, Sweden, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and many other European countries (Carp, 2002; Volkman, 2005).

International adoptions may also be referred to as inter-country, transnational, transracial, multiracial, or cross-cultural adoptions. For the purpose of this study, I will refer to this phenomenon as international adoption, which includes in its definition transcultural, transnational, and transracial components.

Official modern-day records of international adoption began in the aftermath of World War II, where orphans, children born out of wedlock, and children from displaced or lost families became prime candidates to be adopted by soldiers and families in the United States, Canada, Sweden and other developed and wealthy countries who were spared from the ravages of war (Pilotti 1993). Subsequently, in the wars waged in Korea and Vietnam, adoption movements began to rescue children affected from these wars, with the intention to offer them a better life than in their war-torn homelands (Volkman, 2005).

From World War II through today, the typical international adoptive parents have been well educated and White (Goodman & Kim 1999). In the United States, the push to look beyond domestic adoption options was also influenced in part by the U.S. Civil Rights movement and protests of the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) who challenged the appropriateness and morality of domestic transracial adoptions, particularly African American children to White parents. As such, between the war movements and the Civil Rights era, the overall outcome resulted in a huge influx of Korean and Vietnamese adoptees. As an example of the size and scope of this growing social trend in the United States, since 1958, the Evan B. Donaldson Institute reports there have been over 100,000 Korean adoptions since the Korean war ceased being an active military conflict ("International Adoption Facts," 2002).

Today, international adoptions remain as a popular option for creating a family. This is not just because of the historical drivers, but also due to the perception of a paucity of White babies available for domestic adoption (Carp, 2002). At 2005 levels, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2007) reports over 22,000 children are adopted from more than three-dozen countries per year, with China averaging 7,000 children of the total sum adopted into the United States. There has been a 248% increase in international adoptions to the United States from 1988 to 2002.

While the intention behind international adoptions has been to provide a loving family and a better life for an orphaned child, adopting across national, cultural and racial boundaries has created a new world of unintended circumstances, particularly in countries such as America where sameness within family is an unquestioned norm (Volkman, 2005). As an example, in May 2008, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute released a report citing the need to overhaul inter-ethnic and transracial adoption policies and practices by citing the fallout and unintended consequences of colorblindness and the effects of this blindness within policies and practices made in relation to the United States 1994 Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA; Smith, McRoy, Freundlich, & Kroll, 2008). In accordance with this report, the practices of adoption professionals combined with the MEPA policies have contributed to a lack of transracial resources (including training and family support), and the development of ineffectual practices, which not only discount the complexities of transracial placement, but also fail to pick up on clues that signal need for further investigation and family support.

Beyond biological and racial ties, internationally adopted children lose identity and connection to their language and culture of origin, but also gain a new family history with its own racial, cultural, and linguistic makeup. The net result is a socially constructed hybrid identity, which is the composite of all of these markers. This influences the creation of an international adoptee identity.

Because of these globalizing social trends, new and different issues have emerged, particularly around issues such as identity, culture, ethnicity, race, language, belonging, connectedness, citizenship, and public policy. In many ways, each internationally adoptive family has become a microcosm of race and intercultural relations in North America and other Western nations.

### **Non-Adoptee Messages and Voices of the Adopted**

Because of international adoption's historical backdrop, and the increasing trends toward international adoption as a way to create a family, there is often a view that international adoptees are children who have been rescued. International adoption has in many ways been framed as a movement born out of first world compassion helping the abject and forgotten in the third world. In turn, the practices and messages of international adoption have spurred many people to step in and get involved with some humanitarian aspect of international adoption.

In response to this, adoption professionals, adoptive parents, academic researchers, policy officials, and other interested experts have involved themselves and become self-appointed proxy agents, spokespeople, and social actors in efforts to give voice to those too young to speak for themselves and create better systems of support. In many cases these surrogates have “gone native” in order to best serve and communicate the interests and long-term care of children, women, and communities. In order to fully represent the voice and interests of young children, non-adoptee messaging has become an accepted norm. As an outcome of this representation, there are a growing number of non-adoptee experts and caregivers who either overtly or covertly claim an extra level of representation of the “adoptee” voice. In essence, they claim they have gone native by virtue of their deep study of the community, professional knowledge, close or parallel association with, and observation of international adoptees. They use their expert status as a way to share how they have crossed over and returned to tell of their native-like experience. Thus these gone-native messages are being framed as an equivalent voice of witness to those who have actually been adopted and live the experience.

As a byproduct and outcome of this non-adoptee messaging, a great number of people and institutions have benefited from these parlayed views on international adoption. Movies, book deals, and professional and academic careers have literally been launched off of generations of children who do not yet have an “official” voice. Stories and non-native messages shared by these experts are given extra credence specifically because of their expert status as individuals who have gone native.

On the surface, the intention behind going native is clear: to optimally support and provide better representative messaging for the “international adoptee” and the system of international adoption. Accordingly, international adoption research has been conducted by non-adoptee researchers. The messaging in international adoption, however, is becoming a one-way affair, without the voices of those actually adopted (Larsen 2007).

In addition, international adoption research and writing in both the public and academic spheres has typically been done on or around the lives of children and adolescents (up to the age of 18). Exceptions to this have been few (as an example of adolescent research see Cederblad, Höök, Irhammar, & Mercke, 1999; Tieman, Van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2005).

Now, as internationally adopted children become adults, there are unintended consequences emerging as a result of this long-standing historical approach to studying adopted people and its epistemologies. Going native vs. being native is becoming a critical distinction and a question for many internationally adopted adults (and adopted people in general). Non-native messages and declarations of expert insight have alarmed many internationally adopted people. This is controversial. It is my belief that consumers and producers of knowledge in the public, academic and private spheres ought to provide more transparency around voice, authorship and point of view (including its limits). Otherwise the lines between “speaking for” and “speaking as” becomes blurred.

In a recent publication and first-person native account of adoption today, 39 transracial and internationally adopted people told stories about their experiences and did so to specifically challenge the chilling effect of these non-adoptee messages and institutionalized notions of who they are and why they are who they are:

This book is a corrective action. Over the past fifty years, white adoptive parents, academics, psychiatrists, and social workers have dominated the literature on transracial adoption. These “experts” have been the ones to tell the public – including adoptees – “what it’s like” and “how we turn out.” Despite our numbers and the radical way we have transformed the color and kinship of white families, the voices of adult transracial (including international) adoptees remain largely unheard. Our cultural production has been marginalized and essays discussing our personal experiences of adoption have remained undistributed and largely unknown... We seek to honor the multiplicity and complexity of the adoption stories gathered together under this umbrella. There is no homogenous transracial adoptee story, no single political line. Yet taken together, our writings create a hopeful vision of a different world. (Trenka, Oparah, & Shinn, 2006, pp. 1, 3)

I believe there are both pluses and minuses to doing native or insider research. As Kanuha (2000) and Delyser (2001) argue, doing insider research may actually be harder to do “correctly” because one may fail to notice certain clues or issues because one is overly familiar with the community. Natives may succumb to making unconscious and generalized truth claims based on their own experience. Essentially, their insider status can become a blind spot. Conversely, natives may become overloaded or flooded with information and not

know how to process data and separate the minutia from the meaningful.

Doing native research may have its challenges (for example the opportune skepticism raised by established non-native researchers); there are limits to how “native” one goes. Narayan (1993) notes that even native anthropologists are insiders only in certain regards because we all belong to several communities and sub-groups simultaneously. Therefore, insiders run into new gatekeepers and thus must continue to negotiate boundary crossings and work to access information and gain acceptance and trust.

While there are limitations with native research, there are obvious advantages. Gaining entry to native communities and establishing trust is high upon the list. The insider view allows the cultivation of new epistemological tracts by virtue of having an insight into new approaches to inquiry (Kanuha, 2000). In other words, insiders do not have all the answers, but they may know of unexplored areas to begin the digging and excavation.

The debate regarding “being native vs. going native” is a significant item of note and an important item to discuss, particularly in regard to the historical and current conversations going on within the international adoption community and its influence upon the global public sphere. In today’s world of international adoption, I believe the cultivation of a critical stance toward the mapmaker is the beginning of a healthy turn in how knowledge is consumed. Doing research and writing about adoption today should raise critical questions of authorship and intention. This applies equally to both natives and non-natives.

### **Researching a Native Diaspora**

As generations of international adopted people evolve into a significant demographic and become adults, I believe there is a need and desire for internationally adopted people to serve as researchers for their own growing population. As such, I felt obligated to be transparent and disclose my status as an internationally adopted person at the onset of this report. This status obviously affects how I have approached this research and I believe my status gives me a unique perspective into the world of my participants.

As a researcher of my own community of people, I approached this study and the participants themselves from the perspective of “yes, and...” meaning yes, they are international adoptees, and yes they are also human beings who happened to have had an incident

known as international adoption occur as a part of their life story. In a *New York Times* series on adoption and the American family, Hollee McGinnis, also adopted internationally, expressed a similar viewpoint by stating that to better understand international adoptee identity one must ask the question “who am I also known as (McGinnis 2007) .

I recognize there may be questions regarding my insider status. To some, there may be an argument that a complete outsider and non-adoptee perspective may be even more objective and desirable. Certainly as a researcher, holding an impartial, unbiased, and objective view is important. Yet with this project’s target population, I believe I am able to bring the best of both worlds to the table as a researcher: I argue I am actually both an insider and an outsider. Because of this, I operate from a dual perspective. I make this claim based on the fact that the international adoptee community-at-large is a diasporic population. As such, internationally adopted people often grow up in relational isolation. International adoptees often live as strangers to one another and/or in cultural silos (i.e., in subgroups such as Korean adoptees, Colombian adoptees, Chinese adoptees, etc.)

As an example of this isolation, I have lived my life in near complete isolation from all other internationally adopted people. I did not meet another adult international adoptee until 2 years ago when I was 37 years old and attended a conference for international adoptees. So, while I feel my status has given me a unique entry point, I arrived benighted and as an outsider knowing that my story does not, and cannot, predict or purport a broad or generalized norm. It is only one story along the continuum of experiences. As such, I undertook my research with the spirit of beginner’s mind.

This research project offered an opportunity to inquire with others from within the diaspora of international adoption to compare notes and reflections with those who have also grown up under this rubric. I sometimes joke that most of my life I have been the only one of my kind in the zoo of life. Now, I have been transferred to a new facility with others who share a similar life trajectory and story arc. As such, I have taken the opportunity to investigate and uncover the mysteries, that may or may not connect us as people and elicit new stories and narrative grammars to better understand our collective meaning making in order to socialize our stories and understand what it means to be.

So, while I hope this research exists as an addition to the canon of international adoption literature done by a native researcher, I think it is also important to highlight that I do not see this research as being solely intended for the international adoption community itself.

I also feel that the “going native vs. being native” debate can be marginalizing to both groups. The international adoption community, to a degree, has evolved into a community bound in its own dialogic solipsism and situated turf wars. After all, just because international adoption may be an ingredient or descriptor in this research, it does not mean it must be married to, obligated, by or owned by a specific community and its epistemologies. I believe there is a stuckness to this viewpoint and it misses the opportunities which emerge by seeing this as a “yes and” proposition. This is specifically why I framed the research question around the humanity found in the question, not the person’s taxonomy.



### LITERATURE REVIEW

*Research Question: How do adult individuals, who were adopted internationally, manage, frame, and coordinate the meaning of their adoption and orphaning (origin) narratives across cultural and inter-personal boundaries?*

This study of narrative emplotment and the passing narrative burden of storytelling the self has set out to look at and interpret the dynamic process in which the participants have coordinated and managed their sense of self through the story of one's root narrative. The research question is therefore grounded in the tension found when an individual endeavors to most skillfully position, reflect on and tell one's origin (orphaning and adoption) story in concert with one's sense of self, identity, culture, nationality, race, and life narrative. Do internationally adopted people draw upon their root narrative to tell one story, or many? Do social contexts influence or pressure the outcome of the story? How are internationally adopted identities socially constructed in the process of storytelling? How do they field their sense of identity, culture, and origin through their narrative? What do personal resources mean in the context of this research question?

I present this review of literature as a first turn in the overall discussion of research. This chapter begins to frame an approach to my analysis and interpretation of the research question itself. The literatures presented influenced my curiosity as an investigator as well as acted as a resource for the many derivative questions which emerged in the research process. In broad terms, I see this literature review as occupying two interconnected elements: international adoptee identity, and the social construction of identity through narrative dynamics. I see the later element as a way to unpack the problems and issues highlighted in the first element. These elements both speak to how I am framing this research, as well as how I am attempting to answer the research question itself.