Places of Othering and Safety Among Transracial International Adoptees: Urban Versus Non-Urban Environments and the Conceptual Framework of Third Space

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: transracial adoption, international adoption, third space, urban, suburban, race, culture, ethnicity, identity, placemaking.

Identity and environment are intertwined: identity shapes how individuals experience physical and social spaces, and the spaces we grow up in and inhabit also shape our identity. For my senior urban studies thesis, I focus on how identity shapes which physical spaces transracial international adoptees (TRIAs) experience othering and safety in.[1]

Before discussing how TRIAs distinctly experience the physical and social environments around them, what is essential to understand is that the lives of TRIAs begin with the loss of birth families, countries, and cultures. Unfortunately, this loss can feel overshadowed by transracial international adoption being glamorized as white parents saving children of color from poverty abroad. Further, TRIAs can feel a lack of belonging with their own racial group due to cultural differences, as well as from white people. This commonly leaves TRIAs in a strange gray area between racial, cultural, and national identities. It is this gray area, and its impact on spaces of belonging, that is the focus of my thesis.

Another term for the gray area that TRIAs exist in is called third space. Third space is a concept that was coined by the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha that describes a theoretical location of in-betweenness; lived experience that transcends common understandings of race, culture, and nationality. This social location can be isolating and distressing: TRIAs are a high risk population of, for example, mental health struggles, suicide, and substance abuse. This is all to say that this social location needs to be further examined as a way of providing more expertise

[1]Transracial adoption is when an adoptee is a different race than their adoptive parents. International adoption is when an adoptee is adopted into a different country than they were born in.

and resources on this topic. Being a TRIA myself, the chance to learn about others in similar situations seems like a step toward alleviating these negative impacts.

My research was guided by the following questions: as occupiers of third space, what places are TRIAs othered from? Where do they find belonging and safety? And do the answers to these questions differ depending on if a TRIA grew up in an urban or non-urban context? To answer these questions, I conducted five formal interviews and collected five mental maps from TRIAs born in Guatemala (3), South Korea (1), and China (1). Two people were from New York City and three were from suburban areas or small towns in the Tristate Area.

In this thesis, I argue that TRIAs experience a lack of spaces of belonging, especially in childhood, and that their spaces of othering and belonging have noteworthy commonalities. Whether a TRIA grew up in a city or not impacted the amount of spaces belonging they had access to, as well as the forms multicultural spaces came in. For example, the TRIAs in non-urban spaces partook more in place-making their own spaces of belonging in their homes whereas the TRIAs in New York City spoke more of finding places of belonging outside of their homes. Even with this difference, the places of othering and belonging/safety were described in similar manners by participants across the board. The spaces where the TRIAs in my study felt othering in childhood mostly continued in their 20s, but their places of belonging evolved to include more places similar to the concept of third space.

An unexpected finding was that the Asian participants were more comfortable in Asian majority spaces than the Latine (used in this thesis to mean individuals from countries in Latin America) participants were in Latine majority spaces. Although my participant pool is too small to make conclusions, this theme was prevalent and is worthy of future research.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my five participants: Thom, Kat, RG, Gil and Riri. Thank you for sharing your life experiences with me and for placing your trust in me to do them justice. All the interviews and maps were vastly different and each made their mark on my thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

The picture above is of my sister, Danya, and I the morning I came home from Guatemala. I was born in Guatemala City in 2001 and was matched with my adoptive parents Beth and Evan. From their recollection, Danya had always wanted a sister and that day she finally got her wish. At nine months old, my dad brought me home to San Francisco where I began a new life in a new country, a new culture, and a new family.

Taking inspiration from the spaces I enjoy being in and the spaces that cause me anxiety in cities such as San Francisco and New York City, my chosen topic for my thesis is transracial international adoptees (referred to as TRIAs) and common spaces they feel othering and belonging. I also took inspiration from scholarship that focuses on how identity shapes one's experience of public space (e.g. Lubitow, 2017). For clarification, transracial adoption is when an adoptee is a different race than their adoptive parents, and international adoption is when an adoptee is adopted into a different country than they were born in.

When I first began researching transracial international adoption in my junior year of college, it brought up a mixture of feelings. I was fascinated by the topic though and, to my

surprise, it gave me a sense of a foundation in relation to identity that I had never felt before. I speculate that this was because I had never resonated with any history before.

What I knew from my personal experience was that identity and environment are intertwined: identity shapes how individuals experience physical and social spaces, and the spaces we grow up in and inhabit also shape our identity. What I wondered about was how being a TRIA impacted this relationship between identity and environment. For my senior urban studies thesis, I have chosen to focus on how identity shapes which physical spaces TRIAs' experience othering and belonging in. For the sake of simplicity, I chose to limit my participants to people who live or have lived in the Tristate Area

Before discussing how TRIAs distinctly experience the physical and social environments around them, what is essential to understand is that the lives of TRIAs begin with the loss of their birth families, birth countries, and birth cultures. Unfortunately, this loss can for some people feel overshadowed by transracial international adoption being glamorized as white[2] parents saving children of color from poverty abroad. TRIAs can also feel a lack of belonging with their own racial group due to cultural differences, not just from white people. This commonly leaves TRIAs in a strange gray area between racial, cultural, and national identities. From my research over the past year, I found that this gray area highly influences many TRIAs and the spaces they wish to inhabit and the ones they wish to avoid.

Another term for the gray area that TRIAs exist in is called third space. Third space is a concept that was coined by the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha that describes a theoretical

[2]In this thesis, I do not capitalize the words white or whiteness. This is because Michael J Dumas's article "Against the Dark: Antiblackness in Education Policy and Discourse" made a significant impact on me. In this work, he writes that "White is not capitalized in my work because it is nothing but a social construct, and does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences of kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror…White is employed almost solely as a negation of others, nothing but false and oppressive," (Dumas 2016).

location of in-betweenness; lived experience that transcends common understandings of race, culture, and nationality. Sadly, this social location can be incredibly isolating and distressing. TRIAs are a high risk population. Adoptees, compared to non-adoptees, have higher suicidal tendencies (Festinger & Jaccard, 2012; Keyes, Malone, Sharma, Iacono, & McGue, 2013) and are at high risk of psychiatric illness (Hjern, Lindblad, & Vinnerljung, 2002). Meanwhile, transracial adoptees (TRAs) and TRIAs have increased rates of self-harm throughout their lives (Hjern, Palacios, Vinnerljina, Manhica, & Lindbald, 2020), as well as substance abuse (Susan F. Branco1 , Connie T. Jones2, and Sanna Stella, 2020) and eating disorders (Strand, Thorton, Birgegard, D'Onofrio, Bulik, 2020). All of which can commonly feel like hidden struggles due to the narrative that adoptees need to be grateful for being adopted.

This is all to say that this experience, and the gray area that many TRIAs inhabit, needs to be further examined as a way of providing more expertise and resources on this topic. More scholarship on TRAs and TRIAs will help validate these experiences and assist fellow adoptees to situate their own experience in comparison to others. Being a TRIA myself, studying how this social location impacts others in similar situations seems like a step toward alleviating these negative impacts.

Interestingly, there is minimal research available on the factors that shape the identities of TRIAs (Castner et al 2022). As someone who is interested in public space, racial identity, and the social networks of cities, I chose to study how location may shape the identities of TRIAs and, in turn, how their identities shape where they enjoy being and where they do not. My research was guided by the following questions: as occupiers of third space, do TRIAs have similar places they feel isolated from? Do they have similar places they feel belonging and safety in? If so, what are these places? Do the answers to these questions differ depending on if a TRIA grew up

in an urban or non-urban context? And lastly, does anything remain the same among their experiences despite their geographical differences?

I argue in this thesis that TRIAs indeed experience a lack of spaces of belonging, especially in childhood. I argue that they have similar places of othering and belonging despite geographical differences. Urban versus non-urban did, however, impact the amount of spaces of belonging a TRIA had access to, as well as the forms multicultural spaces came in. The TRIAs in non-urban spaces partook more in place-making their own spaces of belonging in their homes, whereas the TRIAs in New York City spoke more of finding places of belonging outside of their homes. Even with this difference, the way places of belonging and isolation were described by TRIAs were similar even if they came in different forms. I also found that the spaces where the TRIAs in my study felt othering in childhood mostly continued as people in their 20s, but that their places of belonging had evolved in adulthood to include more spaces similar to the concept of third space: multicultural spaces, the freeing elements of personal spaces, and virtual spaces for adoptees.

An unexpected finding was that the Asian participants were more comfortable in Asian majority spaces than the Latine[3] participants were in Latine majority spaces. Although my participant pool was too small to make conclusions, this theme was prevalent and is worthy of future research.

Importantly, one TRIA explained how the close-knit community of his small town protected him from feeling different all the time. This demonstrates an instance where a non-urban environment minimized othering for a TRIA in a way that a city could not, which is a crucial point because this thesis is not arguing that one context is better than another. Rather,

[3]Transracial adoption is when an adoptee is a different race than their adoptive parents. International adoption is when an adoptee is adopted into a different country than they were born in.

growing up in a city, the suburbs, or a small town are different experiences with their own benefits and challenges.

The study of urban versus non-urban settings alongside transracial adoption will help explore new territory on this subject. It will hopefully help equip the TRIA community with a more general understanding of the ways in which environments we are raised in influence how we experience places today. I believe that more knowledge on the community can be a source of healing and highlight a population with a distinct perspective on race and culture in the United States today.

In this thesis, I will first contextualize the emergence of transracial adoption in the United States and the ways in which it has been problematic in the historical background. I will then give an overview of the current literature and theory on the subject in the literature review, as well as explain why I chose third space as the main theoretical framework. Next, I will go through my methodology. And lastly, I will present my data and conclusions from the mental maps and the qualitative interviews in the data and analysis section.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

***Trigger Warning*:** I want to preface this section by flagging that this historical background may have content that is upsetting to TRAs and TRIAs. Recent history of transracial and international adoption worldwide is one of an unchecked industry with severe exploitation (Gerow 2009). The main goal of this historical background, besides giving context to the current state of adoption in the U.S., is to help adoptees feel okay about being critical of adoption. This is important because, drawing from experience, there is often a pressure to only feel grateful for being adopted. Adoptees, of all people, know that the feelings surrounding adoption are complex and confusing.

Although adoption is a recent phenomenon in modern U.S. history, adoption in human history has been practiced for centuries. Records of adoptions date back to as late as the Roman Empire as well as in ancient China ("What Is the History of Adoption?" 2019). Since my study is based in the U.S., I will review recent history that impacted U.S. adoption.

Transracial Adoption Post World War II

Transracial adoption took off in the United States after World War II. While today's most common form of American transracial adoption is white parents adopting Black children, such adoptions were unheard prior to World War II (Weaver 2018). When domestic adoptions occurred before the war, agencies used to prioritize race-matching: pairing adoptees with parents of the same race. This was largely due to segregation laws and social norms (Weaver 2018), the exception being Native American adoptees which will be expanded on later ("The Adoption History Project," 2012).

After World War II, however, race-matching was practiced less which was due to the demand for adoptable infants roughly doubling after 1945 (Weaver 2018). Another contributing factor to this shift was the many mixed race children that came out of World War II, e.g. in Japan. Unfortunately, many of these mixed race infants were abandoned which led to U.S. orphan rescue missions. A similar process repeated for the Korean War in 1953 ("The Adoption History Project," 2012). The Vietnam War in 1975 officially had "Operation Baby Lift" as a way of bringing home war orphans. This operation was then accompanied by a white savior narrative of the U.S. military saving children from the communist threat in Vietnam (Thompson 2019; Allen 2009). Here, these transracial adoptions were a convenient political tool.

World War II also spiked domestic transracial adoption. The demand for babies was rising with not enough white infants available for white adopting parents. Because of this, white parents began being more open to transracial adoption (Weaver 2018; Gerow 2008; "What is the History of Adoption," 2019). The first recorded transracial adoption was a Black child being adopted by a white family in Minnesota, 1948. This was immediately controversial to many Black people due to concerns that white couples could not appropriately prepare Black children for a racist society ("Brief History of Adoption in the United States," 2024). At this time, interracial marriage was still not legal, showing the reality that it was legal and acceptable for white people to adopt Black kids but not to marry Black people.

Between 1960 and 1976, there were more than 12,000 transracial adoptions recorded in the United States which were unprecedented rates (Weaver 2018). Advocates praised transracial adoption as a way of helping race relations through integration, while critics called it "cultural genocide" (Weaver 2018). As will be discussed in my thesis, adoption can indeed take away birth culture in a way that feels irreversible. A notable critic was the National Association of Black

Social Workers (NABSW) which made a statement against white couples adopting Black children in 1972 (“Brief History of Adoption in the United States,” 2024). In their statement, not only was the NABSW concerned that transracial adoption would distance Black kids from Black culture and ill prepare them for a racist society, they were calling out the inequitable access to adoption for Black parents in comparison to white.

The NABSW’s stance, as they hoped for, caused a lot of heated debate and rates of white people adopting Black kids plummeted as a consequence. Since then, though, white couples adopting Black children have been steadily increasing again (“Brief History of Adoption in the United States,” 2024; Weaver 2018). With the normalcy of multiracial families in the current day, it seems to me that rates will only keep increasing despite ongoing backlash.

Native American Transracial Adoption: The Race-Matching Exception

The exception to race-matching prior to World War II was the Indian Adoption Program that started in 1958. This program legalized the non-consensual adoption of Native American children to white families as a means of forced assimilation (“Indian Adoption Project,” 2012; Weaver 2018). According to the U.Nn Convention on the *Prevention and Punishment of the Crime Genocide*, enacted by U.N. in 1948 and the U.S. in 1988, the “Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” is an act of genocide. Here, adoptees being cut off from their birth culture and community was weaponized by the U.S. government.

This program lasted for approximately 10 years until congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), making it extremely hard to adopt a Native American child. ICWA argues that these protections are needed because children are collective resources that are vital for the survival of Native American communities (“Indian Adoption Project,” 2012; Weaver 2018). In

2018, the ICWA was challenged in the supreme court for being racially discriminatory but in 2023, it was upheld and ruled constitutional ("Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) (Haaland V. Brackeen)," 2023).

International Adoption Post World War II

International adoption into the U.S., similar to transracial adoption, mostly began after World War II and heavily overlaps with transracial adoption. As mentioned previously, the war left many fatherless families as well as mixed raced, often abandoned, children. Like with transracial adoption, interest in international adoption for white couples grew since the demand for adoption surpassed the supply of healthy white infants in the States.

Religious groups also caught on to the many orphaned babies from the war (e.g. from Korea, Japan and Germany) and undertook the task of finding them homes. From this point on, international adoption was paired with the narrative that the United States is a generous world power saving children worldwide from poverty. This narrative is oversimplified, though, since American intervention was, at times, directly what caused conditions to worsen in the countries they were adopting from (e.g. Guatemala and the U.S.-backed coup in 1954 that overthrew Guatemala's first democratically elected president in order for the U.S. to install a dictator that would preserve American economic interests) ("What is the History of Adoption?" 2019; "Brief History of Adoption in the United States," 2024; "International Adoptions," 2012).

An extremely influential case of international adoption came in 1955 when Henry and Bertha Holt of Oregon decided to adopt 8 Korean "war orphans" ("Brief History of Adoption in the United States," 2024). They were able to do so through a special act of Congress which then increased the awareness of international adoption. After their successful case, the Holts founded

the Holt International Children's Services which is still in service today. From this point on, international adoption rapidly increased ("What is the History of Adoption?" 2019; "Brief History of Adoption in the United States," 2024).

International Adoption After China's One-Child Policy

Rates grew exponentially after 1992 when China imposed the one-child policy. This is because China opened their orphanages for international adoption due to the thousands of Chinese daughters being abandoned at this time. With the demand for healthy infants increasing globally, and the lack of international legal frameworks, international adoption evolved into a booming and dangerously unregulated industry (Gerow 2009). The countries that provided the most children to the United States in 2000 were China, Russia, Guatemala, South Korea, Ethiopia, and Ukraine, making for 18,000 adoptions in total that year ("Adoption Statistics," 2024). All was justified by the narrative that these adoptees would be better off in the States rather than remaining in their birth countries. In reality, lack of oversight made way for mass corruption in adoption agencies (Gerow 2009).

Adoption had become "rife with conflict of interests" (Gerow 2009). Although not every case was coercive, there was enough to cause international alarm. Some examples of coercive tactics were intimidating or pressuring single mothers to give up their children, weaponizing language barriers (as was the case for Mayan mothers in Guatemala), and even the stealing of babies. Some agencies hired "bounty hunters" to find healthy babies who would at times be paid up to $10,000 for each find (Gerow 2009). This was especially common for poorer countries and became routine practices. Overall, the system "was driven by adoptive parents, the paying customer, to whom agencies and attorneys would cater" (Gerow 2009). Many parents did not

know about the coercive tactics, unfortunately. Overall, international adoption was exploiting single, impoverished mothers with "poverty being the leading cause of relinquishment," (Gerow 2009). By 2004, international adoption reached its highest numbers with 22,990 international adoptions taking place that year ("Adoption Statistics," 2024).

Due to the alarm of systematic corruption, many countries closed their doors to international adoption around this time and remain closed today. While there were adoptions that took place without corruption, there was overall too much abuse taking place ("What is the History of Adoption?" 2019). As a response to this unregulated period, an international treaty was proposed called the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect to Intercountry Adoption as a way of safeguarding internationally adoptees ("Brief History of Adoption in the United States," 2024). This treaty officially began being enforced in the United States in 2008. Since then, rates have drastically dropped with only 1,517 international adoptions into the United States taking place in 2022 ("Adoption Statistics," 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There is little to no research centered on the spatial experience of transracial adoptees or how transracial adoptee identity overlaps with the experience of cities, let alone New York City. There was, however, a plethora of psychological research on the transracial and international adoptee experience (Durkee et al 2019; Durkee and Gómez 2022; Ferrari et al 2015; Reinoso et al 2016; Reynolds et al 2021), as well as identity formation of transracial adoptees in relation to family dynamics (Ali 2014; Chang et al 2023; Barn 2018; Bendo et al 2019; Ferrari et al 2015; Goss 2018; Hrapczynski et al 2022; King 2011; Klocker and Tindale 2021; Kreider and Raleigh 2016; Louie 2015; Stangle 2016; Zhand et al 2023). Many of these studies overlapped with critical adoption essays which discuss the historical abuses and colonial roots of international and transracial adoptions (Bendo et al 2019; Hübinette 2004; Miranda 2022).

Korean international adoptees appear to have the most literature, followed by Black domestic adoptees. Other research, although at a smaller proportion, was centered on Native American domestic adoptees, Chinese international adoptees, Latine international adoptees, and a few on Ethiopian international adoptees. In the literature review, I will discuss how place and identity are being theorized together, concepts that could describe the lack of belonging in spaces for TRAs and TRIAs, my choice of third space as one of the main theories for this thesis, and the concept of reculturation.

Place-Identity

In this section, I will discuss the current literature on the concept of place-identity and explain why it is central to my research project. Åshild Lappegard Hauge, a professor of

architecture and environmental psychology at the University of Oslo, contextualizes the term place-identity. Professor Hauge prefaces that "the influence place has on identity in this article is seen as a result of a holistic and reciprocal interaction between people and their physical environment; people affect places, and places (and the way places are affected) influence how people see themselves," (Hauge 2007, 2). The relationship between place and people is thus being portrayed as mutual, as well as significant enough to impact someone's self-concept. The article also provides a definition of "place," which is characterized by Gerda M. Speller, professor of psychology at the University of Surrey, as "a geographical space that has acquired meaning as a result of a person's interaction with the space," (Speller 2000, 27).

Professor Hauge also makes the distinction between place-identity and place-attachment. The definition of place-attachment that is used in Hauge's article is from *Place Attachment* by Setha Low and Irwin Altman, an environmental psychologist and social psychologist respectively. They define place-attachment as "the feelings we develop towards places that are highly familiar to us, i.e., places we belong to," (Hague 1-2). Hauge clarifies that although place-identity is connected to place-attachment, place-identity is stronger and takes it one step further due to feelings of belonging evolving into identification.

The article also notes the limitations of place-identity, while at the same time argues why it is still worth studying. The main limitation of this concept is that it has not been as studied as other identity theories such as Social Identity Theory and Identity Process Theory. Place-identity also has less empirical and theoretical foundation. Even with this limitation, though, the article insists on the importance of place-identity: "instead of defining place-identity as an identity category equal to gender, ethnicity, or social class on a vertical level…, it is possible to think of place-identity as a dimension on a horizontal level, across other identity categories." Although

difficult to define due to lack of concrete empirical foundations, Hague proclaims that place significantly interacts with people's perceptions and developments of their own identities.

Exploring the concept of place-identity is central to my thesis due to its focus on how New York City, in comparison to suburban environments in the Tristate Area, impacts how transracial adoptees see themselves. I will be hyper focused on the interaction between New York City and identity, and hone in on how it impacts identity exploration.

A notable point is that individuals may not inherently understand how the environments they are in shape their identity exploration and formation. What can be said with certainty, though, is that individuals are hyper aware of the places/communities that they feel a lack of belonging or comfort with. This is perhaps especially so for transracial adoptees whose racial or ethnic appearance may not match the behaviors or culture they have learned from their adoptive parents. All impacts of place, both conscious or subconscious, demonstrate interaction between place and identity.

Theorizing In-Betweenness as Identity

This second focus of the literature review will explore concepts that speak to the lack of belonging TRAs can feel. This section connects place and identity with space, and highlights the gray area in which TRAs find themselves in relation to identity. Concepts that I found that could reflect this gray space were "third space" (Hübinette 2004; Samuels 2022; Malafronti 2022), "difference as self" and "the Other" (Malafronti 2022), "identification with difference" (Samuels 2022), and "liminality" (Draus 2023). From these concepts, third space stood out and became the main theoretical framework for this thesis.

Third space was coined by the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha in 1994. He describes third space as a social location and "the space where culture has no unity, purity or fixity, and where primordial notions of race and nation have been replaced by a floating and hybrid existence" (Hübinette 2004, 23). Tying this concept with transracial adoption, Tobias Hübinette, a professor in Intercultural Education at Karlstad University in Sweden, explains how he thinks it is "adopted Koreans, with all their differences and commonalities taken together, who provide a perfect example of such an existence in the third space between their birth country's utopian dream of a global ethnic Korean community, where the adoptees are essentialised as Korean brethren, and a Western culture demanding assimilation and loyalty," (Hübinette 2004, 23). This is because Korean adoptees are, for him, an example of an experience that transcends "race, citizenship, culture, religion and language," (Hübinette 2004, 16) and hence are in third space.

Gina Samuels, a professor of Social Work, Policy, and Practice at University of Chicago, also uses the social location of the third space in relation to transracial adoption. She first argues that being transracially adopted makes individuals susceptible to intersectional minoritized status which then creates the potential for epistemic trauma. She defines epistemic trauma as something that "structurally and relationally transmitted harms to a person as a knower and to their capacities for claiming, making sense of, and healing through their lived experiences," (Samuels 2022). This would be the deprivation of validation of one's lived experience. To counter this, she describes TRAs sharing their stories with each other as epistemic resistance in that feeling a sense of commonality is validation. She shares how when she meets another transracial adoptee, "one of the very first things we do is to tell our stories to each other. This act may grow out of a lifetime of laboring to narrate one's differences into a state of belonging" which creates a "profound kinship with other transracially adopted persons, regardless of racial-ethnic identity,"

(Samuels 2022). This deep sense of community despite racial and ethnic differences is, to her, a demonstration of third space.

Bhabha's third space and Samuel discussing the identification with difference for TRAs is present in other literature on transracial adoption. Christopher Malafronti, a current Ph.D. student at the University of California studying sociology, extends third space to describe the experiences of Guatemalan adoptees. In his work, the concept of the Other is central and is defined as a state that comes from "the alienation and ostracization of individuals who do not meet a socially constructed, normative identity," (Malafronti 2022, vi-vii). He also talks about how "one's sense of self is based in how we perceive and imagine others to perceive us," (Malafronti 2022, vi-vii). Similar to Hübinette and Samuels, Malafronti argues that the constant unstoppable experiences of othering for adoptees places them in third space. He states that "the transnational adoptee is launched into this liminal locale in every instance that their identity is questioned, when they are asked to legitimate their claims to one identity or another, when they get the sense that they are not enough, that they are out of place, that they do not belong, that they 'don't fit in'," (Malafronti 2022, 96).

Malafronti, however, does want to valorize people who have found resilience in this liminality since that would simply play into the adoptive narrative that the mainstream wants to root for; the one that maintains the peace. Instead, Malafronti advocates for TRAs to stay within the third space and "come out of the fog" which is "the question of the practice of adoption itself" (Malafronti 2022, 98), and become adoptee killjoys (Kimberly McKee 2019). An adoptee killjoy is an adoptee who "disrupts adoption narratives of child rescue through political activism," and who "reveal the contradictions and violence of adoption including fraudulent creation of orphans and denial of rights of birth parents," (McKee 2019, 11).

Lastly, and most related to my focus on spatial experience, Roe Jing Draus discusses their concept of "liminality." Draus is an architecture student of The University of Wisconsin. In their scholarship, Draus talks about the built environment and its role in identity formation. They state that, upon reflecting on their childhood, environments were never neutral in relation to identity. This is because many spaces othered him and caused the development of an identity defined by in-betweenness. Draus explains how "for Chinese transracial adoptees, identity and place are in a constant state of liminality and hybridity," (Draus 2023, 1). He defines "liminality" as "an experience that is common with transracial adoptees in which their experiences and identity are in constant movement between and across identities–Chinese, American, adoptee identities–and sometimes neither of them," (Draus 2023, 26).

The main takeaway from Draus' work is that there are unique elements of transracial adoptee-generated spaces. These spaces can be characterized as embodying "grayness, intimacy, and existence completely separated from the superiority of whiteness" as well as "independent from Asianness and whiteness, while also situating itself in between each," (Draus 2023, 25-26). Overall, Draus highlights how agency in relation to identity, physical elements, and social aspects of a built environment is crucial in Chinese TRAs feeling comfort in spaces. He then advocates to incorporate this finding in architectural design to promote equity, inclusion and well-being.

Reculturation

In this section, I will introduce the concept of reculturation. It is an alternative term to enculturation and acculturation because both of these are inadequate in describing the experiences of TRAs and TRIAs and their processes of reconnection to their birth cultures.

Reculturation was coined by Amanda L. Baden, Lisa M. Treweeke, and Muninder K. Ahluwalia, all of whom specialize in adoption studies and counseling. They define reculturation as "process of identity development and navigation through which adoptees develop their relationship to their birth and adoptive cultures via reculturative activities," (Baden et al 2012, 390). Acculturation (the taking on of a new culture due to moving to a new country), enculturation (the process of developing awareness and understanding of one's birth culture throughout one's life), and reverse acculturation (when acculturation is complete and the individual spread their culture to the dominant culture) all do not efficiently include how the enculturation of TRAs and TRIAs gets disrupted and lost in the process of adoption.

Reculturation, however, takes this into consideration, as well as the non-consensual assimilation into the dominant culture that happens after adoption. For TRAs and TRIAs, this loss is usually followed by a longing to rekindle connection to birth culture through reculturation activities in adolescence. Examples of these activities are learning about their birth culture, participating in activities related to their birth culture, and taking time to travel to their birth country. Unfortunately, scholarship on the processes of identity formation and reconnecting to birth cultures is fairly limited which, for me, makes this article especially stand out.

Discussing Race, Ethnicity, and Culture Together

This last section will firstly clarify why this project is studying racial identity, ethnic identity, and cultural identity at the same time. Secondly, it will connect reculturation back to the concept of third space.

An element of Baden's article on reculturation that this thesis adapts is the understanding of how racial, ethnic, and cultural identities are all intertwined. As has been mentioned, TRAs

can often feel that they do not belong or match the expectations that come with their race and ethnicity. And this is connected to culture because this lack of feeling belonging often stems from the fact that they have lost their birth culture, as is mapped out in Baden's article. For this reason, TRAs may feel out of place with people of their same race and may experience race and culture crossing lanes. An example of this is being accused of "acting white" which is a moment when the lack of birth culture leads others to strip TRAs of their racial identity which is harmful and distressing (Durkee and Gómez 2022).

Instances such as these when race and culture negatively cross over as accusations of "acting white" (Durkee and Gómez 2022) are signs of third space. This is because the individual accused is not acting the way someone else thinks they ought to according to their race. The person accused is being penalized for confusing others. Based on personal experience, this accusation of "acting white" is said commonly by, but not limited to, people of color to other people of color. And this is hurtful due to its implied rejection of them being able to claim their racial identity. This is discussed by John McWhorter which reports on the mental health implications of college students of color being accused of acting white by their peers of color. Although my study is about transracial international adoptees, ethnicity and culture must be included in discussions on identity development.

Conclusion

In this literature review, I covered concepts that will be used in my thesis as well as related literature and ideas that contextualize my thesis. I firstly covered recent discussions on the concept of place-identity and its connection to my project. My thesis will be exploring the places in which my participants identify with and how these places vary between New York City

and non-urban environments in the Tristate Area. Secondly, I covered concepts surrounding the identification of in-betweenness that is common for adoptees which has been theorized using "third space" (Hübinette 2004; Samuels 2022; Malafronti 2022), "difference as self" and "the Other" (Malafronti 2022), "identification with difference" (Samuels 2022), and "liminality" (Draus 2023). After evaluating these concepts, third space fit my project best as the leading theoretical framework.

Finally, I discussed a new and exciting theoretical contribution to research on TRA identity formation which is called reculturation. The article on reculturation helped to set the foundation for this thesis in several ways: to highlight the importance of adoptee-led identity exploration and reculturation, connecting race, ethnicity and culture together, and tying reculturation to third space. Overall, literature on the spatial experience of TRIAs in relation to identity is little to none and I plan to help increase this branch of transracial adoption studies.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The research for this senior thesis is qualitative and autoethnographic. The methodology I used for this project came in two forms: interviews (in-person and virtual) and participant's drawing of mental maps. Both forms of data collection attempted to answer the research questions: as occupiers of third space, do TRIAs have similar places they feel isolated from? Do they have similar places they feel belonging and safety in? If so, what are these places? Do the answers to these questions differ depending on if a TRIA grew up in an urban or non-urban context? And lastly, does anything remain the same among their experiences despite their geographical differences?

For the participant pool, I interviewed five TRIAs who either grew up in NYC or non-urban environments in the Tristate Area. Four of the participants were in their 20s and one was 41. The three Guatemalan adoptees were recruited from the online support group *Next Generation Guatemala* and the Chinese and Korean adoptees were recruited through personal connections. In the end, I collected five mental maps and five transcriptions of formal interviews. I will now go more into depth on the two forms of data collection.

Outreach and Recruitment

My strategy for recruiting participants for my study was mainly getting into contact with an online international Guatemalan adoptee support group on instagram named *Next Generation Guatemala*. Gemma Givens is the founder of *Next Generation Guatemala* which I made contact with in 2022. From then on, I began following the account. It was then in October that I reached out again and was connected with Rebecca Baillie, the social media moderator, who worked with

me to develop social media recruitment posts and to discuss my research question with. Now that my thesis is completed, I plan to make my findings available, discuss them on the *Next Generation Guatemala* platform, and assist *Next Generation Guatemala* this summer in the creation of a library of scholarship on transracial and international adoption. Other participants were recruited through contacting family friends, asking if my immediate family knew any transracial adoptees, and reaching out over instagram to individuals.

Formal Interviews and Option of Surveys

Keeping in mind that this topic is deeply personal, I decided to have a survey option for my participants as a way of gathering more inclusive data. This is because a survey option might have been preferable if a participant felt that they could share more without an interviewer watching. In the end, everyone preferred an interview. I speculate that this may have been the case because talking is easier, and sharing about such a personal topic might feel better with another person instead of with a computer screen. To clarify, interviews were the preferred method of data collection but I felt that a survey option was best to have. It was preferred because interviews allow for more details, opportunity for clarification, and the sharing of my own experience which might make participants more comfortable.

Mental Maps

The mental maps, on the other hand, were used to analyze what current spaces they identify with and what spaces are, for them, associated with heightened anxiety/discomfort in relation to their adoptive background. They were instructed to use two separate colors to differentiate these two kinds of spaces. When participants confirmed that they were interested in

participating in my thesis, I sent them an overview of what participation would entail: completion of a mental map and then scheduling an interview. With this overview, I sent instructions for the mental map, along with examples, including my own mental map of San Francisco.

The mental map prompt was as follows: What physical spaces/characteristics represent your personal identity? What physical spaces/characteristics make or have made you anxious or uncomfortable with your identity in relation to race and adoption (if this second prompt does not apply to you, no need to draw it. Just write that you are not drawing this prompt somewhere on the map)? In the instructions, I clarified that the spaces they drew were not limited to one prompt. Instead, one space could overlap between places of identification and places of discomfort.

Overall, I used this mental mapping method because it provided a way to collect spatial data that will not be influenced by my bias and can be visually analyzed. As for the prompt, it was crucial that each person had the same prompt for the sake of scientific validity. I chose the word "identify" as a way of learning about spaces that were deeply significant to participants. And I chose "anxiety/discomfort" for the second prompt in order to associate negative feelings, as well as the possible range of intensity people may feel in such spaces. Lastly, I emphasized that this was a drawing activity and that accurate scaling was not necessary, along with some tips on how to get started. In retrospect, the wording of my prompts may have been too complicated and possibly deterred other people who were initially interested in participating. But, again, for the sake of scientific validity, I decided not to change the prompt.

After receiving maps, I analyzed if the spots they drew for the first prompt were related to racial/ethnic/cultural identity specifically. I also analyzed if people drew similar locations.

Limitations

There were limitations to the data collected. A limitation to interviews was that the data was at their word. On the other hand, I found this to be a benefit as well since participants were in full control of their narrative and therefore aligned with my goal of validating experiences. This data collection was also not able to compare childhood experiences in detail. I believe, however, that I had enough data to be able to identify patterns. I hope, too, that recollection of childhood was not a major constraint. Another concern was that this topic would be psychologically distressing or emotionally triggering for some participants (which was specified in the consent form). To be sensitive to this possibility, I reminded each participant before their interview that they could refuse any question, stop the interview at any time, or rescind participation at any point.

Another limitation to this study was my pool of participants: five is not enough to make general conclusions about living in urban environments versus non-urban environments. I believe, however, that I can suggest patterns for future research. Most of my participants were also international Guatemalan adoptees from *Next Generation Guatemala*. While I am confident that I was able to answer my research questions, this pool may have skewed some elements of the results. I also have my own bias on this topic which I attempted to minimize.

Positionality

The selection of the Tristate Area for my thesis partly reduces my bias since I grew up in San Francisco and therefore have a different urban experience. As a fellow adoptee, though, I needed to be extra careful in not projecting my own experience on the answers of the participants. Before data collection, I attempted to minimize this by discussing my project with

fellow adoptees for their input, doing research into the adoptee experiences who are not Guatemalan, providing more that just my own mental map as an example, not providing examples for my interview questions unless asked, and reminding myself to be open to new elements of transracial adoption that I may have not encountered before. This project does, however, have autoethnographic elements. An autoethnography is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis 2010). The topic of this thesis was based on my own personal experiences as a TRIA in San Francisco. And such experiences are included in the data and analysis section alongside the other five participants.

For reflections as a researcher, I could not assume that all TRIAs have the exact same experience. Adoptees are vastly different. To document my own experience, I grew up in a city and in majority white spaces. While I knew a fair amount of fellow transracial adoptees, my contact with fellow Latine people was minimal before high school. The only Latinos I saw in my neighborhood while growing up were babysitters of white children and construction workers.

I speculate that the majority white spaces and the lack of membership to reculturation programs affected me significantly, especially throughout school. When I was young, I felt extremely anxious in Latine majority spaces and could not listen to Spanish music. As an adult, I identify as Latin American, Guatemalan American, an adoptee, and with the cultures of my adoptive parents, although not with Guatemalan culture. I avoid racial affinity groups and am uncomfortable in Latine majority neighborhoods and restaurants. I find peace in urban spaces where I am not confronted with my adoptive identity: transit, where I can pass as a "regular" Latina woman, parks, and non-Latine enclaves. Interestingly, after completing my thesis, I noticed being calmer in Latine majority spaces and in general when talking about my identity.

DATA & ANALYSIS

Introduction to the Five Interviewees

The findings of my thesis are based on formal interviews and mental maps of five international adoptees of color who have a white adoptive parent or parents. The five TRIAs are from Guatemala, South Korea, and China, three out of the six countries that were providing American families with the most international infants to adopt in 2004 (the three other countries being Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine). Along with the five interviews and mental maps, I also have elements of my own experience as a TRIA and a map of my own in the analysis as well.

Prior to their interviews, participants submitted their mental maps of the places they felt strong enough ties to identify with as well as places that have made them feel anxious in relation to their adoptive identity. But before discussing where these TRIAs experienced othering and belonging as occupiers of third space, I am going to introduce each interviewee (using their self-chosen pseudonyms) in their own words.

Thom (26 years old, he/him): I was adopted from Guatemala at eight months old and brought to the United States, New Jersey, where I'm still located in South Brunswick. So I'm pretty close to Princeton and Trenton. It's very suburban you know, the closest city-like area is Trenton for me.

Kat (24 years old, she/her): I grew up on the Upper West Side ever since my mom brought me home from Guatemala when I was 10 months old. It was actually like the year I turned one. My birthday actually landed on Mother's Day, so I was in a way like my mom's Mother's Day gift. She officially became a mother the year she brought me home.

RG (23 years old, she/her): I was adopted at four months. And I originally lived in Washington State. And then when I was about six, I believe, I moved to Rochester, New York, which is like western, very upstate New York. And I lived in Rochester for all of my life basically, and then I went to school down in New York City.

Gil (41 years old, he/him): I grew up about three hours directly north of New York City in Upstate New York. I think the area is generally pretty small. If you go a little ways out, you're in the Adirondacks…The thing is about the town I grew up in, it's technically a city. It has a

downtown. It has elements of the city life, but it's so small and isolated that, in my mind, I always categorize it as a small town.

Riri (22 years old, she/her): I was born in China and then I moved to L.A. I lived there for eight years. Then I moved to New York and I lived there for about four or five years, NYC. Then I moved to Washington, D.C. and I lived there for about four years of high school. Then since graduating, I moved back to New York City.

One goal of this thesis is to give the participants control of their narratives and to validate their different lived experiences as international transracial adoptees. As the primary researcher, I felt that interviews did this best. As a disclaimer, general conclusions about how growing up in New York City versus non-urban environments affected TRIA spaces of othering and belonging cannot be made due to the small pool of participants. However, there were still significant themes that will perhaps resonate with other TRIAs and suggest further research.

The data and analysis section of this thesis consists of two overarching chapters. The first chapter covers experiences from childhood and adolescence, and the second chapter covers experiences from adulthood. Both of these chapters will be marked with **CAPITALIZED, BOLDED, AND UNDERLINED TITLES.** Each chapter is then broken up into two sub chapters: the first covering spaces of othering and the second covering spaces of safety. These are marked by **CAPITALIZED AND BOLDED TITLES ONLY.** Lastly, the broad sub chapters will then have smaller sections categorized by specific themes and are marked by **bold lettering only.** The thesis is formatted in this way due to the fact that childhood and adolescence is generally a time when people have less control over the places they inhabit versus adulthood when people have more agency over the places they inhabit.

Another significant difference between chapter one and chapter two is how the adoptees, in adulthood, seemed to grow to embrace places that mimicked the concept of third space: a social location and experience that transcends the stereotypical notions of "race, citizenship,

culture, religion and language" and is a "hybrid existence" (Hübinette 2004, 12-23). This came in the form of interviewees placemaking[4] spaces they felt comfortable in, multicultural spaces, and virtual spaces in adulthood. What began as discomfort in third space as kids seems to change into finding comfort and peace of mind in spaces with third space qualities: places that reflect their unique identities. And, as shown by the five participants, it seems that third space can be found or created anywhere despite living in a city or not.

(CHAPTER 1) CHILDHOOD & ADOLESCENCE: SPACES OF OTHERING & SAFETY

When growing up, people generally have less agency over the spaces they occupy in comparison to adulthood. Since this thesis has the goal of highlighting adoptee voices and perspectives, I felt that this chronological order of data would be the best way to craft a comprehensible narrative and to show how these spaces of othering and safety seemed to have changed over time. In this first chapter, I will discuss the themes I found in their experiences growing up. Participants were vastly different but had interesting commonalities across the board.

The word safety is key. A prompt for the mental maps was drawing places they felt strong enough to identify with. When asked in their interviews how they would describe the feelings associated with the places they drew for this prompt, the word "safety" was used by four of the five participants. Thus, the second section of this chapter will be called spaces of safety.

[4]As is defined by Mark Wyckoff, Senior Associate Director of the Land Policy Institute and Director of the Planning & Zoning Center of Michigan State University, "Placemaking is the process of creating quality places that people want to live, work, play and learn in" (Wyckoff 2014). This is the definition of placemaking that this thesis uses, and it includes the creation of quality home spaces, not just public spaces.

SPACES OF OTHERING

Spaces of othering and isolation were present in all five interviews. When reflecting on childhood, there were six general themes of where this isolation took place: in majority white spaces such as schools, in interactions of people of the same racial background, within complex family dynamics, through race being equated to culture, and the repeated experience of adoptees confusing the people around them. The experience of othering and isolation is, however, different for each participant and will be noted when this is the case.

Majority White School Spaces vs. Having More Peers of Color

All five adoptees reflected feeling othered by white people and white space (places that have majority white people occupying them) while growing up. This was made apparent by all five adoptees preferring spaces with more racial diversity[5] when they were in school. This is noteworthy because transracial adoptees who have a white parent or parents often, but not always, grow up in constant white majority space. This was the case for the participant Thom.

Thom (26, Guatemalan adoptee), who grew up in a suburban area in New Jersey, expressed in his interview how he was used to white space: “pretty much everywhere I go, it’s mostly just white-dominated.” His high school experience, however, stood out to him as a time of increased racial diversity for him. In contrast to whiter spaces, Thom expressed how being among more racial diversity in high school “made it easier for me to kind of learn and interact with people” and that “when there is an array of different faces, different races, it’s easier for me to just like be myself instead of trying...to reach to the proper lexicons you know, to reach the

[5]The word diversity will consistently come up in the following paragraphs. It is important to note that the word diversity, whether about race or another identity, is a relative term depending on what the majority population is. In this context, racial diversity reflects an increase in people of color for these adoptees due to them having the common experience of being in majority white spaces and middle schools. For other contexts, such as majority Black and Latine schools, another racial group would “diversify” the school.

way that white people speak. For lack of a better term." Here, white spaces were othering because they limited connecting with others for Thom and caused an anxiety to perform in a way that was not authentic to Thom's full identity.

Kat (24, Guatemalan adoptee), who grew up in Morningside Heights in New York City, expressed having a similar experience in high school. Like Thom, her high school was a space of increased racial diversity in comparison to her previous school experiences, and she preferred it this way: "I could talk about certain things more…things that they would understand rather than others." Here, "they" was in reference to fellow students of color while "others" imply her white peers. Like Thom, majority white school environments limited what Kat felt she could share and the amount of people she could connect with.

Gil (41, Korean adoptee), Riri (22, Chinese adoptee) and RG (23, Guatemalan adoptee) also recall growing up in majority white school environments. Like Kat and Thom, Riri experienced an increase in racial diversity in high school. RG and Gil, on the other hand, did not mention high school being more racially diverse. Gil remembered race not being spoken about in his small town and he himself being confused about how to speak about race. Meanwhile, RG expressed feeling isolated during this time of her life:

> I think just kind of being around a lot of people who I didn't necessarily feel like we shared an experience with, like I didn't feel like I related to the majority of the people I was around, that kind of I feel like caused me to form my own and carve out my own sense of identity within that type of school that I was attending.

While not explicitly said, I speculate that this school experience for RG came from being around mostly white peers. This is because RG had previously mentioned going to majority white schools growing up. If this is the case, RG's experience mirrors Kat and Thom feeling like it was harder to connect to people their age in comparison to having more peers of color.

Tokenism of Students of Color

Like Kat and Thom, Riri preferred her high school to her middle school because of the increase in students of color. In general, she mentioned that the places that cause her the most frustration and discomfort are the ones that have lots of white people around. In a school context, though, she spoke about how the increase in students of color came with its own challenges. Riri explained how the tokenism of students of color continued a sense of othering for her: "at my high school, they loved to be like, 'We have over 57% people of color…I was an admissions guide, and that was like something they always told us emphasize. I thought it was super weird." Mwendwawangai Daisley, a writer for the student newspaper *The Choate News*, defines tokenism as "the practice of substituting genuine efforts to create self-sustaining initiatives that produce representative and inclusive outcomes for those that come from a place of inauthenticity or malice." They write that this is harmful because tokenism "objectifies the individual, effectively strips them of their individuality, reduces them to a prop based on their skin color, gender, etc. and robs them of their voice; all of these factors become valuable assets in the business of advertising and raising the profiles of schools and companies" (Daisley 2023).

The podcast series *Nice White Parents*, produced by *Serial Productions* and *The New York Times*, is also enlightening on how advertising racial diversity can feel hollow for majority white schools. *Nice White Parents* discusses current racial disparities in the public school system and how white parents are often the ones that hold the most power. Although white parents say they support diversity efforts, they often take actions against true integration. Diversity is "a virtue that white parents could feel good about" while diversity and integration for many low-income families of color is about *"*safe schools, qualified teachers, functioning toilets, full day of school. A remedy for injustice," (Joffe-walt 2020).

For Riri, her school's obvious advertisement of students of color and racial diversity negatively affected her time there. Even with the comfort of more peers of color, this tokenism seems to have dulled the sense of a truly inclusive school environment.

The Normalization of Microaggressions & Racism

RG (23, Guatemalan adoptee) and Gil (41, Korean adoptee) did not mention their high schools as being a place of increased people of color. Instead, they discussed their high school experiences in relation to having to navigate racially insensitive environments. For geographical context, both RG and Gil are from New York. RG describes where she grew up as a suburban area while Gil describes his as a small town. Reflecting on her high school experience, RG explained how "since I went to a really, really majority white high school, nothing about being in white spaces now really-- like I've seen it, and I've heard it all." RG saying that she has seen and heard it all shows the normalization of being othered in white spaces.

Gil also went to a high school that was majority white. Unlike Thom and Kat who experienced an increase in racial diversity and the feeling of being able to talk more openly, Gil explained to me how race was not discussed at his high school in the 90s. When they would talk about race, it was "not in any way that there was anything that could be changed or celebrated or anything like that. It was more in like the sense of understanding that we were clearly the minority to this overwhelming majority." Gil even spoke about overhearing racist comments regularly while growing up: "There were certainly racist things said and done, but you know a lot of it was also just hearing people's racism towards other groups while I was around...Of course, I'm sure they had anti-Asian values too, but it's just not as prevalent in almost the culture." Similar to RG, it seems that Gil also normalized constant racially insensitive comments

from his peers and had even come to terms with the thought that they might be harboring racist beliefs against Asian Americans.

Gil also spoke about having uncomfortable instances outside his hometown. He recollected what it was like to be in the surrounding farmland just 15 minutes away: “maybe I’m making it up, or I do trust my feelings and I think I did have experiences, but there’s just this different racialized experience when you go out into these places as a person of color, where you’re like, I don’t know if this is the place for me.” From my interpretation, there was an unspoken suggestion here that Gil experienced racist behavior 15 minutes from his hometown. The initial hesitation to label it reminded me of my own experiences of doubting instances of racist behavior. This may have not been the case for Gil, but for me, having white parents made me feel less confident in my ability to identify microaggressions and racism. This is because I had to explain and convince them that something off had just happened which would then leave me wondering if being raised by white parents had made me worse at identifying racially insensitive comments.

Majority Latine and Asian Spaces

As a part of investigating places of anxiety and belonging for TRIAs, I wondered as a researcher if all my interviewees felt the same in regards to being in spaces that were made of mostly people of the same race as them. Did the Guatemalan adoptees feel a sense of safety and belonging in majority Latine spaces? And did Gil and Riri feel a sense of safety and belonging in majority Asian spaces? For most of the interviewees, being around kids of the same racial or ethnic background did not provide an immediate sense of community. This did, however, vary between participants. The Guatemalan adoptees, myself included, all expressed feeling

uncomfortable in majority Latine spaces. Meanwhile, Gil and Riri did not specifically stress being uncomfortable in majority Asian spaces.

The Guatemalan adoptees, Thom, Kat, and RG, all described the emotional toll of not fitting in with fellow Latine peers due to what appeared to be cultural differences. Thom explained in his interview, "Because I was adopted, I didn't necessarily fit in with the Hispanic people. Like there's one group of just Mexican kids. They all hung out together…But I didn't necessarily get the chance to meet other Hispanic people like that just because of that kind of barrier that was in the way." This separation of birth country and culture that comes with being a TRIA is what Thom seems to be labeling as the root of this barrier. Due to this cultural divide, Thom found community elsewhere: "A lot of my friends were just like more of the outcasts you know…we kind of just bonded in that sense because we didn't fit in any other category." Thom and his friends bonding over not feeling like they fit any category mirrors the concept of Difference as Self from the literature review (Malafronti 2022): the idea that adoptees' often identify with a constant state of difference, therefore identifying with *difference* itself. Thom feeling like he didn't fit in with fellow Hispanic kids or into one category also reflects how isolating third space can be (third space applied to adoptees being the experience of transcending the experience of race, ethnicity and nationality). In conclusion, Thom's experience with the cultural barrier that comes with being a TRA or a TRIA can sometimes limit racial solidarity.

Kat also described a cultural barrier with Latine peers. When I inquired if she had interacted with people of the same race as her in her childhood, she responded: "That's the thing, even though I looked the part, I wasn't considered to be Hispanic because I grew up in a basically white family, which is just my mom and my old big caretaker." From my interpretation, it seems that it was fellow Latine peers that did not consider her "Hispanic." And their denial of

her racial and ethnic identity, as Kat explained, came from having a white family. Kat also interestingly equates looking Hispanic as “looking the part” which is something I relate to. In my reading of it, this metaphor o reveals how disassociating being denied one’s racial and ethnic identity can be, and how looking the part but not acting the part can make one feel hollow.

As for RG, she explained how she didn’t see many people of the same race as her in her childhood. RG recalls how **“**Growing up, I didn’t interact with like specific community that was the same ethnicity as me. I really had no exposure. Like the main- I can’t even think of a time in school- the Hispanic population was probably the smallest of all of the ethnicities.” This would however change when RG would start to talk about her experiences in the current day and the uncomfortable cultural barriers she would face with Spanish speaking people. But since this chapter focuses on childhood and adolescence, that discussion will take place in chapter two.

Gil also brought up a lack of exposure to people of the same race as him before talking about cultural differences. In his own words, he explained how “there weren’t a critical mass of any- even a significant minority of, I felt like, non-white people” in his small town in upstate New York. When he did mention cultural differences, it did not seem to have as much of an exclusive effect with Asian people as it did for the three Guatemalan adoptees with fellow Latine people.

Riri differed from the four other participants the most on this topic. She shared about the many interactions she had with Asian people while growing up, and made no mention of feeling isolated during this section of the interview. Similar to Kat, she spent her childhood in New York City, but later moved to Los Angeles and then Washington D.C. Specific to her time in New York City on the Upper East Side and Lower East Side, Riri reflected the following: **“**I feel like I interacted with Asian people a lot, but it was really only the same Asian people, the same group

of them." Here, she made no mention of cultural differences having a negative impact. Riri also brought up a specific childhood friend that she was close to: "In New York specifically, one of my best friends was half Indian-half Chinese. I hung out with her a lot and her family." In speculating about why cultural differences were so difficult for the Guatemalan adoptees and not for Riri, I wondered if Riri growing up with a close friend of the same race made a difference. Perhaps a close friend of the same race for a TRA or TRIA is an especially important opportunity since an established friendship could possibly make enduring the cultural differences easier. But due to the lack of a bigger participant pool, this can only be speculated.

Clubs and Affinity Groups

Another childhood experience I was interested to hear about from the participants was their possible involvement in racial affinity groups and clubs. I wondered if access to these clubs, and membership in these spaces, had been a positive experience across the board, or if they had been places of anxiety. Similar to the last section, answers varied but, in general, such gatherings were either places of discomfort, places an interviewee didn't have access to, or places that did not make a significant impact on them.

For the participant Thom (26, Guatemalan adoptee), the Hispanic club at his high school did not feel like a place of belonging. He explained: "I didn't feel like I necessarily belonged, even though those are places where you find a belonging you know. Again, I didn't necessarily even like fit in with the Hispanic people." As Thom states, racial affinity spaces have the expectation of being places of immediate connection and community building. In reality, racial solidarity is not always this simple. By referencing the fact that he did not feel like he fit in with the local Hispanic kids as a reason why the club did not provide him with a sense of belonging, I

speculate that cultural differences were again a barrier here for Thom. This very much reflects my own experience in racial affinity clubs: the lack of speaking Spanish, Latine parents, and knowledge surrounding Latin-American cuisine and music causing me to stay silent in discussions. In the times I did speak up, I'd often be met with puzzled looks to which I would then feel compelled to reveal that I was adopted. This would then seem to always place another barrier between me and the other members.

RG (23, Guatemalan adoptee) and Gil (41, Korean adoptee), on the other hand, spoke of not having the opportunity to join spaces like these growing up. When RG finally did have the opportunity in college, she described feeling hesitant to join.[6] She explained how she "always thought about going" but that she was hesitant due to the fear of being "seen as a fake or like an outsider in that sense…while I might be part of that community, my experiences are not the same as the majority of people." These sentiments mirrored Thom in that the cultural differences seemed significant enough to not want to attend. This seems to reveal how central bonding over culture is in Latine affinity groups.

Despite their complicated relationship with these spaces, Kat (24, Guatemalan adoptee) and Thom did attend clubs centered on Hispanic and Latine identity in college. Thom unfortunately still felt a lack of belonging which he again attributed to cultural differences: "Everyone's speaking Spanish. Everyone knows all these things, they have these cultural aspects that I don't have because I was raised in a different family." Meanwhile, Kat attended a club called the Hispanic and Latinx Student Association (HALSA). She credited her attendance to their accepting messaging of "everyone from everywhere," and it was there that she met fellow

[6]For this thesis, I considered college age to be adulthood for the interviewees. This would mean that these college experiences could be placed in the second chapter on adulthood. But since clubs and affinity groups were not spoken of much when interviewees spoke about their current day lives (and the fact that interviewees always answered this portion of the interview in reference to their access to clubs and affinity groups when they were young), I decided to place these experiences in chapter one for simplicity.

Guatemalan adoptees for the first time. Kat bringing up HALSA's messaging, specifically, reveals to me that welcoming and accepting language for Hispanic and Latine clubs goes a long way.

In my own experience, this conflict of what a racial affinity club space should be providing me versus what it was actually like was disappointing and isolating for me in high school. I recall seeing how happy some members were to be around people with similar cultures and would feel envious. At the same time, I would often overhear non-adopted individuals feeling a similar discomfort to me in the space since they couldn't speak Spanish or also lacked culture or felt "too American." Hearing these sentiments often, and personally feeling not Latina enough every time I attended, would come to form my belief that Latin-American and Hispanic affinity groups have a culture of exclusivity.

Overall, among the Guatemalan adoptees, cultural barriers and cultural invalidations (both from peers and themselves) was a prevalent theme. Cultural barriers greatly impacted Thom and his experience of racial affinity clubs. And RG felt "fake" or like an "outsider" in these spaces which was starkly similar to Kat's words of "looking the part" but not being the part. Additionally, while interviewing Kat, we bonded over both having the experience of being nicknamed "gringa" by fellow Latine peers growing up which translates to white girl. Clearly, culture is a central point of discussion for Latine TRA and TRIAs.

In relation to Kat and I both being called "gringa," the concept of the acting white accusation (AWA) (Durkee and Gómez 2022) is enlightening. Being accused of acting white is a cultural invalidation and has been studied to have mental health implications on individuals who receive this labeling, especially when they are accused by an ingroup member (someone of the same race). RG feeling "fake" or Kat feeling like she is an actor in the wrong body is connected

to this accusation because their cultural differences from their Latine peers have resulted in feeling severed from their bodies and race.

Lastly, Riri also participated in clubs and racial affinity groups throughout middle and high school. Unlike Thom, Kat, RG and me, she did not mention feeling fake or out of place. In her interview, she described attending a mentor program with the University of California, Los Angeles that would connect older Asian students with younger Asian kids. She also was a part of a Chinese club in elementary school. And at her high school in Washington D.C., she was a member of the Asian Students Association (ASA). While she reflected on ASA feeling aimless at times and not particularly bonding, she did not seem to feel a lack of belonging.

Riri's cultural differences with her Asian peers did not make her feel less Chinese. Unwavering in her racial identity, Riri's cultural differences instead made her feel more American. She explained how growing up in white spaces all her life…

> ...makes me more aware of not being white. It's a different dynamic to be in a group of all Asian people because then that makes me feel more American. Not like more white because I'm not white, but very much more American. When I'm hanging out with my international friends, I definitely feel more American.

While cultural differences seem to be more connected to racial identity for the Guatemalan adoptees, Riri's cultural differences are connected to her understanding of her nationality. This difference was fascinating to me and I wondered if Riri was an outlier here or if interviewing more Chinese adoptees or Asian adoptees would have revealed this as a greater trend. Due to the lack of data on this, I cannot make any conclusions. I was left with the following questions: can a larger cultural trend between the Guatemalan American population and the Chinese American population explain this difference or would this be too general? Is the acting white accusation less common for Chinese or Asian adoptees? Does the current criminalization and demonization of Latine immigrants on the American Southern border play a role in this?

Home and Family

A tricky theme that emerged from the five interviews was the complicated dynamics and emotions surrounding the home space. While it is not uncommon for any individual to have mixed feelings about one's family and home, TRA and TRIAs have the added layer of navigating their adoptions story and racial differences. Due to the sensitive nature of this specific theme and one interviewee requesting their comments on family to be taken out, I have made the decision to not only take out their comments but to remove all the pseudonyms as well and use a number system for this section. Speaking from my own experience, family dynamics growing up were tricky because I would often feel alone or like the discussion leader when issues came up. I also never knew how much is appropriate to share or to ask, or how to call out questionable comments made by them. This is all to say that I wholeheartedly respect and understand the difficulty of this section.

Diving into this section, three out of the five interviewees shared about how complicated family dynamics were while growing up as a person of color with white parents. Interviewee 1 recalled feeling unsure about asking their family for help when they wanted to reconnect to their birth roots: "I think for the longest amount of time, I didn't know how to express to my parents that it [reconnecting to birth culture] was something that I wanted or was interested in out of fear that it might upset them or cause them to be upset with me." Here, interviewee 1 is describing how they remember feeling stuck between wanting to learn more about their culture while at the same time wanting to keep the peace at home. While this comment is not explicitly about race, it is most definitely about their adoption, and I speculate that this must have been anxiety producing and lonely. It reminded me of a conversation I had with a TRIA that was not part of my participant pool but was someone I talked to for my thesis where we bonded over the fear of

angering and upsetting our parents, and having no one if we ever upset them to the point of no return. Hence, this fear of upsetting one's adopted parents was a theme I had heard before and seems to be one element that makes the home space for TRAs and TRIAs complicated.

Fortunately, when interviewee 1 did express their wish to learn more about their birth country and culture, their parents reacted well. They shared with me how "when I was 16, I really wanted to go back to [birth country][7] for like a trip, and my parents were really supportive within that. We went for like a week. It was over my birthday. And that really allowed me to feel connected to the place that I was born." This would be an example of reculturation because, as Dr. Amanda Baden distinguishes, reculturation is defined by the TRA/TRIA making the choice to learn more about their roots and adoption story. Interviewee 1 also explained how "I think I could have asked for more, like reaching out to my parents and having them look for spaces for me where I could learn about that, but I did not really ask for that." I was left wondering if this was because interviewee 1 did not want to continue to rock the boat or because they were taking their reculturation journey one step at a time.

Interviewee 2 also talked about navigating tricky family dynamics growing up. When I asked about activities they did in their childhood with their family related to their birth culture, interviewee 2 expressed appreciation for their parents' efforts:

> I think they tried to some extent. We're limited because I did grow up in such a small town. To be fair to them, I do think they took my lead, like when I pushed back on that culture camp. That's a tricky thing, I think, for parents. Should we push the kid more to say, 'Just stick with it,' or should we just listen to them and kind of say, 'Okay, we don't have to do it.'

Unlike interviewee 1, interviewee 2's parents were the ones who initiated activities surrounding reconnection to birth culture. Interviewee 2's parents did this through a culture camp for

[7]The name of this country has been removed for the sake of keeping anonymity for this section alone.

adoptees of their specific ethnicity. Culture camps are a common kind of program that many adoptees have experienced as a way of learning more about their birth culture in childhood. Importantly, this is not an example of reculturation because it is not initiated by interviewee 2 but by their parents. What interviewee 2 exhibits, though, is that figuring out how to acknowledge a TRA/TRIAs heritage can be confusing to navigate for both kids and parents. For interviewee 2, seeing their parents try to navigate the situation with thought did not go unnoticed.

Interviewee 2 also brings up how the town they grew up in limited their options for places that could teach them about their birth culture. This begs the question: do urban environments inherently have more reculturation opportunities? After evaluating the data collected from the five participants, I later concluded that this was perhaps too general of a question but that a place where an adoptee grows up indeed impacts their places of belonging, as will be discussed later, and the amount of places they have access to to learn about their birth cultures, as interviewee 2 has pointed out here.

Finally, interviewee 3 wished for her quotes on this subject to be taken out which I immediately agreed to, and I think exemplifies how challenging this topic can be. Without using her quotes, she discussed how spaces with mostly white people had always made her feel uncomfortable and frustrated. For many TRA and TRIAs, they are the only family member of color. I am not sure if this was the case for interviewee 3 but it sounded to me that they were accustomed to having a mostly white extended family. In general, we spoke about uncomfortable comments made by relatives and not knowing how to appropriately respond. Thus, being a TRA or TRIA in a mostly white family, or a family that is mostly a different race than you, can feel lonely to navigate.

Speaking from my own experience, my home used to have mostly negative associations. I recall how in middle school and high school I was consistently overcome with emotions when I thought too hard about how my lifestyle was so far from being stereotypically Latina. My own home space became a mixture of feeling safe, confused, and distressed. Similarly, two interviewees labeled their homes as spaces of discomfort and anxiety on their mental maps which will be shown and discussed in the next section "Spaces of Safety and Belonging" of this first chapter. In conclusion, home and family dynamics was a prevalent theme worth noting.

SPACES OF SAFETY

Continuing the time frame of childhood and adolescence, this second half of chapter one will discuss the spaces where the participants felt safe and a sense of belonging during this period of their lives. Four out of five of the mental maps will be presented. Due to Kat's map being in the present day, hers will be discussed in chapter two. Kat did, however, have relevant interview quotes for this section. I also decided to discuss each map individually for the sake of simplicity and for readers to have the chance to appreciate the details of each map one by one.

A mental map is a research tool that helps visualize a participant's spatial experience. This method was chosen in an attempt to give participants control over how they're presented in this study. The mental maps had two prompts: 1) what physical spaces/characteristics represent your personal identity? 2) What physical spaces/characteristics make or have made you anxious or uncomfortable with your identity in relation to race and adoption? This second prompt was optional in case a participant did not have places of anxiety in relation to race and adoption. All five participants, however, responded to it. Overall, these places of personal identity had general commonalities that will be discussed throughout as well as summarized at the end.

RG's Mental Map

The term personal identity in the first mental map prompt was chosen in order to include places of deep meaning for adoptees. For four participants, these spaces of personal identity also came to symbolize senses of safety, as was the case for RG. In her mental map, the black represents her spaces of personal identity and safety, and the red the spaces that caused her anxiety. All three red spaces overlap with black ink.

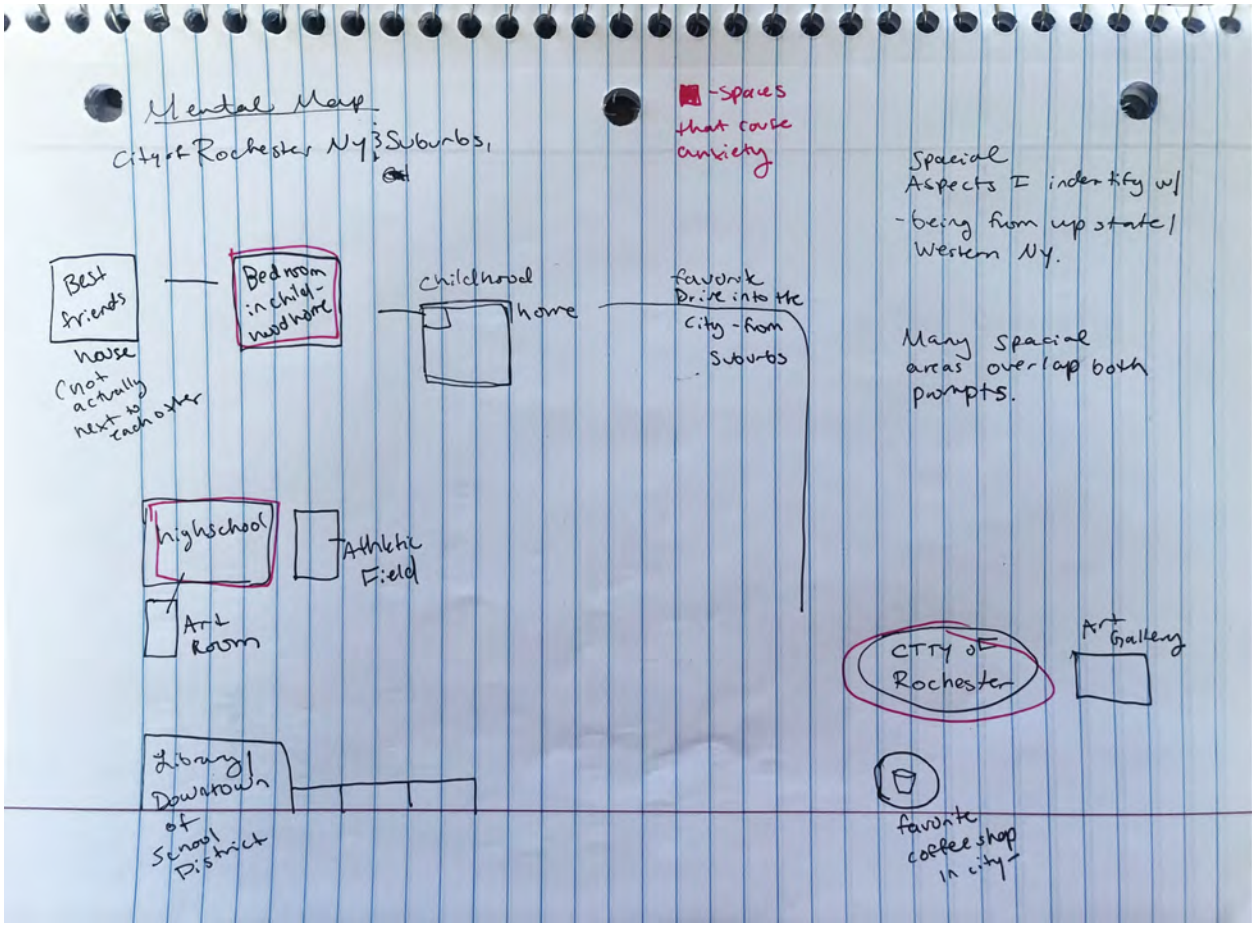

Figure 1: Mental map drawn by the participant RG which depicts her places of personal identity (black pen) and the places of anxiety (red) while growing in the city of Rochester, New York and the surrounding suburbs.

In RG's own words, the commonality between the places of personal identity that she drew on the map depended on "who I would be with in those spaces or who I was allowing in those spaces with me." For the friends she felt the most safe with, "it was like I was allowed to

exist without being labeled as white or being labeled as this. There was no expectation of how I should perform…It was just the expectation was that they were just there to be with me." In my interpretation, there seems to be an emphasis on being in control of the people allowed around RG because of her experience of being labeled, and perhaps analyzed and evaluated by peers that are confused by her. Having a similar experience myself, the appreciation of close friends who do not focus on this labeling deeply resonates with me. It demonstrates how TRIAs may feel that they cannot fully exist in their complexity all the time due to the fear of being ridiculed for not acting appropriately to their race. It shows why true, sincere friendships are so significant for TRIAs.

Looking at the map itself, many of the places RG felt strong enough to identify with seem to be connected to passions: the athletic field, art room, art gallery, library, and coffee shop. One space that overlapped with feelings of anxiety was her bedroom in her childhood home which connects to the complexity of home spaces in the previous subchapter. High school was also a place of personal identity and anxiety which may be due to her recounts of white peers making racially insensitive comments. Lastly, the city of Rochester was also a place of anxiety. While we didn't speak of this in detail in her interview, she said this of her places of anxiety: "I think the spaces that were uncomfortable were ones where I was questioned whether questioning was meant to be a hurtful thing or not." Hence, it seems that the city of Rochester was a place she experienced this specifically. It leaves me with the question: are urban environments inherently more confrontative than non-urban environments for TRAs and TRIAs?

Another important space of safety that RG mentioned in her interview was her childhood room. She described her room as having beautiful natural sunlight, as well as being a place that would allow her to escape confrontations of identity: "I always viewed my bedroom in my house

as the place where I got to be me, and all of the aspects of race and culture didn't exist in there because it's just a space that I was in without any outside force." If the outside world is chaotic and demanding, it seems that this space was quiet and still for RG. And it appears that the complicated topics of race and culture are what cause this chaos. As will be discussed later, Kat and Thom expressed similar experiences when they were outside their spaces of safety. In her room, however, RG said "I feel like…I could do whatever I wanted, and I could be whatever I wanted."

Gil's Mental Map

Gil had a similar interpretation of the prompt about places of personal identity in his smalltown growing up: a sense of safety and a feeling of control. On his map, the places of personal identity were coded with green dots and the places of discomfort with blue dots. Like RG, many places were both at the same time. He explained how "the places that I coded as personal identity spaces completely [with green dots only], not like both [places that had the green and blue dots], were places that I actively made a choice. Like, oh, my identity is that I really like reading, so I code the library." Here, the element of control comes in the form of places he went enthusiastically and by his own free will, whether it was in connection to his passions or his friends. For places associated with friends, he explained "feeling safe in close friends' cars because it was a very- I don't know. It just felt like a place that we're just us." Similar to RG again, Gil is emphasizing the importance of true authenticity with friends.

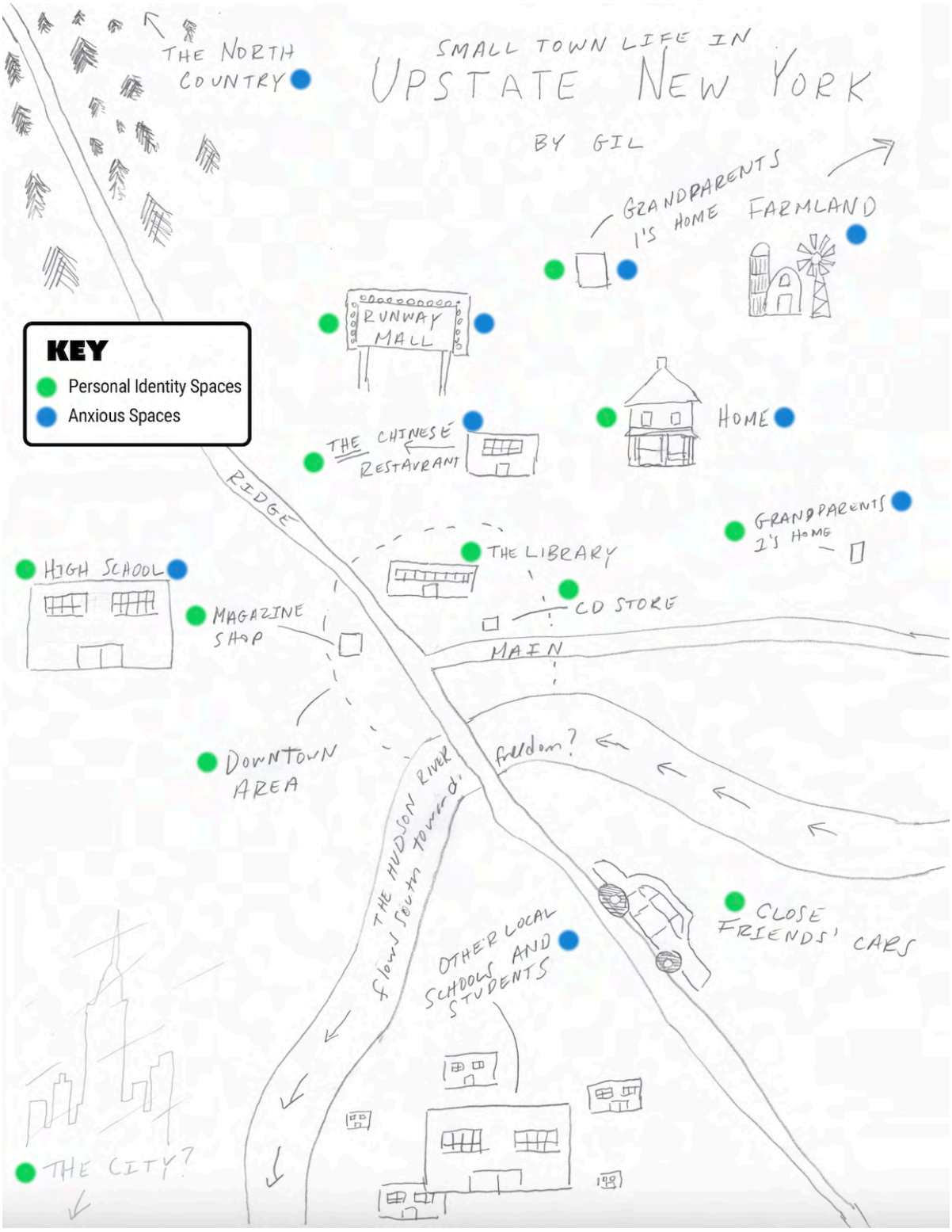

Figure 2: Mental map drawn by the participant Gil which depicts his places of personal identity (green dots) and the places of anxiety (blue dots) while growing in a smalltown in upstate New York.

Taking a closer look at his map, the places he chose to inhabit were the magazine shop, the CD store, the library, the general downtown area, and his friend's car. Gil also put a green dot next to New York City, where he went for college.

As for the places with only blue dots, Gil drew the other local schools in his area, the nearby farmland, and the north country. In his interview, he explained that these spaces were where he would be confronted or questioned about his identity or background, which mirrors RG's response. Put differently, they were also places that were absent of choice for Gil: "places that I couldn't avoid." In the worst cases, it was a racist or questionable comment and in the best cases, it was people who were curious about him. In both situations, Gil said that when he was younger, he remembers "feeling like I didn't have an adequate understanding of those things or I didn't want to talk about them." Hence, the spaces of safety seem to be when his identity is not questioned and Gil could focus on other elements of his life, such as his friendships and passons. In connection to the Home and Family section, Gil's home spaces were also both places of personal identity and spaces of anxiety. This reflects the ongoing discussion of tricky family dynamics.

Gil also spoke about the advantage of growing up in a smalltown. He explained, "It definitely has that insular, small town feel of there's few degrees separating everyone that I think can be stifling, but it's also probably what kept me in some ways safe because I was just a known quantity and I don't think anyone was questioning it." By being a known quantity and knowing everyone in his town, Gil did not have to constantly explain his identity. It seems to me that this allowed Gil to exist more freely as an individual. It is hard to imagine that a city could provide the same kind of protective environment since there are so many more people.

Thom's Mental Map

Thom, on the other hand, described his places of personal identity as the places that felt in some part like home. Thom specified how "they were places that weren't necessarily happy places, but there are places where I was familiar enough that I could call them home-ish." For clarification, the map is a combination of South Brunswick and Glassboro, New Jersey.

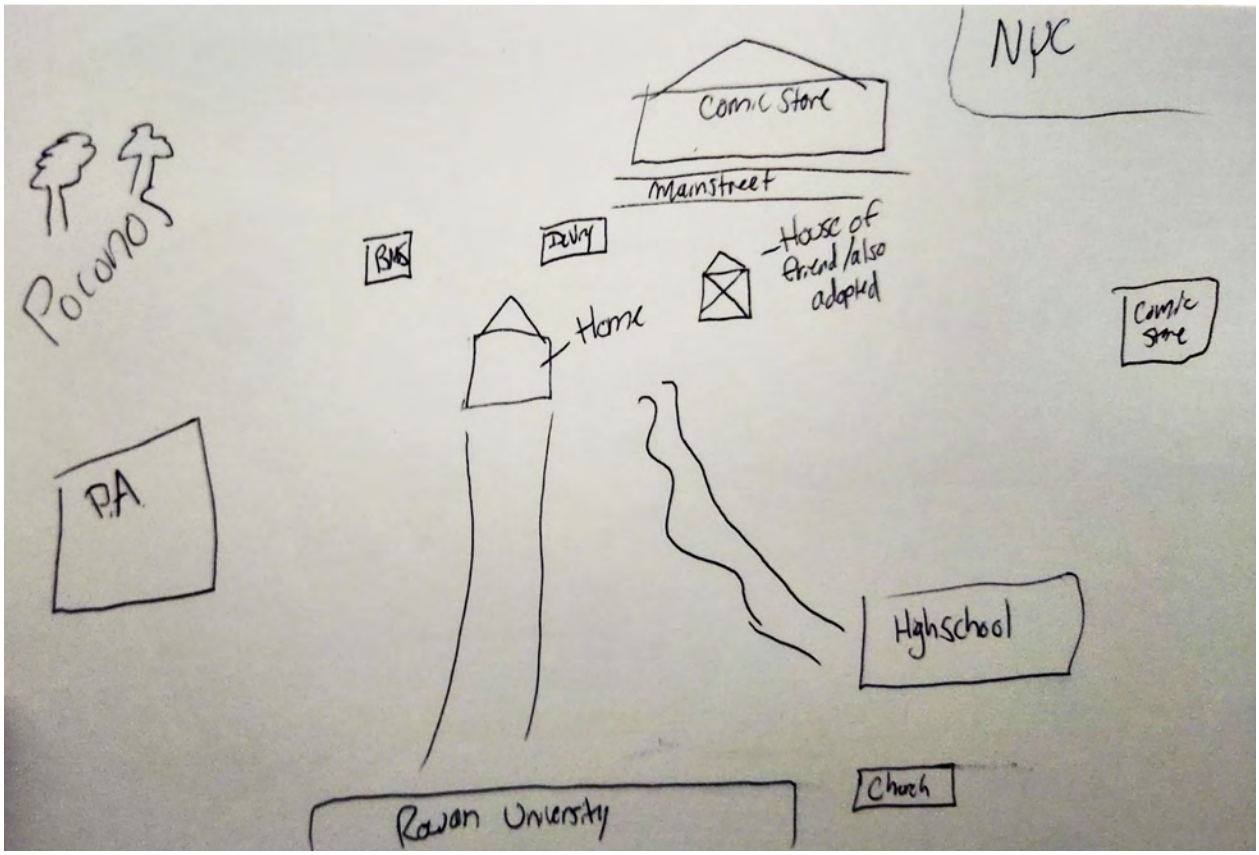

Figure 3: Mental map drawn by the participant Thom which depicts his places of personal identity and the places of anxiety while growing up in the suburban areas of South Brunswick, New Jersey and Glassboro, New Jersey. There is no color coding, but Thom explained which places were with which prompt during his interview.

Instead of color coding, Thom explained to me which locations were places of anxiety and which places were homish. Similar to Gil and RG, Thom's places that represented his identity included places with friends and personal interests. This came in the form of several comic stores which he described as "just my happy place you know. That was a place where I

always went to when I was feeling bad, when I was feeling tired, whenever I was just down on myself." In contrast, a specific place of anxiety was the Poconos: "The Poconos is the place where I did not feel very safe at all because, again, I was the only person of like color there."

In his interview, Thom also talked about how metal music helped him find his voice in high school: "For me, I coped with [struggling to have a voice] by listening to heavy metal and learning how to scream so that I could be heard." This led Thom to finding community in the local metal concert scene: "That was the culture that I fit into…Music was the central theme of everything that I was. And so when I learned how to scream, that's when I started meeting people, meeting people in bands, meeting bands that were small bands, but still growing." Learning how to scream to find his voice implies a time where Thom felt he lacked a voice. This reminded me of how TRA and TRIAs often experience a lack of confidence in voicing what they have experienced due to not many people understanding, also known as epistemic trauma (Samuels 2022). As Thom shares, though, finding a passion outside of racial and ethnic identity can be incredibly freeing, just like the places of personal interest for RG and Gil.

Riri's Mental Map

Riri described the places that represented her identity as the places she liked to go. This is similar to Gil and his places of personal choice. In Riri's own words, she said "I feel like they're more just like me romping around having fun. There's no real zhuzh to it." Unlike the other participants, the term safety was not explicitly used. The places that were just of personal identity (only colored in orange) included restaurants, cafes, stores, art museums, public squares, outdoor markets, neighborhoods, transit stations, streets, central park, the reservoir, and schools.

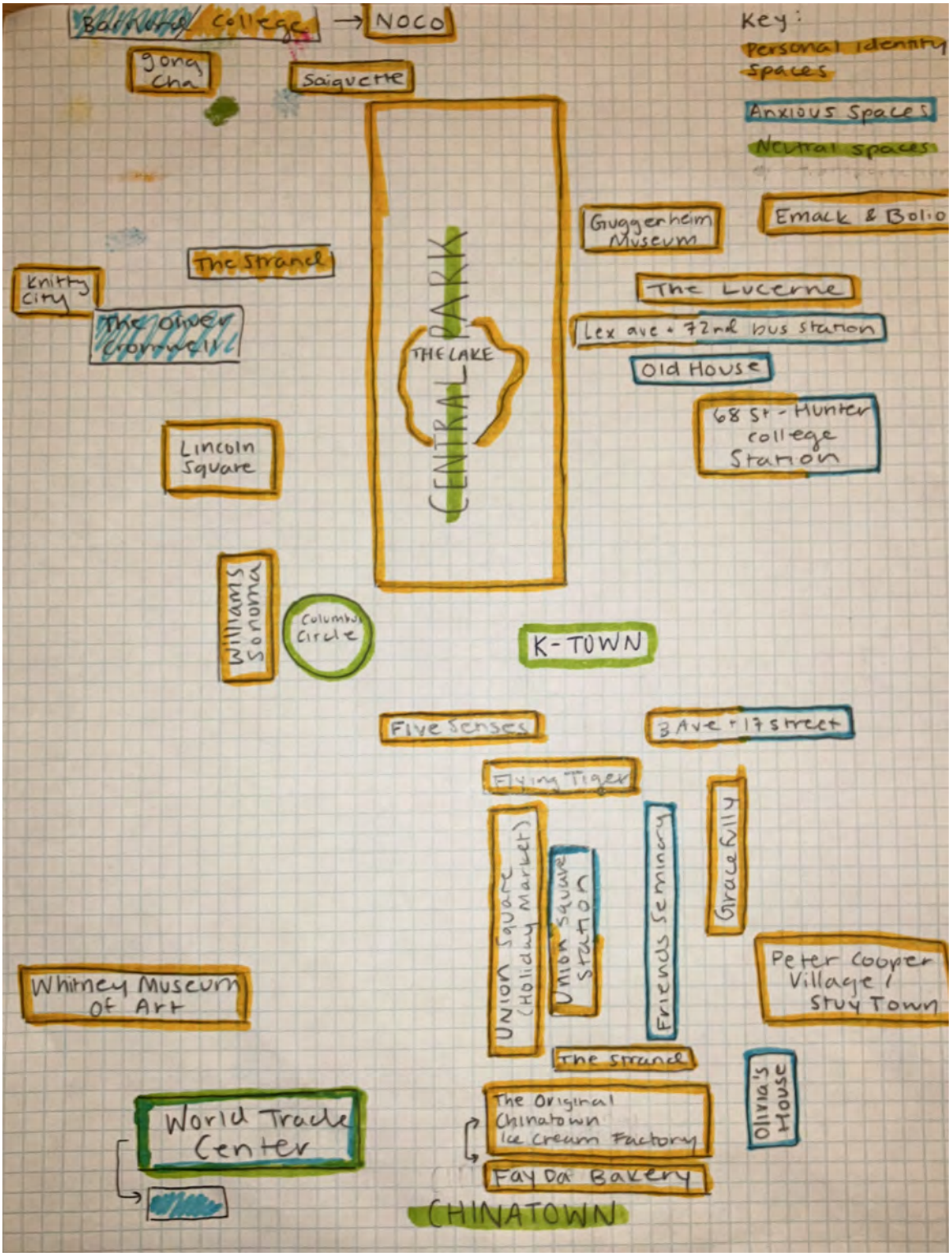

Figure 4: Mental map drawn by the participant Riri which depicts her places of personal identity (orange) and the places of anxiety (blue). She explained in the interview that green were neutral points of reference, and that the map was of her time in New York City in middle school and currently. In a general sense, the right side and bottom of the map is of her childhood while the top left of the map is in the present day.

For clarification, Riri's map is of both the past and the present since she partially grew up in New York City and then moved back to NYC for college. She indicated in her interview that in a general sense, to the right and below central park was of her childhood, meanwhile the top left is of the current day (with the addition of the World Trade Center).

A significant element of Riri's map is her depicted access to locations associated with Chinese culture and her lack of anxiety in those spaces. Firstly, in contrast to RG, Thom, and Gil, Riri and Kat did not mention a lack of access to places associated with their birth cultures. I wondered if this was an instant where growing up in a city does make an impact on the spatial experience of TRIAs. My five interviews seem to indicate that growing up in New York City does indeed give an individual more access to cultural exploration. Where Riri and Kat do differ is their level of comfortability in these spaces associated with birth culture. While Kat and I connected over feeling uncomfortable in places with mostly Latine people out of fear of our racial identities being invalidated, Riri's map shows something different. Riri includes "the original Chinatown Ice Cream Factory" and the Chinese bakery "Fa Da Bakery" in her places of personal identity with no overlap of them being places of anxiety as well. This was amazing to see and also aligned with how she was the only participant to not feel uncomfortable in places that were made up mostly of people of the same race.

My Own Mental Map

My own mental map is the final map to be presented in this subchapter Spaces of Safety. Being the author of the prompts, how I would describe my places of identity (in purple) is places I felt comfortable being fully myself, places I go to often, and places I feel at peace in.

Personally, what this meant for me was places that were not connected to race, ethnicity, and culture but rather locations where I felt unburdened by thoughts on racial identity and adoption.

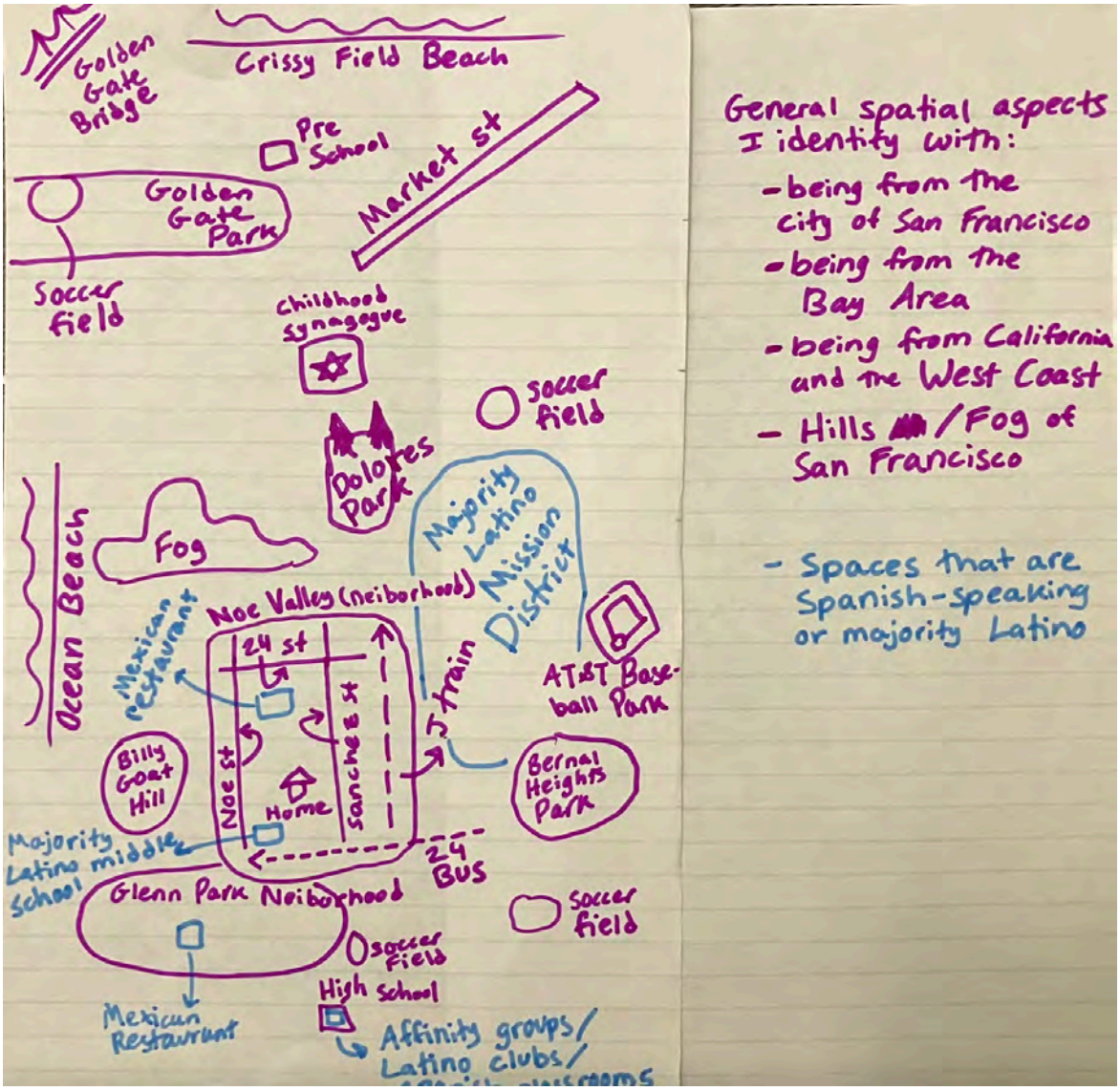

Figure 5: Mental map drawn by Sulmi Rubenstein-Markiewicz which depicts places of personal identity (purple) and the places of anxiety (blue) in San Francisco, California. To the right is a list of general spatial aspects that are associated with personal identity and associated with spaces of anxiety.

Upon looking at my own map, my places of personal identity included many locations of personal interests such as my love of sports: soccer fields I used to play in and the AT&T baseball park. This mirrored the other four maps and their inclusion of locations of personal interests. Like Riri, a fellow urbanite, I drew neighborhoods, public transit, parks, and streets as

places of personal identity. Like the rest of the participants, I included schools and places of worship for places of personal identity as well.

As for places of anxiety (in blue) in relation to racial and ethnic identity, I drew places that were mostly Spanish speaking or places with mostly Latino people. This was, again, due to past experiences of my racial identity being questioned. Similar to Gil and RG, these were places that were associated with confrontations over identity.

A noteworthy change in the past year has been that, after finishing the research for this project and finding so much scholarship on TRAs and TRIAs, I have noticed a shift in my level of comfortability in these spaces associated with the Latine community, the Spanish language, and my birth culture. I have found that discovering more knowledge on the subject has somewhat empowered me to be more comfortable in my differing identity.

Interestingly, my high school was the only location that was both a place of personal identity and anxiety. Although, upon reflection, I would have made my home space and my own neighborhood a mixture of purple and blue as well.

Lastly, the synagogue I attended as a kid is unique. If I had been interviewing myself, I would have specifically mentioned this synagogue as a place of safety due to being able to meet so many other international adoptees and adoptees of color there. This was because it was a synagogue created to be a safe place of worship for Jews of the LGBTQ+ community, and thus had many community members who adopted children. Because of this, I was able to grow up seeing many families that looked like mine and somewhat normalize my situation, which I always felt grateful for.

Kat's Spaces of Safety

Like RG and Gil, safety was also Kat's chosen word when describing what her places of personal identity had in common. Again, Kat's New York City map was of the present day and will be analyzed in chapter two. However, her similar interpretation of the places of identity is still significant in the endeavor to investigate the commonalities in between the spatial experience of these five TRIAs. When looking at her map during the interview, she had this to say about them: "I feel safe in these places most of all. Everywhere else, not so much." This description reminded me of RG and the so-called "outside force" that perhaps symbolizes the general expectations of race and culture. This force seems to impede on the daily lives of TRIAs since their lived experience transcends the stereotypes of race, ethnicity, and nationality.

(CHAPTER 2) ADULTHOOD: GROWING INTO THIRD SPACE

The chapters of this thesis are in chronological order as a way of seeing how the spaces of othering and safety for the five participants may have changed overtime. As will be presented in this chapter, a shift does seem to take place. While spaces of othering persist, each interviewee seems to find ways to cope with being occupiers of third space: the social location and experience of transcending stereotypical notions of "race, citizenship, culture, religion and language" that is a conceptual "hybrid existence" (Hübinette 2004, 12-23). These ways of coping, for the participants, came in the form of spaces that were made up of different people and cultures, creating multicultural spaces at home (placemaking), beginning on reculturation journeys, feeling less inclined to explain one's identity during instances of confrontation, and exploring virtual spaces dedicated to the adoptee community. What I argue is that these places mimic the concept of third space, and that inclusive third space can be created anywhere.

SPACES OF OTHERING CONTINUED

Into adulthood, all five of the participants shared that they were still learning how to navigate spaces they felt othered in. These spaces, similar to chapter one, included white spaces, spaces that were majority of the same race as the participant, international Chinese spaces for Riri, and, in general, instances where their identity was confronted or questioned. Interestingly, Gil and Riri both expressed feeling comfortable in spaces that had mostly people of the same race as them, which differs from the Guatemalan adoptees. It is important to note that Riri had always felt comfortable in spaces with people of the same race as her, while Gil did not have access to many majority Asian spaces growing up. Due to the small sample of participants, there can only be speculation about the differences between Latine and Asian adoptees. Even so, such differences emerge even more in chapter two and could be the topic of future research.

Discomfort in Majority White Spaces

White spaces continued to be uncomfortable spaces for TRIAs into adulthood. Unfortunately, four out of the five participants alluded to still being white spaces constantly. For Riri, it's "all the time, all the time" and for Thom, "Most of the spaces are white, let's be real [laughs]...Yes, pretty much everywhere I go, it's mostly just white-dominated." In Riri's interview, her tone seemed to articulate annoyance at this fact. Meanwhile, for Thom, it seems like a reality that is not ideal but has been accepted. He later explained how he has gotten used to never fully feeling belonging in white spaces: "I'm Hispanic, I'm Brown, I don't belong in the white culture and I feel like that you know, it's something that will never go away. And I've accepted that." RG also expressed being used to not belonging in white culture: "in those spaces, I still don't feel comfortable, but I definitely feel better now that the spaces that I'm in aren't as

bad as it was in high school." Without a doubt, majority white spaces are not places of belonging for these three. At the same time, they are accustomed to these spaces and know how to navigate them which is itself a privilege.

For Kat, it seems that being accustomed to majority white space has caused her to equate herself to feeling white at times. When asked about how she identifies, she expressed how the question was tricky to answer: "I still kind of see myself more as kind of like a Caucasian female trapped I don't want to say trapped- but inside an indigenous body." At the same time, Kat wants to "reclaim who I truly am."

TRIAs and whiteness is a tricky topic and the acting white accusation (AWA) is a part of that discussion. An example of this is Kat and I both being nicknamed "gringa" in childhood. The AWA has been known to impact mental health for people of color, not just TRIAs (Durkee and Gómez 2022). This is because being accused of acting white is one's racial identity being invalidated. This accusation is largely based on cultural differences which is what makes TRIAs raised in white families so susceptible to it. For Kat, she shares how it has impeded her sense of self. On the other side of this discussion is the privilege that comes with being accustomed to majority white spaces and the white gaze. TRIAs with white families or parents grow accustomed to uncomfortable white spaces which then allows them a position of privilege and access to certain, exclusive white spaces. Hence, TRIAs have a sort of social capital that is similar, but not the same, as being white. It is not the same because TRIAs still experience othering in white spaces, microaggressions, and racism.

Riri especially feels discomfort in white spaces. She was the only participant who, while explaining her mental map, described her places of discomfort and anxiety solely dependent on the presence of white people. On her map, all the places are "just places where a lot of white

people around." Riri expressed how this has always been the case for her: "I feel like for me it's always been white people that make me uncomfortable." Unlike Kat, Riri does experience this impeding on her racial identity. Instead, Riri felt being around white people all the time "makes me more aware of not being white."

Gil, on the other hand, was comfortable with labeling this social capital as whiteness. In his interview, he reflected how "I think it's good to interrogate our whiteness and what environments we were raised in, or some of us." The question of whiteness is complicated and I do not want to dictate how other TRIAs comprehend their experience of third space. I personally am hesitant to use the word "whiteness" to explain this position of privilege due to the harm it could cause. However, when I equate this "whiteness" to a position of privilege, e.g. the spaces I have access to due to family ties and cultural differences, I find the use of the word helpful in brainstorming how to critically think about this topic.

Gil also does not frequent majority white spaces. In his interview, he explained how "I think the most common time that I'm ever doing that [going to majority white spaces] is going back home to visit family. That's really the only time. I don't actively seek to be in majority white spaces." He also spoke about having different places of belonging than his parents and being at peace with that fact: for his parents, their hometown was "where they feel belonging…Whereas I never went back. I just have lived elsewhere." Although not explicitly stated, I speculate that Gil never moving back was partly connected to the overwhelming white demographic of his hometown. In a powerful statement, Gil said how "even as a young person, I knew that I could never live where I grew up. Like that wasn't a sustainable place for me to be and I had to go somewhere else." I speculate here that this partially had to do with the racially insensitive culture of his hometown that Gil spoke of in chapter one. This quote also shows how,

although TRIAs can navigate and are accustomed to white spaces, this does not necessarily translate to belonging.

Discomfort in Spaces of the Same Race

For the Guatemalan adoptees, discomfort in Latine spaces continued and were due to cultural differences and language barriers. For Thom, he experienced this in college when he went to a club for Latine students: "even when I went there, again, everyone's speaking Spanish. Everyone knows all these things, they have these cultural aspects that I don't have because I was raised in a different family." RG felt similarly to the point where she didn't attempt going to a racial affinity club at all. She said, "I don't really go to majority places like that, I think again because of my uncomfortableness with feeling fake in them." In relation to racial affinity clubs, RG feared she'd just be "seen as like a fake or like an outsider in that sense that, while I might be part of that community, my experiences are not the same as the majority of people in that sense."

Similar to Thom, Kat also brought up a language barrier. When asked if she spends time in majority Latine spaces now, Kat immediately answered no. She then went into why this is, citing the fact that "I still feel like a bit of an outsider kind of looking in if I do go to primarily Latino places, because, again, I don't really speak Spanish fluently…I just feel like, okay, I'm not going to touch that side yet until I actually learn Spanish." What these quotes suggest is that culture is extremely important when it comes to majority Latine spaces. When there's already a cultural difference for these TRIAs, a lack of Spanish seems to further intensify a sense of exclusion which then results in avoiding majority Latine spaces, especially for RG and Kat.

RG specifically brought up Spanish speaking restaurants as a place of discomfort, an experience I can relate to. RG recalled how her partner worked at a Mexican restaurant and

because of this, she would visit frequently. The Mexican and Guatemala staff, she explained, "were all kind to me, but there was always that sense that it was like, 'Well, she can't speak Spanish,' and she doesn't really understand the kind of experiences that they went through, which is true, but it just kind of made me feel uncomfortable." Reflecting on my own experience, I often feel a sense of anxiety stepping into a Spanish speaking restaurant, often Mexican cuisine, because the staff assume I know Spanish. Once it is established that I do not know Spanish, it often feels like a bond has been broken. Because of this, Spanish still causes me discomfort.

Riri, on the other hand, does not feel discomfort in Chinese restaurants. During her interview, Riri and I speculated that this was possibly because her experiences in Chinese restaurants have been less confrontational: "I have never gone to a restaurant and had somebody who's like, 'dajia hao, what can I get for you?'... It's just never happened." By the restaurant staff not speaking to Riri in Chinese, these spaces have not become places of anxiety for her. The language barrier does, however, become a source of discomfort for Riri when traveling to China which will be discussed in the next section.

Gil and Riri, the Asian adoptees, felt comfortable being in majority Asian spaces. Interestingly, Riri clarified that her identity is questioned more by Asian people rather than white people. In her interview, she explained that Asian people are often the ones that ask her where she is from. Even though this causes awkwardness for her, this does not deter her from Asian majority spaces.

Riri on Uncomfortable International Dynamics

Riri brought up being uncomfortable abroad in Asian countries and when she is with Chinese international students. In her interview, she explained the general groups of Asians she

interacts with: “Asian Americans whose parents are first gen immigrants. Whose parents came to America as immigrants and who have that experience” and “Asian international students.” She explained how she felt that, as an international adoptee, she had interacted with both groups differently. With the first group, she explained how she did not feel questioned by them: “I just feel like Asian Americans whose parents were immigrants somehow understand, and are less confused by Asian adoptees’ experiences… I feel like they understand it more.” She did however feel that she made Chinese international students uncomfortable, which in turn causes her discomfort.

Together, we speculated that this had to do with the one-child policy in China, a program that endured from 1980 to 2016 where the Chinese government mandated that most parents could only have one child in order to lower population growth (Gerow 2009). The one-child policy had many negative consequences, including a disproportionate male to female ratio due to families prioritizing sons. Such prioritization led to a disproportionate level of female infants being adopted into the United States, and in some cases female infanticide, since they were seen as less desirable. In Riri’s opinion, and in reference to this policy, she said “I think it’s kind of taboo, I wonder, because of the one-child policy. By being an adopted Chinese girl in America, you’re like a reminder of the one-child policy to the international Chinese students, and it’s weird.” She went on about the international Chinese students she has met: “They are also all only children. You’ll never meet somebody our age who's from mainland China, and is not an only child. It’s weird because we’re both like- our lives are impacted literally from the one-child policy.” Because of this larger political narrative, Riri’s identity is perhaps not confronted but rather avoided by Chinese international students.

In a way, Riri feels like the Chinese international students do understand her but go about addressing it in an awkward way. She shared, “I remember one girl, she was like, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry that you were adopted.’ Those were the undertones…like, ‘I’m so sorry you couldn’t stay in China.’” We both speculated that this was likely because of the tension that is leftover from the one-child policy. Additionally, we wondered if I had felt more exclusion from the Latine community because adoptions in Guatemala were much more secretive in comparison to a federal mandate.

Riri also discussed feeling uncomfortable with language when traveling to countries in Asia. Riri explained, “In China, they’ll assume I speak Chinese.” She speculated that this is because she does not initially come off as American. She recalls how “When I go to China or Asia, people, they’re not like, ‘Are you American?’ Then I start speaking English. This has happened to me numerous times, especially when I was in Vietnam.” Here, it is Riri’s English speaking abilities that cause a moment of confusion which then makes Riri uncomfortable. She explained how she does not think it is intentionally malicious. Even still, this initial moment of passing as non-American and then confusing locals is an instance of her identity being in question. Interestingly, this mirrors the experience of RG and I when Spanish is expected from us in Spanish speaking restaurants. She ended this topic by saying, “I do feel awkward when I’m in Asia, and people point out that they know that I’m not [nationality-wise] Chinese…I try to be funny about it, but I wouldn’t say it’s a funny situation.” Although a language barrier is not a source of anxiety for Riri in the states, English is a source of discomfort in Asian countries.

SPACES OF SAFETY NOW: MULTICULTURALISM, PLACEMAKING, RECULTURATION, & VIRTUAL SPACES

This last section will focus on the spaces of safety for the five participants today. This is important due to the common feelings of isolation that can come with being a TRIA or a TRA. Sharing where adoptees are finding belonging, safety, and empowerment will perhaps help other TRIAs and TRAs brainstorm the ways in which they can themselves find and create spaces that they feel comfortable for them. The overall themes of these places of comfort came in the form of placemaking safe spaces for themselves at home, being in multicultural spaces, beginning reculturation activities, and finding adoptee communities online. In my interpretation, I believe these spaces mimic the concept of third space because they all accommodate differences and make room for individuals that transcend "race, citizenship, culture, religion and language," (Hübinette 2004, 16).

Multicultural Spaces

While I was initially interested in how urban and non-urban environments impact where TRIAs feel comfortable in, certain spaces remain the same despite the different geographies. One theme that emerged in three interviews was feeling at home and safe in multicultural spaces. These participants were Thom, Kat and Riri.

In his interview, Thom shared how he has created a safe space within his own home. He first discussed the importance of his Guatemalan and Mayan roots: "I've really tried to make like my house kind of representative of like Guatemalan culture. Like if you look behind me I have a tapestry of like the Mayan stuff over here. And in my room I have Mayan statues, and all of these different things." Thom's home space is intentional and is a form of reculturation in that it reconnects him to his birth culture. His home space is also decorated with more than just

Guatemalan culture, making it multicultural: “I have Mayan masks and just instruments from Guatemala and from other South American countries, so I have tried to make this kind of just a multicultural kind of place.” When discussing how he identifies, he also mentioned feeling connected to Native Americans in the United States. All of this accumulates to a cultural mosaic of a home space.

This multicultural safe space accommodates his complex identity. This is because the home he has adorned with pieces from cultures across the American continent allows him to “linger in my own identity.” In my interpretation, this statement seems to articulate a sense of relief and ease. The word “linger” suggests a kind of contemplation of his identity for himself. Perhaps being able to linger in his identity means that he can experiment in the ways in which he wishes to express and see himself. In relation to the spaces outside of his home, he explains, “I can’t really find what I am looking for outside. Here I can kind of mix everything to where it fits me and suits me.” This wording shows how most, if not all, spaces Thom encounters outside of his house do not reflect or give space to his multicultural identity. This lack of spaces thus has made his home especially meaningful to him. Identification with multicultural spaces also shows that belonging to one identity, such as just Mayan identity or just his adoptive family’s cultural identities, is overly simplified. One identity seems to not encapsulate his experience. Instead, a “mix” is more accurate.

Kat also identifies with multicultural spaces, but it takes a different form in the urban center of New York City. Sitting in Barnes and Nobles together, where I conducted her interview, she first introduced the topic by talking about her identification with a multicultural identity:

> I have adopted like a few different cultures in my life. Like Asian, like Chinese heritages. Japanese. Maybe Chinese and Korean…of course like my white Caucasian family too so. From time to time, I do find myself like speaking Italian cause my old caregiver, may she rest in peace, she taught me Italian a tiny bit.

This identification with several cultures is similar to Thom's multicultural home and shows how multiculturalism resonated for Kat as well. Kat also discussed how she felt that parts of her Guatemalan identity were missing. Perhaps the feeling of losing identity for TRIAs makes identification with several cultures more accurate. For Kat, her identification with multiculturalism came from the people around her as well as personal interests. Although she did not mention identifying with Guatemalan culture in the quote, she did later show me a Mayan jade necklace she was wearing. To me, this conveyed a connection to Mayan and indigenous culture as well.

Along with identifying with multiculturalism, Kat felt the most safe in spaces she perceived as multicultural in New York City. Her mental map displays this well:

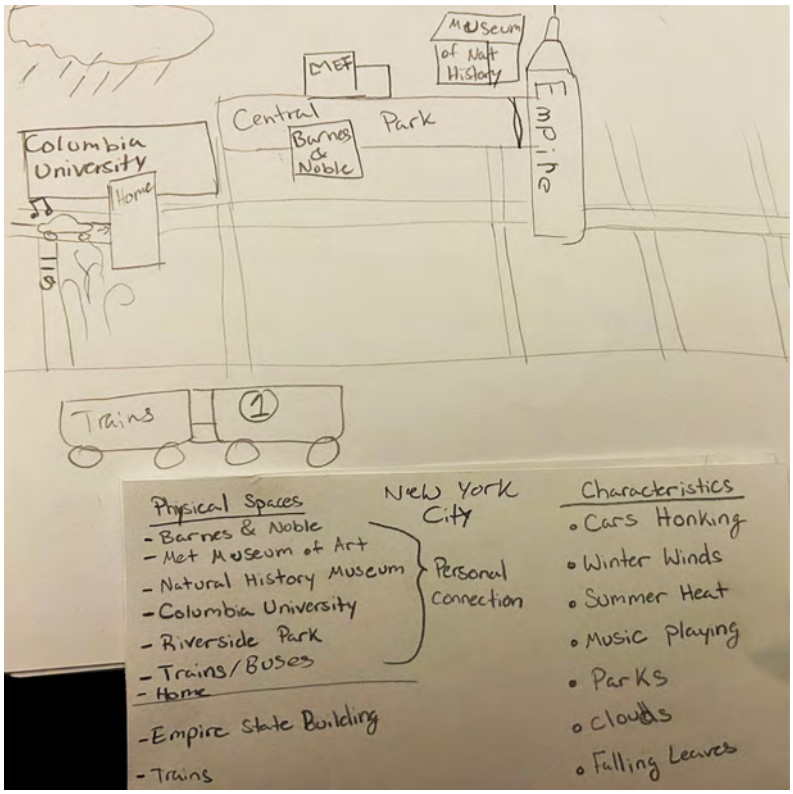

Figure 6: Mental map drawn by the participant Kat which only depicts her places of personal identity while living in New York City, and not the second prompt of spaces of anxiety.

She reflected that "when doing the map I actually kind of like realized that a lot of the places that I liked going to were like full of people from all different types of backgrounds." Unlike Thom, who creates a multicultural space for himself as a response to a lack of multicultural spaces, Kat has access to multicultural spaces in the city. In my interpretation, it seems like a multicultural space would be a safe space for an adoptee precisely because it is not associated with one race. In my opinion, this is because TRAs and TRIAs are specifically attuned to the fact that race and culture are so closely correlated, at least in the United States.

As is shown on her map, Kat highlights Barnes and Nobles as a safe, multicultural space. In her words, "Barnes and Nobles is like the perfect thing…full of different people with different histories and their different stories, different backgrounds, different cultures." Identification with difference and individuality reflects the concept of Difference as Self (Malafronti 2022). And, as RG pointed out, the TRIA experience can feel like you are existing in your own world. Kat also listed other urban multicultural places she feels comfortable in: "On the subway, it's basically again people going to different places yet we all take the same kind of like trains and stuff to get there…Central park: full of diverse people, lots of interesting things happening." When I asked what feelings were associated with these spaces, Kat said "I feel safe in these places most of all. Everywhere else kind of like not so much." This reminded me of Thom's comment about how outside of his home, he did not feel like he could linger in his multicultural identity.

Thom and Kat only feeling safe in spaces that allow complex layers of identity perhaps reveal just how racialized spaces can be for people, whether in a city or not. It seems to be almost stifling for individuals who exist in third space, whether that be TRAs, TRIAs, biracial people, bicultural people, or people from other countries. I resonated with both participants,

especially in high school, when I found myself not being able to stop racializing every space and object I encountered.

Interestingly, all participants expressed feeling comfortable around fellow people of color in general in chapter one. I speculate that this continued into the present although only one participant mentioned it again. Upon asking Riri where she feels most comfortable now, she said "I guess multicultural spaces, yes. For me, I just like being with other people of color. Like it doesn't have to be Asian people. It could be. Like I can vibe with Asian people, especially Asian Americans." I find this general comfort with people of color interesting and would go as far to say that this too could be an example of TRIAs feeling comfortable in a multicultural space.

Overall, Thom, Kat and Riri's comfort in multicultural space, or being with people that are not white, is a great example of third space. This is again because, like TRIAs, multicultural spaces cannot accurately be described by one race or one culture. Rather, they are places that are uniquely defined by their mixture and complexity.

Comfort in Spaces of the Same Race

Gil and Riri expressed feeling comfortable in majority Asian spaces. This differed from the Guatemalan adoptees. For Gil, he talked about how he has lived in Koreatown in Los Angeles, and now frequently visits Fort Lee which is predominantly Korean. At For Lee, "we will go there to shop or eat, my partner and I. So yeah, I think it's really important to have those spaces, personally, to feel connected to where I came from and the experience also of just being Asian American in this country and having a consciousness of that." Not only is Fort Lee a connection to his birth country but is a way of connecting to the broader Asian American

community. In his interview, Gil also mentioned being connected to the organization AAPI New Jersey as a way of being up to date on issues surrounding the AAPI community.

Riri also felt comfortable being in majority Asian spaces. In her interview, she explained why she thought this was: “I feel like Asian people are more accepting of adopted Asians for the most part, especially. I keep saying Asian Americans because I feel like they understand it more. Even Chinese international students, I think understand that a little bit.” While RG and Kat described feeling white when they interacted with fellow Latin-Americans, Riri has a different experience. As she explained, hanging with a group of all Asian people “makes me feel more American. Not more white because I’m not white, but very much more American. When I’m hanging out with my international friends, I definitely feel more American. I can’t fully understand what they’re saying in Chinese or whatever.” Here, a cultural barrier is being interpreted as distance from Riri’s Chinese roots, not distance from her racial identity.

Although cultural differences causes Thom to feel discomfort in Latine spaces, he does however find comfort and community in a Guatemalan store near him called *Tipica El Quetzal*. For context, Thom explained in his interview that he felt that he and his family were isolated from fellow Guatemalans and Guatemalan culture in general. In relation to the majority Latine places he frequents, Thom said “the only place that I have is that store that I go to that’s run by people from Guatemala with clothes from Guatemala. That’s really the hub where I go when I feel like I need a little bit of my culture.” Along with clothes, Thom shared how they also sometimes sell Guatemalan food as well. Overall, Thom did not express frequenting many Latine spaces besides *Tipica El Quetzal*. This could be a mixture of lacking Latine spaces near him as well as most Latine spaces having cultural barriers that make being there difficult.

Finding Comfort in Explaining Their Identity Less

In his interview, Gil expressed feeling more okay with not explaining himself when his identity is questioned. At the same time, he also felt more comfortable going into depth about his identity when he wanted to. This shows a shift from when he was a kid and wanting to avoid the topic while at the same time feeling a pressure to explain himself: "I have now a sense of comfort where it's like if somebody asks me a question, I don't have to go into the depths of it...I just can say whatever I want, and I feel very confident and comfortable talking about my identities." This was something Gil and I found common ground about. I, too, feel less inclined these days to explain my background to people who are confused about the mismatch of my race and my cultural practices. Instead of feeling forced to talk about my identity, I now feel okay with leaving people in confusion.

Who Gil talks about his identity with depends on who he is speaking to. Generally, the main difference for him is having more comfort speaking to fellow people of color: "If it's somebody who's a person of color or another Asian American person, I would probably go into more depth about being Korean American, or even maybe sharing I'm a Korean adoptee." What I appreciated here was that, even with people of color, Gil seemed to still not feel pressured to share about his adoptive identity. To sum up his thoughts, Gil stated that "I guess the point I'm saying is I feel much more secure in talking about my identities or withholding those things." Overall, it seems that Gil speaking about his identity on his own terms has been empowering.

Along with talking about his identity when he wants to, Gil also had a lot of insightful thoughts about the cultural differences that TRIAs often experience from their racial group. I bring this up because I found his thoughts on his Korean identity inspiring, and suspected that they were contributing to him feeling so comfortable talking about his identity now. On the topic

of cultural practices that are associated with white people in the United States, Gil said "My partner is a Korean American person, and then they sometimes will tease me for some of the things I enjoy, like music-wise or you know things. But it's like I also acknowledge that we're both Korean Americans, and we've just had different journeys to arrive at our experience." His cultural differences therefore do not take away from his Korean identity.

Gil also talked about how he has heard many adoptees get down on themselves for having cultural differences or acting so-called white: "there's certain things that I do enjoy and I know it's because of how I grew up and the environment I was raised in. I don't think it's necessarily wrong." I agree with Gil in that TRIAs should not shame themselves for the culture they grew up in, even though it is easier said than done. As Gil reflected, "It's been probably a 20-plus-year journey for me."

Reculturation and Travel

The desire to learn more about their birth country was another theme in between RG and Kat. This is called reculturation which is when a TRA or TRIA chooses on their own accord to learn more about their birth country, family, and culture as well as their adoptive background (Baden et al 2012). For RG and Kat, they wished to learn more about Guatemala and get in contact with their birth families. I highlight this because reculturation differs from parents connecting their kids with their birth cultures and is instead an empowering step in TRIA identity exploration.

RG and Kat both expressed feeling like parts of their identity were missing and wished to be more connected with their Guatemalan heritage. In her interview, RG explained how she thinks about identity a lot. She reflected how this is partly because "I feel like I don't have quite

like a grounded sense of identity. And I've kind of just like made one up for myself, but I still feel like I'm missing pieces that have to do with me being born in Guatemala…I don't know who I am, like the adoption part of it, I guess." RG feeling like she has to make up an identity for herself reminded me of the concept of third space in that the current understandings of race and identity today don't resonate with RG. This also came up when RG talked about how being Latina nor white seemed to fit: "I don't feel like I have the right, kind of, to claim titles of being Latina or being anything that sort of relates to that, but at the same time, I don't feel like a white experience is what I've experienced." RG did, however, feel connected to Guatemala when she took a trip there in high school. Looking towards the future, she was excited about her trip she was planning in 2024.

Kat also was excited about reculturation activities as the next step in her identity exploration. Similar to RG, she felt that she had lost some of her identity. When I asked her if she thinks about identity a lot, she said "I don't want to say it comes up a lot, but I do have like internal battles with myself about it. But I'm still working on myself and figuring out who I really am. And before I figure that out, I feel like I need to have all the pieces of my past and present figured out." Although not always on her mind, Kat is still in the process of exploring her identity. By collecting more information about her past, it seems to me that Kat would then have more of a solid understanding and foundation of where she came from in order to move forward.

While part of Kat has felt like a white person within a Latina person, as was mentioned in chapter one, she also simultaneously pushes back on this. She explained how "another part of me is just like, no, I want to reclaim who I truly am, and I feel like the way to do that is by reconnecting with my family from Guatemala…First, I want to find my sister, because she was actually adopted around the same time I was." By reclaiming who she truly is, Kat gives off the

impression that she has a part of herself that hasn't been veiled yet. I too felt like this, and learning more about the history of Guatemala and Guatemalan adoption has helped me feel like I have a more solid foundation for identity. While RG's form of reculturation in the current day is visiting Guatemala, Kat's form is reaching out to her birth family. Both decisions are not spaces of comfort, per say, but felt important to highlight.

Agency and Home Space

One thing that Thom and Gil both talked about was agency in relation to home space. For Gil, this was moving away from his hometown. Going to college in New York City impacted this decision: aftering coming home from college, "my relationship with my parents especially was profoundly different…It's, oh, the thing and the person that's changed is me because they are the same as they've always been. They never pretended to be anything different, but I'm the one who changed." This shift in himself caused him to realize that his hometown wasn't the place he wanted to be. College had a similar impact on me in that the difference in location showed me a different way of living and the agency that would come with being an adult. When reflecting on his parents and their hometown, Gil thought it made sense for them: "That's where they feel comfortable, that's where they feel belonging, or that's just the inertia of where they'll be. Whereas I never went back. I just have lived elsewhere." In my interpretation, there seems to be a feeling of being at peace with this for Gil in that both his parents and him were living in places they knew they belonged. As for Thom, his creation of a multicultural space in his home is a form of placemaking and having agency over what the space looks like and means to him.

Virtual Spaces

Virtual spaces were a place of community and safety for several participants. They were also described as easy steps to the beginning of reculturation journeys. For Thom, virtual spaces and the Guatemalan store *Tipica El Quetzal* are the only places he feels he can see his Guatemalan identity reflected, besides his home. Both are also where he finds a sense of community. For RG, virtual spaces, such as Facebook groups and instagram communities, helped her realize she wasn't alone in this experience: "I didn't actually realize that it was such a big community. I think for the longest time I've kind of just existed in my own world that's been like 'well I know I have this really kind of weird unique situation.'" RG's experience mirrored my own. It was not until I began researching Guatemalan international adoption that I found *Next Generation Guatemala* and realized just how many Guatemalan adoptees there are. For both of us, virtual spaces were starting points into learning the broader Guatemala adoptee community.

Gil spoke about the importance of virtual spaces as well, especially for TRIAs, and how they are great beginning stepping stones. He explained, "What's really been great about joining the community is that there is a lot of space. I feel like I came through virtual spaces at first and that was like the easiest bar for me to clear." By having a "lot of space," Gil seems to be articulating that these online forums spotlight individual adoptees in a way that outside spaces may not. And by describing joining as the "easiest bar" to clear, Gil seems to be insinuating that virtual spaces are special because they require very little action while at the same time symbolizing big emotional steps. Now, Gil goes to adoptee events and conventions. He is a supporter and advocate for the Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network (KAAN), an in-person conference in June. Gil also virtually connects with fellow adoptees year around. For Gil, these spaces are now a very important element in his life.

CONCLUSION

Feelings of isolation can be a common experience for transracial international adoptees. Oftentimes, racial identities of our families and broader racial communities do not feel like they encapsulate such complex lives. As has been established, the distress that comes from being a TRIA can have many negative mental health implications such as substance abuse, depression, and self harm. What I have found is that knowledge is power, and the more I can articulate and learn about this experience, the less it impedes on my daily life and the spaces I'm in. The concept of third space was fascinating to me because TRIAs and TRAs know first hand what it is like to exist in between categorizations and labels. As occupiers of third space, it can sometimes feel especially difficult to find spaces of safety and belonging.

Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, I have put a lot of effort into trying to make it the best it can be. What I hope to accomplish with this year-long project is to gather helpful conceptual, historical and informational resources on this topic, to share TRIA stories so that we can compare and contrast with one another, and to explore the spatial dimensions of the TRIA experience. My research was guided by the following questions: as occupiers of third space, what places are TRIAs isolated from? Where do they find belonging and safety? And do the answers to these questions differ depending on if a TRIA grew up in an urban or non-urban context?

From five interviews and five mental maps, I concluded that there is a general shared spatial experience among the participants. In childhood years, common spaces of othering were majority white spaces and schools, spaces associated with the TRIA's race such as racial affinity groups, and complicated home spaces. As for common spaces of safety, themes between the interviews included places of personal interests, personal rooms and homes, being with fellow

people of color, g in the company of close friends, and generally places where the adoptees had a sense of control and where race and culture were not impeding forces.

Interviewing the participants about their lives now, there were also commonalities between their current spaces of othering and safety. Importantly, the main difference between their childhood spatial experiences and their current spatial experiences was their discovery of multiculturalism and the incorporation of third space-like places into their daily lives. While the spaces of othering continued, their spaces of belonging and safety came to include places that made space for racial and cultural differences, the creation of their own multicultural spaces, being okay with withholding information about themselves to people who confront their identities, beginning their reculturation journeys, having agency over their home spaces, and virtual adoptee communities. Speaking for myself, learning more about TRIAs and the history of international and Guatemalan adoption has made me feel more solid in my identity and therefore safer in more spaces.

As for my investigation into how urban environments versus non-urban environments impact the spaces of othering and belonging for TRIAs, there were some noteworthy trends. The three participants who grew up in non-urban contexts shared with me how they felt that they lacked spaces to learn about their birth cultures. Two of them shared with me that they felt where they grew up limited the amount of people of the same race they came in contact with. Interestingly, one of the participants from New York City had the same comment about not seeing too many people of the same race in her neighborhood growing up. Thus, this element was not limited to non-urban environments due to the tendency of cities being racially segregated.

Another finding on this topic was Gil sharing about how his close-knit community in his small town protected him in a way since he was a known entity there and did not have to constantly feel that his identity was being confronted. I speculated that this kind of protection would not be possible in a city since you meet people you don't know every day. This point is important because it emphasizes that one environment is not better than another but that urban and non-urban environments come with their own benefits and challenges.

Lastly, the difference between urban and non-urban environments also came up for the spaces of safety and belonging in adulthood. Although urban versus non-urban environments did not impact the common qualities that made participants feel safe, it did impact the forms in which their safe spaces came in. While the participants currently living in New York City found multicultural places outside of their homes, one participant living in a non-urban place now created the multicultural space himself in his home. Another participant living in a non-urban place spoke about the lack of spaces of belonging outside and the importance of her bedroom being a place where she could be anything she wanted.

Overall, the five participants did indeed have commonalities between their spatial experiences that reflect how distressing being occupiers of third space can be. Interestingly, though, it seemed to be the acceptance and incorporation of third-space like places into their adult lives that created more spaces of belonging and safety for them. These places reflected an acceptance of difference, multiculturalism, and mixtures of identities. Further, virtual spaces seem to be an exciting new element to the adoptee experience. In total, I believe that the concept of third space is a great framework for scholarship on the TRIA experience and that this topic TRIA spatial experience is worthy of future research, possibly focusing on a smaller region and one with more participants.

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