

**Event Title:** Who Are Adoptees and Who Has the Right to Write about Them?

**Event Description:** Books featuring adoption have garnered attention in recent years, and yet, many portrayals of adoptees in literature continue to be one-dimensional. This panel will take a critical look at adoptee representations in several examples of contemporary literature in order to interrogate the ways in which adoptee narratives reflect broader understandings of adoptee identity. We will also examine the consequences these problematic depictions can have on US international relations and policy-making.

**Statement of Merit:** From Superman to “Operation Babylift” to family separation at the US/Mexico border, adoption has a complicated global history. This panel will consider how adoption is often portrayed in literature, reinforcing stereotypical tropes such as the grateful adoptee, white savior, and reunification. Panelists will discuss how writers might incorporate a complex, intersectional lens when writing adoptee characters engaging with citizenship, colonization, alienation, and heritage.

**Event Category:** Panel Discussion: Multiple Literary Genres Craft & Criticism

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60 minutes

The moderator will begin by welcoming attendees, providing a brief overview of the panel, then introducing panelists with their short bios. The moderator will describe why and how this panel came together, and then offer a series of prepared questions for the panelists to discuss for 30 minutes. Each panelist will also read a short sample of their own work (1-2 poems each) in response to certain discussion topics.

## **EVENT OUTLINE: Who Are Adoptees and Who Has the Right to Write about Them?**

### **Introduction & Bios (Tiana Nobile)**

Welcome to “Who Are Adoptees and Who Has a Right to Write About Them?” This panel will consider how adoption is often portrayed in literature, reinforcing stereotypical tropes such as the grateful adoptee, white savior complex, and happy reunification story. We will interrogate the ways in which adoptee narratives reflect broader understandings of adoptee identity, and we will discuss how writers might incorporate a complex, intersectional lens when writing adoptee characters engaging with citizenship, colonization, alienation, and heritage.

To begin, I will introduce our panelists:

**Marci Calabretta Cancio-Bello** is the author of *Hour of the Ox* (University of Pittsburgh, 2016), which won the Donald Hall Prize for Poetry. She and E. J. Koh co-translated *The World’s Lightest Motorcycle* by Korean poet Yi Won (Zephyr Press, 2021). She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Kundiman, the Knight Foundation, and the American Literary Translators Association, and her work has appeared in *Kenyon Review Online*, *The New York Times*, and more. She serves as co-director for the Adoptee Literary Festival and PEN America Miami/South Florida Chapter, and as program coordinator for Miami Book Fair.

**Ansley Moon** is the author of the poetry collection, *How to Bury the Dead* (Black Coffee Press). Moon has received awards and fellowships from the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, Kundiman and The Mae Fellowship, among others. Moon’s current poetry collection has been a finalist for the Pleiades Press Editors Prize, the Slope Editions Book Prize, and the Kelsey Street Press QTBIPOC award.

**Tiana Nobile** is the author of *Cleave* (Hub City Press, 2021). She is a Korean American adoptee, Kundiman fellow, and recipient of a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award. Recently named one of the Gambit’s 40 Under 40, she is a finalist of the National Poetry Series and Kundiman Poetry Prize, and her writing has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *The New Republic*, *Guernica*, and the *Texas Review*, among others. She lives in Bulbancha, aka New Orleans, Louisiana.

**Leah Silvius** was born in South Korea and adopted to the U.S. at three-months old. She grew up in small towns in Montana’s Bitterroot Valley and western Colorado. She is the author of *Anemochory* (Hyacinth Girl Press), *Season of Dares* (Bull City Press), *Arabilis* (Sundress Publications) and co-editor with Lee Herrick of the poetry anthology, *The World I Leave You: Asian American Poets on Faith and Spirit* (Orison Books). She is a recipient of awards and fellowships from Kundiman, The Academy of American Poets, and Fulbright and serves as a

mentor on [The Brooklyn Poets Bridge](#). A 2019-2020 National Book Critics Circle Emerging Fellow, Leah serves as a senior books editor at Hyphen magazine and an associate editor at Marginalia Review of Books. Her reviews and criticism have appeared in the Harvard Review Online, The Believer, and elsewhere. She splits her time between New York and Florida working as a yacht chief stewardess.

### **Adoptee Book Club / Starlings Collective Origin Story (Tiana Nobile)**

We thought we'd begin with some background into what brought us together as a group and why we think this topic is important. In 2016, Leah had initiated a research project about the ways in which emerging adoptee poets contend with identity, loss, culture, and family in their work. She sent a query through the Kundiman network, looking for Asian American adoptees who would be interested in participating, and the three of us were eager to participate and connect.

Each of us found that being in community with not only fellow transracial, transnational, Asian American adoptees, but also poets was incredibly meaningful. We realized that navigating the world as transracial, transnational adoptees and sharing a deep affinity with language made our relationships particularly affirming.

This initial meeting led to us forming an adoptee book club, where we began reading books written by both adoptees and non-adoptees, all featuring prominent adoptee characters. Through our conversations, we began to notice recurring tropes that reflected problematic understandings of the adoptee experience, including the white savior and the insistence on reunification as a solution to all problems. In reading, processing, and critiquing together, we developed a unique analysis of these narratives, grounded in our own adoptee experience, and it's an analysis that we believe is too often excluded from mainstream literary discourse.

From there, we've continued to read together and support each other's work. In the fall of 2021, we launched The Starlings Collective with the mission to honor the experiences and elevate the work of BIPOC adoptee writers and artists through public events, workshops, and more. Adoption is a global phenomenon that is informed by the intersections of multiple systems of power, including white supremacy, sexism, ableism, war, and colonialism. Erasure and displacement are inherent in adoption stories, and there is no singular adoptee narrative. At the core of our mission is to elevate and deepen the breadth of adoptee narratives.

And now Leah is now going to provide us with some more background on the history of transnational and transracial adoption and some of the common tropes we discovered through our adoptee book club.

### **Common & Problematic Tropes & Statistics (Leah Silvieus)**

- **Statistics:**

Intercountry adoption has played a large role in the following:

- In 2004, the rate of intercountry adoptions within the U.S. reached an all-time high with 22,989 adoptions from abroad and fell to a recent low rate of 4,714 in 2017 (Jones & Placek, 2017), the lowest rate since 1973.  
<https://www.umass.edu/ruddchair/sites/default/files/rudd.baden.pdf>
- Mental Health Statistics
  - A second study published in 2013 in the journal Pediatrics found that adoptees are ~4 times more likely to attempt suicide than non-adoptees. Out of the 1165 study participants, which included 657 adopted and 508 non-adopted adolescents ranging in age from 13 to 17 at the start of the study, 56 young people reported that they had attempted suicide. Of those 56 individuals, 47 were adoptees.  
<https://www.bcadoption.com/resources/articles/adoptees-and-suicide-risk>
  - Birth rates go down = adoption rates go up?
  - (From [this site](#)) A [study](#) published by the Institute for Family Studies found that 44 percent of the adopted children surveyed were adopted by parents of a different race. Additionally, according to the [U.S. Department of State website](#), the majority of children adopted into the United States in 2017 came from Central and South America, Africa, and Asia, thus creating transcultural/transracial adoptions.
  - 2020 Adoption Study & Placement  
<https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/private/pdf/264526/MEPA-Data-report.pdf>
  - Over 50% of adoptees are persons of color, whereas adoptive parents are predominantly White—71% of private placements, 63% of public placements from foster care, and 92% of intercountry adoptions (Vandivere et. al., 2009).  
<https://www.umass.edu/ruddchair/sites/default/files/rudd.pinderhughes.pdf>
- For most intents and purposes, systematic international Korean adoption began after the Korean War, targeting war orphans and mixed-race children fathered by GIs. The political, economic and social circumstances that led to foreign

adoptions have shifted over the years from the “rescue” of War orphans in the 50s to abandonment due to economic hardship in the 60s and 70s to out-of-wedlock births in the 80s and 90s. Despite these shifts, however, the program represents the longest and largest of its kind in the world. Between 1953 and 2008, 162,665 Korean children were adopted internationally, the majority to Western Europe and to the U.S., the latter of which received 75 percent of the total.

- **What have we noticed about adoptees’ representation in literature?**

- In narratives that range from Biblical stories to popular novels to contemporary superhero movies, adopted or orphaned children often play a prominent role. However, many of these stories often utilize the orphan or adoptee as a plot device. They are victims of their circumstances/fates/greater social forces and a point around which the rest of the plot unfolds. Consequently, they often become symbols of white or Euro-American saviorism, or the fallout of war, political or economic struggle. They are flattened, one-dimensional characters without their own agency over their identities, circumstances, or futures. Many of these fictional tropes have their roots in the complex political and economic history surrounding adoption. For example, although Korean adoption began with the “rescue” of war orphans in the 50s and then shifted to abandonment due to economic hardship, the trope of the “poor,” “helpless” Korean orphan persists, without attention to the global political and economic systems that produced such hardship in the first place. The deleterious effects of flattened political and economic narratives about adoption disproportionately affect children from developing countries. [According to the U.S. Department of State website, the majority of children adopted into the United States in 2017 came from Central and South America, Africa, and Asia, thus creating transcultural/transracial adoptions.](#) Such economic and power differentials between sending and receiving countries can serve to heighten the exoticification of intercountry adoptees and the objectification of their experiences. As a result, their trauma can be seen merely as collateral damage. This phenomenon disproportionately affects BIPOC adoptees. Over 50% of adoptees are persons of color, whereas adoptive parents are predominantly White. These economic/political narratives often find their way into stories, novels, TV shows and films, with little or no nuance, producing the idea of an “ideal” adoptee who is submissive, grateful for their adoptive families without any sense of grief or loss.

Why does the interweaving of these narratives matter? Many children (and adults) come to literature to understand ourselves better. What happens when depictions of those characters whose experiences we expect to align with ours are stereotypes without agency, a sense of self, or a sense of belonging in community? [A study published in 2013 in the journal Pediatrics found that adoptees are ~4 times more likely to attempt suicide than non-adoptees.](#) While nuanced depictions of adoptees in literature is not a corrective for the diverse social and psychological challenges that adoptees face, such depictions can, as they have for many of us on this panel, make us feel a little less alone and empowered to create our own identities both on and off the page.

- Representation of adoptees is important because it influences adoptees' self conception as well as public and political opinions that affect adoption policies.
  - grateful adoptee
  - good adoptee
  - evil adoptee/villain
  - Reunification
  - surprise, you're adopted
  - helpless baby as plot device
  - suicide of adoptees
  - white savior
  - Broken angel / false binary (unethical adoption practices)
  - joke/insult for not belonging
  - Adoption & reproductive rights

### Discussion

- **How do these representations reflect a wider understanding of transracial adoptees as people? (Ansley Moon)**
  - Because there is a lack of varied adoption narratives, this can sometimes lead people to believe that adoption is a monolith.
  - How might this impact publishing?
    - "We already have an adoption narrative in our catalog"
    - Expectations of story beyond complicating backstory / reunion narrative
- **How do these representations affect policy? (Marci Calabretta Cancio-Bello)**
  - Orphan trains during war/western expansion
  - Forced immigration/Undocumented adoptees: In 2019, estimated 25,000 - 49,000 people were adopted by American parents but never naturalized.
  - Adoptee Citizenship Act: Passed the House early Feb 2022. Now an amendment to a much larger/unrelated bill. This amendment removes previous date-based

restriction requiring intercountry adoptees to be younger than 18 as of Feb 27, 2001. If enacted, ANY intercountry adoptee who qualified for citizenship as a child no matter the date of birth, would acquire U.S. citizenship.

<https://adopteesunited.org/what-to-know-now-adoptee-citizenship-act/>

- Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) 1978: Gave tribes exclusive jurisdiction over any child custody proceeding involving any Indian child. ACLU contests cases when non-Native families have successfully adopted/fostered a child.
  - Forced removal of Natives from homelands by federal government in 1800s.
  - Indian Boarding Schools (1879+): Mass assimilation effort separating children. “Forcibly transferring children from one group to another is an international legal definition of genocide.”
  - Indian Adoption Project (1958-1967) placing Native children with white Americans after boarding schools lost popularity.
- Separation of families at the U.S.-Mexico border: Keeping children, sending adults back. White Americans stepping forward to adopt children separated. They already have families. Sexual assault by staff, abhorrent living conditions.
- Socioeconomic disparities and lack of support that would keep families together, which disproportionately affects BIPOC families/communities.
- **Writers who do it well / Poetry vs. Prose (Fiction/Nonfiction) (Tiana Nobile)**
  - Too often we see adoptee narratives / lives being co-opted by various entities, ranging from fairy tales and television producers to larger systems of power, such as adoption agencies, christian missionaries, and various govt institutions.
  - As writers and adoptees, we seek to shift that paradigm and center the adoptee experience, a story that has for too long been told by people who are not directly impacted but rather use it as a plot device on one end or as a capitalist endeavor and exertion of power on the other.
  - We have read a number of books that we’d like to recommend: authors who do it well, who consider the complexity of the adoptee not simply as an add-on or plot device or tool for diversity.
    - *Surviving the White Gaze* by Rebecca Carroll (memoir)
    - *Bitter in the Mouth* by Monique Truong (novel) (non-adoptee)
    - *Palimpsest: Notes from a Korean Adoption* by Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom (illustrated memoir)
    - *All You Can Ever Know* by Nicole Chung (memoir)
    - *Disappear Doppelgänger Disappear* by Matthew Salesses (fiction)
    - *For Black Girls Like Me* by Mariama J. Lockington (middle-grade novel)
    - Poetry

- *Scar and Flower* by Lee Herrick
- *Interrogation Room* by Jennifer Kwon Dobbs
- *Unbearable Splendor* by 신선선영, Sun Yung Shin
- *The Adoption Papers* by Jackie Kay

### **Reading**

- Marci reads “Origin / Adoption” and “Self-Portrait as Moses”
- Ansley reads “Elegy for X” and “Ghost Daughters: A Broken Ghazal”
- Tiana reads “‘Lost’ first languages leave permanent mark on the brain, new study reveals”
- Leah reads “When Asked Where I’m Really From” and “Naturalization”

### **Conclusion**

- **The Starlings Collective:** We honor the experience and elevate the work of BIPOC adoptee writers and artists. <https://www.thestarlingscollective.com/>
- **Adoptee Book Club:** Meets quarterly, open to the general public. <https://www.thestarlingscollective.com/events>
- **Adoptee Resources Handout:** This is not a comprehensive list. These are only some books, films, documentaries, and other resources that the panelists have personally viewed and can recommend. We haven’t read or seen everything out there, and continue to add to this list as we discover.