Transnationally Adopted Children’s Perspectives on Place and Identity

by

Jennifer Shaw
B.A., University of Victoria, 2007
A.A., Camosun College, 2005

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Abstract

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This thesis focuses on the ideas and experiences of transnationally adopted children regarding place and identity, and how their perspectives compare to those of their parents’. Although anthropologists have long been interested in child circulation, the growing transnational nature of adoption has sparked new interest in kinship studies. However, anthropological literature on transnational adoption largely focuses on the perspectives of adults including adoptive parents, adoption professionals, and adopted adults, while children’s opinions are rarely elicited. I interviewed ten transnationally adopted children using semi-structured interviews and drawing exercises to explore how they come to know about their migration and birth places as well as what places they find important sources of their identification. I also interviewed 14 parents of transnationally adopted children to examine how they emplace their children, physically and socially, upon adoption. Parents understand birth places to be a significant source of their children’s identities and construct ideas of this place that are meant to foster children’s ethnic and cultural connections to their birth places. However, children do not always conceptualize place or themselves in the same way as their parents. Rather than articulating abstract ethnic identities based on birth places, children draw on particular locations, people, and events that are important in their daily lives. By solely drawing attention to dichotomous dual ethnicities, or dual places of belonging, multiple other places that play an important part in children’s lives may be neglected. Through child-focused research, children can be viewed as competent social actors who are subject to their parents’ practices and desires but they also hold divergent perspectives on place and identity that shape their lives and influence those around them.
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Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Research Topic

In 2004, approximately 45,000\(^1\) children moved around the world to become part of a new family through transnational adoption (Selman 2009:34). This represents a 42% increase since 1998 (Selman 2009:34). The growth and popularity of transnational adoption has undergone much public attention and discussion regarding “children’s best interests.” Debates oscillate amongst those who view transnational adoption as a form of “child trafficking” where children are moved through overt or subtle coercive means and those who understand it as “child-saving” where abandoned children are provided with a much needed family and home (see Fonseca 2002b, Masson 2001, Smolin 2004).

In the wake of popular debate over the ethics of transnational adoption, the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (1993) was developed to standardize adoption practices. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) affords children the right to a cultural identity and the Hague Convention specifies due consideration must given to the ethnic, religious and cultural background of each child adopted across national borders. These conventions not only define and sustain a particular type of childhood based on Western European and North American notions of children’s best interests, but they also assume abstract concepts such as “ethnicity,” “culture” and “identity” sourced from places of origin are important to children themselves (see Stephens 1995). Multicultural discourse further perpetuates notions that people can and should always partially identify with their places of origin by adopting a dual ethnic identity (see Ackroyd and

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\(^1\) It is difficult to know the exact annual number of transnational adoptions worldwide since each country is responsible for documenting their own statistics and not all countries make their statistics readily available.
Pilkington 1999, Olwig 2003, 2007). As I worked my way through this research study, I increasingly questioned if children find these concepts relevant or important and how their perspectives differ from their parents and other authoritative adults in their lives.

Transnational adoption is a prime example of how people’s bodies are mobile through physical migration. However, along with migration comes the relocation of sociality, identity, and belonging. Children undergoing adoption may circulate through numerous caregivers and institutions (Leifsen 2004:183); in order to make these transitions children are conceptualized as mobile and passive, subject to the decisions of adults (Leifsen 2004:183). As children move into their new adoptive contexts, their parents emplace them physically and socially within their homes, families, neighbourhoods, and communities. However, children’s attention is also drawn back to their birth places which are constructed as the source and permanent location of their ethnicity and cultural identity based on origins. These “contradictory values concerning identity” (Howell 2009:256) paradoxically draw children’s attention both near and far. How children understand and negotiate multiple place-based identities is of interest here. Children are subject to the place-making practices of their parents but are also actors and agents within these relationships formulating perspectives in conjunction with their parents as well as beyond the parent-child relationship.

Through this thesis I tell two co-current stories; one is an empirical story of what children told me about their migration, adoption, and place-based experiences through semi-structured interviews. The other is a theoretical story about place-making as a process of negotiation between parents and children where they decide independently and together what places mean and why some places are important sources of children’s identifications. Together, these foci will provide information into how practices of migration and place-making are experienced by
those who are traditionally marginalized, silenced, and viewed as passive participants in the processes of transnational adoption.

1.2 Terminology

I begin my discussion by defining some terms that are central to this thesis. In reviewing adoption literature and talking directly to parents and adoption professionals, I recognize that the language one chooses to use is demonstrative of how that individual or group views adoption and what issues they see as important.\(^2\) Throughout the journey of this research I have come across many terms for describing similar ideas. Adoption can be referred to as transnational, international, transcultural, cross-cultural, intercountry, transracial, interracial, and domestic. I have found that *transnational adoption* is the most common term employed by anthropologists and sociologists (see Dorow 2006, Fonseca 2006, Howell 2006, Volkman 2005). The term *transracial adoption* is commonly used in other academic disciplines and within adoption organizations (see Trenka et al. 2006). Additionally, the term *international adoption* is prevalent in popular media. All of these representations of adoption insinuate boundary-crossing, such as transversing national borders, culture, or race.

I maintain the use of transnational adoption for several reasons. First, I find the notion of *transracial adoption* problematic in the sense that it upholds naturalized notions of “race.” As discussed by Thomas Hylland Erikson (2002:5) it has long been a popular practice to divide people according to “race” but today modern genetics tends not to employ the concept. Erikson notes three key reasons why this shift has occurred,

First, there has always been so much interbreeding between human populations that it would be meaningless to talk of fixed boundaries between races. Second,

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\(^2\) Prominent examples of debates regarding terminology are evident through the emergence of Positive Adoption Language (PAL) (see Johnston 2004) and Honest Adoption Language (HAL) (see Origins Canada 2003). Although these adoption discourses have not been heavily researched academically, there are many online forums devoted to such discussions.
the distribution of hereditary physical traits does not follow clear boundaries... In other words, there is often greater variation within a ‘racial’ group than there is systematic variation between two groups. Thirdly, no serious scholar today believes that hereditary characteristics explain cultural variation. (2002:5)

Thus, biological explanations of race have been debunked. However, this is not to say that the idea of “race” is not salient within our society. As stated by Erikson, “race exists as a cultural construct, whether it has a ‘biological’ reality or not” (2002:5). Thus, racialization exists as processes of constructing difference based on ideas of “race.” People who experience demarcation according to perceived racial differences are actively racialized. Likewise, adoptions that are seen to be crossing “racial” boundaries can also be considered racialized. Because the racialized nature of the relationship between parent and child is seen as important by some adoption actors, I will use the term “transracial” when it is referenced by the participant(s) or other researchers. Otherwise, I will employ the terms racialization and transracialized adoption to emphasize the socially constructed nature of race.

The second reason why I maintain the use of the term transnational adoption is because not all the participants in the study conceptualize their adoptions as transracial or even transcultural. Some parents who adopted from Eurasian countries saw their children to be of similar background to their ancestors who may have come from Central or Eastern Europe. What all families have in common is the fact that their children migrated from one country to another for the purposes of adoption, making their adoptions transnational in nature. The term international is confusing in that it is too large in scope, referring to governance at the global level. Trans simply implies crossing, while national implies nation or state. As stated by Volkman (2005:2), the focus on transnational enables one to examine processes of migration that are situated within two or more different countries.
Additionally, I will clarify how I am referring to the participants of this study. I hesitate to use the term “adoptees” when talking about the child participants. Although this term is frequently used in adoption literature\(^3\) I find that most of the children I spoke with never refer to themselves as “adoptees” and see their adoption as only one of many contributing factors to how they see themselves. When I am referring to the adopted status of the participants in this study I will use the wording “adopted children” or “adopted people”; however, most of the time I will simply employ the term “children.”

1.3 Research Objective and Significance

As I will show in the following literature review, anthropologists have demonstrated that transnational adoption has profound implications for people’s emplacement and processes of identification. Little qualitative anthropological and academic attention has been paid to the processes transnationally adopted children undergo as they negotiate the transitions of migration and adoption. When considering how children might experience transnational adoption, I arrived at the following questions: How do transnationally adopted children conceptualize their movement from one country to another? How do transnationally adopted children imagine their places of origin? How does place and place-making affect transnationally adopted children’s perceptions of their identity and who they are?

The first question focuses on migration and enables a close look at what aspects of a child’s life are mobile and reconstructed through socialization as well as what aspects are made into “natural facts” according to blood and soil (Olwig 2007:14, Strathern 1992:17). The second question focuses on place of origin and allows an examination of how places are socially constructed through interactive processes of meaning making. How places are constructed for

\(^3\) Because I will be referring to the work of other researchers in the literature review and elsewhere, I will employ the terminology they have chosen, which sometimes includes reference to “transnational adoptees.”
and by children is central to my discussion on children’s roles in place-making. The last question focuses on what places provide children with sources of identification. Migration research in North America has tended to focus on places of origin as one’s natural place of belonging and subsequently how well people “integrate” into the receiving society (Olwig 2003:217). Through my research, I examine how relevant these ideas are in children’s experiences of migration and what places they draw on as sources of identification.

This research is significant because it highlights children’s perspectives. Although anthropologists have increasingly turned their attention to the arena of transnational adoption, research focusing on children’s perspectives and experiences is scarce and this lacuna sustains the notion that children have few opinions of their own. This thesis provides information from children’s perspectives and thus partially fills a gap in knowledge. For the most part, I focus on children’s narratives to highlight their understanding of the world, although at times I draw in parents’ perspectives since children live interactively amongst others.

More importantly, this thesis contributes to broader theoretical understandings of place-making from the perspective of multiple actors. Transnational adoption as a process of family formation highlights how children are viewed as passive and mobile, subject to the decisions of adults; parents adopt children, children do not adopt parents. Because many aspects of transnational adoption are imposed upon children it makes it all the more interesting to examine how children negotiate the meaning of migration, place, and identity with their parents. Thus, this thesis also contributes to theoretical understandings of children’s roles as agents who have the capacity to transform the world around them. Throughout this paper I highlight how children are acted upon due to their subordinate position within a generational hierarchy but are also informative, strategic, and agentive within these relationships.
Additionally, although children are subject to broad social categorizations such as ethnicity and the multicultural practice of highlighting dual ethnicity, children’s ways of identifying themselves are contextual and flexible (see Ackroyd and Pilkington 1999, Olwig 2003, 2007). Although places of origin figure as partial sources of children’s identifications, other locations that figure prominently in children’s daily lives often act as primary sources of identification. By focusing on what places are important to children and why they take on significance, this thesis expands anthropological understandings of place and identity from the perspectives of transnationally adopted children.

1.4 Literature Review
1.4.1 The Role of Psychological Research

Psychology has been in the forefront of adoption research for decades, acting as “expert knowledge” and informing adoption education, policies, and practices (see Howell 2006:86, 2007:90-91). Pioneers on adoption research within this disciple include David Brodzinsky (see for example 1986, 1990, 1998, 2005) and H. David Kirk (1964). Many anthropologists critique the developmentalist paradigm employed in psychological adoption research that sees child development as linear, progressive, and empirically measureable (see Howell 2006 and James and James 2008:46-48). According to this paradigm, identity formation largely occurs during stages of adolescence. Howell (2006:87) argues that psychology creates categories of normality; deviations from the norm are viewed as pathological. Adopted children who “fail to settle down” are deemed “maladjusted” (Howell 2006:87) and even “damage[d]” (Howell 2006:102).

By creating a set path for development as well as homogenizing what it means to be “normal,” psychological research constrains the breadth of diversity that emerges within each adoption experience. Additionally, qualitative research on how children of any age understand
themselves according to an array of significant social categories including culture, class, ethnicity, and geography becomes sidelined in favour of linear, developmentalist perspectives (James and James 2008:48). In contrast, as I discuss below, anthropologists have placed these issues of identity at the centre of their research on transnational adoption.

1.4.2 Anthropological Research in Sending Countries

Many anthropologists focus on the conditions within sending countries including poverty and inequalities that lead to children’s availability for adoption (see Fonseca 2002a, 2005, Johnson 2005, Kendall 2005). In 2004, the top countries that provided children for adoption, or “sending countries,” include China, Russia, Guatemala and South Korea (Selman 2009:36, Volkman 2005:1). The main sending countries have shifted over recent decades, and these shifts reflect changing historical and contextual circumstances of adoption. Peter Selman sums up the adoption trends by observing that sending countries have shifted...

...from the predominance of war-torn and defeated countries after World War II through the long period of adoption from South Korea after the Korean War to the emergence of Latin America as a major source in the 1980s and the recent dominance of China and Russia, with brief periods of high levels from Viet Nam and Romania. (2009:36)

Just as transnational adoption began to grow in popularity, Saralee Kane (1993) conducted a broad international study on child abandonment. She (1993:337) found that social and economic conditions are primary catalysts for transnational adoption. More specifically these included “migration to urban areas, breakdown of extended families, high pregnancy rates among unmarried women, difficulty in obtaining abortions, an increase in single mothers as

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4 Selman (2000, 2009) is a leading researcher who has examined transnational adoption statistics in over 20 receiving countries. Unfortunately his research only provides data until 2004. Statistics from the Adoption Council of Canada (ACC 2009) show that the largest number of children received to Canada in 2008 were from China, the United States, Ethiopia, and Haiti. Similarly, statistics from the United States Department of State (2010) show children were mainly received from China, Ethiopia, and Russia in 2009. Norway receives the most children from China, Ethiopia and the former Soviet bloc (Howell 2006:25) and Spain receives the most children from China and Russia (Marre 2009:232).
heads of households, and high rates of unemployment. Some countries of origin have also experienced political unrest which compounds family suffering and stress” (Kane 1993:337). Jessaca Leinaweaver (2008:157) also notes that war leads to a rise in transnational adoptions by perpetuating discrimination, violence, poverty, inequality, dislocation, and even death (also see Gailey 2000:298-303). In addition to economic and social concerns, population policies are contributing factors to the migration of children for transnational adoption. For example, China’s Planned Birth Policy is a major determinant of children being placed for adoption (Johnson 2002, 2005).

The information that emerges from this literature challenges the notion that adoptable children are orphans who lack family or other caregivers; most children are not placed for adoption due to parental death but because of parental constraints and poverty that emerges through historical relationships between sending and receiving countries (Briggs and Marre 2009:2). Research conducted by Jessaca Leinaweaver (2008) in the Andes, Erdmute Alber (2004) and Esther Goody (1982) in West Africa, and Claudia Fonseca (2002a, 2005) in Brazil confirms that perceptions of orphanhood are socially constructed and imposed categories that negate the complexity of children’s social worlds. Collectively, anthropologists that focus on the history of transnational adoption and pre-adoption contexts demonstrate that most children are part of intricate social networks prior to adoption as well as subject to global forms of structural inequality that enable adoptions across national borders.

1.4.3 Anthropological Research in Receiving Countries

Some countries that accept children for adoption or “receiving countries” include the United States, France, Italy, Canada and increasingly Norway and Spain (Marre 2009, Selman 2009), to name just a few. In 2004, the United States received 22,884 children while other top ranking countries received between approximately 2,000 and 5,000 children (Selman 2009:33).
Sending and receiving countries remain distinctly separate within the sphere of transnational adoption. Children flow from countries that are war-torn and impoverished towards countries that are comparatively politically stable and wealthy. Such divisiveness is apparent, except for the United States which both receives and sends children for transnational adoption. In 2008, the United States provided the second highest number of children to Canada overall (ACC 2009).

The experiences of transnationally adopted people in a receiving country are explored through the work of anthropologists including Signe Howell (1999, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2009) and Barbara Yngvesson (2000, 2005, 2006). Howell expands upon studies kinship studies by examining concepts of kinning, place, and identity. She focuses on the kinning and place-making practices that transnationally adopted people undergo in the receiving country of Norway. Kinning is the process that brings people “into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people, and the connection is expressed in a conventional kin idiom” (Howell 2006:8). Place-making enables emplacement within social and physical contexts through occupation, recollection, and connection to people and places (Hammond 2003:78). Howell’s research explores how kinning and place affect processes of identification. Howell also provides useful concepts for place and place-making among transnationally adopted people which will be discussed later in my conceptual framework.

Research on processes of identification among transnationally adopted people often narrowly focus on conceptualizations of ethnic identities and how this form of identification is experienced through different national integration policies directed towards newcomers. For example, Howell (2006) posits that Norwegian adopted people will experience a different sense of ethnic identity than those adopted to the United States. She suggests transnationally adopted people in Norway may cultivate an authentic sense of “Norwegianness” while larger immigrant
populations and pervasive multiculturalism in Canada and the United States fosters dual ethnic identities and hyphenated citizenship such as being Korean-American or Chinese-Canadian (Howell 2006:115-122, also see Sætersdal and Dalen 2000). However, the lack of anthropological research on the experiences of people adopted into Canada or the United States does little to expand upon these ideas.

Yngvesson’s (2000, 2005, 2006) work with Swedish and American transnationally adopted people demonstrates that processes of identification are complex negotiations of belonging and authenticity. Yngvesson and Coutin (2006) show how paper trails including birth certificates, adoption records, and immigration papers complicate transnationally adopted people’s sense of belonging in their adoptive countries. Yngvesson and Mahoney (2000:85) argue that transnationally adopted people rarely feel an “authentic” identity as prescribed through American kinship discourses. These researchers suggest that discourses of authenticity in the United States concern kin relations that are based on “blood” and “birth,” often recognized as “real” and “natural” where “the only experience of authentic identity is bestowed by blood ties” (2000:85). They argue that metaphors of blood and birth ties are also deeply rooted within national discourses, where place of birth is considered to be one’s natural place. They (2000:82) opine that discourses of authenticity deeply affect transnationally adopted people who may grow up feeling biologically out-of-place.

1.4.4 Anthropological Research on Return Visits

The implications of place-making activities are further investigated in anthropological literature on how adopted people think about their birth places and some of their experiences participating in return visits (Howell 2006, Kim 2005, Yngvesson 2005). Nationalist discourses in sending countries as well as encouragement by adoptive parents draw some adopted people back to their birth places (Howell 2006:113, Kim 2005, Yngvesson 2005). Return visits often
promote essentialized discourses of belonging based on birth (Howell 2006:111). However, Howell (2006:115) argues that people adopted into Norway rarely identify with their birth places during return visits. She observes they maintain emotional distance by acting as “superficial tourists,” experiencing “culture” (2002:97) through dress, food, and tourist attractions. She (2006:115) suggests these activities often work to affirm their sense of belonging within their adoptive contexts rather than within their birth places.

The reification of culture is compounded by the ways in which adoptive parents learn about their child’s birth place. Howell observes that most parents express an interest in knowing superficial markers of culture including “food, dress and artifacts” (1999:43) but beyond that they have little interest in learning about the social, economic, or political contexts and conditions from which their children were adopted. Françoise-Romaine Ouellette (2009:77) agrees that country and culture become the main point of reference as opposed to people. Both researchers suggest that it may be easier for adoptive families to focus attention on geography and culture rather than people. This may be because to think about people would demand an evaluation of both biological and adoptive relationships and ultimately confront issues of abandonment by one family and belonging in another. Yngvesson (2005:37) suggests that the experience of visiting birth countries throws adoptive people into the “eye of the storm,” propelling them into a place that they largely consider “Other” but is also deeply connected to their histories of abandonment and displacement (also see Telfer 1999).

1.4.5 Discussion and Critique

Anthropological literature on transnational adoption is helpful in providing information on processes that shape the availability of children within sending countries as well as processes transnationally adopted people undergo upon entering the receiving country. However, there are three problematic aspects of the current literature that I will briefly discuss.
First, research on identity amongst transnationally adopted people is narrowly focused on ethnic identity and provides little information on the multiple and complex ways people identify themselves that are not necessarily specific to ethnicity. For example, Howell narrowly focuses on “Norwegianness” as an ethnic identity at the expense of negating other, multiple forms of identification (Howell 2006:115). Second, researchers such as Howell (2006) and Barbro Sætersdal and Monica Dalen (2000) theorize that the experiences of North American adopted people will likely vary greatly from those in Norway because the former is considered “multicultural” while the latter is considered culturally “homogenous.” However, the experiences and perspectives of Canadian and American transnationally adopted people remains minimal within current anthropological literature. Third, anthropological literature on transnational adoption is dominated by the perspectives of adults including parents and transnationally adopted adults while other disciplines employ quantitative and clinical methods to measure normalized perceptions of children’s development (see Howell 2006). Thus, children’s perspectives from a qualitative, anthropological approach are under-represented in the current literature. This not only creates a lacuna within anthropology but also allows for other methods and models of researching children to dominate adoption education, policy, and practice.

There is increasing intent among academics, editors, and writers to include the perspectives of adopted people who are now adults but qualitative approaches to understanding children’s experiences remains marginal. Occasional anthologies such as Outsiders Within: Writings on Transracial Adoption (2006) and Intercountry Adoptees Tell Their Stories (2007) attempt to incorporate the writings of transnationally adopted people but they fall short of including the experiences of children. This may be due to barriers that limit children’s
involvement in research and publication. For example, there are ethical implications when working with children and child-focused research requires special consideration since children are often viewed as a vulnerable population. However, with careful consideration directed towards involving children in research and other cultural productions, more work can be done to be inclusive of their perspectives. Specifically, more research is needed on how transnationally adopted children experience their migration, come to understand their place in the world, and what places become important sources of their identification.

It is with this in mind that I formulated my research questions: How do transnationally adopted children conceptualize their movement from one country to another? How do transnationally adopted children imagine their places of origin? How does place and place-making affect transnationally adopted children’s perceptions of their identity and who they are? The following conceptual framework provides a lens through which I approach this study and address the research problem and questions.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

This thesis draws from anthropological theories on how people make place and how places become sources of identification. Drawing from theories of place and place-making, I focus on children’s experiences of migration and place, and how this knowledge affects the way they think about themselves. My conceptual framework arises specifically from work of Howell (1999, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2009), who examines processes of kinning and place-making that children undergo during and after adoption. Because the primary focus of this study is on children’s experiences, my framework substantially draws from anthropological interest in childhood studies (James and James 2008, James 2007, Prout and James 1990, Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998, and Stephens 1995) and from literature that examines children’s perspectives.
of place (Ackroyd and Pilkington 1999, Hammond 2003, and Olwig 2003). Lastly, I draw from standpoint theory (Harding 2004, James 2007, Mayall 2002) which informs my focus on children as actors and agents who know about the world in a particular way based on their social position and the resources they have available to them (also see Sprague 2005:41).

My conceptual framework is built upon the idea that people construct meaning and knowledge (Schwandt 2000:197). According to Thomas Schwandt, a constructivist perspective understands that “human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience...” (2000:197). However, this is not so say that the world is not real, “but rather that it is the product of human activity” (Sprague 2005:51). Accordingly, places do not exist in and of themselves. Rather the concept of place is made meaningful by people who actively construct knowledge about what place means to them. Theories of place-making highlight this constructed nature of place.

Place theorists including anthropologists, geographers, and philosophers have articulated how place can hold two salient meanings; first, place-making can foster a sense of place and second, place-making can enable people’s social and physical emplacements. To elaborate on the first expression, place can be defined as locales that are imbued with “personally and affective meaning” (Hammond 2003:78) that draw people’s attention not just to the physical landscape but their relationship to that place. In this way, place-making practices enable one to know and feel connected a geographical location. Keith Basso argues that by “sensing places, men and women become sharply aware of the complex attachments that link them to features of the physical world” (1996:54-55). However, Edward Casey notes that place “determines not only where I am in the limited sense of cartographic location but how I am together with others” (1993:23). This leads to my second understanding of place not just as a sentient geographical
location but also a social position, or one’s “place,” in society. This notion of place derives from Yi-Fu Tuan’s conclusion that “the primary meaning of ‘place’ is one’s position in society rather than the more abstract understanding of location in space” (1974:233). Although I at times discuss places as geographical locations such as “birth places,” this thesis is principally concerned with emplacement which “refers to a perspective in which the subject is inextricably situated in a historically and existentially specific condition, defined, for brevity, as a ‘place’.” (Englund 2002:267). The social and geographical aspects of the place concept work together: the notion of place and its importance as a site of lived experience is constructed through interactions of location and subjectivity.

Howell (2006, 2007) has expanded conceptualizations of place to include those far away and imagined. After conducting extensive research among adopted people, she theorizes that people can experience what she calls “globalising places,” “naked places” and “relational places” (see Howell 2007). Howell defines globalising places as “a place located geographically but also virtually for all those who live in other places but are connected to the place through descent and continue to focus upon it as a source of personal and ethnic identity” (2007:28). The concept of “globalising places” enables one to conceptualize how places can be meaningful from a distance. Howell (2007:28) argues that this concept is useful when considering the experiences of migrants who move away from physical locations but remain connected through descent and identification. She further expands upon this concept when considering transnationally adopted people who do not have experiences analogous to other migrants. She (2007:29) argues that transnationally adopted people can rarely name their birth place or where their birth parents live(d). Howell (2007:29) uses the concept of “naked place” to describe these imagined places that are significant yet unknown. Because transnationally adopted people often lack personal ties
to birth places, these places are largely devoid of meaning and thus considered “naked” (Howell 2007:29). She (2007:27) also refers to “relational place” to conceptualize places that are inscribed by genealogy and family history. Relational places are connected to both biological and adoptive family. For transnationally adopted people, this may mean their own birth places or adoptive parents’ ancestral homelands.

Researchers including Judith Ackroyd and Andrew Pilkington (1999), Laura Hammond (2003), and Karen Fog Olwig (2003, 2007) have examined how children engage in practices of place-making. Olwig (2003) demonstrates that children make place for themselves in local and specific settings that are connected to friends and family and identify themselves accordingly. Ackroyd and Pilkington (1999) and Olwig (2003) find that migrant children in North America are often subject to multicultural discourses that promote their identification with places of origin and highlight their dual ethnicity. However, these abstractions of place according to ethnicity may not be of utmost importance to children’s self-identification. Olwig argues,

...children’s place-making involves the creation of different social sites of belonging connected with the various spheres of life that children encounter in their everyday lives. Indeed, the development of a particular ethnic or national identity may not be of key importance to the children, as their lives straddle a host of places of belonging that are identified with the local, national and transnational relations in which they are engaged. (2003:217)

Olwig draws connections between place, belonging, and identity; places can become sources of identification based on everyday life experiences, a sense of belonging, and sociality.

When speaking about “adoptive identities,” Harold Grotevant (1999:102) borrows Erik Erikson’s conceptualization that identity is one’s definition of him- or herself within a particular social and historical context. Conceptualizations of identity have been complicated by identity theorists including Anthony Cohen (1994) and Stuart Hall (1996) who argue that identities are multifaceted, complex, and fluid. Hall (1996:277) defines cultural identities as being held by an
individual or group based on the perception of shared cultural traits that can be grounded in social, economic, political, historical, or geographical similarities. He (1996:291) defines a national identity as being formed according to state borders and national discourses. It follows the idea that people inherently belong to one nation and primarily identify themselves accordingly. Allison James and Adrian James define ethnic identity as “the combination of characteristics derived from a person’s geographic and hence national origins and heritage, which are acquired by birth and used to demarcate and maintain differences in background and identity” (2008:54). Alternatively Olwig (2007:14) suggests that such fixed definitions of ethnicity are far removed from Barth’s (1982[1969]) interpretation that ethnicity is malleable based on “a dynamic form of cultural attachment that may be defined according to changing criteria” (Olwig 2007:14). In the first definition, ethnicity is based on origins and heritage, while in the second, it is based on dynamic cultural attachments. Thus, even within anthropology, definitions of ethnicity vary and are sometimes contradictory. Importantly, anthropologists have largely come to understand that “ethnicity [is] a socially pliable construction” that is “situational, contextual, and contestable” (Baumann 1999:59-60).

Definitions of identity based on culture, nationality, and ethnicity are just a few conceptualizations that I considered for the purposes of this research, but none of them singularly suffice to encompass the complexity of any single individual much less a group. Other identity markers include age, gender, ability, culture, and racialization, just to name a few. The infinite number of identity markers makes the task of naming or labelling one particular type of identity an anaemic attempt at understanding the way people hold individually unique and dynamic positions in and amongst these categories. For the purposes of my research, identity refers to an understanding of who one is based on context and his or her subjective experience of multiple
identity markers. Subjectivity refers to “the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects... as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on” (Ortner 2005:31).

Richard Jenkins argues that “similarity and difference are the touchstones of human social identity, which position us with respect to all other people” (2002:117). Attention to sameness and difference is also a key tenet in childhood studies (see Christensen and James 2000). Some childhood researchers argue that attention to sameness, that is the shared experiences of children, will help better elucidate what it means to be a child within the social space of childhood. The argument rests upon the idea that childhood studies should focus on how the structural aspects of childhood including children’s social position within a subordinate generational unit provides common experiences for all children (see James 2007). Attention here lies within understanding the space of childhood rather than the individual experiences of children. Alternatively, many researchers focusing on children and childhood emphasize the importance of examining differences between children (see Christensen and James 2000, James 1993). By observing and examining the differences in children’s experiences, researchers can better elucidate how children are agentive within their subaltern social positions.

James notes that oscillating attention towards sameness and difference is a “key theoretical tension within the field of childhood studies” (2007:270). In order to address this tension she calls for greater emphasis on standpoint theory when examining children and childhood (also see Mayall 2002). Standpoint theory, as theorized by Sandra Harding (2004), focuses on women’s marginalized social position in arenas of recording history and experience. Accordingly, men are the dominant recorders and storytellers (James and James 2008:133). Standpoint theory enables space for and the legitimization of women’s experiences including
their opposition to and exclusion from mainstream knowledge production (James and James 2008:133). This same principle has been increasingly applied to children who occupy a similarly marginal and subordinate status in academic research and knowledge production (James 2007, James and James 2008, Mayall 2002). I also suggest that children’s perspectives are marginalized in adoption literature and education.

In the context of childhood studies, James and James define standpoint as “the structural context within which children’s experiences and perspectives should be understood as shaped by power relations” (2008:133). Importantly, standpoint theory draws attention to the structure that hierarchically organizes particular groups of people and works to shape their experiences within power-over relationships. James and James (2008:133) argue that children’s minority status within the generational scheme fosters their subordination and dependence. However, children are not passive to these impositions. Standpoint theory also accounts for one’s capacity to act through agency and resistance. Agency is the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001:112) within one’s own social world. James and James (2008) argue that the ways children work to inform and shape their everyday lives contributes to their experiences. In this way, children are social actors because they are acted upon by others but also social agents who actively cultivate their own experiences and ideas and transform the world around them. Standpoint theory enables researchers to simultaneously account for the sameness children experience through the structure of childhood as well as the differences generated through agency.

Importantly, children do not just occupy the social space of childhood, but are also impacted by other modes of identification that are co-constitutive. Theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991, McCall 2005, and Yuval Davis 2006) offer one way of understanding how
multiple sources of identification influence each other in dynamic ways. Intersectionality can be defined as “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall 2005:1771). It follows the basic premise that aspects of identity are never experienced in isolation; all modes of identification are co-constitutive and mutually experiential (Yuval Davis 2006:193). This is particularly interesting as it relates to children since their age and generational status marks them as inferior to adults, yet they must negotiate multiple other forms of identity politics based on ethnicity, racialization, and culture. Additionally, age and generational status are not fixed and along with age progression, social roles, responsibilities, and rights change. Nira Yuval-Davis (2006:201) sees age as one important yet often underrepresented aspect of intersectionality studies. She states,

> Age represents the dimension of time and the life cycle and shows even more clearly than other social divisions how categories and their boundaries are not fixed and how their social and political meanings can vary in different historical contexts as well as being continually challenged and restructured both individually and socially. (2006:201)

Thus, theories of standpoint and intersectionality as they specifically emphasize power, social position, subjective experience, and identification are analytically helpful in enabling a much more complicated yet rich and full understanding of the diverse experiences among transnationally adopted children.

**1.6 Overview of Thesis**

This chapter highlights a lacuna in anthropological knowledge on adoption where children’s perspectives remain under researched. I also raised the more significant problem that transnationally adopted children are subject to numerous discourses that tell them their birth places are important sources of identification, yet research shows children mainly identify with everyday places of belonging. Through a theoretical lens of place-making this thesis examines
how children negotiate multiple sources of knowledge that shape their understanding of various places and themselves. Importantly, I will highlight the multiple roles children play as recipients of parents’ knowledge, co-creators of knowledge and active agents of place-making.

In Chapter Two I provide an overview of the methods used for this research study. I briefly describe the context of the study and the methods of interviewing participants. This chapter also explicates my positionality in approaching the research topic and in relation to the participants as well as ethical considerations when conducting child-focused research.

Chapter Three focuses on the interviews with the parents of transnationally adopted children. I discuss how parents make place for their children upon arrival in Canada, yet they also see their child’s birth place as an important source of identification based on origins, ethnicity, and culture. This chapter also reveals that some parents are perplexed as to why and how much they should talk to their children about their birth places when they recognize their children often feel a sense of belonging in their adoptive contexts.

Chapter Four provides a summary of the research findings amongst the child participants. In this chapter I explicate how children gain knowledge about their birth places, how they feel connected to their birth places, and what places are generally most important to them. This chapter serves to draw attention to children’s perspectives through their narratives and drawings.

Chapter Five consists of an in-depth analysis of the findings among parents and children. Through the application of interview material as well as a theoretical lens, I employ theories of place-making to examine how knowledge, place, and identity are constructed in dynamic ways between children and their parents.

Chapter Six is a summary of this research project. I draw final conclusions from the research by reflecting on the parent-child relationship as well as how children can be framed as
knowledgeable subjects. I highlight the implications of my conclusion including how they could potentially inform future adoption education, policy, and practice. Lastly, I provide recommendations for new avenues of research that could further expand knowledge within the area of adoption as well as the anthropology of place and children.
Chapter Two: Methods

Chapter Two provides an overview of the research methods. I first discuss the research context including transnational adoption patterns and statistics within Canada. I then discuss participant recruitment including how I contacted adoption organizations and subsequently connected with potential participants. I review the specific interview methods that were employed. Interviews with children involved additional methods including drawing and sharing significant objects. This chapter will also explicate methodological issues concerning my positionality as well as ethical concerns that arise when conducting research with children. Lastly, the chapter will discuss the methods of analysis used to examine the research data.

2.1 Research Context

This research study took place throughout British Columbia, Canada. B.C.’s overall population estimate at the end of 2009 was approximately 4,455,000 (British Columbia, Ministry of Citizen Services 2009). Greater Vancouver is B.C.’s largest regional district with a population of approximately 2,319,000 in 2009 (British Columbia, Ministry of Citizen Services 2010) with other regional districts representing considerably smaller cities and towns.

In large part, my fieldwork is an example of “anthropology ‘at home’” (James 1993:11) amongst children and families that reside in and around the very places I call home. I have lived in British Columbia for most of my life with family located in several B.C. cities. Although I am often viewed as distant from adoption by my non-position within the “‘adoption triad’ of birth parents, adoptive parents and adopted children” (Volkman 2005:2), transnational adoption is a phenomenon that exists within my community. My own positionality and interest in adoption studies will be further discussed at the end of this chapter. But for now, it is fair to say that
although I am partially removed, separate, or “outside” from the experiences of adoptive families, I am not unfamiliar with the context in which my fieldwork was conducted. For example, I am aware of and subject to the multicultural discourses of Canadian nationalism. Since the 1970s, Canada has followed policies of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism can be defined as “the granting of minority cultural and political rights” (Castles and Miller 2003:15). In theory, these policies reject assimilationist practices of settlement and adaptation and instead enable pluralism and ethnic diversity (Castles and Miller 2003:14-15). This is not to negate deep seeded histories of exclusion, inequality, and xenophobia within Canada but rather multicultural policy and practices shape the current political climate of Canada.5 As stated earlier, Howell (2006) and Sætersdal and Dalen (2000) suggest that multicultural discourse enables hyphenated ethnic identifications among those transnationally adopted to Canada as opposed to other countries that have assimilationist practices towards newcomers. Thus, the acceptance and integration of people born outside Canada is partially shaped by federal and provincial governments’ policies towards migration and citizenship.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) provides statistical information on transnational adoption in Canada and its provinces. This information is posted through the Adoption Council of Canada (ACC). I will focus the majority of my attention on earlier trends and statistics since most of the child participants were adopted in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the exception of two children adopted more recently at older ages. Between 1993 and 2002, nearly half (41%) of all children brought to Canada for transnational adoption were adopted by Quebec residents, over a third (34%) were adopted by Ontario residents and approximately 14%

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5 For further reading on the relationship between multiculturalism, the essentialization of culture, and ethnic identifications, see Baumann 1999, Mackey 1999, and Turner 1993.
were adopted by British Columbia residents (ACC 2003). British Columbia received 273 children through transnational adoption in 1999, 227 children in 2004, and 311 children in 2008 (ACC 2005, 2009, CIC 2003:8). Approximately half of all transnational adoptions in B.C. are undertaken by Greater Vancouver residents (ACC 2003, 2009). Throughout the past decade the number of transnational adoptions has shifted slightly but children adopted into Canada come from sending countries including China, the United States, South Korea, Russia, the Philippines, Haiti, and Ethiopia (CIC 2003, ACC 2003, 2009, also see Selman 2009).

British Columbians who plan to adopt transnationally must undergo the processes set forth by the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (1993), Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Province of British Columbia, and policies stipulated by the sending country. Most British Columbians must go through a licensed adoption agency in compliance with B.C.’s Adoption Act (1995) (see British Columbia, Ministry of Children and Family Development 2010). British Columbia has six registered adoption agencies each providing adoption services for different sending countries (British Columbia 2010). Parents can also opt for an adoption agency that is physically outside of B.C. but still registered to facilitate adoptions within B.C. (British Columbia 2010). Thus, parents may choose an adoption agency based on their personal desire to adopt from a specific country, or they may choose a sending country based on those serviced by their local adoption agency.

I found both circumstances to be evident through talking with adoptive parents for this study. In addition to the influences of adoption agencies, local adoption groups and organizations also shape the patterns of adoption within a local community by acting as sources of information for other prospective adoptive parents. These influencing factors were apparent
while talking with parents during my field work. Thus, the local context of adoption is shaped by adoption professionals and social workers at licensed adoption agencies as well as parents and community groups that participate in, promote, and share their experiences of adopting a child transnationally.

2.2 Recruitment

The local context where I conducted this field work shaped participant recruitment and research methods for this study. I wanted to attain some diversity in the sample of participants since Canadians adopt from a variety of sending countries. To accomplish this I recruited through various adoption organizations including agencies, mentoring groups, and family support groups. The focus of these organizations varies; some organizations concentrate on assisting adoptive families residing within a particular region while others support families who adopt from the same sending region. Additionally, several of the organizations are not specific to transnational adoption but rather provide support and resources for any adoptive family or individual. Many of the organizations are small, often parent-run family groups that meet or communicate regularly.

I began recruitment by sending out a statement of interest and information (see Appendix 1 and 2) about the research to five organizations who all responded positively. The statement of interest clearly explained the purpose, methods and outcomes of the research study and requested their assistance in recruitment by sharing subsequent research information with their organizational members and listservs. I supplied their positive responses to the university’s Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) to demonstrate support from these adoption organizations. During my fieldwork I found it difficult to find enough participants, so with HREB approval I approached several more organizations that could potentially assist in
distributing the research information more broadly. In the end, I received recruitment assistance from one major provincial association, one B.C.–based adoption agency, two mentoring groups, and five family support groups. Unfortunately, I am unsure whether or not several smaller organizations who agreed to assist in recruitment actually forwarded the research information to their members. My lack of confidence stems from the fact that I did not receive any interest from members within these groups and the organizational contacts did not respond to my follow-up inquiries.

I recruited through organizations because I thought it would be the most effective way to distribute the research information to adoptive families. Additionally, by recruiting through adoption organizations I hoped to reduce the possible risk of harm by 1) recruiting child participants through parents, 2) recruiting families who were already engaged in discussions around adoption issues with their children, and 3) ensuring participants had access to some or all of these organizations in case they required support during or after the research. Although my method of participant recruitment was done with careful ethical considerations, recruiting participants was challenging and affected who received the research information and ultimately who participated in the research.

I intended to recruit ten to 15 transnationally adopted children between the ages of eight and 18, and one or both of each child’s adoptive parents. These families were to reside within only two B.C. cities but this was later expanded to include all of B.C. I expected the child participants to be a diverse group according to age, gender, and country of origin. I also assumed they would vary in other ways including age at adoption, length of time in Canada, and level of

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6 With HREB approval, I also attempted to recruit in-person at one organization’s annual family event. I attended the event and set up a table with information for prospective participants. However, the overall turnout was lower than I had anticipated and the attendees included a broader population of “multiracial” families, and not just adoptive families. I did not generate any participants from this recruitment event.
openness within their family regarding adoption. Importantly, I hoped to include children and youth participants across a range of ages in order to examine how children and youth differentially experience and engage in place-making practices. I assumed younger children would be subject to the place-making activities of their adoptive parents (see Olwig and Gulløv 2003:3, Hammond 2003:87). Alternatively, I assumed older children and youth may have the ability to participate in their own place-making activities due to increased autonomy, mobility, and access to resources outside of their parents’ influence and surveillance (see Olwig 2003:217).

Participant recruitment was more challenging than I anticipated. Although I had very positive responses from most adoption organizations, the subsequent responses from individuals and families was not as numerous as I anticipated. I worked on recruitment for a total of five months and was able to reach my minimum recruitment goal of ten children. Difficulty in participant recruitment likely relates to a number of issues including children’s own disinterest in speaking with me (a stranger), the time commitment required for interviews, people’s concerns regarding the intentions of my research, and accessing children through adult gatekeepers (see Hill 2005).

Adoption organizations represented the first set of gatekeepers that I had to pass in order to distribute the information. Parents represented a second set of gatekeepers. Gatekeepers have the ability to enable access to particular populations but also act as protectors, especially when research involves children. Adult perceptions of children’s vulnerability is evident both in the requirement to obtain parental consent for child participants as well as the ethical recommendation that I should recruit through parents rather than directly approach children. Malcolm Hill discusses the role parents have in research with children; he states,
The meaning of parental consent is not always clear...When a parent refuses to give permission for their child to take part in research, that is usually seen as the end of the matter, at least for children up to their mid-teens. Yet legislation in many countries indicates that children of any age should be able to express their views, provided they are mature enough to do so, and to have their opinions taken into account. Is it fair that a parent can debar a child who might wish to take part? (2005:71).

Although anthropologists and other childhood researchers increasingly try to focus on children’s perspectives, this is a difficult task to actualize when children are restrained from such opportunities because they continue to be viewed by North American society as vulnerable, rendering them perpetually voiceless. Children’s perspectives are the primary focus of this research but the involvement of children in research cannot be seen as separate from adults’ desires to act on behalf of children.

Parents received research information through emails distributed by the adoption organizations. Some parents likely received the information more than once since they may participate in more than one organization, as well as the fact that several organizations distributed the information twice, approximately three to four months apart, at my request. Interested parents were asked to contact me directly. Once parents contacted me, I supplied them further information about the study which included a standard script (see Appendix 3). I also supplied them with another script for their children (see Appendix 4 and 5) which I encouraged them to share with their children prior to my visit. These scripts were nearly identical to the consent forms. Upon initial contact I answered parents’ questions and confirmed that their child was also interested in participating before setting up a time to meet with the family. After several initial correspondences, I offered to meet the family at their home. All the parents agreed to this location.
Upon arrival at the family home I reviewed the consent forms (see Appendix 6, 7, 8 and 9) with the prospective participants and answered further questions. Parents and children each signed their own, separate consent forms. Parents were also required to sign a consent form allowing their child to participate if their child was under the age of 13. I had originally planned to review the consent forms with the families during a visit that was prior to and separate from the first interviews, whenever possible. At the beginning of the recruitment phase, I provided most families the option of meeting with me first for this purpose but I quickly realized that most families preferred to conduct the first set of interviews during that same visit. This was because of several reasons including parents’ work schedules, children’s activities, and summer vacations. Arranging one or two visits was difficult to negotiate with participants due to time constraints and a third visit may have been nearly impossible. Also, most families were only available to meet with me on weekends and nearly all the visits required my extensive travel within B.C.. Adding additional visits to the research schedule would have increased the research time and cost unnecessarily.

It should be noted that although I had originally intended for transnationally adopted children to be the population of interest and the focal participants, I realized I was not recruiting individual children but rather entire families. My strategy of recruiting through parents involved them immediately in the research process and the interview setting within the family home made my presence known to the entire family as well as brought the whole family into my view.
2.3 Participants

In total, I interviewed ten children from nine families and one or both of their parents for a total of 14 parents. In Table 1 I provide an overview of the participants\(^7\) including the children’s current age, age at adoption, and birth country.

**Table 1: List of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Participant</th>
<th>Age at Research</th>
<th>Approximate Age at Adoption</th>
<th>Birth Country</th>
<th>Parent Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adeline</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>Susan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Under 1 year</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>Andrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Under 1 year</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Theresa and Bernard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>15 months</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Maria and Tim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankie</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Under 1 year</td>
<td>Caribbean country(^8)</td>
<td>Lindsay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivan</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Patricia and Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Under 1 year</td>
<td>Republic of Georgia</td>
<td>Linda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peterson</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Under 1 year</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>Stephanie and Jason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polina</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Karen and Craig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robby</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Under 1 year</td>
<td>Republic of Georgia</td>
<td>Linda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although I had originally planned to use purposive sampling by deliberately selecting for diversity, I found it unnecessary since each new family that contacted me was unlike any other I had already spoken with. A naturally diverse sample arose on its own. This could be attributed to the diverse adoption groups who assisted in recruitment. Approximately one family from each adoption organization contacted me, thus not swaying the sample towards one age group, gender, or sending country.

\(^7\) All participants were given pseudonyms.

\(^8\) One participant was adopted from a Caribbean country that has provided a limited number of children for transnational adoption. Although I specified to all participants that I would not be altering the age or country of origin of the child participants, I feel that in this one particular case the country of origin may be too revealing and thus I refer to his birth region rather than country.
Children ranged in ages from eight to 14, providing variation in age although less than I had anticipated since I originally planned to interview children as old as 18. It was suggested to me by one parent that older children have increasingly busy schedules which might hinder their ability to participate in such research. Additionally, it was suggested to me that older children were less likely to hear about the information since it was up to parents to share the information with their older and perhaps often absent children. Of those interviewed, five children were eight or nine years old and five children spanned ten to 14 years old. I interviewed five boys and five girls. The children were adopted from seven different countries included China, Vietnam, Russia, the Republic of Georgia, Guatemala, Haiti and another Caribbean country. Additionally, children’s age at adoption also varied. Seven of the children were adopted under the age of two, one child was adopted just over the age of two, one child was adopted at the age of seven and another child was adopted at the age of eight. Approximately half of the children were identified by their parents as “transracially,” “interracially,” or “transculturally” adopted while other families mainly referred to their adoptions as “international.” This may provide some indication of which children were perceived to be racialized or ethnically distinct from their parents. The small but diverse sample provided variation on:

- Age (eight -14)
- Gender (five female, five male)
- Country of Origin (seven countries)
- Age at adoption (four months to eight years old)
- Length of time in Canada (approximately 14 years to less than two years)
- Racialization (approximately half identified as racialized)

Diversity was useful in this research because it enabled me to examine commonalities and particularities across all cases. As will be discussed, place-making practices directed towards birth places are often commonly enacted by parents, regardless of their child’s birth
place. Parents hold common perceptions about these places despite the fact that these countries may be geographically, socially, politically, and economically distinct. Diversity also makes these commonalities all the more interesting as it highlights common practices in adoptive families. However, this diverse sample also enables an examination of the particularities; namely how each child’s experience is contextual and situated. The particularities of each child’s circumstances cause me to greatly question a uniform category such as “adoptee.” Although I had employed this term early on my research, I now find that this social categorization conceptually homogenizes the experiences of all adopted people.

Specific factors that varied across the child participants, including current age, age at adoption, and ethnicity, differentially affects place-making practices and children’s engagement with various places. First, by comparing younger children to older children, I examined how increased autonomy enables children to explore their own social worlds in ways that are increasingly distinct from their parents’ practices. Second, variation in age at adoption helps me elucidate how place-making practices are altered when children are adopted at a significantly older age. When children claim to directly recall their previous emplacements they become the primary purveyors of knowledge rather than their parents or other adults. Third, ethnic diversity, as described by the children and parents, highlights how social categories are applied to people based on origins, culture, and even appearance. The high level of diversity demonstrated through the stories and perspectives of the child participants confounds my ability to create grand generalizations but as will be shown, it further provides information on how children are diverse individuals despite occupying the common space of childhood (See Christensen and James 2000).
Parents were predominantly middle-class Canadians in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Most parents identified some European heritage or background according to their parents or grandparents but primarily identified themselves as being from a Canadian or American city. In all but one case, the parents are married to their child’s other adoptive parent. In all cases, I was able to interview at least one of the child’s parents. Partners were not always available to participate (usually the father) because they were unavailable at the time of the interview.

Parents presented a variety of reasons and motivations for choosing adoption that did not always relate to infertility. Many of the families expressed a long-held, conscious desire to form their families through adoption despite their ability to conceive a biologically-related child.

Two of the families had more than one transnationally adopted child. In one case, I was able to interview both children individually. In the second case, I was only able to interview one child because the other children were too young or declined to participate. During the interview, the parents referred to their experiences with all the children although I tried to keep the discussion focused on the child who had agreed to participate. Parents often referred to other people including non-adopted siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and close family friends. This inadvertently drew a wider range of people into the interview thus creating the sense that this research was partially about families rather than individual children. Although other individuals were discussed during the interview, I did not include the details of that information in my data analysis or write-up.

Participants were compensated for their time through small honouraria. I did not inform participants that they would be receiving a gift because I did not want to induce participants monetarily. I provided a $10 gift certificate to a bookstore for each child participant and both parents or the individual parent if only one participated. I sent the gift card with the appropriate
denomination to the family after the research interviews were completed and addressed the thank you letter and gift certificate to all the participants within that household to acknowledge that it should be shared between them.

2.4 Interviews

I initially intended to interview each child participant twice and their parent(s) once for approximately one and a half to two hours per interview. I was aware that many families would be restricted in their ability to meet with me due to time constraints. I met with seven of the families twice and two of the families once. The interviews varied in length depending on how much the child had to say and how engaged they were in the interview process. I interviewed parents for approximately one and a half hours and children from 30 minutes to two and a half hours.

Table 2 Meetings and Interviews

| First Visit (3-4 hours) | • Reviewed research information and consent forms with parents and children  
| | • Conducted interview with parent(s)  
| | • Conducted first interview with child  
| Second Visit (1-2 hours) | • Re-reviewed the consent form with the child participant  
| | • Conducted second interview with the child

The interviews with children were semi-structured with topical questions on migration, place, and identity (see Appendices 10 and 11). The questions were formulated to be open-ended to minimize the effect of closed (yes/no) questions where people may feel compelled to answer the question (Nunkoosing 2005:700). I asked introductory rapport-building questions before asking the children to talk about adoption, migration, place, and identity (see Nunkoosing 2005:701). These introductory questions were on topics that are familiar to children’s everyday experiences at school, with friends, and with family. Topics such as place, home, belonging, and
identity were investigated slowly during the interview in order to explore these abstract concepts as well as reduce the likelihood of harm.

Because many of the children do not remember their birth place or migration, I asked them to tell me what they might imagine about such places and events. Although the children may have been infants at the time of their migration and adoption, the information they gather through various sources such as stories, photographs, and clothing assist in constructing and containing memories of their lives. By memory, I mean “the subjective ways that the past is recalled, memorialized, and used to construct the present” (Holtzman 2006:363). According to Jon Holtzman, this includes “a broad array of disparate processes” such as “how a sense of historicity shapes social processes and meanings, nostalgia for a real or imagined past, and invented traditions” (2006:363). According to this definition, memory and imagination are not mutually exclusive, but rather co-construct the past and present. What children come to know and imagine contribute to their understanding of their biographical past and ultimately their subjective understanding of who and where they are.

I included drawing as an interview technique with child participants. Drawing has been widely used as a research technique with children and is often considered a “child-centered” method due to the presumption that children are familiar with drawing (Mitchell 2006:61). The drawings were examined in conjunction with interview material to explore how children not only verbally articulate their perspectives but how they represent their ideas through visual means as well (Dalton and Virji-Babul 2006:12, Horstman et al. 2008:1001, Nunkoosing 2005:705). Visual data gathering techniques have been used to elicit information on how children perceive their cultural identities (Dalton and Virji-Babul 2006) as well as how they perceive space and place (Orellana 1999). Although Orellana (1999) mainly discusses the use of photographs, her
analysis of visual methods with children is applicable to the use of drawing when she argues that children and adults do not see the same things in physical space (Orellana 1999:84). The combination of visual and verbal methods assists in validating my interpretations of children’s ideas (Orellana 1999:84).

The first interview session with the child participants focused on how they identify themselves, their adoption, and their migration. I examined common ways that the children identify themselves to family, friends, and teachers and what places they find to be important. I asked children to talk about their adoption and migration, including their own ideas about leaving one place and entering a new place. I also examined how the children come to know about their migration through sharing knowledge with others and story-telling. Near the end of the interview I asked each child to draw an image. The first drawing activity was the participant’s representation of the day they came to Canada. This activity was intended to elucidate how they conceptualize their migration. I followed up by asking them to explain what they had drawn.

The second interview session with these participants focused on birth places and place-making practices. I explored what the children know and imagine about their birth place as well as what places are most important to them. During this interview session, I asked children to draw an image of what they imagine when they think of their birth places. I asked the participants to explain what they had drawn and to elaborate on how they came to know about this place. This provides further information on how children learn about their birth places. Towards the end of the second interview, I asked participants to share significant objects with me. Objects can hold personalized and affective meaning that draws attention to place; Tuan (1977:196) argues people encapsulate time and place throughout their lives via mementos and
objects that memorialize the past. Thus, objects can be used by individuals to reflect upon and inform their own history, relationships, and identity by concretizing these abstractions in material form. Significant objects and drawings as methodological tools proved to be useful visual representations of children’s knowledge.

Although drawings can be a useful methodological tool when working with children, they can also be problematic if not scrutinized within the context of the interview. Drawing can be highly influenced by relationships of power such as those between the researcher and participant, or a parent and child. The child may feel compelled to provide the right kind of drawing or appease the expectations of adults (Mitchell 2006:70, Horstman et al. 2008:1008). Additionally, drawing may be interpreted as “childlike” to some research participants (Horstman et al. 2008:1008). With this in mind, I was prepared that some children might not want to draw. However, all the children agreed to draw with little encouragement. Some children were so keen on the activity that they asked to draw additional pictures to help explain their ideas. On some occasions I also asked the children to draw additional pictures relevant to an interview question if I saw that they enjoyed the activity and were able to talk about their answer more clearly through drawing. Overall, drawings proved to be a valuable method that assisted in visually representing what the children were conveying in the interview. I note that due to the structure of the interview, the themes that emerged in the drawings were largely shaped by and reflective of the conversations we had earlier. Thus, the drawings did not necessarily provide new data but rather validated what was being expressed verbally by the children.

Slightly different interview techniques were employed with parent participants (see Appendix 12). Parents were not asked to draw pictures or share significant objects. Parents required less probing than children and answered questions with longer narratives, after which I
would follow up on key points. Additionally, I could ask parents direct questions about their child’s identity because they were often aware of and concerned with these issues, unlike most of the children. Techniques also changed slightly from child to child based on their competencies and experiences (Christensen and James 2000:176). After several interviews I realized that the wording of the questions had to change slightly depending on the child’s circumstances. For example, some children had no recollection of their adoption or migration and as a result were asked to “imagine” what that might have been like. Other children clearly recalled specific occasions including first entering an orphanage\(^9\) or children’s home,\(^{10}\) meeting their adoptive parents, and flying to Canada for the first time. Each interview proved to require a slight alteration in the way I asked participants about their experiences. The semi-structured aspect of the interviews enabled adaptation and flexibility to each participant’s circumstances.

I interviewed all participants in their homes. Berry Mayall (2000:127) suggests that when interviews are conducted in the family home, it is important for the researcher to negotiate their position within the home as well as the parameters and conditions of the interview that suit the needs, requirements, and comfort levels of those involved. I am aware that parents often assigned a particular location in the home for the interview. This location was usually at the kitchen table which seemed to be hub of activity. Often one parent was cooking, eating or serving food. Children were on a nearby computer, watching television in the next room, or sitting at the table with me while simultaneously eating, drawing, or playing. I was aware that

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\(^9\) I use the term “orphanage” as a categorization employed by some children and parents who participated in this study. It should be noted that this term was contested by some participants for its implication that children who reside within these institutions are “orphans.” As a result, some parents preferentially chose the term “children’s home” instead. I acknowledge that notions of “orphan,” “orphanthood,” and “orphanage” are deeply problematic but these concepts also proved to be important to some of the children in this study. I will use “orphanage” and “children’s home” based on how it was described to me by the participants.

\(^{10}\) As stated in the previous footnote, “children’s home” will be used to refer to an institution that houses adoptable children, although not all children within these institutions are available or waiting for adoption.
this location may have differed if children had assigned the interview location (see Mayall 2000:127). For example, some of the children wanted to show me their rooms, especially if they had particular objects that they wanted to show me. The location of the interview in the home and the proximity of others including parents, siblings, and family friends were different during each interview and thus slightly altered the interview contexts.

During the initial email correspondence, I offered parents the options of being present for the interviews with their children, being in a nearby room, or allowing the interview to occur just between the child and me. Most parents opted to remain close by often moving in and out of the space where the interview was taking place. This created the feeling that the interview was just occurring between the child and me but the parent was still able listen-in and, at times, add their own comments to their child’s responses. The parent of the oldest child participant opted to leave the house completely because she felt her son would be more responsive if she was not nearby. In three interviews, the parents were directly participating in the interview with their child by sitting beside their child. These varying contexts influenced the way I interviewed the child as well as how the child answered the interview questions. It was evident that parents who chose to sit in during their child’s interview also felt the need to coach their child, facilitate their child’s responses, and interpret my questions. Although this initially seemed problematic it did allow me to observe the interactions between parents and children as they negotiated knowledge including the details of an event, the origin of a particular object, or people’s names. Parents sometimes tried to remind their child of a place, event, or person that the child did not recall. Parents seemed to find these points important enough to mention while children may have thought otherwise.
Interviews with parents took place with either one parent alone or both parents together in the same room. In all the cases, the children were not present. Some of the parents specifically asked for the child to leave the room during their interview and seemed to deliberately lower their voices when the children were nearby. I doubt this had to do with secrecy, although some parents indicated the information they were sharing was not always known to the child. I had told the parents that I was going to ask their children similar questions and that their answers might be the same or different. Thus, parents were aware that their child’s eavesdropping might affect their subsequent response to similar questions during their own interview.

During the interview sessions with parents, I enquired about their motivations and decisions to adopt, how they came to decide on the sending country, their child’s migration, their place-making practices both in British Columbia and in the child’s birth place, and how parents contribute to or inform their child’s identity. When parents were interviewed together, they often took turns answering each question. Often, parents expressed different perspectives on the same topic and were vocal about their divergent opinions.

2.5 Researcher Positionality

My interest in adoption began unexpectedly. In 2002, I worked for a small Haitian-based organization that housed, fed, and educated children who could not reside with their families, often as a result of poverty. Most of the children lived at and attended a small children’s home that was frequently referred to as an “orphanage” despite the fact that most children had living biological parents. The organization had other facilities including a nursery for younger children. I often stayed at the children’s home and visited the nursery frequently. Not long into my stay I realized that many of children between the ages of one and seven were in the processes of being transnationally adopted. Because I had spent significant time with these children and
learned to speak a small amount of Haitian Creole, I was familiar with their contexts including their family situations, current residence, and social lives. Their adoptive parents from North America or Europe would arrive, meet their child, and move them to the guesthouse where they would stay for approximately a week while the final paperwork was being processed. It was there that I witnessed new relationships being formed, kinning practices taking place, and an interesting confrontation between children and adults.

Many of the children who were undergoing transnational adoption had experienced a very different type of life compared to the one they were expected to undertake upon adoption. Prior to entering the nursery, many of the children had to engage in “adult” tasks including housing, feeding, and caring for themselves and other family members. Familial poverty often required children’s assistance in meeting basic daily needs. Some form of wage labour was not uncommon even among very young children. These practices conjure up very different notions of childhood than the one preferred and practiced by many Euro-Canadian families. Upon adoption, it seemed that one form of childhood was traded for another when newly adopted children were expected to become docile and accepting of their new life. Simple tasks such as eating became intriguing cultural negotiations of knowledge; what to eat and how to eat confronted children’s previous practices with parents’ expectations of appropriate child behaviour. This is not to say that parents or children did not mean well but both sets of cultural and materially-shaped knowledge and behaviour were challenged during these precarious times and often compounded by language barriers. Analytically, it was fascinating to observe yet this situation was seemingly frustrating at times for both parent and child.

When I returned from Haiti, my notions of childhood and family formation had been forever altered by my observations of transnational adoptions. I also note that my experiences of
family are influenced by my own childhood where I grew up in a divorced and blended family with step-parents and siblings. I have thus experienced kinship through biological and non-biological means. I sought to learn more about the complex social interactions that enable us to form families and eventually found my way to anthropology. Thus, my interest in adoption studies preceded and guided my academic interest in anthropology. Anthropology has provided me with the theoretical and methodological tools to examine what adoption means to children whose opinions and perspectives are rarely solicited.

My approach to this study is also informed by aspects of my social position. Age was the most apparent site of sameness and difference between myself and the participants. My age hindered and enhanced my understanding of children’s perspectives within this research study. As an adult, it is difficult for me to completely elucidate and comprehend children’s perspectives since I do not, for the most part, occupy the space of childhood. James (2007) questions how researchers can attempt to get at children’s perspectives when they are constantly filtered through adult interpretations. In this way, my position as an adult challenges my ability to really know what children experience; what often emerges are adult interpretations of children’s worlds. However, I do not feel as though I wholly fit within adulthood. I was 25 at the time I conducted the interviews and in many circumstances I am still considered to be within the “youth” category. For example, the Government of Canada defines “youth” as those between the ages of 15 and 30 (see Canada 2009). Also, I volunteer extensively as youth leader providing services for newcomer youth. These services focus on youth providing assistance and guidance to other youth. In this way, I feel very much as though I occupy youth-hood rather than adulthood, although this depends on the context.
The malleability of my age within generational units was apparent throughout this research. The parents and children who participated in this study often inquired about my age and were, at times, surprised to hear that I was 25 years old. Judging by my size and appearance they often perceived me to be younger. One young participant was convinced I was younger than her 18 year-old sister and was astonished when I told her my actual age. In many ways my age made it easier for me to talk to children because I could relate to their social worlds. We share common interests, listen to similar music, watch similar television shows, and went through similar school systems. With parents, I firmly occupied the space of adulthood but with children I was able to draw on my not-so-distant childhood.

Other aspects of identity that inform my social position include my status as a middle-class, Euro-Canadian who was born in Canada and raised by both biological parents (in addition to non-biological step-parents). My social position as a student has enabled me to undertake this research. However, many aspects of myself distance me from the participants. I do not know what it feels like to have been born somewhere else, migrate to Canada, be adopted by a family, experience racialization through “Othering,” or have my belonging in Canada questioned by strangers who inquire: “Where are you from?” (see Trenka et al. 2006). I am not located within the adoption triad as an adopted person, an adoptive parent, nor a birth parent. As a result, some consider me an “outsider.” However, whether or not researchers are “inside” or “outside” the arena of their study, they cannot claim to know or accurately represent what or how someone else experiences the world. According to standpoint theory, experience is subjective and informed by peoples’ social positions. In a sense, every researcher is an outsider to someone else’s life and to claim otherwise is a deeply problematic practice of representation. Reflecting on the work of Haraway (1988), Joey Sprague argues that,
We all...have the ability to be empathetic, to listen to and imaginatively put oneself in the position of another. We are none of us completely integrated unitary selves...and the multidimensionality of our identities allows us to make partial connections to other knowers, to see things from some extent from their perspective. (2005:74-75).

My experiences do not just distance me from my area of study since I do bring some understanding of the adoption context. Through personal experiences, I am aware of power differentials between parents and children including how parents’ practices and decisions deeply inform children’s lives. I am also aware of the social context from which many of these children came including the relationship between poverty and abandonment, and some aspects of life in an institution that houses children. This contextual knowledge has enriched my understanding of childhood as well as processes of migration and adoption.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Special ethical considerations are required when working with a vulnerable or marginalized population. Children are considered to fall within this category and researchers have discussed and addressed many ethical considerations that arise when working with children. Three issues that were pertinent to this research include power-over relationships, consent, and risk of harm.

Because I am considered an “adult” researcher working with child participants there is a power-over relationship at work since adults are perceived to have authority over children. I put in place safeguards to minimize inducement, coercion, and harm by ensuring that research participants understood the research project and the consent process. Written and verbal information about the research project was provided to potential research participants before and during the initial meeting. I encouraged parents to share a child-friendly version of the research information with their children prior to my arrival. Once I confirmed that all parties were
interested in meeting me, I offered to meet at the family home. For the child participants, I clearly explained the research process using language that is age-appropriate. Hill (2005:68) suggests that children require an explanation of the research using language that is accessible to them. I explained the purpose, methods, and potential outcomes of the research to all participants. The consent forms and my verbal explanation indicated that consent is voluntary, they have the right to dissent, they could stop an interview, they could chose not to answer a question, and they could withdraw consent at anytime. All potential participants were asked if they understood and had the opportunity to ask me questions. Positive consent was indicated by signing the consent form and on-going consent was sought at the beginning of the second interview.

In order to reduce the power-over relationship between the participant and me during the interview, I encouraged the participant to speak freely about their experiences through open-ended questions in semi-structured interview format rather than asking closed questions (Nunnoosing 2005:700, Westcott and Littleton 2005:144). Helen Westcott and Karen Littleton (2005:144) argue that open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews provide children with more opportunity to answer a question voluntarily rather than coercing an answer through simple yes or no responses. In many cases, the interview followed unpredictable paths as the child participant chose to discuss issues other than their birth place, migration, or adoption. In many cases, they preferred to discuss friends, family vacations, and places they would like to visit. I was open to these alternative avenues of discussion.

Keeping the conversation focused on matters that interested the child also assisted in reducing possible risk of harm. Initially I was very concerned about the possibility of harm when talking to children about their past. I assumed that many of these experiences, memories,
or imaginings would conjure up feelings of loss or abandonment (Howell 1999, Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000). However, I am also aware of psychological literature that demonstrates the beneficial impacts of open discussion around adoption (Brodzinsky et al. 1986, Brodzinsky and Palacios 2005).

I attempted to reduce potential risks of harm by recruiting through parents and adoption organizations, and by involving parents in the interview processes as they saw necessary. However, once I met the children and entered the interview context it became increasingly clear that adoption was not a sensitive issue but rather an openly discussed and shared topic within the families who participated. Granted, I am aware that the families who agreed to participate are likely more open about adoption than those who chose not to contact me or participate. What I came to realize is that reflections on birth places, migration, and adoption are very much part of these children’s lives. Although it is confounding to think about complicated biographical histories, it is not entirely unfamiliar to these children. Rather, it is an apparent part of their lives that they talk about with their parents, friends at school, and even complete strangers.

There were times that children seemed uncomfortable because they did not understand the question and therefore were unsure how to respond but I did not sense any discomfort around the topics we discussed. If a topic was unfamiliar or incomprehensible, I simply moved onto another line of questioning. Furthermore, upon my arrival for the second visit I asked the child participants how they felt after the first visit and many of them indicated that it was enjoyable in the sense that they liked talking to someone about their lives and themselves. One participant, Lauren, even stated, “I felt really happy that I could, you know, let the information out to somebody.”
2.7 Methods of Analysis

Data was collected through audio-recorded interviews, brief field notes to document the interview context, drawings collected during the interviews, and photographs I took of significant objects. I transcribed the interviews verbatim noting voice intonation, laughs, deep inhales/exhales, and pauses. I wrote down field notes immediately following the interview in order to document where the interview took place, who was present in the room during interview, concerns or ideas that became apparent to me during the interviews, the context in which the image was drawn, and how the photograph was taken. I obtained the hardcopies of the drawings and electronic copies of the photographs which I offered to return upon completion of the research study.

I employed a thematic analysis for interpreting the data, developing ideas and generating grounded theory (Bernard and Ryan 1998:608, Markovic 2006:416). After all the interviews were transcribed I coded them for themes and sub-themes. Themes are similar or frequent sets of ideas that emerge from literature, theory and data. According to Markovic (2006:416), themes are most identifiable by looking for repetition in the data. However, themes can also be identified by paying attention to emic typologies and categories, metaphors and analogies, transitions, similarities and differences between research participants, linguistic connectors, missing data, and information that relates directly to the employed theories (Ryan and Bernard 2003). Sub-themes represent more nuanced expressions of the thematic ideas. My development of sub-themes mainly occurred by reviewing the data. Attention to sub-themes enabled me to look at the interview transcripts in more detail, pinpointing not just a theme but a more specific aspect of that theme expressed by the participants.
My previous literature review enabled me to identify some themes that would emerge in the data. I anticipated that themes including place, people, time, and identity would be evident after reviewing theories of place and place-making (Hammond 2003, Howell 2007, Olwig 2003). These themes represented deductive coding (Bernard 2001:464). As I conducted the research, I found emergent themes which informed my inductive coding (Bernard 2001:464). These included migration, adoption, and objects. I also found themes that reflected words used by the participants including “orphanage” and “attachment.” I used in vivo coding for these emergent themes (Bernard 2001:454).

I defined sub-themes to account for the variations in the way themes were discussed. Within the “place” theme children and parents discussed local places, favourite places, countries, institutions for children, senses of belonging, and home. Within the “people” theme participants discussed acquaintances, friends, family, attachment, and people at adoption organizations. “Events” included birth, first meeting, adoption, movement, and migration. After I thematically coded the transcripts, I extracted examples from the data and reviewed how the themes worked together, for example the relationship between “place” and “identification,” to build and inform my theoretical framework. This is consistent with the process of grounded theory (Bernard and Ryan 1998:607).

The drawings assist in providing visual representations of children’s narratives and affirm how they see themselves in relation to particular events and places. I conducted thematic analysis and grounded theory by employing theories of place-making to elucidate how children enact, negotiate, and undergo processes of place-making that simultaneously transform the importance of place and assist in altering how children see themselves. Together, the interview material and drawings from the children enable an analysis of on-going place-making through
recollection and imagination while parents’ interviews assist me in understanding the role they play in shaping and informing their children’s emplacement.

### 2.8 Chapter Summary

The research area and the methods employed to recruit participants likely affected the participant sample. Had recruitment been conducted in and amongst children, rather than parents, the participant sample may have been very different. Adoption organizations and parents proved to be challenging adult gatekeepers that both hindered and enabled children’s participation in this research study. Ultimately, many of the children who participated in this study did so in ways that were influenced by adults including adoption organizations, parents, and myself. However, this does not invalidate their perspectives or concerns nor does it mean they would not have participated otherwise.

The child-focused methods including semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions enabled children to discuss the varying issues they regard as important. Drawing also assisted me in elucidating their thoughts because this activity enables children to represent their ideas in ways that were not only based on words and language but on images and imagination. Together, data from children’s interviews and drawings, and the perspectives of parents enables me to examine how emplacement and knowledge are negotiated between children and parents.

The power-over relationship between adults and children was apparent throughout this research during recruitment as well as during the interviews. However, my position as an adult was malleable in the ways I see myself as well as how the participants saw me, often relating me to their siblings. Taking the “least-adult” role (Mandell 1991) in the interviews aided in building rapport and reducing the power dynamics between myself and the child participants. Chapter three will provide a summary of what parents had to say about adoption, place, and identity.
Chapter Three: Parents’ Perspectives on Adoption and Place

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the findings among the parent participants. First, I examine how parents decided on a particular sending country and their experiences meeting their child for the first time. In the second section I discuss what parents said about bringing their children home, making place for their children within the family home, and their kinning experiences often referred to as “attachment.” In the third section I examine what parents think about their children’s birth places and what connections their children have to these places. In this chapter I demonstrate that parents simultaneously locate birth places as important sites of their children’s ethnic identifications yet recognize that their children feel a heightened sense of belonging within their adoptive contexts.

3.1 Early Adoption Decisions and Events

Parents evaluate their relationships and connections to other parts of the world when deciding what sending country to adopt from. They assess pragmatic issues such as the country’s adoption policies. They also evaluate their ability to raise a child who was born elsewhere and may be visibly different from them. In this section I explore parents’ decisions to adopt transnationally and their experiences moving their child to Canada. Upon adoption, parents engage in their child’s migration and cross national borders to form their families. These early decisions and events inform family stories, origin narratives, and other information children are given about their lives.

3.1.1 Choosing Adoption and the Sending Country

Parents chose to adopt at various stages in their lives and had different motivations for doing so. Some parents were just starting their families and had no previous children. Some
parents had married later in life and preferred to adopt an older child rather than raise one from infancy. Other parents hoped to add more children to their already existing families. As stated by one parent, adoption literature provided to prospective parents commonly puts forth the assumption that adoptive families experience infertility. It is important to note that this is not always the case; some parents in the study purposefully planned to form their families through adoption. However, some parents did express that fertility and age were a concern:

Jenny: So what drove you to the older age group?
Karen: I’m old. You know. If I would have had Polina, I would have been 40...

We got married a little later in life than a lot of other couples. I was 37 when we had Julia and we wanted to have at least two children but obviously felt that we have a fairly tight window in which to do that if we wanted to complete our family by the time, ideally, I wasn’t too much older than 40. (Susan)

Some parents’ concerns regarding their age were contributing factors to their decisions to adopt a child and for some, adopting an older child meant they were able to reduce the age gap between them and their children. Age was also a factor many parents took into account when deciding to adopt within Canada or transnationally. Parents’ decisions to adopt transnationally were shaped by what they perceived to be a restrictive domestic adoption process:

[From the] adoption agency we sort of got a feel of how much luck we would have locally. Like in B.C. and the stats, the statistics weren’t very good for us because of our age. And so then we decided to think internationally after that. (Bernard)

... we were going to adopt -- at that time in the Ministry it was really difficult to adopt if you didn’t -- they had really severe restrictions. You had to be under 40. My husband was over 40. You know, you had to have a certain income and own things. And we did that but we didn’t quite fit into their parameters... (Andrea)

Age restrictions and other limitations set forth by the local adoption system dissuaded or prevented some parents from adopting within Canada. The two families mentioned above each looked into domestic adoption but both sets of parents felt that they would not fit into what the government deems ideal parents. I note that transnational adoptions are not necessarily easier
than domestic adoptions nor are the regulations more lenient. However, more parents may be able to participate in a transnational form of adoption since policies and stipulations vary based on sending country. As will be demonstrated, many of the parents were able to find a sending country that would allow them to adopt despite their age, socio-economic status, marital status, or family composition.

Andrea shared more of her struggles to find a sending country that would accept her and her husband. They looked into transnational adoption from several different countries but for reasons including age, religion, and family composition they were unsuccessful in finding a sending country until Andrea came across an advertisement:

...So one day I was looking at a paper on adoption and it said, ‘VIETNAM! We need families!’ And I called them up... (Andrea)

Media including newspapers and documentaries assisted Andrea and some other parents in their adoption decisions. Other families expressed that they had similar reactions after seeing documentaries or finding a newspaper article on adoption. Not only do media provide visual and contextual information about adoptable children but also inform parents’ early knowledge on their child’s birth country. As noted by Lisa Cartwright, “news media images work in tandem with technologies of social classification to create ways of organizing and managing children in states of crisis” (2005:188). Particular countries are portrayed as needing adoptive families to care for their “abandoned” or “orphaned” children. None of the parents suggested that media alone caused them to adopt but rather these acted as catalysts and subtle encouragement to seek adoption from a particular country or region.

Other parents decided to adopt from a particular sending country because after a process of talking to adoption professionals including social workers, one country seemed to make the most sense based on their situation. As noted earlier, adoption processes vary based on the
sending country. According to the parents I spoke with, adoption professionals are aware of these variations and sometimes encouraged them to choose a particular sending country because the process is comparatively easier or the “children come younger”:

*It was recommended by the, um, we had actually started off with Russia and had put our name in with Russia. And then Georgia was recommended by the, who was it? Was it [adoption agency]? Somebody had said, ‘Oh, you’ve got all these other countries.’ Because originally I was just fixated on Russia... one of the reasons they liked Georgia was because the children come younger. (Linda)*

In addition to the influences of adoption professionals, some of the parents were adamant they wanted to abide by specific international protocols concerning transnational adoption to eliminate the potential for unethical practices such child abduction or coercion through financial incentives. Some parents chose to adopt from countries that have government programs in place to regulate adoption or were signatories to the Hague Convention:

*I knew I wanted a government program because at – in – at that time there were all sorts of horror stories about babies being stolen and sold and all that. So I knew it had to be a government program... (Lindsay)*

*We first of all wanted to go to a country that is a signatory to the Hague Convention because we wanted to have a country that has the maximum number of controls in place. Which adds a lot to the bureaucratic nightmare but we felt very strongly about that after doing some basic reading... (Patricia)*

Some parents chose to adopt from countries that they felt personally connected to and this was evident among the families who adopted from Haiti. Often times these parents knew other families who adopted from Haiti:

*I mean there were a number of organizations in Haiti and we could have chosen several of them. This is the one that probably our closest friends that had also adopted from there. So, just because I had connections to the adoption agency, you know, we sort of, we knew these people and we trusted them and we felt good about their process and we knew that we could have some fairly direct contact with them in the process. (Susan)*
Direct connection to people working at the sending organization including administrators at orphanages and children’s homes influenced parents’ decisions to adopt from Haiti. Parents’ comfort levels throughout the adoption were heightened through these connections and enabled them to feel more involved and confident during the process. Similarly, Maria and Tim chose to adopt from China because of the connection they feel to this country. This resulted from time they spent residing there prior to adopting. Maria and Tim decided to adopt from China knowing that it was a familiar country and “culture”:

But we felt that we were familiar with Chinese culture and we understood it to a degree. We respect it and appreciate it. So we could – we felt that we could bring up a child to be proud of having been born in China... (Maria)

Parents’ motivations to adopt varied greatly as did their choice of country. After investigating domestic adoption, many of the families opted not to adopt locally due to age restrictions, long waiting periods, and other factors that challenged their ability to adopt within Canada. Other families immediately knew they wanted to adopt transnationally regardless of the domestic adoption system. These early decisions shaped how these families were formed and instigated the migration of a child. Parents’ decisions to adopt across national borders makes them and their children subject to “the effects of the nation” (Volkman 2005:2) where children come to gain citizenship in a new country through their adoption but their original ethnic and cultural ties are highlighted through the assumption that birth place remains a significant source of children’s identification.

3.1.2 Initial Meetings and Migration

In this section I focus on parents’ first interactions with their children and their experiences bringing them to Canada. Parents’ recollections of these events are important because they become part of family stories and inform children’s sense of knowing about how
they came to Canada. Parents articulated that the time they spent in their child’s birth country was an important event in their lives because they were able to learn more about where their child is from. Some of the parents opted to visit the child’s birth place prior to picking up their child in order to explore and see the sites:

*We went -- we were there for just over a week I think. Um, we had spent the first two days just exploring the country a little bit ourselves because we knew that when we got him we probably weren’t going to be able do that kind of thing. Um, so we travelled... took thousands pictures. All the stuff that we thought we might want – he might ask and we might want to pass onto him. And then the third day we were there we went and picked him up from his foster family.* (Lindsay)

*It’s interesting because the agency recommended we fly in, receive Christopher, and fly out again within 48 hours. Um, and we actually didn’t follow their advice. We specifically went in two days before just to have a good day to explore the country. And it was really interesting. I mean -- It was great that we did that because we got a sense of what Guatemala looked like, we went to the old city, we took a tour. Um and then after that, those two days, we then you know received Christopher in the hotel room...* (Theresa)

According to Theresa, the professionals assisting with the adoption had a prescribed itinerary for their trip to Guatemala, as they assumed it was natural for parents to meet their child and leave as soon as possible. Theresa also expressed that the adoption professionals feared they would decline the adoption if it was not done quickly. Theresa went on to describe how the adoption professions reacted to their early arrival in the sending country:

*...They were quite surprised and shocked that we were doing that and I don’t think that they really understood... They were kind of like, ‘Why wouldn’t you want to see him right away?’ ‘Well we do but we, you know -- We’ve got to know his country first.’ ... It just seemed important to know his country before we accepted him.* (Theresa)

Many parents felt that it was important to have a record of their visit. Lindsay emphasized that having photographs of her sons’ birth place at the time he was adopted was important to her and her husband. She expressed that they thought their son might want this information especially as he got older. Theresa expressed a similar concern that she should
“know his country” prior to her son’s adoption. Although Theresa felt the adoption professionals found her early arrival in Guatemala “surprising” and “shocking,” her actions and feelings were not uncommon among the other families I interviewed.

Parents found meeting their child in-person emotional and memorable. Although parents were thrilled to see them face to face, these moments were sometimes overlaid with confusion by both parent and child. These events were not portrayed by parents as the idealized image of an instantaneous moment of recognition:

... when I got to the orphanage, I picked up the wrong baby because there was this baby that looked just like Peterson... it was for a minute. You know, I was holding this really cute baby and they were like ‘No, no, no that’s not him!’ and they went to the back and brought him out. (Stephanie)

I mean basically the way it worked is that there was a group of caregivers each for one child. They called her Chinese name, handed her to us and the person disappeared and that was it. It’s like ‘Here’s your child. Now go away.’ (Maria)

For parents adopting older children, their initial meetings were even more challenging than those adopting infants due to language barriers, knowledge differentials, and children’s own sense of discomfort:

So the first day we go after meeting the head of the orphanage and the other teachers we go into a room and he’s waiting for us. And there’s a big Russian woman with her arm just completely enveloping this little boy sitting at a table like he’s dressed up in this big puffy white shirt and a velvet – it was like something out of the Middle Ages too, wasn’t it? And he’s very nervous about this outfit. It’s obviously an outfit they probably use for every child who’s getting adopted for the first meeting. He’s tugging at it and his big eyes are looking at us, his big smile... (Patricia)

Craig: She [Polina] cried because she did understand. Karen: Yeah she started to cry because we talked stupid. We didn’t know how to talk and so, yeah...

Both sets of parents were unable to speak Russian. Although they had made attempts to learn a small Russian vocabulary, communication was difficult and compounded differences
between parents and child during initial visits. For example, Polina thought her parents “talked stupid” because they could not speak her language and spoke to each other in English.

Parents explained to me that when adopting from Russia they were required to make two trips to the country; the initial visit is for parents and child to meet each other and accept the adoption. During the second visit, parents pick up the child, await final paperwork and move their son or daughter to the receiving country. The time between adoptive parents’ first and second visits may allow children time to learn about adoption and consider their impending migration:

...The woman who had been working with him, with English, she told us that in those three months that we were gone he had actually had periods of really I guess identity issues and he’d become quite depressed at one point and had said to her things like ‘But who will I be?’ You know, which is really quite a profound question for – for a seven year old. ‘Who will I be?’ And she told us that she had worked through this and talked through – to him about this a lot at their meetings in addition to doing English training she’s also talking to him about this incredible process that he’s going through and that he was afraid of -- he said he was afraid. (Patricia)

By their second visit to Russia Patricia and Andrew agreed that they saw no indication of Ivan’s fearfulness:

Now we never saw any of that. We only saw, ‘Yes, I want to be adopted, let’s go. When can it happen?’ Complete confidence in the whole thing to us. But there’s this other thing going on but it seems to me as best as we can tell he had resolved all of that by the time we had come back to get him... (Patricia)

Patricia thought the time between their first and second visit to Russia was beneficial for Ivan because he could become acquainted with the idea of adoption. Similarly, Karen and Craig understood that Polina could use the time between visits to learn what her new life might be like. Polina’s parents left items for her to keep between their visits including a photo album of her new adoptive family. Karen and Craig also recall how few items Polina had with her when they met her again on their second visit:
Karen: You know, anything we gave her was left in the orphanage. When we got Polina we got a naked little girl with nothing.
Craig: Two hair ties.
Karen: Yeah. Two pieces of rag, pink rags that were left in her hair that we took out. So nothing. Yeah, we totally gave her – Craig bought her a 60 dollar necklace and we don’t know where it was, nothing came back. Everything stayed.

According to her parents, Polina chose not to bring any objects with her as she left the orphanage nor did orphanage caregivers provide Karen and Craig with any of her belongings. This is likely due in part to a lack of material resources such as clothing and toys within the orphanage but may also be indicative of Polina’s desire to leave her old things behind. Most of the parents expressed that their children came to them with very few objects and children rarely had possessions of their own while residing in institutions. In some cases, parents were required to give back the clothing their children came in. Much like the birth of a child, these children were given over to their adoptive parents as socially and physically naked children (see Howell 2007:26).

As will be demonstrated in Chapter Four, migration is a notable event in children’s origin narratives and how they came into being within their adoptive families. Parents are one source of information for these stories. All parents within this study picked up their children in their birth places and travelled back to Canada on an airplane:

...I walked up and down the aisle with him. And everybody was just clapping just about because he didn’t make any noise. (Bernard)

Worst flight of our life. No, it was terrible. I mean there were issues we didn’t even expect with adoption. Like Elsa for 15 months only slept, never got held. Except – well we don’t know – seldom got held probably but she wasn’t used to sleeping or anything in somebody else’s arms. (Tim)

Throughout the flight, parents attempted to mitigate the disruption their children caused to other passengers by passing the child around, walking with them, and holding them. As will be shown, this information figured prominently in children’s stories of migration. Although
children often identified the airplane ride as the main mode of their migration, parents had much more detailed stories to tell about the immigration process at airports. Paperwork and transporting a child through other countries prior to the final destination of Canada caused a number of anxieties and concerns among the parents. Some of these issues included incorrect paperwork, airport delays, language barriers, and parents’ unfamiliarity with their children’s behaviours.

In sum, all the parents in the study went to retrieve their child in order to bring them to Canada, embarking on the migration journey together. Most of the time parents were already familiar with the country from previous visits or went early to see the country’s sites. First meetings between parents and children were often socially awkward but fulfilling in the sense that it was the moment when their family was being remade. The migration event always involved an airplane which children found important to mention in their migration stories. However parents recall their fears, anxieties, and complications while moving their children to Canada. These events create complicated and often times stressful first beginnings but none the less are the contexts in which parents become more familiar with their children’s birth places, children become more familiar with their new families, and both parties begin to kin and emplace each other.

3.2 Place-Making in Current Residences

Throughout the adoption journey, parents engage in kinning and place-making practices. Through these practices parents work to emplace their children socially within their adoptive contexts and profoundly shape how children identify themselves. Casey (1993:23) suggests that where one is in a geographic sense assists in defining who one is including the place they occupy physically and socially. He says place assists in defining “not only where I am in the limited
sense of cartographic location but how I am together with others...” (Casey 1993:23). Attention towards processes of emplacement highlights the very social nature of kinship and belonging. In this section I discuss parents’ interpretations of their arrival home and their social processes of kinning, often referred to as “attachment.” I also reflect on what parents say about their children’s local sites of belonging, which are maintained through their long term emplacement in adoptive contexts.

3.2.1 Arriving Home

Parents’ reflections on moving their child away from their birth place is indicative of a displacement process. Upon arrival in the family home, parents engage in processes of emplacement as they emplace their child geographically and socially. After arriving home children were introduced to their place in the house such as their bedroom, which included toys and other objects of their own. Parents described how they made a place for their children and often times this involved setting up the child’s room:

... my mother made him a blanket and things like that so we would put that kind of stuff. Oh, well, well we made him a bed because my stepdaughter had been – my stepdaughter would stay with us every now and then overnight so she had a loft bed so we turned it into a bunk bed and made him a little bed underneath hers.

(Lindsay)

Andrew: We bought a bed, a big double bed. I made a little thing – a piece with his name spelled in Russian.
Patricia: Russian. On the door to his room. And we did give him photographs of his room at the suggestion of the authorities, someone in the process. Outside of the house and his bedroom and I think that’s something that he really had digested because he was expecting it. Well he showed no surprise when he arrived he somehow articulated ‘Well, I’ve seen the pictures.’

Although some parents provided their children with their own rooms, other parents were less concerned with this and preferred to have their child sleep with or near them. In either case

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11 Parents often referred to their children arriving “home.” I use the same terminology.
parents’ intentions were to create a sense of family and home for the children within the household. Some parents expressed that physical closeness cultivated a sense of family and belonging:

...So we stayed very close to home for the first week or two. We actually said to friends and family, you can come to our house to visit but we’re, we’re not going out for a couple of weeks. And so, we wanted her to get really used to just our home. This is where you live, this is where your family is. People can come and go. But that’s it... (Susan)

Parents often spent the initial weeks at home. Some parents ventured outside with their children but often stayed close to home, limiting their excursions within the neighbourhood. Alternatively, some parents were unable to restrict their lives in this way and rather carried on their normally busy lives with their child in tow. For example, one family was in the process of moving just as their child arrived home. They had to negotiate their working schedules, demands of graduate school, parenting their older child, packing their belongings, and moving houses when their new daughter arrived home. Whether or not parents have the capacity to stay at home, the house becomes the primary site of emplacement.

All of the parents agreed that the first people to meet their children upon their arrival were family or close friends. Over time, parents introduced children to grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. For children adopted as infants, the main purpose of these introductions is to allow excited family members to meet the child. Alternatively, parents who adopted older children wanted to appease their children’s curiosity about their new family. In the cases of Polina, adopted at age eight, and Ivan, adopted at age seven, parents wanted the children to become familiar with their siblings, nieces, and nephews soon after their arrival. I asked Andrew and Patricia who Ivan met first when he arrived:

Andrew: His brother – new brother and new sister.
Patricia: My mother flew out... to meet him.
Andrew: That’s right. That’s right. Your mom came.
Patricia: Yeah, mainly Andrew’s children.
Andrew: We just wanted to give him a sense of family.
Patricia: Yeah and we had talked to him a lot about that – who’s in the family. And we went over this before he came, on the plane. Who are the people in the family – this information he’s clearly very interested in – who are the people in my family?...

Similarly, I asked Karen and Craig who met them at the airport upon Polina’s arrival:

[Our] son and daughter-in-law were both there. They didn’t bring the kids... We walked over and met the neighbours and went up to my mom’s and she [Polina] met some of my family. You know it was all – I thought it should have been overwhelming but she didn’t seem overwhelmed by it. (Karen)

Attention to how parents emplace children within their families demonstrates the highly social process of kinning, which generates permanent familial relationships between people (Howell 2006:8).

Parents who identify their children as transracially adopted discussed their early desires to introduce their children to families who are similar in configuration to their own. This highlights how parents see their families as distinctively racialized and unlike most other families within their communities. Lindsay introduced her son to people within an adoption organization. Stephanie and Jason introduced their son to other adoptive families at their church and elsewhere:

Stephanie: I remember taking him to the church for the first time.
Jason: Yeah. And there was – it was a very supportive church because there’s a lot of adoptions in that community and quite a few Haitian kids as well. So there was just a real openness to adoption in a lot ways and a lot of support. A very warm kind of community.
Stephanie: Oh okay, so family was first and then we have another family who we are friends with who have adopted twice from Haiti as well...
Jason: Haitian kids with white parents.

Parents’ reflections on arriving home with their children illuminate a stage in parents’ place-making processes. Children were introduced to their place within the family home marked
by objects such as their own room, a bed, and toys. Most parents found it important to keep their children nearby and introduce people slowly starting with immediate family, followed by extended family and friends. Children are placed at the center of these kinship networks; they explore places and people close by to begin with and expand outwards over time. For transracialized families, it was important to these parents to make sure their children knew and saw other families similar to their own.

3.2.2 Kinning and Attachment

I read about the attachment concept in psychological literature on family and adoption and became more acquainted with its saliency after talking to adoptive families. Although my research focuses is on place-making, parents often opted to discuss attachment. Attachment is a concept that has spanned decades of analysis mostly within the field of psychology (see Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980). Brodzinsky et al. define attachment as “an organized behavioral system whose purpose is to foster a sense of security for the infant by maintaining proximity to caregivers, as well as providing the youngster with a secure base from which to explore the environment” (1998:13).

Parents employed attachment parenting practices as they were recommended to them by adoption professionals and articulated in adoption education. Parents conveyed that attachment to them meant keeping the child close by during their initial time together. For some parents their infants slept close to them and shared their room; for others this meant keeping other people away in order to insulate the child within the family and foster a sense of attachment. Attachment can be seen as a kinning strategy that brings people into permanent and significant relationships with each other. Andrea discusses her attempt to keep her young daughter near her at all times to promote attachment:
...you know they look like car seats with a handle and you walk around with them so that if she fell asleep I’d schlep her around the house wherever I was so that if she woke up I would still be there... and I had a snugly. I did all that attachment parenting stuff but it didn’t work... (Andrea)

Parents often expressed their concerns regarding attachment-related issues both initially and over the years. Andrea found that despite her attachment practices, her daughter resisted her attempts to be physically and emotionally close to her particularly during their initial years together, refusing to be cuddled or consoled. The child’s age at adoption was one major concern parents had when considering their ability to bond. Andrea told me she and her husband were grateful that they had adopted a younger child because an older child may have been even more difficult to bond with. In the following excerpt, Bernard discussed his opinions on his son’s foster care, age at adoption, and attachment-related issues:

Especially to my way of thinking was that he was put into foster care right after we decided to go for it [adoption] because that way it wouldn’t be so traumatic... I mean we were lucky we got him at nine months so basically he didn’t have that much attachment to anybody at that time so he could just go into the attachment. By ten, by age ten they say it’s pretty difficult for both parties. (Bernard)

Some parents felt that attachment issues may have been compounded if the child had been older when they were adopted since the child may have spent more time with other caregivers or expressed more autonomy and resistance to parents’ attachment practices. I cannot say if age is the primary determinant of attachment-related issues. Rather, each child has their own set of circumstances that helps or hinders their ability to bond with their parents:

Stephanie: So yeah by and large the adoption reading I would take with a grain of salt and we do less and less reading as time goes by.
Jenny: The experience you’ve had is more important than the reading?
Stephanie: Yes.
Jason: You want to be a good parent regardless of where your kid was born and what their heritage is, you want to be a good parent. And there are a lot of factors to being a good parent. You don’t really change based on your race or their race.
Stephanie: And you need to think about your kid’s individual experience.
Overall, parents’ stories of bringing their children to Canada are stories of place-making where home and community are made meaningful to children. Parents’ stories reveal how they actively emplace their children into new contexts through kinning and attachment as well as creating physical and social space for their children to occupy. Thus, parents partially shape their children’s social worlds by actively creating and fostering their bonds of attachment to people and places.

### 3.3.4 Local Place Identities

Parents’ kinning and place-making practices are overt during the initial stages of arrival. Parents clearly demarcate physical space for their child as well as actively shape their children’s social networks. Local places become increasingly meaningful as children’s lives take shape within these contexts. Parents recognize that children enact daily life within their adoptive context and cultivate a sense of belonging accordingly. I asked parents to name places most important to their children. According to parents, children’s favourite places include home, friends’ houses, the mall, amusement parks, and places where they do activities:

*Lauren’s favourite place has to be the mall. She loves to shop. She’s one of these kids, yeah. She’s, she’s very material.* (Linda)

*Any amusement park.* (Tim)

*Well I would think probably at home or at one of his friends’ houses.* (Lindsay)

*I think here at home. That’s what I would guess.* (Craig)

Parents are aware that their children enjoy being within local places that provide them with familiarity through family and friends. Other favourite places identified by parents include places visited on family vacations or former residences:
Both my girls often talk about going back to [former Canadian city]. I think they really enjoyed where we lived there... It wouldn’t surprise me for her to tell you that, you know, she’d love to go back [there]... (Susan)

Places where family is located, or where children spend time with their family is identified by parents as important to their children. When I asked parents where their children may feel a sense of belonging, their answers were similar to those of the children’s:

_I think her sisters and brothers. Her dad’s kids and me..._ (Andrea)

_All of her aunts and uncles..._ (Karen)

_He really likes being part of a group so being at school and being part of class is important... I think family too. I mean he really would rather that we had a lot of kids because I think his ideal would be that he would get all his social interaction within the family._ (Stephanie)

_I’d say the school above everything. He was so excited that the teacher announced that this year in grade six you can stay after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays an extra hour and half to get help with your homework. And he’s like, ‘Great, I can stay at school longer.’_ (Patricia)

Parents identified co-themes of family and home when discussing their children’s sense of belonging but also widely included school and the residences of extended family. Parents recognize that their children strongly identify themselves with local places of belonging that shape and inform their everyday lives. This is conducive with their early place-making practices that work to bring local places into significance. However, as will be explored in the following section, parents’ place-making activities occur both near and far; parents make place for their children locally but also from a distance as they draw their children’s attention towards their birth places.

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12 I have removed the locations of current and previous residences from participant narratives. I have left location names in the text if the participant refers to a stopover which is not necessary indicative of their place of residence.
3.3 Children’s Places of Origin

Parents discussed at length bringing their children to Canada and introducing them to their new surroundings. They talked about the family home, meeting other family members and friends, and their attachment practices. Parents worked to firmly emplace their children within their adoptive contexts yet parents also talked at length about the importance of their children’s birth places and the role these places play in informing their children’s identities. This section will examine parents’ perspectives of their children’s birth places and how parents connect their children to these places according to origins, ethnicity, and culture.

3.3.1 Perceptions of Sending Countries

Parents’ perceptions of their children’s birth places are shaped by a number of sources including media images, literature, adoption professionals, and time they have spent in the country. When I asked parents to tell me their perspectives of these places they often focused on the landscape and their notions of “culture” including the country’s history and descriptions of poverty. Some parents found solace in their child’s birth place by admiring the tropical climates and aesthetic beauty:

*Well it’s a lovely country. I mean I grew up in the tropics, like I said, so a lot of it reminds me of my youth and childhood. It’s got to be one of the most perfect countries in the world. I mean it’s just – it’s beautiful, it’s gorgeous…*(Lindsay)

*The actual experience of being there – super colourful the soundscape is really interesting to me. Chickens and goats and cows. *(Stephanie)*

*Somentimes I miss it. Um I miss the smells and the lifestyle and the culture… And learning. I’m a big traveler. I mean I’ve travelled all over Asia, South America so just I like learning new languages and trying to figure it out. Oh, that heat. I like the heat. Like I can just envision the air on your skin and it was fun…* (Andrea)
Through embodied experiences of being there, parents hold experiential knowledge of their children’s birth places. Sensory memories of the sights, smells and sounds resonate. However, these pleasurable memories are juxtaposed to parents’ descriptions of poverty:

...we flew on a little plane between DR[Dominican Republic] and Haiti and you see this National Geographic type image from above of the forest ending at the Haitian border and deforestation of these super mountainous lands is just etched in my mind of just a place that has been environmentally has been trashed and the population keeps growing and even the trees and the riverbeds and valleys are gone. And they’re losing their water and even the idea of a bath for these kids is rare because there’s so little water. So I see it as just so resource poor... (Jason)

...So I just think it’s the coal miners, there’s the coal mine next to the children’s home and it’s dirty and noisy and just row upon row of shoddily made apartment buildings. It’s kind of a bleak area. I mean I know it sounds funny but kind of a Chinese Charles Dickens’ London. It’s not a very – it’s not a romantic version of China when I think of it. Dusty streets, grey. (Tim)

The context of the adoption including the place where their child specifically resided, the circumstances of the adoption, and experiences within the country while adopting greatly shape how parents perceive their children’s birth places. These experiences become part of parents’ situated knowledge of place. In the cases of Russia and the Republic of Georgia, parents’ sentiments towards these places are partially shaped by the political histories of these countries. Patricia and Andrew reflect on their feelings towards Russia:

Patricia: ...It was in an isolated part of Russia, very old historic part of European Western Russia... I imagine in my mind that this part of Russia not all that far from Moscow would have had a roughly comparable [to Canada] although slightly poorer standard of living and in some ways it was like going into – not chaos but, but, but something almost feudal.
Andrew: Dark Ages.
Patricia: The Dark Ages really. It was quite shocking. Quite shocking. We met so many people and in certain ways it was what I expected. People are very highly educated, very sophisticated people. Articulate, spoke many languages. But the degree of poverty and despair because of things I hadn’t known at the end of communism meant the end of security for a lot of people. Especially like pensioners lost the value of their pensions and—
Andrew: And that’s all layered on top of the horrors of World War II.
Karen and Craig’s experiences in Russia were similar:

...Being interested in the wars and all that had happened and all that kind of stuff. So I had read lots and lots about that kind of stuff. It was kind of what I imagined but it does break people... (Craig)

Karen’s sentiments towards Russia were formulated both by her knowledge of its political history and more strongly by her experiences within the country. She expressed that she found the initial stages of meeting and caring for her daughter difficult since their affection and bond towards each other was not what she imagined. While in Russia, Karen’s discomforting feelings were compounded by the frustration of being in a new country, language barriers, and caring for a child whom she did not completely know. These memories conjure up unsettling emotions and affect the way she feels about being in Russia:

I don’t have good thoughts when I think about it. Craig’s are probably different but I just go back to feeling like I felt when I was there... (Karen)

The emotions and experiences of the adoption events greatly shape how parents construct sentiments towards their children’s birth places. Parents’ ideas of their children’s birth places are created through multiple sources of information including media representations, history books, and their experiences of being in these places. Additionally, these places become sentimental to parents because they are locations where their families were remade.

3.3.2 Connection to Birth Places

Throughout the interviews it was clear that parents place substantial emphasis on their children’s connections to their birth places. Most of the parents in the study held similar opinions that these places are important sources of their child’s identification, although their sentiments may have changed over the years. Nearly all the parents made a special effort to discuss these places within their families and regarded themselves as very open about their
children’s histories despite whether or not their children desired to engage in these discussions. Regardless of children’s interest, parents often felt compelled to provide them with information and openness that they may come to appreciate later in life:

*I talk with her more about adoption but everybody talks. I mean she has been aware at some level – and I don’t know at what level it is for her -- forever that she was born in China. So we talk about China, we have books about children’s lives in China. These are the ones that are specific to the area where she’s from but we talk about it a lot.* (Maria)

*Jenny: Do you think, or did you think when he was younger that it was important for him to know about [his birth country]?*  
*Lindsay: Yeah, absolutely. I still think it’s important. I know because I’ve watched him do this with other issues too that he’s claims no interest in things like puberty and things like that and I know that, you know, that he – he is taking in the information even if he’s not asking about it. And someday he will use it, I’m sure.*

Parents employ objects such as mementos, souvenirs, and photographs to talk to their children about their birth places. Parents purposefully placed objects around their home as subtle reminders of their children’s past. Linda placed Georgian items in her children’s rooms and a Georgian painting in the hallway. Stephanie and Jason have Haitian tin art and limestone sculptures on their walls and bookshelves. Maria and Tim have numerous photographs of their trips to China around their home. In addition to using objects as talking points, they also take advantage of media representations to discuss these places with their children. For example, political strife in Haiti and subsequent news reports instigate conversation within Stephanie and Jason’s family.

Parents also draw connections to place through children’s relationships with people. Some parents stayed in close contact with administrators at orphanages and children’s homes who knew their child prior to adoption and assisted in the adoption process. These social connections make places important based on interpersonal connections. Additionally, most
families do not ignore the fact that their children likely have living birth relatives and often emphasized the role of the birth family:

*I mean I want Elsa to understand that she -- not only does she have two sets of parents but especially bring up the birth parents and to me it's important for us, for Elsa, for everybody in her life to understand that, I mean, she's not an orphan as far as we know. (Maria)*

Enabling and encouraging children to write letters to people within their birth place is also practiced by some parents. Communicating with people through letters maintains relational ties to birth places. Thus, through discussion, photographs, and letter-writing parents work to inform their children’s connection to their birth places. Parents enact place-making not just within current residences but also in far away and geographically distant locations.

Parents are aware that they sometimes overly encourage their children to talk about their birth places. During our conversations Susan wondered if her efforts to discuss Haiti are useful for her daughter:

*...But you know, in some ways, I’m not sure if we would never mention again, the fact that she was from Haiti, and tell those stories, whether it would be as important to her. We do it because we think it’s important and you know, it will be interesting to see, you know, as she grows up how much those things are important to her. I mean, she has a pretty good sense of self. (Susan)*

Additionally, Lindsay told me that her perspectives have changed over time:

*...I guess one thing that might be useful is that when we first adopted him and all the stuff that I had read and a lot of the parents that I’ve talked to who have older kids agree that when they’re – before you bring them home you think the most important thing in the world is where they’re from and their sense of identity. And you realize as they get older and you just live your everyday life that it’s one of the important things but there’s so many other things that are important too... (Lindsay)*

As demonstrated, some parents question their own actions and wonder how helpful they are being to their children who may show little interest in their birth places. So, what compels
parents to draw children’s attention to their birth places? What aspects of children’s identities do parents think rest within their birth places? The following section examines why parents see birth places as a particularly important sources of children’s identifications.

3.3.3 Origins, Ethnicity, and Culture

The question “Where are you from?” is intriguing, particularly as it relates to children. Trenka et al. argue that “although it appears to be an innocent question, ‘Where do you come from?’ carries the implicit rejection ‘you are not like us’ and underlines the assertion ‘you do not belong here’” (2006:7-8). Some parents chose to adopt a child closer to their own European background in order to minimize difference within the family. Karen and Linda describe how they each chose to adopt from Eastern Europe:

...it is very close to my heritage and I just thought it would be easier on the child... I just thought this would be easier for the child and the transition. That was the only reason. (Karen)

...I didn’t want to go to China or one of these other countries where the children would be so different because that introduces a whole other level of complexity, right? So... the Eastern European kind of melted in with the German, Polish, Russian. It’s all sort of part and parcel of, you know, what used to be sort of the Eastern Bloc countries so it wasn’t too far of a leap. (Linda)

Parents and children within these families look relatively similar and may be subject to less inquiry. Alternatively, parents within transracialized families stated they sometimes feel very visible in public particularly when the child was younger. They hear questions like “Is your child adopted?” or “Where is your child from?”

Well when she was much younger people asked constantly. Like we felt that we were stared at. A lot of people would come and ask. I think now that she’s older, people might look but they don’t bring it up so much... (Maria)

...I don’t think that they very often ask her where she’s from... I think more often people ask if she’s adopted... People ask why she has a white sister... (Susan)
Parents receive an array of questions regarding the composition of their family. These questions can be based on perceived ethnic differences, the adoptive status of the child, or concerns regarding parents’ ages. In any case these questions are formulated out of a normative understanding of a nuclear family as being ethnically homogenous, biologically related, and within particular age parameters (see Dorow and Swiffen 2009). Adoptive families deviating from this perceived norm are subject to onlookers’ curiosity and questions.

Parents noted that as their children age, they receive fewer questions. Maria suggests that people may still look at her child but less frequently approach with questions. Parents felt differently on how to answer such questions; some parents preferred to locate their children according to their current residences while others specified the child’s birth place:

So there’s two things that we used to always get asked. One is: ‘Where is he from?’ And my generic answer would be ‘We’re from [current city].’ You know, and then if they pushed, ‘Oh well, where’s he really from?’ I would say, ‘Well he was born in [Caribbean country].’ As he got older sometimes it was him that they would ask and you know we talked about how you don’t have to answer that question. And I would say, ‘I just say we’re from [current city].’ He said, ‘That’s not what they mean.’ I said you know, ‘Yeah I know but they don’t need to know unless you want to tell them.’ (Lindsay)

Lindsay provided her son with a sample response such as simply stating the location of their current residence. In doing so, she addresses his capacity to withhold information at his own discretion. However, both mother and son recognize that this response may not suffice for people who have particular expectations of his answer. Parents noted that a strategy like this was employed to avoid divulging personal information to strangers. Alternatively, other parents shared information about their child’s birth place frequently:
I felt like it was good to role model feeling proud of where you’re from. I’d just say, ‘Oh, she’s from Vietnam.’ And just be really happy about saying it... (Andrea)

...Polina and I will both say, ‘Well, Polina’s from Russia.’ You know, and ‘Polina was adopted from Russia.’ We’re very open when we talk about it... (Karen)

Whether or not parents chose to reveal information about their child’s birth place to other people did not impact how they thought about their children. In most cases, parents clearly expressed that they considered their children to be originally and ethnically from their birth places:

You know, neither Patricia nor I want him to forget you know, where he came from, who he is or where he came from... (Andrew)

According to Andrew, where Ivan is from and who Ivan is are synonymous with his Russian heritage. As noted by Olwig (2007:3), the conflation of ethnicity with origins deviates greatly from Barth’s (1982[1969]) more fluid definition of ethnicity. According to Barth (1982[1969]), social groups demarcate themselves into ethnic groups based on constructed and perceived cultural differences to others. Olwig argues that this interpretation of ethnicity “designates a dynamic form of cultural attachment that may be defined according to changing criteria and attributed with varying meanings in different social, historical, and geographical contexts” (2007:14). Many parents seemed to naturalize the connection between origins and ethnicity, expressing that “blood and soil” (Olwig 2007:14) are intricately connected to identity. Some parents surmise that their children feel similarly:

...Her being Chinese is a very important part of her identity as far as I understand it. (Maria)

...her teachers at school when she came back [from a return visit] said she had a different sense of herself like she was very proud of being Vietnamese and she’d
often talk about in Vietnam people would squat, you know, they’d eat low and people would squat. (Andrea)

...he knows he’s Guatemalan, he knows that’s where he comes from and it’s part of who he is... (Theresa)

Many parents expressed a desire for their children to know their birth country and culture. Representations of birth culture were made by parents through reference to cultural artifacts such as souvenirs and mementos that they had either picked up in the child’s birth country or were given to them by someone there. Parents make reference to these objects to illustrate ideas of culture to their children. Many parents I spoke with also thought language was a vital part of their child’s birth culture and encouraged their children to learn and practice the language spoken in their birth country:

...His first babysitter we specifically sought out a Spanish-speaking South American/Central American babysitter. Um, so we tried to maintain that contact and, you know, in choosing her we asked her if she would consider speaking Spanish to him to try and you know maintain some of that language for him... (Theresa)

I think it’s really important to him to maintain some sense of cultural identity. And like Patricia said, one of the things we want him to do was get his Russian language back and we’ve made contact with some people and want to get started on that because I think it’s a big part of who he is and what he is. And I’m sad that at least the language aspect of it is lost. (Andrew)

I’ll try to talk to her in Russian a little bit. She does not respond. She never says a thing in Russian... (Craig)

An exception to this observation is Linda whose opinions were by far very different from most other families I spoke with. She emphasizes to her children that people are born in many different places, so their transnational migration are not all that different from the experiences of other people within their family. She explains that:

...We have a globe and, you know, we’re constantly pointing out this is where you were born. But we always put it into context of this where you were born, and then we point to... Poland and say, ‘This is where [your adoptive relative] was
born.’ And then we point to Southern Germany and say, ‘This is where your [other adoptive relative] was born.’ You know? So we point out that it’s not just you being, them being different... Everybody was born in different places. (Linda)

Many of Linda’s relatives were born in various parts of Europe, not far from her children’s birth country. She and her husband make an effort to minimize the difference their children may experience having been born elsewhere:

The school asks for place of birth and sometimes I leave it blank, sometimes I put down Georgia, but mostly, like mostly I just try to leave it blank because I ask them, I say ‘Why are you interested in place of birth?’ ...Like, they’re Canadian, they have Canadian citizenship cards they came when they were eight months old. Their Canadian citizenship cards have these little baby pictures on them and yet, there’s so much stuff about place of birth and, in a way I think that that’s probably more damaging, if I can use the word, to them than because they know where they’re born, that’s great. But why do they have to keep on explaining it to people? ...They think place of birth is going to give them some information, but it doesn’t. Then ask cultural heritage. If you want to know, ask. You want to know what languages are asked [spoken] at home? Ask what languages are asked [spoken] at home. You want to know whether or not somebody has a certain ethnicity? ...then ask that! (Linda)

Linda expresses her frustration over the assumptions that birth place insinuates cultural heritage, language, or ethnicity. According to Linda, birth place is a location that does not describe details of her children’s identifications. Linda told me she thinks she may have talked too much to her daughter about her birth place which “confused” her later on:

...In fact, if anything, with Lauren I probably made a mistake of talking too much about it. I over compensated and talked too much about it and then when she was about four she was actually a little bit -- I noticed her getting kind of confused because then she would say, ‘Oh, I’m not Canadian, I’m Georgian’... I had to back off and not mention it quite so much. (Linda)

Linda was concerned over her daughter’s assertion that she was “Georgian” rather than “Canadian” which did not seem quite right to Linda who then decided to “back off” and not talk about Georgia to the same extent. Other parents discussed how they negotiate ideas of ethnicity with their children:
Patricia: ...He has mentioned a couple times, now that I think about it children have said, “Well, you’re Asian” because of the shape of his eyes. And ‘Am I Asian?’ He has asked us.
Andrew: And sort of he is.
Patricia: And he sort of is. That’s right. We explain that as best we can. He’s brought that up a few times now that I think about it. He’s brought it up a couple times. ‘Cause now he’s gotten to the age where when a new child arrives at the school, the ethnicity of that child is identified, ‘There’s a new Korean child.’

Differences between children, at school for example, are points of interest in negotiating ethnicity, as are the relationships between parent and child. Andrea told me about being in her daughter’s birth country during a return visit:

... initially, it was funny because in the beginning Ashley said to me, ‘Mom, dye your hair black.’ And I said, ‘How come?’ She goes, ‘Because I don’t want to be seen with a Westerner. It’s embarrassing.’ ... (Andrea)

According to his parents, Ivan seeks to understand his own ethnicity according to the labels given to him by other children. The conversation was instigated by an incident at school where children identified him as “Asian.” Ivan’s parents also told me how Ivan seemed pleased to change his last name since his previous name reveals that he was not “ethnically Russian” but rather from a minority ethnic group in Russia. According to his parents, Ivan thought his ethnicity could be altered through the application of a new last name that referenced neither a Russian nor minority ethnicity. Similarly, Ashley could alter her mom’s appearance through hair dye. What is interesting here is children’s perception that identity is malleable, alterable and even strategic, not necessarily fixed based on their origins.

As mentioned earlier, it was important for parents in transracialized families to introduce their children to similarly racialized children. For example, parents often desired to introduce their children to other people with a similar background. Sometimes these people included children their own ages:
...We do seek out opportunities for Adeline to be able to play with other kids of her same race. Not necessarily Haitian kids... (Susan)

Susan described how she encouraged Adeline to play with children who were “not necessarily Haitian kids” but family friends with children from Africa. However, Susan wonders if it is appropriate to pressure her daughter to play with other children just because they are similarly racialized:

...I also don’t want to force Adeline to play with a kid that she doesn’t identify with just because she’s black... (Susan)

In this case, Susan attempted to introduce Adeline to a girl similar in age and racialization; however Adeline found more compatible friendships with other children and her mother feels that perhaps those relationships are more beneficial for her daughter.

Other times parents seek racialized adult role models for the children to become acquainted with. Lindsay found someone nearby when she first arrived home with her son. Her son has since stayed in contact with this person and Lindsay sees him as a role model for her son.

Andrea had to look harder to find an adult who identified as Vietnamese. She told me about contacting a local multicultural group:

...I’d call the multicultural society... and say, ‘Hi I have a Vietnamese baby. I’d like to learn about Vietnamese culture so that I can bring her up in it.’ And the woman who answered the phone said, ‘Well I’m Vietnamese...’ (Andrea)

Parents connect children to their birth places through ideas of origins, ethnicity, and culture that are perceived to be permanently grounded and bounded in these geographical locations. However, parents noted times that their children understand their ethnic identity to be malleable and even alterable based on markers such as name or appearance. Despite children’s interpretations that identity is alterable, parents tended to hold fixed notions that children’s original places are integral sources of who their children are.
3.3.5 Return Visits

Return visits, or visits to the child’s birth place, were a central topic of conversation within the interviews. I intended to ask specific questions about the possibility of such a trip and expected answers to vary. However, I found that nearly all the parents discussed their plans to revisit their child’s birth place without me specifically asking them. In many cases, parents were interested in going on a return visit with their children. Two of the families had already embarked on a trip while others have discussed the idea within their families.

Stephanie and Jason felt that a return visit is urgent because they are concerned about the types of images and information their son is receiving about Haiti:

*Well I mean I think that probably as time goes on it’s becoming more urgent in my perspective that we do go to Haiti. They’re building a perspective of what Haiti is and it’s based on media clips and snippets that are generally not positive. So I don’t think that it’s going to serve us or them well to wait really any longer. (Stephanie)*

Parents struggled with the types of places they would take their children to if they went on a return visit. Parents are sometimes concerned that the level of poverty within these places may be too harsh to expose their children to since parents recognized that their children have come from very impoverished towns or neighbourhoods. Parents discussed whether they are going to take their children to these impoverished neighbourhoods or show them a tourist-friendly part of the country such a larger city or a resort:

*I think we pretty much in the next 18 months need to get them to a beach resort and just show them a totally sanitized version of Haiti just to get them able to enter an orphanage or to see something that’s real, without hopefully overwhelming them... (Jason)*

*So within three years we’ll probably go back to China. But the big question we’re having now to think about is whether – well we want to take her to the province that she’s born in but whether to take her back to the town that she was born in. Which, like I said is grey and nothing... Or in the South of her province there’s a beautiful mountain range. Like the China that you – the mythical China with the mountains and the beautiful – you know the scenery and stuff. We think it’s*
probably better just to take her to show her a pretty China and a China to remember then – then the other one. I mean there’s thoughts like that we have to work out. We’re not sure what China to take her to. (Tim)

Both of these fathers reflect on the varying aspects of their children’s birth countries; poverty versus mythical beauty. Neither parent wants their child to be frightened or overwhelmed by what they see but they do hope to show their children their previous residences and the places where they were born. These parents’ statements emphasize how knowledge of place is socially situated and subjective; parents feel as though it is their responsibility to foster a healthy sense of place for their children. Susan is more definitive in her plans to take Adeline on a return visit:

...I think it would really just be a sort of a matter of just showing her some of—I mean even where her parents, where her mother lives in Cite Soleil, I mean it’s not a safe place for people to go. I mean, I don’t want to be responsible for taking children there. You know, so, what do you do? Do you kind of white wash it for the kids, you know, and show her the nice parts? You know? There’s beaches in Haiti. You know, would that have ever been part of her experience? Never. To me what’s relevant is for her to see places that she would have been, you know, thinking of growing up in Cite Soleil\(^\text{13}\) ... (Susan)

Some parents desire to show their children not just the country of their birth, but the specific locations where the child and their birth family may have lived, although parents worry that this may scare their children. What is revealed here is not just parents’ concerns with understanding vague notions of culture, language, food, or dress but rather what life might have been like had their children grown up within these settings.

Parents were also concerned about the age at which they should take their children on return visits. Based on the belief that adolescence is a pivotal period of identity formation, a

\(^{13}\) Cite Soleil is one of the largest informal settlements in Port-au-Prince. See Kovats-Bernat (2006) and Maternowska (2006).
time when children are learning who they are, parents felt it was an ideal time to make a return visit:

*Tim:* ...*I think we’re definitely going to go back within three years, in the next three years.*

*Maria:* Well before she turns into a terrible teenager.

*It won’t be long. We’re almost there... there’s a certain amount of hesitancy in this feeling of you know I hope he gets comfort in going back rather than discomfort. You know, is it going to unsettle him? You know, he’s a teen and you know sense of self and angst changes so much through your teens and I kind of go ‘What are we jumping into by taking him there?’ And I don’t know. But one of these days we’ll do it.* (Theresa)

Most parents articulated that it is ideal to take their children on return visits between the ages of ten to 16 years old, aside from one participant who returned when she was slightly younger.

Parents who already participated on return visits with their children reflected on the trip positively as a chance to see the landscape, culture, and people associated with these places. These parents reflected on meeting particular people including birth mothers, foster mothers and adoption administrators. They reflected on the sense of comfort it gave them to provide more knowledge to their child:

... *the culture is so absolutely different. Which is why I wanted to bring her when she was young because I realized that being part – feeling part of something is more than just language. It’s having a sense of cultural competency and I wanted her to get a sense of cultural competency.* (Andrea)

... *I’m glad we did. I know he – you know, it was a difficult time for him... but it was wonderful for both us I think to meet his birth mother.* (Lindsay)

Although Andrea and Lindsay both struggled with when and where to take their children on return visits they both agree that the trips were positive experiences overall. However, their children did not always share their sentiments. Return visits are undertaken by parents in order
to provide what they think their children need to cultivate a healthy identification towards their birth places. However, return visits also satisfy parents’ desires to see their children’s birth places.

3.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have explored parents’ differential place-making practices that simultaneously work to emplace children within their adoptive contexts but also virtually, and sometimes physically, within distant birth places. These practices highlight the constructed nature of place. Place becomes salient through the application of meaning and daily engagement. How and what children learn about various places and their connection to them informs their physical and social emplacements. Parents’ initial practice of place-making within their homes and neighbourhoods is a prominent example of how children can be geographically and socially emplaced locally. However, emplacement can occur from a distance through objects and stories.

Parents connect their children to their birth places through the event of their birth, significant people, ethnicity, and cultural identities. This is paradoxically juxtaposed to parents’ recognition that their children increasingly identify themselves according to local places of belonging such as home, school, and the neighbourhood. Some of children’s favourite places and places of belonging have very little to do with their birth places but despite this recognition many parents still feel that it is important for their children to know about their birth places and eventually go on a return visit during adolescence.

Parents noted during the interviews that their children sometimes hold different perspectives than them. Parents articulated that sometimes their children see ethnicity as malleable and changeable rather than static. Parents also noted that their children are sometimes
resistant or disinterested in talking about their birth places. However, parents still feel it is important to provide their children with open dialogue about their birth place. In the following chapter, I examine what children have to say about their birth places, their connection to these places, and most importantly what places figure most prominently in their lives, providing them with sources of identification and belonging.
Chapter Four: Children’s Perspectives on Migration and Place

This chapter focuses on the perspectives of children who participated in this research study. I provide children’s responses as they relate to the two first two research questions: How do transnationally adopted children conceptualize their movement from one country to another? How do transnationally adopted children imagine their places of origin? The chapter begins by looking at how children responded to questions about migration and their imagined or recalled movement from one country to another. I then provide examples of how children imagine or remember their places of origin including how children learn and share information about their past through objects and locations. Lastly, I examine which places are important to children and why. What I found was that children identify specific events, people, and places that occur within their birth places but do not necessarily draw on this place a significant source of identification in their everyday lives. Importantly, children articulated that their sense of belonging is local and specific rather than in accordance with broad social categorizations such as ethnicity.

4.1 Movement and Migration

In this section I provide an overview of what children know about their migration, including their understandings of why they left their places of birth, why they were adopted, and how their life changed following these events. Through interview extracts I explicate how children conceptualize, through imagination or memory, their emplacement within new social and geographical contexts. As will be demonstrated, many of these children expressed polarized emotions of both sadness and happiness when reflecting on the migration. They often associate negative feelings such as sadness with their displacement and positive feelings of happiness with their emplacement.
4.1.1 Adoption Stories

Before I examine children’s experiences of displacement and migration, I first discuss how the child participants understand adoption in general and more specifically how they came to be adopted. Despite literature that suggests adopted people have a difficult time confronting issues of “abandonment,”\(^{14}\) I found that most of the participants have an understanding of their birth parents’ economic and social difficulties that ultimately affected their ability to care for a child:

Adopted means your parents – your birth parent -- couldn’t take really care of you. So another person had to take you. (Robby, 8\(^{15}\))

...she had to give me away and she’s kind of poor and that’s pretty much why she had to. (Christopher, 13)

...my mom gave birth to me when she was 14. So I’m pretty sure that I was probably a love child or something like that and we don’t know anything about my father. They weren’t married or anything. So I was probably an accident and then she didn’t really -- her parents had died at that point so she probably didn’t have very much money so she really couldn’t take care of me. (Frankie, 14)

When I was a baby my parents could not keep me because people can only keep one baby and they already had a baby. (Elsa, 9)

Elsa was aware that reproductive policies in her birth country, China, likely shaped her birth parents’ inability to keep her. Her mother later explained to me that because of Elsa’s understanding of China’s Planned Birth Policy, she was convinced she had other older siblings in

\(^{14}\) I recognize the term “abandonment” has problematic connotations that do not account for the social, economic and political circumstances under which birth parents relinquish rights to their child. Research that specifically discusses these circumstances within sending countries can be found in Cartwright (2005), Fonseca (2002a), Johnson (2002, 2005), and Kane (1993).

\(^{15}\) I state the age of the child immediately following their interview excerpts and pseudonyms. I chose to identify children based on age because it was a commonly self-identified characteristic. This is similar to the findings of Olwig 2003 and Gulløv 1999 cited in Olwig 2003.
China. Elsa understands herself to have been an additional child and thus was unable to remain with her birth family.

“Care” was a word commonly used to describe parents’ actions toward their children. Children often expressed that their birth parents could not keep them because they could not “care” for them. This form of care was directly associated with poverty and lack of resources. Christopher explained to me that his birth family could not be a “full family” because his mother was poor. I asked him to define what he meant by “poor”:

*Jenny: How would you define poor? Like if I didn’t know what that word meant?*
*Christopher, 13: If you couldn’t really buy things or get things that you wanted.*

Other children also shared their ideas of what poverty means:

*Mother: Why do you think people get adopted? What are some reasons people get adopted?...*
*Ashley, 11: I don’t know... Sick... She didn’t have very much money.*

*... at Haiti there was no clean water to drink from. My birth mom barely had enough money to buy a package of paper every day. I was starving then one day she gave me up and decided to put me for adoption. (Adeline, 8)*

The children’s explanations of their adoption focused on birth parents’ inability to care for their materials needs. Children’s notions of care were defined based on access to material goods including food, money, healthcare, and education. When children expressed that their parents could not care for them, they did not usually associate this with a lack of emotional care or love:

*My Chinese mom and dad loved me but they couldn’t keep me. (Elsa, 9)*

An exception to this particular understanding of care was provided by one girl, Lauren, who thought that her birth parents were not only unable to care for her but did not care about her:
Jenny: How do you think you might have felt or how do you remember feeling that day that you moved from Georgia to Canada?

Lauren, 9: Really happy... Because the parents I was with didn’t really care about me. So I like, like when I – it was way nicer the parents I have now and that’s about it.

In addition to children’s ideas about being available for adoption, they also expressed some understanding as to why their adoptive parents decided to adopt them. Children either associated their adoption with their adoptive parents’ infertility or their desire to expand their families with more children. Some children even expressed that their parents wanted to help a child by adopting them:

*It means I was born from someone else and then my – and then people came who didn’t have any children came to adopt, to care, to take someone and then go back home so they have a child.* (Elsa, 9)

*It’s kind of hard to say. It’s when a man and a woman don’t want to make a baby, instead they take another child from another country. And they, they take care of them until, at least until they grow up.* (Christopher, 13)

*Like it’s people who like know about a place and then they want to come and get a child because they like think it’s like sad like they come and get a child and they take care of it for forever. And yeah. And they become their mom and dad.* (Polina, 10)

Most of the child participants associated their adoption with their birth parents’ poverty and these ideas figure into their origin narratives. These narratives also include why their parents’ chose to adopt them into their families. Some children articulated the long term commitment their parents made to “become their mom and dad” and care for them “at least until they grow up” or “forever.”

### 4.1.2 Migration Stories

Children who claimed to not remember their adoption and migration were usually infants under the age of two when they were adopted. For these children, I asked them to use their imaginations and share with me what people had told them about their migration. Many
children seemed puzzled by this question because they could not directly recall their migration experience but were still able to provide responses that were surprisingly similar:

*Jenny:* What do you think when you think about that [reflecting on the day you moved]?  
*Adeline, 8:* A little bit sad because I had to leave there and happy so that I could get fed properly and stuff.

*Jenny:* What do you think it might have been like to come to Canada for the first time?  
*Ashley, 11:* Exciting... ’cause I get to go to a new place.  
*Jenny:* And then how do you think you’d feel having left Vietnam?  
*Ashley, 11:* Sad ’cause I had to leave the place where I was born.

Many of the children expressed polarized emotions of being sad to leave their birth places and happy to go to a new family. Most children talked about the airplane flight from their birth places to Canada, particularly drawing from stories their parents shared with them regarding that event:

... on the flight to [back] from Haiti I was always getting passed around the whole airplane. Once my mom didn’t even get to hold me. (Peterson, 9)

I was squirming and sleeping... I was feeling really happy because I was with new people. (Lauren, 9)

... when my mommy adopted me I was very happy that I found a home. Yay! Then I flew in an airplane all the way to [former Canadian city]. (Adeline, 8)

The children’s drawings provided a visual representation of their migration stories. Airplanes were a common theme:
Adeline and Peterson repeatedly mentioned airplanes in their migration stories. Other children also talked about the airplane at great length discussing what the flight and airport might have been like. For example, some children chose to draw themselves arriving at the airport in Canada,
In Figure 3, Robby imagines himself arriving in Canada. He explains to me that the image portrays him outside the Canadian airport:

*There’s me and there’s daddy. There’s a cloud, there’s the plane, there’s the sun and there’s the tree... I was really small... and I was asleep.* (Robby, 8)

Robby imagines himself passively experiencing his migration as he lay sleeping in his father’s arms. Christopher drew a similar image of himself as an infant flying to Canada with his father. Christopher explained that his father walked him up and down the aisle of the airplane in order to keep him calm and quiet for the other passengers. I asked him how he imagines his father was feeling at this time and he responded, “Really happy.” I then asked him how he was feeling and he responded:

*Christopher, 13: Ah nothing. I can’t really feel anything because – I would probably feel, well nervous.*

*Jenny: Nervous? How come nervous?*

*Christopher, 13: Well, I’m going away to a new family.*

Christopher describes himself as nervous and then later provides the analogy that his nervousness was similar when he went to a new camp because he did not know anybody and had to make new friends. His analogy alludes to the ways in which his bonds of attachment in his birth place were displaced upon his migration, yet he had not been fully integrated into his new family and was thus “nervous” about making new family. Frankie evokes a similar sense of unfamiliarity and represents this in his drawing (see Figure 4) where he portrays himself as “lost.” When I asked Frankie to explain his drawing to me, he responded:

*Frankie, 14: I guess that I was imagining that in the [Canadian city] airport... I got lost because I always get lost. So that’s why my parents aren’t there... I’m actually not even sure if I knew how to walk then. I would have been eight months. But I know that I managed to get lost somehow...*

*Jenny: ...What do you think you would be thinking about?...*
Frankie, 14: I probably, well, it would be sort of like, well I guess I was going to a new country. At that age I probably wouldn’t have seen much so everything would have been new to me. And I’m curious by nature so I probably would be taking in everything around me. And observing it even though I wouldn’t really understand anything.

I asked him if he thought he would have recognized his parents at the time:

Jenny: Do you think you would have recognized – like if you were lost and your mom and dad were looking for you, do you think you would have recognized them?
Frankie, 14: Nope. I don’t think I – well maybe recognize them but I probably wouldn’t recognize them as what I knew of parents yet because they probably would have only been with me for less than a month.

By reflecting on these moments of transition, children reiterated a sense of uncertainty, characterized by being scared of what was to come and the unfamiliarity of their new parents and surroundings. Thus leaving and entering places through the migration process highlights bonds of attachment, or lack thereof, towards people and places.

Many children contemplated how their lives in Canada are different from what they would have experienced in their birth places. They imagined and expressed that their current context provides them with more “happiness” or “joy” than what they may have experienced otherwise:

Ivan, 11: I think I’m happier here.
Jenny: You’re happier here? What makes you happier here?
Ivan, 11: That I have a family. In Russia I was just an orphan, where orphans were and I have more friends [here]. And that’s all.

There’s really nothing much to say except that it was a joy going away from Georgia. They didn’t have a park that was meant for kids really. Only two of the little rocky rides and no gravel, no wood chips. Cement for the ground. (Lauren, 9)
Children who recall their adoption and migration had much more specific stories to tell me about their sense of unknowing at the time. Polina and Ivan, adopted at ages eight and seven respectively, recalled the first time they learned they were going to be adopted and their initial introduction to their adoptive parents. Ivan told me this story:

Jenny: Do you remember when you met them or spent that time with them [your adoptive parents]? How did that feel for you?...
Ivan, 11: ...Kind of scared and nervous...’cause I didn’t know who I was with and why I was with these people.
Jenny: How long would you say – did you feel scared and nervous for a long time or for a short time?
Ivan, 11: For a short time...
Jenny: ...Is there anything that would have made it easier, so maybe you weren’t so scared and nervous?
Ivan, 11: Maybe they just tell me who the people were and I remember that I was [being] adopted and I cried because I didn’t want to go.

Similarly, Polina recalls when she found out about her birth mother’s death and her impending adoption:

Jenny: If you are here, if you are in the orphanage, how are you feeling at this moment [referring to her drawing in Figure 11]?
Polina, 10: Like I want to go back to my family. I guess... But I got adopted.
Jenny: But you got adopted?
Polina, 10: Yes. Because they told me that my mother died [when I was] in the orphanage.
Jenny: You learned that there?
Polina, 10: Yeah, they told me.
Jenny: They told you that.
Polina, 10: Yeah.
Jenny: Do you remember how they told you that?
Polina, 10: They just said that your mother died and it was like at nap time. We had nap time and I hated it.
Jenny: They just told you at nap time?
Polina, 10: Yeah.
Jenny: Do you remember how you felt at that moment?
Polina, 10: A little bit scared.
Jenny: Scared? How come scared?
Polina, 10: Because I didn’t have – if somebody had to come and get me and I didn’t know like that, like it, it wouldn’t be her.
Jenny: So you didn’t know who it would be?
Polina, 10: Yeah.

She goes on to tell me about meeting her adoptive parents for the first time:

Jenny: What do you remember about the first time you met your mom and dad in Russia?
Polina, 10: Ah, I was in the little red dress that was tight on me and they put it on me and it didn’t feel good.
Jenny: It didn’t?
Polina, 10: No.
Jenny: Did they tell you what was going on, like why you were wearing the little red dress?
Polina, 10: They just, they just put the red dress on. I don’t know why but they just put it on.
Jenny: Yeah? Did they explain to you why?
Polina, 10: Ah, no. They just put it on me.

Polina reflects on the uncertainty and sense of discomfort she recalls when she was waiting to meet her adoptive parents. She was aware that other children around her were also in the processes of being adopted and had observed these events taking place with other children in the orphanage; however she never associated them with the contingencies of her future:

Jenny: Did you see other families coming in to pick up the kids?
Polina, 10: Yup.
Jenny: How did that make you feel when you saw that?
Polina, 10: Um, it made me feel like I’m never going to see them ever, ever, ever again.
Jenny: Did you think that one day that would happen to you? That you’d get adopted?
Polina, 10: I never thought.

Polina affirms the finality of adoption when she describes what she saw taking place with other children. Her repetitions of “ever, ever, ever again” signals that she knew their adoptive arrangements were permanent. However, she later tells me that she did not imagine she would be leaving Russia forever:

Jenny: When you think about leaving Russia, what do you think of?
Polina, 10: Think of? I thought of -- I thought that I -- I didn’t -- I wasn’t gonna leave that place. I thought that I was going to like visit like not just leave that place and not see it again. Like I thought I would visit and like visit and visit and visit.

Both Ivan and Polina verbalize a similar sense of unknowing due to a general lack of information provided to them about adoption prior to their migration and the incomprehensibility of their permanent adoptions. Children’s migration stories reveal complex negotiations between comprehending leaving one place while entering another and ultimately becoming part of a new family.

Ivan and Polina both chose to draw images of themselves being with their adoptive families when I asked to illustrate their migration, as opposed to other children I spoke with who mostly drew airplanes:

![Figure 5 (Left) Meeting my brother (Polina, 10)](image)

![Figure 6 (Right) Arriving at the family home (Ivan, 11)](image)

As noted in Chapter Three, Ivan’s and Polina’s adoptive parents had introduced their children to what would become their new life through photographs of people, pets, and their homes in Canada. Ivan and Polina were able to imagine their new lives through these references
before their migration. Both children reflected on how they were excited and full of wonder when they first arrived at their new homes:

*Jenny:* When you think about coming to Canada for the first time, what do you think of?...

*Ivan, 11:* Of going into a taxi and coming here and my parents take a picture of you [me]... And when I met my cat and there was another cat named Smudge[^16] and I petted them and went up and my parents showed me where my room is and they got me cars and I was playing with them.

*Jenny:* I want to ask you some questions about the day that you came to Canada. Do you remember that [day]?

*Polina, 10:* I was tuckered out when I came. I was scared of the dog because in Russia we had like dogs that would bite not like dogs that are as nice as Charlie. Charlie just barks because somebody’s here and she wants to let you know ‘cause and stuff like that and when I came it was like so cold and it was dark and pitch dark, pitch black and I came in here and we went up here and I ran on this chair and I laid on it and I almost fell asleep.

*Jenny:* Did you like that chair when you first got here?

*Polina, 10:* Yeah. And I thought it was for grandma.

*Jenny:* How come you thought that?

*Polina, 10:* Because it rocks.

When I asked her about her move to Canada, Polina reflected on meeting her older brother at the airport (see Figure 5), who she recognized from the photographs that her parents had left for her while she was in the orphanage awaiting her move to Canada. These photographs showed her who her family would be. Ivan also illustrated how his father captured the moment of his arrival at the family home by taking a photograph (see Figure 6). Rather than focusing on the transitional moment of the flight, Ivan and Polina emphasized their initial introduction and integration into their families through meeting their siblings and arriving at the family home. To them, these were the most memorable aspects of their migration journeys.

[^16]: Pets are also given pseudonyms.
4.2 Children’s Places of Origin

In this section I provide examples of what children told me about their birth places and what specific events, people, and locations within these places are important to them. I will first provide examples of how children talk about their birth places using descriptions of landscape and culture associated with food, dress, and behaviour. I will then discuss the importance of previous residences for the children, specifically institutional living in what are differentially referred to as children’s homes and orphanages. Lastly, I will demonstrate which people children associate with their birth places. These include their adopted friends, birth family, and former caregivers.

I am aware that throughout my questioning I engaged children in a place-making activity by asking them to think about places, and more specifically their subjective experiences of place. Keith Basso (1996) makes the point that place-based research can act to create and enhance sense of place. Basso argues that most often, knowledge of place is “brief and unselfconscious” (1996:54); however moments of robust awareness of place bring its sentiments into view much more precisely and intensely. He (1996:54) suggests that by acutely sensing place, people become much more aware of their attachments to it. By way of my research objectives and methods, I am assisting children in sensing place. However, this is not to say that such places are meaningless otherwise. For the purposes of scope, it was important for me to focus attention on the place concept in order to elicit children’s conversation and ideas.

4.2.1 Landscape and Culture

Many of the children saw their birth places as physically and culturally distinct from where they currently live. During the interviews, it was often easier to first talk to the children about other places based on ideas of appearance and culture; for example, what their birth
country might look like, the types of food people eat, the clothes they wear, and how people behave. Often children’s descriptions acted as comparisons between places,

\[
\text{Jenny: Coming from Haiti to maybe Canada..., do you think it would have been different?}
\]
\[
\text{Adeline, 8: Yeah.}
\]
\[
\text{Jenny: What might have been different?}
\]
\[
\text{Adeline, 8: There might not have been a lot of black people there.}
\]
\[
\text{Jenny: Interesting. How does that make you feel?}
\]
\[
\text{Adeline, 8: Different...}
\]
\[
\text{Jenny: ..What other things do you think might have been different?}
\]
\[
\text{Adeline, 8: There’s no snow in Haiti. There’s tons in [former Canadian city].}
\]

\[
\text{Jenny: When you think about flying from Georgia to Canada do you think that those two places might have looked really different?}
\]
\[
\text{Lauren, 9: They do. They look really different... Well Georgia like I said about the park already and they had horrible weather. There is no colour like green leaves, no green leaves anywhere. There’s no colour. All grey. And lots of nothing at all...}
\]
\[
\text{Jenny: ..What else might make them look different?}
\]
\[
\text{Lauren, 9: The people there. They didn’t have good quality clothes.}
\]

Children identified weather, landscape, and people’s appearances as markers of difference between their birth places and their current residences. Poverty and a lack of resources also figured into their understanding of differences between places. Often, they associated their birth places with a lack of basic resources or amenities that were suitable for children such as a lack of food, education, or playgrounds.

Additional differences between current residences and birth places were described through reified notions of culture. How people eat, what they eat, what they wear, and how they behave were constitutive of children’s ideas of culture. The following statements demonstrate some material culture that children found important:
Jenny: When you think of the place where you were born, what do you think of?
Ashley, 11: A bowl of rice, chop sticks and the shape of an ‘S’ because it’s shaped like an ‘S’ on the map. (see Figure 7)

We just wear casual [clothing] and they wear like these religious clothing, you like have to wear ‘em... I guess maybe it’s, maybe if they’re like in a church and they believe in something maybe it like, it um, how do I say it? It respects God or, or talks about it, it shows visual like things about him. (Christopher, 13)

Jenny: So the dragons, [you have] almost 30 dragons. So when you look at the dragons what do you think of?
Elsa, 9: I think of flying over China.

Ashley and Frankie have been on return trips to their birth countries since their adoptions. They remember their return trips and these experiences have reshaped their ideas of their birth places. As will be discussed later on, Frankie said he was hesitant to return to the Caribbean birth country but did so at the encouragement of his adoptive parents. While discussing this place a large part of his focus remained on the climate, food, and sea life. When I asked him to draw an image of this place he reflected on his return visit and provided the drawing in Figure 8:
That was right by the beach that my mom forced me to go to every day and there was a palm tree beside it with a single coconut which I always wanted to try and my mom told me there was milk inside and I didn’t want to try it and I still to this day have never had a coconut. Even though that was the one thing I went to [Caribbean country] for. (Frankie, 14)

There’s dolphins there. So I always imagined that I’d see dolphins when I went but I didn’t see dolphins. That’s probably one of the things that made me really angry... I really like dolphins. (Frankie, 14)

Figure 8 Return visit (Frankie, 14)

Ashley spent significantly more time in her birth country when she and her mother decided to live there during a portion of Ashley’s elementary school years. Her narrative of place revolves around cultural and behavioural differences she observed at her school:

They sleep in the middle of the day from like 11 to two. So I just did some work that my teacher gave me that my mom had for me while they were napping... It didn’t make sense... and since I stayed up they’d get me to wash the toothbrushes and cups. (Ashley, 11)

Ashley, 11: ..and they had toilets, like four toilets. Upstairs in one bathroom and two downstairs.
Mother: Like together like so you’d go to the toilet with someone sitting next to you going.

Children who had not revisited their birth country and cannot remember their migration often told imagined stories of how people live such as descriptions of housing structures. Peterson told me that he believes people in Tanzania live in mud huts. He imagines that the living conditions in Haiti might be similar and provided the drawing shown in Figure 9:
He later provided more information on how he envisions his Haitian residence prior to adoption:

> It probably would have been like a mud hut... The inside would probably have looked like a room here and a room – like sort of close together instead of far apart like we have in these houses. Like some rooms there, some rooms there but like spread out. It probably wouldn’t be like that. It probably would be like all close together... Probably other houses really close together. So if they had a back door you go and see other people’s back, backs of the houses maybe. (Peterson, 9).

Christopher also explained a similar notion of the infrastructure and how people live in his birth country:

> Jenny: So tell me about your picture.
> Christopher, 13: Um, I guess those are adobe homes and that was – there was a volcano somewhere in Guatemala. I heard there was a pretty big disaster. There was a lot of water shooting but it was mostly water. And then there’s rocky bits because they don’t have asphalt...
> Jenny: ...And then how do you know about the adobe homes? How do you know that people live in adobe homes?
> Christopher, 13: Because I guess they’re pretty poor I assume. Everything inside there is pretty much cold concrete and just some mats.

When asked to describe their birth places, children described poor infrastructure and living conditions that were unsuitable for children. In describing their birth places, children justified why that place was not good for them and through comparison articulated why Canada
was much more hospitable for a proper childhood. This information not only reflects how places are socially constructed through various sources of information but how particular places are envisioned as suitable and unsuitable for children.

4.2.2 Institutional Living

Many of the children were able to identify at least one place where they resided prior to their adoption. These places were discussed through interview questions as well as in response to my second drawing exercise that asked them to draw their birth places. I received varying answers to these inquiries since some children resided in houses with birth families, some lived in temporary foster care while they were awaiting adoption, and others spent time in institutions. Since many of the children could not recall their exact place of birth, or where their birth families lived, many of them were left to reflect on what information they had about residing in an institution (see Howell 2007). Five of the ten child participants referred to children’s homes or orphanages as part of their biographical past. Although Howell (2007:26) refers to institutions such as orphanages as “non-kin” and “liminal worlds” she later asserts that it is often a place transnationally adopted people wish to see during return visits (2007:28-29). The importance of these institutions was reiterated through many of the children’s narratives and drawings. Adeline told me the following:

*Jenny: When you think about Haiti do think about specific places? Like places you actually went to or were?*  
*Adeline, 8: Port-au-Prince... the orphanage*
She then made this drawing:

![Drawing of an orphanage](image)

Jenny: Have you ever been to this place [orphanage in the drawing]?
Adeline, 8: [nods indicating yes].
Jenny: Do you remember being there?
Adeline, 8: A little bit.
Jenny: A little bit? Okay. Do you remember anything about the inside?
Adeline, 8: Lots of diapers, lots of toys. Lots of beds. Food. Lots of babies.
Jenny: Lots of babies? Do you feel connected to this place?
Adeline, 8: A little bit.
Jenny: A little bit? How come? Like in what ways?
Adeline, 8: Because I spent three years there.

**Figure 10 Orphanage (Adeline, 8)**

Peterson’s and Adeline’s families have remained close to orphanage administrators. The administrators visit the families once every year or so and remain in the children’s lives. In these cases, orphanage administrators and caretakers sustain the adoptive family’s connection to these places. Both children discuss their desire to revisit the orphanages:

Jenny: Do you ever want to go and visit that place? Like have you ever thought about that?
Adeline, 8: I might.
Jenny: You might? What would you want to do if you visited that place?
Adeline, 8: Um, help out.
Jenny: In what ways?
Adeline, 8: Like the kids.

Peterson, 9: Probably I’d go see the orphanage I used to live in. And help out there... To see other children to see what their conditions are... I would probably go to a beach.
Jenny: Go to the beach? Would you want to see any people?
Peterson, 9: Um, probably [orphanage administrator].

Adeline and Peterson both expressed their desire to “help out” and conveyed the understanding that the people within these institutions were in need of assistance. Peterson
desires to see what “their conditions” are and shows concern about the welfare of the children residing in the orphanage. His desire to witness other children living within the orphanage may also be indicative of his desire to see how he once lived.

Labelling an individual as an abandoned or orphaned child was troubling to some children and parents. The term “orphan” is often ascribed to children residing in an orphanage (which is precisely why some parents did not want to refer to the institution as an “orphanage”). However, some children come to believe that they were orphans prior to their adoption. Ivan explained to me his understanding of being an orphan:

*Ivan, 11: I think I’m happier here.
Jenny: You’re happier here? What makes you happier here?
Ivan, 11: That I have a family. In Russia I was just an orphan, where orphans were and I have more friends [here]. And that’s all.
Jenny: So you’ve said that word a couple times – Orphan. If I didn’t know... how would you explain it to me?
Ivan, 11: Orphan is a child who had a family but couldn’t take care of him or her so they put him or her into a house where people take care of children. And the children are called orphans.
Jenny: ...When you talk about being an orphan or an orphanage, how does that feel inside for you?
Ivan, 11: Alone.

Ivan’s self-ascribed status of “orphan” emphasizes how he saw himself within the orphanage space. He too reiterates his desire to visit the orphanage again and specifically visit the friends he had there. Polina also tells me about her experiences living in an orphanage and attending the nearby school. She provided these visual references:
She explained in great detail the people she knew in the orphanage including the characteristics of each child and how their behaviour compared to her own. She told me about a spray-painted staircase leading up to the entrance door of the orphanage and the broken glass scattered on the ground nearby (see Figure 11). She also talked about the appearance of the orphanage and nearby school as well as how she felt within these institutional confines. In Figure 12, Polina provided a representation of the school and detailed her experiences of spatiality through the following conversation:

Jenny: ...How did you feel when you were in this place? So when you were in the school by the orphanage?
Polina, 10: Ah, safe.
Jenny: Safe? You felt safe? How come you felt safe?
Polina, 10: I don’t really know.
Jenny: Was it a place you liked to be?
Polina, 10: Yes. And it was like -- and it was like tight.
Jenny: Tight?
Polina, 10: A little bit.
Jenny: ‘Cause was it tight in terms of lots of people?
Polina, 10: Like. Yeah, and like see? ...Here, see there’s like a fence and it’s like tight to the school and then there’s the school right there.
Jenny: Oh, I see. So the space that you were allowed to be in was small?
Polina describes her embodied, perceptual experience of being in the school space (see Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003:13). Her phenomenological experience of being bound within this institution is associated with sensations of safety and tightness due to the close proximity to buildings, other children, and authorities such as teachers and caretakers. She later went on to tell me about a drawing she once made for her parents that conveyed some of her emotions while living in the orphanage:

Polina, 10: I drew a picture of the saddest time and the happiest time. That was when -- the happiest time is when I was like out of the orphanage, like they’re adopting me and then the saddest time I just drew me in the orphanage.
Jenny: You were sad in the orphanage?
Polina, 10: A little bit.
Jenny: How come? What was sad about it for you?
Polina, 10: I don’t know but there was something.
Jenny: Something about it that made you sad?
Polina, 10: Yes.

Although Polina associates the orphanage with sadness, like many of the other participants Polina also wants to visit the orphanage to see the people that she once knew. She recalls friends and wonders in later conversations with me how they have changed or even if they are still there. Talking with children about institutional living reveals that it is a sad time associated with their perceived abandonment, orphanhood, and lack of care. However, it is also a place of identification as relationships were once forged there with orphanage staff, administrators, friends, and other children in similar situations.
Five child participants had resided in foster homes prior to their adoption. They chose not to draw or talk much about this place since they were infants at the time, claimed to have no memory of it, and had few referential objects to remind them of their fosterage. Rather, these children tended to focus on their imagined or known birth family and the point at which their adoptive parents arrived in their lives. Children are aware that they have birth parents because of the way adoption is explained to them but often times very little is known or said about foster parents.

Return visits were a large topic of conversation during interviews with children and parents. Many children articulated some desire to go on a return visit, except for the two children who had already been on such trips and felt differently than the other children I spoke with. Children’s desires to go on return visits were somewhat reflective of their parents’ perspectives likely because they have shared conversations together:

*Jenny*: Do you ever imagine that that’s a place that you’ll go back to and visit?
*Christopher, 13*: Probably. Maybe for school... Go to school there for like maybe a term.

*Jenny*: Is that an important place for you [Haiti]?
*Peterson, 9*: Yup.
*Jenny*: How come?
*Peterson, 9*: Um, ‘cause, probably ‘cause I used to live there and I want to go back.

*Jenny*: Do you ever want to go a visit that place? Like have you ever thought about that?
*Adeline, 8*: I might.

*Jenny*: Do you ever want to go back and visit that place?
*Polina, 10*: Mhm[indicating yes]...
*Jenny*: And if you went to Russia to visit, where would you go and what would you do?
*Polina, 10*: Ah, to the orphanage and try to go to the place when I was, where I was born.
Jenny: Would you ever go back to Russia for a visit?  
Ivan, 11: Yeah.  
Jenny: When do you think—why do you think – what makes you want to go back there and visit?  
Ivan, 11: I want to play in the snow again.  
Jenny: You like the snow? What else do you think you’d do or see if you went there?  
Ivan, 11: I’d see the orphanage.  

Interestingly, while parents wanted children to see their “country” and “culture,” children primarily wanted to visit the orphanage they once resided in and perhaps other children they knew. Parents’ ideas were broadly based on the country as a source of identification, while children desired to see specific places and people that were meaningful to them.  

Ashley and Frankie had already been on return visits and showed little desire in doing it again:  

I kind of want to go and I kind of want to stay here. (Ashley, 11)  

Jenny: Do you think you’ll ever go back to [Caribbean country] again?  
Frankie, 14: I’m almost certain I don’t think I’ll go.  
Jenny: ...If your mom just went would you go with her? If she was already going?  
Frankie, 14: No. She probably would try to drag me along and she might succeed but I would definitely not want to go.  

Overall, most of the children who resided in institutions prior to adoption found these places to be important sites of their biographical past. They often know of or remember at least one person from the same institution such as a caretaker, an administrator, or a fellow adopted child. Although these places are often times associated with sadness and loneliness, they are also locations children talked about the most in relation to their birth places, and the place they would most likely visit if they ever went on a return trip.
4.2.3 Birth Family and Other Adopted Children

Theorists agree that the formation of social relationships is one way places are made meaningful as people become socially emplaced within networks of relations (see Hammond 2003, Howell 2007). Hammond suggests that “interactions constantly alter relationships between the individual, the group and place” (2003:78). Children in this study often identified people as important sites of connection between themselves and their birth places. When I asked children to tell me about some of the people within their birth places, it was common that they would tell me about people who they resided with including other children and people who took care of them. Adeline and Peterson both told me about the orphanage administrators:

*Um, I remember the -- what’s her name? ...The orphanage -- one of the orphanage ladies.* (Adeline, 8)

Peterson explained to me that the orphanage administrator was important to him “because she used to take care of me.” Peterson directly associates this person with his biographical past. Many participants talked about other children who resided in the same institutions as them. Lauren, Elsa, and Polina told me similar stories about their friends. Lauren told me about a little girl who lived in the same foster home as her and was adopted by a Canadian family at around the same time. Elsa told me a similar story about a girl who resided with her in the children’s home and now lives in the same city as her. Lauren and Elsa remain friends with these girls. Elsa in particular feels a strong connection with her friend because of their long history together. She told me about a conversation she had with another friend:

*Sam thinks he knew me for way longer than Annie but he didn’t know that I was born with Annie.* (Elsa, 9)

I later learned that Elsa and Annie may not have in fact been born together, but resided within the same children’s home prior to their adoption. Since the children’s home fits
prominently within Elsa’s origin narrative she associates Annie with her life beginnings and makes the orphanage as the site of her birth.

Polina also shares her experiences of being adopted at the same time as a boy who lived in the same orphanage as her. She explains that they were able to undertake their adoption and migration journey together:

Because he got adopted with me and we like went together and like all the way to the place where we had to like separate. So they had to go to [another city] and we had to go here. So, we had to say good-bye. (Polina, 10)

Many of the child participants could name at least one other child who had been adopted from the same institution or foster home; other children knew at least one other child adopted from the same country. These relationships were formed either because the children already knew each other or because they had been introduced through post-adoption organizations and playgroups. As discussed in Chapter Three, parents encouraged their children to know other children like them who had undergone similar experiences.17

Children also thought about and discussed people who are related to them. They often wondered about their birth family:

Jenny: So what do you know about it and how you feel about it [the place where you were born]?
Christopher, 13: Well I don’t really know what it looks like except for maybe the photos we printed off the computer. I guess my birth mom gave me away because my birth dad, I don’t know where he is and I do have a birth brother and sister.

Jenny: So when you think of that place, what people do you think of?
Frankie, 14: I guess my birth mother and then my foster family and that’s pretty much it. I’m pretty sure some person who introduced me to...

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17 See Rapp and Ginsburg (2001) for a discussion on parental constructions of similarity and difference in creating kinship for their children living with disability.
Caribbean style Ginger Ale which I really, really liked but I can’t remember who they were. I think someone at our hotel.

Jenny: Does anybody ever talk to you about the people that you might have known when you were in Haiti?
Peterson, 9: No.
Jenny: No? Or like anybody that you might have been friends with or have been related to?
Peterson, 9: No.
Jenny: No? Do you ever wonder?
Peterson, 9: Yeah.
Jenny: What do you wonder about?
Peterson, 9: If I have any brothers or sisters or if I was the only child.
Jenny: Oh, I see. What makes you want to know about any brothers or sisters?
Peterson, 9: ‘Cause if I did have any brothers or sisters, could I like talk to them?
Jenny: So you might want to know them?
Peterson, 9: Yeah.

Most of the children expressed concern over the welfare of their birth family. Some of the children had very little information about these people and did not know if they were still living. Additionally, children were concerned about the welfare of their birth parents, knowing that most of them lived in impoverished circumstances and had “problems with their life,” as stated by Lauren.

Children who were adopted at an older age confidently referenced their own memories when talking about their relationships to their birth families. When reflecting on their birth families they expressed an array of emotions. For Ivan, his recollection of residing with a biological relative prior to entering the orphanage reflected “good” memories. He represented one of these good memories in a drawing (see Figure 13):
Ivan told me that he recalled a time when his biological relative played a joke on him by coaxing him into a dark room and then closing the door to scare him. He said he was scared but when he realized she was playing a trick on him, he thought it was funny:

*Ivan, 11: I think it was a good memory.*

*Jenny: What makes it good?*

*Ivan, 11: ‘Cause it was funny.*

Children often claimed that their imagined or recalled interactions with birth family constituted “good memories.” When I asked Adeline what ties her to Haiti, her response focused on the connection fostered by the love people felt for her:

*Adeline, 8: ...there’s lots of memories there.*

*Jenny: Good memories or?*

*Adeline, 8: Good memories and bad memories.*

*Jenny: Both? Can you tell me one good memory?*

*Adeline, 8: Lots of people loved me there... like [orphanage administrator], my birth mom, friends.*

Overall, children could identify cultural and landscape differences between their birth places and their current residences. However, children felt drawn to their birth places through specific connections to events, people, and locations. Many of the children expressed the desire to have more information about their birth family, to communicate with them more frequently, or to simply know them. This was not just limited to birth parents but also birth siblings. Many of the children also reflected on people who cared for them such as staff at institutions. This was not just because they nurtured them but because these people could memorably place the child
in, what was for many of them, an unimaginable past. When talking about their birth places, children also identified other children who had undergone similar processes of abandonment, institutionalization, adoption, and migration. James (1993) argues that by forming social relationships with others, children reflect on and learn about themselves, cultivating identifications in relation to others.

4.3 Objects of Knowledge

Objects become important sites of knowledge as they are imbued with meaning. According to Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003:5), experiences are often remade into objects such as artifacts, gestures, or words. According to Appadurai (1988:19), objects have the ability to take on the identity of their owners when they are imbued with biographical history. Thus, objects can be used by individuals to reflect on and inform their own history and identity. The children I spoke with referred to objects that help create memories and inform their knowledge on their birth places. These objects of knowledge are locatable in the sense that they are tangible or experiential. Tangible objects including clothing, blankets, baby toys, photographs, books, and souvenirs are used by children and their parents as sources of story-telling and reflection. Particular people and locations also act as sites where children provide, share, and construct knowledge of their past. Lastly, children’s own bodies act as objects of knowledge when their racialized appearance or physical markings sometime indicate a complicated biographical past (see Haraway 1988:595).

4.3.1 Souvenirs, Artifacts, and Photographs

Parents attempt to bring the cultural significance of their child’s birth country into the family homes. This was evident through souvenirs and mementos that hung on walls, sat on bookshelves, or were collected by the children themselves. Some of these objects directly related to the child’s birth or infancy:
Mother: And why are dragons important?
Elsa, 9: Because when I was in China, I was born in the year of the dragon.

Jenny: What do you think about when you have the hat on? Or when you hold the hat?
Robby, 8: Being a baby.
Jenny: You think of being a baby? How does that feel?
Robby, 8: Because I got this when I was a baby.

Elsa and Robby associate particular objects with their birth countries and more specifically with the time of their infancy. Although Robby associates his hat with being a baby, he didn’t express much attachment to it; his parents got it when they first met him and he showed it to me only when his parents reminded him of its existence. Alternatively, Elsa avidly collects dragons because she associates them with her birth and showed me lots of dragons she collected on shelves in her room. Similarly, Frankie has a blanket that he associates with his infancy. In the following interview excerpt, Frankie verbalizes how important a biographical object can become:

Frankie, 14: My mom sewed it for me and sent it to me in [Caribbean country] before she even met me... It’s probably the inanimate object that I’ve had for the longest. In fact, technically it’s older than all the cells in my body right now. So I mean I probably couldn’t bear to be separated from it. I always whenever we go on vacation, I always have nightmares about the airport people not letting me take it on the plane, so I never bring it with me anywhere because although I like it so much, I don’t want to lose it.
Jenny: ...When you hold the blanket what do you think about or how do you feel?
Frankie, 14: I guess probably nothing because I’m just so used to liking it. Like I can’t even remember how I became friends with most of my friends and like you know how often other people can smell you but you can’t smell you because you’re so used to your smell?... I just – it just feels normal to me.

Frankie conveys a close sense of familiarity with his blanket. Interestingly, the older children adopted from Russia were described by their parents as having little attachment to
anything. Ivan struggled to find a single object to show me but ended up finding a Russian Coat of Arms that his father had recently given him. He told me:

Ivan, 11: This is a symbol of Russia. I think.
Jenny: Do you know when you got it?
Ivan, 11: It wasn’t very long ago. I think it was August that I got it.
Jenny: So fairly recently, hey? Who gave it to you?
Ivan, 11: My dad.
Jenny: Your dad? ...And why do you think he gave it to you?
Ivan, 11: Because it’s from Russia and he probably thinks I could have it.
Jenny: Do you remember how you felt when he gave it to you?
Ivan, 11: Well, I didn’t really care ’cause I didn’t really want it.
Jenny: You didn’t really want it. How come?
Ivan, 11: Well, it’s just, it’s just, well I didn’t have a use for it. But I put it in a picture of me and [my biological relative]. There were little holes in the whatever you put the picture in it...
Jenny: ...Why did you connect that with the picture?
Ivan, 11: Well I didn’t really have anywhere else to put it and I saw the little holes in the picture frame and it kind of looked good.

Ivan could not find a use for this object and was not really sure what it even was. He recognized it as a Russian symbol and connected it to a photograph of himself and his biological relative. Photographs play a large role in how children reflect on their past. Many of the children referenced photographs when I asked them how they learn about their birth places. For example, when I asked Adeline how she learns about the place in her drawing (see Figure 10), she explained, “From the video that we have.” Adeline’s parents video-recorded the initial meeting between themselves and their adopted daughter, as well as the days following the event. The family frequently watches the video and annually celebrates the day when Adeline first arrived home. Adeline’s mother said they have routinely watched the video over the years and feels this has helped Adeline construct and maintain memories of the orphanage and her adoption. Other children also said photographs provided them with information:

Jenny: When you think about this place [in Georgia] what do you think of?
Lauren, 9: Well I kind of think of some like grey ground and fountain and a park. So that’s pretty much it... Oh, except for that fountain where they have all these stairs leading up to it.
Jenny: How do you know about that place?
Lauren, 9: Um, pictures. And I remember my mom taking me up there.

Jenny: So when you see these pictures, what do you think of when you see these ones?
Lauren, 9: I think of it as like what I’m noticing now I’m kind of thinking that I think the people who live in this little part of Georgia are very kind of poor because if you look in the picture over here is more city-like and here is more like ‘Oh’ in the bushes and everything. So I think they didn’t have a lot of money.

Some children identified the photographs as source of information that they can access on their own. Polina shared with me numerous photo albums that she and her parents created over the years since her adoption. She sat with me for several hours going through about a half dozen albums. As we flipped through the albums I was surprised at the distribution of photographs that seemed particularly disorganized; one photo was of children playing in the cement play space of the orphanage. The next photo would reveal the green grass of her B.C. backyard. The next photograph would then be an orphanage caregiver accompanied by Polina’s in-depth commentary. Although these images did not seem to flow in any chronological order, Polina was quite comfortable juggling amongst various times and places of her life even as she narrated the photographs. She told me she looks at her pictures frequently and often on her own:

Jenny: And when you’re sitting around at home do you ever see pictures of Russia...?
Polina, 10: When I’m sitting around if I sit around at home sometimes I take my pictures out and I look at them.
Jenny: By yourself or with your parents?
Polina, 10: By myself.
Jenny: Why do you do that?
Polina, 10: I don’t know I just pick a thing to do and I just do it.
Two participants, Elsa and Lauren, shared scrapbooks with me that their adoptive mothers had made for them. Elsa’s mother had written her adoption story under photographs that were organized chronologically. Elsa read me this text but tried hard to change the wording from her parents’ perspective to her perspective, as if to tell me the story of her life in her own words. The following excerpt is an example:

I had a Chinese mom and a Chinese dad. But they could not take care of me. They brought me to a children’s home where many nice aunties gave me milk, played with me and patted me to sleep... (Elsa, 9)

She then goes on to negotiate who is telling the story:

The paper in China said that we could adopt you – I mean you could adopt me, if we promised to take good care of me. We were so happy excited that we showed the picture to everyone. (Elsa, 9)

Elsa attempted to take ownership of the story and the book, conveying the information as if it were her own story. Lauren explained to me her desire to start her own scrapbook:

Jenny: Do you remember the first time you saw this scrapbook?
Lauren, 9: Um, I don’t know.
Jenny: You don’t know? Do you remember how you felt when you saw it, maybe the last time?
Lauren, 9: I felt like ‘Oh, so this is when I was adopted.’ Now I get more information and I kind of understand it better.
Jenny: Is it -- so was this, would you say this was an important sort of like source of information for you?
Lauren, 9: Yup, I think so... I’m gonna start my own scrapbook.
Jenny: And is it important for you to maybe keep working on this?
Lauren, 9: I want my own because my life right now I want to like take pictures of my friends and take pictures of [my stuffed animal] and say like family and put my family on that one page and then say best friends and put like Tanya and whoever else.
Jenny: So is it important to you to have these pictures and to look at them?
Lauren, 9: Yeah. I think so...
Jenny: ...How does it make you feel when you look through this book?
Lauren, 9: Really good because I kind of am understanding more now.
Elsa and Lauren both articulated their desires to tell their own story. Elsa tried to retell her mother’s story by placing herself as the story-teller. Lauren wants to start her scrapbook in order to tell her own life story according to what is important to her. This scrapbook may not contain images of her adoption and migration; rather it would capture images of people and places that are important to her “life right now.”

While photographs mark instantaneous moments of the past and provide visual representations for children’s origin narratives they do not capture all the moments, and thus some spots are left “blank”:

“Well, it’s odd because I’ve seen a picture of me when I was in [Caribbean country] with my parents and then my mom told me a story about how I was yellin’ – yellin’ or smiling at passengers on the plane. And then, I learned a little bit about immigration. So basically what I have in my mind is a picture of me in [Caribbean country] and then me on a plane playing and then me teleported into some office to sign – my parents sign papers and then me teleported back to [my Canadian city] and that’s pretty much it. I guess I never really thought about the blank spots, just the information that I know of... I think they would have put me in one of those trays and put me underneath and put me on the conveyor belt underneath the machine that checks if there are any weapons inside... it just seems natural because I’m small like the backpacks. (Frankie, 14)

In this interview excerpt, Frankie describes how some parts of his life story are unknown to him. He imagines himself as teleported from one place to another minus many of the unknown details. Additionally, he refers to himself as a piece of luggage and imagines that he was passively moved by others with no agency of his own.

For children who remember their lives within their birth places, images enable them to recall important people and places. Photographs become a source of story-telling where children recall the details of place through people, time and events. However, for children who are unable to recall themselves in such places, photographs visually represent not just imagined
places but actual locations. Regardless of age at adoption, objects, and photographs assist in actively constructing specific memories of these places and visually situate the child in his or her birth place.

4.3.2 Learning and Sharing at School

Because children spend a significant amount of their daily lives at school, how they come to know the world including themselves and others is largely shaped by their school experiences (see James 1993). Here, I focus on children’s experiences at school in order to add breadth to my discussion since the majority of this research focuses on children and their parents. I asked children how they would describe themselves to their teachers and their classmates if they were asked to introduce themselves. These were some of their responses:

My name is Elsa. And I’m nine years old. (Elsa, 9)

I’m 11 years old and I like Science. And when I grow up I want to be a singer. (Ivan, 11)

Hello my name is Robby Smith... I like Star Wars, Batman and the Wii. (Robby, 8)

I’m Christopher and -- most of my-- I know most of you guys from elementary school, so. (Christopher, 13)

Only two of the participants said they would share information about their adoption:

Hi, I’m Peterson. I am nine years old and I’ve been adopted from Haiti and that’s it. (Peterson, 9)

I’d say what I like and ah I guess where I live or ah where I’m from... Um I would say I lived like, before, I lived in Russia. (Polina, 10)

One participant shared her experiences of telling people at school that she was adopted:

Lauren, 9: To make a good friend usually I tell them that I’m adopted and if they react really like ‘O:------:okay.’ Like they kind of don’t really – they got themselves into being my friend and now they don’t want to be. If they have that look. But if they’re like ‘Oh, okay. That’s alright.’ Like if they’re like that than I totally would be their friend. And ‘cause they like me for who I
am but if they just want me for some reason, cause I’m in Canada or whatever.
Jenny: So, do you feel that it is important for people to know that about you? Like when you’re making a friend?
Lauren, 9: Yes because I don’t like the fact that when I tell them then they kind of react and act differently to me. Like I’m from a different culture or whatever and say – ‘Do you eat this a different way?’ I don’t like that.

Lauren expresses how she sometimes tells people she was adopted from another country in order to see if they genuinely want to be her friend. However, she clearly expresses her desire not to be considered culturally different by other children. Polina describes how she sometimes has to explain her story to curious classmates:

Jenny: Do people at your school or when you first came to your old school, do people ever ask you where you’re from?
Polina, 10: Well not really. Like my teacher knew that. Like she would like say that.
Jenny: So she told everybody in the class?
Polina, 10: Well, yeah but that was at like at [first school] not at [second school]. At [second school] I was, well some people knew me so they knew that. So they tell like other people. So, yeah.
Jenny: Did anybody ask you?
Polina, 10: Ah well, yeah some little kids. They’d be like, they’d say like, if you’re from Russia -- Like they’d say, ‘Are you from Russia?’ And then I’d be like, ‘Yes.’ Because they won’t believe other people.
Jenny: So they don’t believe the other people. How come they don’t believe them?
Polina, 10: I don’t know. They just, they just have to ask me.

Polina reveals that at times, her teachers share with the class information about her biographical history and adoption and some of her classmates ask her for confirmation. Most of the child participants, including Polina, expressed that they did not mind being asked questions about their birth place or family situation. However, I am unsure if this was just a gesture of politeness since I was asking them these very questions. One participant made this point clear:

Elsa, 9: Lots of places some people ask me about that.
Jenny: People ask you about it? Like who maybe would ask you?
Elsa, 9: Lots of places.
Jenny: Lots of places. Do you like it when people ask you about it, or do you not like it?
Elsa, 9: I’m okay with it.
Jenny: Okay with it? And then what do you usually say if somebody asks you?
Elsa, 9: The same as you ask me.

Some children use the school setting to learn more about their birth places or share information they have with the rest of the class. Bringing significant objects such as souvenirs and clothing to school to show to classmates is common. Peterson shares his experience of bringing a book on Haiti into his classroom:

Jenny: I know that you brought your book to school. Can you tell me what inspired you or how that happened that you brought that book to school?
...Why did you decide that you wanted to show it?
Peterson, 9: I just liked reading it during silent reading and people wanted to start seeing it so I just shared it.
Jenny: Oh, I see. Okay. And then when you shared it what did the people around you do?
Peterson, 9: They looked, they saw that it was a lot nicer than around here like the grass is different, they saw a lot of differences.

Similarly, Polina also shared a photo album with her class. Other children including Adeline and Elsa wrote short stories about their birth countries for class projects. By sharing information with their classmates, these children could take ownership over the knowledge they held by disseminating it at their discretion. Additionally, their classmates could better understand their life histories. Christopher used a school assignment to learn more about his birth place,

Jenny: Do you remember where you got the information from for it?
Christopher, 13: I think I got it from the World Textbooks or something like that. Like encyclopaedias. And so it started off that we had to choose a country that was around the Ring of Fire and so we had to pick out one. My friend – one of my other friends Jake -- he had mine and I had Mexico so I traded with him because I just wanted to.
Jenny: Because you really wanted to do it on Guatemala?
Christopher, 13: Yeah. It was all about like clothing and agricultural stuff and religion.
Jenny: Do you remember a couple of really interesting things that you learned when you did that project that you maybe never knew before?
Christopher, 13: There are actually not – I’m not quite sure but I think they’re not quite as poor as like the other countries but I could be wrong because they’re not very healthy either. They don’t have the proper furniture, house, it’s all adobes. Which is kinda sucky.

School is a site of negotiating knowledge, often times outside of parents’ gaze. However, teachers can similarly overlay identification upon children by sharing information about them that they may or may not have shared with their classmates otherwise. As revealed by most of the children, stories of adoption and migration are not necessarily aspects of themselves that they choose to reveal right away. However, when children are provided the space to explore their own histories and interests, they may take the opportunity to learn about their birth places and share this information with their classmates.

4.3.3 Embodied Places

Children’s bodies were also objects that provided them with knowledge of their past emplacements. Casey suggests that bodies can be pulled between multiple places; when the body is offered two locations it is pulled in two equally possible “theres” (1993:54-55). Bodies as sites of difference and as reminders of former emplacements were particularly evident among children who were adopted transracially. These children cannot completely envision themselves within their birth places, yet experience themselves as “different” from others in their adoptive contexts. Difference was sometimes expressed according to hair type and skin colour:

Jenny: Ah, what do you think it would have been like meeting your dad the first time?
Peterson, 9: Scary.
Jenny: Scary?
Peterson, 9: And we would have met my brother there [at the airport]. I would have looked at him more than my dad.
Jenny: How come?
Peterson, 9: Because he was probably the same colour as me. Not that different.
Jenny: Not that different? Okay. So what makes you different?
Peterson, 9: Um, skin colour and the hair.
Jenny: And hair. Okay. Anything else?
Peterson, 9: Um, no.

Jenny: Coming from Haiti to maybe Canada or [former Canadian city], do you think it would have been different?
Adeline, 8: Yeah.
Jenny: What might have been different?
Adeline, 8: Um, there might not have been a lot of black people there.
Jenny: Ah. Interesting. Hm. How does that make you feel?
Adeline, 8: Different.

Peterson and Adeline both refer to their appearance including their skin colour and hair as a source of difference between them and their family and other community members. Peterson thinks he identified with his brother more so than his father when he first met his new family because, according to him, they look similar. Christopher explained how similarities in skin colour helped him feel connected to Belize, a place his family recently went on vacation:

Jenny: Do you feel connected to other places?
Christopher, 13: Yeah. Sometimes.
Jenny: Like what – what places?
Christopher, 13: Mexico. And other Southern countries.
Jenny: And what makes you feel connected to Mexico?
Christopher, 13: I guess almost the same skin colour. Or like Belize.

Events of illness or injury were discussed by some participants as embodied memories of former emplacements. Four of the participants talked about their health and events that left permanent alteration on their physical bodies:

I’m healthier here [in Canada] because in Russia I had -- my teeth were rotten... because I had a lot of sugar there and we didn’t have toothbrushes there. (Ivan, 11)
Robby, 8: I was really sick when I was born... I was that close to dying.
Jenny: You were?
Robby, 8: I was that close to dying.
Jenny: Oh really? Do you know what you were sick with?
Robby, 8: Lots of sickness and I do not know what and I had to eat lots of medicine.

... when I first came there [the orphanage] my hands they were all sore and they were wrapped up... That's because they had like and they had like bumps on them and stuff and they were weird. And they had to wrap them up and it all hurt and I had to put -- they had to put like cream stuff on them and stuff like that. And then they had to put it on, wrap it all up and they -- and when I had to hold a spoon, I'd go like go like this. (Polina, 10)

Adeline, 8: There is one bad memory there before. I got bit by a dog.
Jenny: Did you?
Adeline, 8: Yeah. I've got a scar...
Jenny: ...Do you remember getting bit by a dog?
Adeline, 8: Nope.
Jenny: Nope? But you know that's what it's from? How do you know that?
Adeline, 8: Because when I was little I said that to my mom.
Jenny: So maybe you knew when you were little?
Adeline, 8: [nods to indicate yes].
Jenny: ...And when you look at it, does it make you think of certain things? Like does it remind you of things?
Adeline, 8: Haiti.

Some of the children remember the sensations of their illness. Embodied memories of their former emplacements represent what Low and Lawrence-Zungia call “embodied spaces” (2003:5). These children can recall being there through the sensory perception of their bodies. For Ivan and Polina, embodied memories can be located within their teeth and hands, respectively. Robby and Adeline cannot directly recall their injuries or illnesses but reflecting on and recounting these events is one way they imagine themselves in their birth places. For Robby, the contingencies of his life are difficult to conceptualize, especially his idea that he nearly died as an infant. For Adeline, her scar reminds her of her birth place and superimposes this place directly onto her body.
Racialization of children’s bodies according to skin colour and hair type was identified by children as a source of their feelings of difference. Additionally, imagined or recalled embodied experiences of illness or injury enable children to locate their bodies in another place, at another time and thus assist them in imagining their former emplacements. The intrigue of Adeline’s scar provides her a direct route to remember and reflect on an imagined event in her life. In these ways, children’s emplacements within birth places are sometimes mapped directly onto their bodies (Hammond 2003:88).

4.4 Origins, Home, and Belonging

The structure of the research study including my research questions and methods puts great emphasis on children’s birth places. In structuring this project, I was aware of how the data maybe skewed towards an over-representation of these places and this may have effectively caused me to neglect how children feel about their lives overall. Importantly, I aimed to learn about children’s ideas of migration and place, but also how they see themselves more generally. In order to elucidate the array of important places, people, and events that constitute these children’s lives, I asked questions that broadly focused on their origins, family, sense of belonging, and home.

4.4.1 Origins and Ethnicity

Most of the children expressed little concern over being asked “Where are you from?” by strangers, acquaintances, friends, and even myself. Most children said they respond by stating their birth country. When I asked the children why these places are important to them, many of them emphasize that its significance rests within the fact that it is the place they are from. In this way, these children maintain and believe in the notion that the event of their birth naturalizes their relationships to particular places. Where they were at the time of their birth greatly shapes
their understanding of who they are since children’s origins constitute an important part of how they see themselves:

My favourite place is Haiti because I was born there. (Adeline, 8)

Jenny: Are the people in your birth place important to you?
Polina, 10: Yes...Because that’s where I was born and that’s where I came from.

Jenny: What kinds of things connect you to Vietnam?
Ashley, 11: Um, I don’t know.
Mother: Well, why do you feel connected?...Well when someone says, ‘Do you feel connected Russia?’ Would you say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’?
Ashley, 11: No.
Mother: Well why do you feel connected to Vietnam?
Ashley, 11: Because I know about it...Russia I’ve never been there and it doesn’t make any sense to me.
Mother: But Vietnam you know about and what else?
Ashley, 11: And I’ve been there and I’m from there.

The event of their birth and the site where this took place was an important part of children’s origin narratives. According to Yanagisako and Delaney (1995:1-3), origin narratives are a type of story about how one “came-into-being” in a physiological, social, and ontological sense. These authors posit that origin narratives are neither empirically true nor false, but are representations of how people perceive their beginnings. Origin narratives are important ways of narrating oneself into a fixed identity (Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000:77).

Although many children I spoke with see their birth place as an important site of their origins, mostly they chose not to identify themselves ethnically with their birth places. Thus, origins and ethnicity were not necessarily synonymous for children. In fact, children generally did not label themselves ethnically unless I specifically asked them about it, or it came up in a conversation with their parents. During these occurrences, children often identified themselves
as Canadian. Polina and Ivan spent the least amount of time in Canada compared to other children I talked with. Both of them agreed that they felt more “Canadian” than “Russian”:

_Jenny: ...Do you feel closer to being Canadian or closer to being Russian?_
_Ivan, 11: To Canadian._
_Jenny: And how come?..._
_Ivan, 11: Because when I was in Russia I was little and I don’t remember anything but in Canada I’m older and I know, I know things, I know about it. A lot more than I knew in Russia._

_Jenny: What makes you feel a little bit more Canadian?_
_Polina, 10: Because I speak it and I forgot a little bit of Russian and I don’t ever think about that I am, only if like somebody asks me._

Polina’s father recognizes that she corrects him when he refers to her as “Russian” by stating she is “Canadian-Russian.” Alternatively, Peterson’s parents find that their son sometimes chooses to identify himself as “American” rather than Haitian. According to his mother, “It might be an easier label to wear, to be African American.”

Although Frankie participated in Afro-Canadian adoption groups as a younger child, he finds other ethnic labels more relevant to his life and activities. I asked him if he would ever do a school project on his birth place if he had the opportunity and he told me the following:

_If it asked me where I came from then I’d probably talk about [Caribbean country]. And if it asked me what kind of nationality I was then I would start talking about Japan. My friends and I have agreed that I am Japanese... Japanese-Canadian... I’m Canadian on the outside and Japanese at heart._
_(Frankie, 14)_

As will be discussed in Chapter Five, Frankie strongly identifies with Japanese art, language, food, and dress. He sees himself as Japanese due to these interests, but also Canadian. Thus, birth places figured into children’s origins narratives but are not necessarily sources of current ethnic identifications. When specifically asked about their ethnicity, these children respond with labels relevant to their everyday lives such as Canada, the United States, or even Japan. This highlights the array of places that can also figure into modes of identification.
Olwig agrees that when children are continuously referenced according to distant birth places, “other kinds of places that may be of greater significance... tend to be ignored” (2003:226).

4.4.2 Family and Home

The significance and meaning of places is partially constituted through the occurrence of social interactions such as kinning (Howell 2006). In order to understand the role of kinning in place-making, I asked children to tell me about their families, what makes them a family, and where they feel the most at home. As will be shown there is a co-constitutive relationship between notions of family and home. I asked children to define the word “family” and to tell me about their families:

Jenny: ...What makes them a family?
Ivan, 11: They love each other... And they stay together... In the same house.

Jenny: Who feels like your family?
Ashley, 11: My mom, my dad, my sisters, and my brothers, and my cousins, and my aunts and my uncles.
Jenny: And what connects you to them? What makes you feel like they’re your family?
Ashley, 11: Because I know they’re there... ‘cause they love each other.

I’d have to say probably it [family] means that people love you and they live with you and they’re your parents or your brother and you go a lot of places with them and you have your own room. You live in the same house.
(Lauren, 9)

Many of the children identified family according to residence; for example living in the same house. They also identified family according to a sense of mutual love. The oldest child participant also told me that he experiences some ability to choose who is part of his family:

I have two families. There’s the family that I was given which is pretty much the people who adopted me. My mom and my dad who are divorced and then my brother and their relatives. And then there’s the family that I made which consists of all my friends whether they know themselves -- each other or not. And I include my brother and my mom in that family too.
(Frankie, 14)
Frankie conveyed his ability to partially choose who his friends and family are. He claims he was given his adoptive family but subsequently can make other people significant enough to be considered family. Although his mother and brother were not chosen by him at the time of his adoption, he can now choose to include them in “the family that I made.” This emphasizes the dual nature of kinning and place-making when children are subject to the decisions of their birth and adoptive parents but are also selective within these relationships.

Home was more difficult for children to define. Their definitions often reflected their previous statements that family has much to do with co-residence and love. “Home” was often defined according to the common building in which their family resides. What was distinctive in children’s definitions of home was its sense of permanency:

...home is where your family is. Where you have relatives and stuff. (Peterson, 9)

I lived in an orphanage for a few years. Then when my mommy adopted me I was very happy that I found a home. (Adeline, 8)

Lauren, 9: ...The adoption centre I remember and everything.
Jenny: What can you tell me about the adoption centre?
Lauren, 9: Well it wasn’t a bad place at all. It was a really nice place but I didn’t want to be there, so.
Jenny: How come you didn’t want to be there?
Lauren, 9: Well because it – you know what I mean right? Who would want to be in an adoption centre?
Jenny: So you think it’s a place that people don’t want to be in?
Lauren, 9: Yeah. Yeah. It’s a place that nobody wants to be in.
Jenny: What would be a place somebody does want to be in?
Lauren, 9: A house with a loving family.

Although many children name their children’s homes or orphanages as important places in their past, it was often juxtaposed to their desire to find a permanent home which includes what they called a “real,” “good,” “proper,” or “loving” family. However, Peterson’s
recognition that he once lived somewhere else with his birth family leads him to believe that he had more than one home:

Um, I think I had two other homes. One in Haiti and one in [former Canadian town]. (Peterson, 9)

Peterson goes on to describe the similarities and differences between these homes. He recalls his previous B.C. –based home where the family grew their own food, raised small animals, and lived close to his grandmother’s house. He goes on to imagine that his home in Haiti might have looked like the mud hut in his drawing (see Figure 9). These places are where he once lived with people who were and are considered his family.

Although most children identified their current residences as “home,” children such as Peterson are able to imagine or recall other places that may have been their homes. Polina refers to her house in Russia as a former site of “home.” Being away from this place when she lived in the orphanage caused her sadness and she expressed this in one of our conversations. At one point she told me about reading the book Heidi (1880) and describes how she identifies with the main character because she too felt emotions of being “homesick” while residing in the orphanage:

Jenny: Do you feel like connected or that you have similarities with Heidi or Anne of Green Gables?
Polina, 10: Yes... Um, with Heidi. I was homesick in the orphanage a little bit and I couldn’t go back though but with Anne of Green Gables I was adopted and she was adopted.
Jenny: Mm. So you said you were a little bit homesick in the orphanage? What did you miss? What were you homesick for?
Polina, 10: Well, I don’t know but like I was homesick.
Jenny: Homesick. What does it feel like to be homesick?
Polina, 10: It feels like you’re a little bit sad and you’re a little like scared and you, um, and you miss the people.
Jenny: What people did you miss?
Polina, 10: Like, my mom and dad.
Polina uses the term “homesick” to describe her feelings of being sad, scared, and wanting to reunite with her birth family. Home as described by these children is expressed through a triad of themes consisting of a house, a sense of family, and a sense of permanency or the ability to return to this location at any time. Sometimes children referred to their houses and family within their birth places but more often they talked about home in reference to their adoptive families that continue to care for them and provide them with the feeling of love.

4.4.3 Places of Belonging

When I asked the children to explain what it meant to belong somewhere, most of the children were unsure what to say. I could usually sense that they did not really know how to explain it. Sometimes they told me they could not explain the word. However, Polina was able to provide me with an interesting analogy in order to explain her interpretation of “belonging”:

*Jenny:* So like, if I didn’t know what it meant to belong somewhere, how would you explain that to me?
*Polina, 10:* Well, I don’t know how to explain it but like I say it all the time.
*Jenny:* And then like can you give me an example of one time you might say it?
*Polina, 10:* I always say it like if we do homework like that word belongs there or that word belongs there. Stuff like that.
*Jenny:* And so if you had to say, ‘I feel like I belong...’ Where? Where would you say?
*Polina, 10:* I feel like I belong at home.
*Jenny:* Home? At home. And so tell me about your home. Where is your home?
*Polina, 10:* It’s I guess it’s in British Columbia... My room... because that’s where—that’s my space where I get to, well, it’s a space I get to be by myself.

Polina uses the metaphor of a word belonging in a sentence to explain to me what it means to belong. Her metaphor can be expanded to think about words, their relationship to each
other, and their position with the context of the sentence. Alternatively, her interpretation of belonging can infer that people belong with other people, emplaced with particular contexts. Although most of the participants could not define the word “belonging,” they did share Polina’s sentiments that they belong somewhere within the vicinity of their city, house, and family:

*Jenny: Where do you feel like you belong?*
*Elsa, 9: In [current city].*

*Jenny: Where do you feel that belonging?*
*Ivan, 11: Here.*
*Jenny: Here? And where’s here? Is it?*
*Ivan, 11: In [current city].*

*Jenny: Are there places that you feel like you really belong?*
*Robby, 8: Home.*
*Jenny: Mm. And so tell me about your home. Where is your home?*
*Robby, 8: Right here.*

*Um, definitely my school. Occasionally at home. And I guess wherever I’m having a track meet or Ultimate game... (Frankie, 14)*

Children’s discussions of places show that belonging is a mobile and transformable aspect of their identifications. Belonging can occur through place-making and kinning practices that arise through the adoption and migration process. Although many children reference their birth places as the site of their origins, their places of belonging are local and centered on their adoptive family.

4.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have reviewed how children conceptualize their migration, birth places and local places that shape their everyday lives. For these children, accounts of adoption and migration figure in their origin narratives because in many ways these events are part of these children’s beginnings as they embarked on their new, adoptive lives. The event of adoption and
permanency provided by adoptive parents are seen by the children as the care they should be receiving within their “proper” and “real” families. Migration thus instigated a social and familial change that emplaced children within what is perceived by many of them to be a better context.

Children learn and negotiate information about these events, people, and locations through objects of knowledge including tangible artifacts, their bodies as well as through other pedagogical locations such as school. Often children are subject to practices that identify them ethnically and culturally with their birth places. They encounter this at home, at school, and sometimes amongst the general public. Children are sometimes resistant to this imposition, rejecting claims that they are “Russian,” for example. However, this does not mean that they completely disregard their birth places. Children do show interest in their birth places in specific, contextual ways. Rather than assuming broad social categorizations in relation to birth place, children identify specific events, people, and locations in their birth places that shape and inform their lives. Events include birth and adoption. People include caregivers, orphanage administrators, other adopted children, and birth family. Locations include birth parents’ residences, children’s homes, orphanages, and schools. Children may not identify ethnically with their birth places, but they do play with cultural identities based on the specificities that make place meaningful.

In addition to specific connections children hold to their birth places, they mostly draw from local places of belonging that inform their everyday lives. When I specifically asked children about their birth places, they answered my questions. However, they were most enthusiastic when talking about their local school, neighbourhood, activity centres, friends, and
family. Although children are sometimes ascribed ethnic identities, children draw on their everyday lives and activities as primary sources of their identification.
Chapter Five: Analysis

In this chapter, I consider the interviews with adoptive families in the context of theories of place-making to analyze how places are made for and by transnationally adopted children. As noted in my conceptual framework, place-making fosters a sense of place and informs children’s emplacement. By sense of place, I mean one’s sharp awareness of his or her attachment to a place, such as birth places, current residences, and other locations that act as sources of identification. By emplacement, I mean the geographical as well as social positions children come to occupy that are often shaped by children’s relationships to other people. Children’s social position, or their place in the world, is created by many actors who influence, shape, and dominate their lives. In this chapter, I focus on place-making through child-parent relationships, setting aside numerous other relationships that also inform children’s place in the world.

In particular, I use theories of place-making to examine how children differentially experience emplacement according to age, ethnicity, and social position within their families and generational units. Olwig and Gulløv (2003:2) argue places for children are created by adults and often include institutionalized settings such as school and home. Adults define safe places for children according to where an adult-constructed idealized childhood can be enacted. They argue that “places for children, in other words, are defined by adult moral values about a cherished past and a desirable future, clothed in commonsense notions about children’s best interests” (Olwig and Gulløv 2003:3). Children’s best interests, as articulated in Article 20 of the Convention on the Rights of Child (1989), includes consideration towards children’s ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic background which is particularly pertinent to the places made for transnationally adopted children. In this chapter, I examine the extent to which Olwig and
Gulløv’s ideas are reflected in the interviews I conducted with adoptive parents and how parents’ place-making practices are informed by children’s ethnic and cultural backgrounds. I also examine how children engage in their own processes of place-making. In other words, in addition to explicating parents’ place-making practices I also examine how children are transformative within processes of place-making, creating and reclaiming places of their own.

This chapter is divided into three sections exploring children’s differential involvement in place-making practices. The first section analyzes how parents make place for their children within their current, local communities as well as their children’s birth places. The second section will discuss how parents and children negotiate place-making activities together, particularly in regards to telling biographical stories and enacting return visits. The third section will examine what places are most important to children and ultimately how children make their own places, highlighting the array of places children draw on as sources of identification.

Through information provided by the participants as well as the theoretical framework of place-making I highlight the diverse and complex ways parents and children construct place and children’s identification with places. Overall, parents tend to emphasize the importance of children “knowing” their birth places and overlay ethnic identities onto their children based on their perception that biology and genealogy are important factors in identity formation. Alternatively, children selectively decide what aspects of these places are important to them but more importantly find a sense of belonging within their local and current communities.

5.1 Parents Making Place for their Children

As demonstrated in Chapter Three, parents actively work to make place by bringing their homes, neighbourhoods and cities into significance for their children. Parents make place for
their children by familiarizing them to the local geography and by fostering social positions for them within family networks. Creating social attachments is reflective of what Howell (2006:8) calls “kinning” by bringing people into close, permanent familial relationships. Parents enact kinning through attachment parenting practices, a more common terminology within adoption discourse. Through kinning and attachment adoptive parents challenge conventional North American kinship discourses that suggest “real” family can only be formed through “birth” and “blood” (Howell 2009, Schneider 1968, Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000). However, parents work to make place for their children both near and far. Although parents work to emplace their children locally, they also draw their children’s attention towards their birth places, often identifying their child’s ethnicity according to their place of origin. Parents attempt to make birth places meaningful through discussion, recollection, and eventually going on return visits.

5.1.1 Place-Making in Adoptive Contexts

Parents participate in their children’s displacement by driving their adoption and migration journeys to Canada. Displacement occurs when vital attachments to places are severed in favour of fostering emplacement elsewhere. Researchers including Amith (2005) and Hammond (2003) discuss how this can be done violently through forced migration of Indigenous populations and refugees, respectively. However, displacement can occur through more subtle ways such as through plenary\textsuperscript{18} transnational adoption where legal and familial ties to place are removed in favour of creating a place for the child elsewhere. Parents mitigate their child’s displacement by swiftly attempting to make new places meaningful, emplacing children in new

\textsuperscript{18} As noted by Ouellette, plenary adoption is the only legal form of adoption in Canada, the United States, and most European countries (2009:69). The plenary form of adoption requires “the complete dissolution of the child’s original kinships ties. The child becomes not only a full member of the adoptive family, as if born into it, but also a legal stranger to his or her birth parent and other relatives” (Ouellette 2009:69). This can be compared to other forms of adoption including simple adoption practiced in France and Belgium (Ouellette 2009:69). Simple adoption maintains the child’s legal ties to both birth parents and adoptive parents, providing children with an “additional family” without severing legal connection to their birth family (Ouellette 2009:69).
contexts, and creating continuity through these transitions with objects, photographs and stories that narrate children’s biographies.

As children arrive into the family home, parents engage in place-making practices to make physical locations that are specifically for their child. This includes providing them with their own bedroom, putting a bassinet within the parents’ bedroom, or practicing co-sleeping\(^\text{19}\) where parents and child(ren) sleep in same bed. Parents discussed “normal things” that they provide to their child including cribs, dressers, and toys. These fit within what Nieuwenhuys (2003:100) calls Euro-American icons of affluent childhood including toys, clothing, books, playgrounds, school, and children’s rooms. These places are not just occupied by children but are made for children by adults who envision how they would like their child to experience childhood; children’s rooms are relatively safe places since they are within the family home, separated from the dangers of society, and supervised closely by parents (Olwig and Gulløv 2003:2).

Children and parents identified the family house as “home.” Most child participants agreed that the family home provides them with sense of belonging through inclusion, stability, and permanency. Parents’ place-making practices begin specifically within the family home by preparing a social and physical place for their child. Some parents engaged in this practice more than others since parents’ ability to stay home and avoid daycare was dependent on their employment circumstances. Most parents attempted or desired to keep their child at home for a period of time following the adoption. Rosaldo argues that the family home acts as a domestic

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\(^{19}\) The practice of co-sleeping is interesting in the context of adoption and attachment parenting practices since co-sleeping is not particularly socially valued in North America. McKenna (2001) suggests co-sleeping may not be socially valued in North America due to expert medical knowledge that warns parents of the “dangers” of co-sleeping as well as the perceived need for children to be independent and sleep alone. The focus on “attachment” by adoption actors may work to emphasize the desire to bond with the child initially rather than foster independence by sleeping alone in separate bedrooms.
sphere representing “institutions and modes of activity that are organized immediately around one or more mothers and children” while the outside world is a public sphere reserved largely for men (1974:23). Although dichotomous notions of public and private spheres have been widely debated and critiqued within anthropology, what is important here is the notion that domestic, familial life is largely formed and practiced at “home.” Parents monitor this public/private divide at least during the early days when they seek an intense period of time with the child and allow only some visitors from outside. Parents believe that home is the safest place for their children and the main site for nuclear family activities. As argued by Mayall, children’s activities in public spaces are restricted due to perceptions of “traffic danger” and “stranger danger” (2002:3). Parents articulated that the most important place for their child to be immediately after arriving in Canada was within the family home, followed by a period of exclusivity within the family.

Immediately following their entrance into Canada, children’s social activities were mitigated by parents who determined when and where introductions would take place. Creating relationships is integral to place-making because places take on meaning as people’s social lives acquire form, creating places of relational significance (see Hammond 2003). Parents often stated that it was important for their children to meet relatives such as siblings and grandparents early on, followed by aunts, uncles, and close family friends. As time passes, parents expand their children’s social and geographical networks by introducing them to people and places further from home. I found that who parents chose to introduce their children to and how parents encouraged those relationships signify their desire for their children to become firmly emplaced within their adoptive kinship networks and adoptive context.

Many of the parents in the study felt it was important for their child to know other children like themselves. They often ensured children knew other adopted children and other
children of similar ethnic backgrounds. By encouraging certain friendships, parents attempt to draw out children’s adoptive and ethnic identities, highlighted through similarities and differences to other children. According to James, children learn who they are by identifying themselves in relation to others including what they share in common, what is different between them, and “which differences make a difference” (1993:3). Howell’s (2002, 2007, 2009) research demonstrates that it is not uncommon for adoptive parents to desire a sense of community among other adoptive families where their commonalities are shared and celebrated. She finds that although parents commune well with other adoptive parents, “Norwegian transnationally adopted young people do not feel that they constitute a community” (2002:100).

In this study, I similarly found that many children could not name the other adopted children that they knew, despite the fact that they may see them regularly. Alternatively, some children named others who had resided in the same institution or country. Howell suggests that sometimes a common country of origin is “a sufficient criterion for communality” whereas “the fact of being adopted does not represent a sufficiently important characteristic of their self-perception” (2002:100). Similar ethnic or adoptive identities are less important to children than place-based identification where the other child had resided in the same institution or country prior to adoption.

Interestingly, parents focus on “home” as a central location for childhood and a place where they create generational, kinship, and other social identities for their children, reframing their child’s sociality in and amongst their adoptive family. However, parents also emphasize their child’s biological and genealogical ties as they draw children’s attention towards the importance of their origins and associated ethnicity and “culture.” This place-making practice through distance disrupts clear distinctions between what is home and not home, inside and
outside, private and public. In addition, it is paradoxical that attachment parenting practices are meant to draw children and parents physically and sentimentally closer, yet children’s distant relationship to their birth places are also made significant.

5.1.2 Place-Making in Birth Places

In addition to place-making practices within adoptive contexts, parents also work to bring their children’s birth places into significance. Howell observes that parents eventually seek to “function in daily life” (1999:43) by going back to work and sending their children to school following the adoption. However, despite attempts to “conform” to a normalized life, parents become increasingly aware of how their family is different (Howell 2002). Howell states “parents begin to foreground the fact that the child has a biological and ethnic origin that they do not share, but which they have been told by all the experts... they must not allow themselves – nor the child – to forget” (1999:43, also see Yngvesson 2005:26-27). As a result of visible “differences” as well as expert psychological knowledge that suggests children should know their origins, parents engage in place-making practices directed towards their children’s birth places. This functions to create what Howell calls globalising and virtual places that are geographically distant yet become personally significant through place-making (Howell 2007:27).

As discussed in Chapter Three, parents’ perceptions of sending countries are constructed through multiple sources including television news, documentaries, newspaper articles, adoption advertisements, adoption professionals, history books, talking to other adoptive parents, and their experiences living in or visiting the country. Howell (1999:43) argues that adoption agencies increasingly stress the importance of knowing the child’s birth “culture” prior to adoption. The parents I interviewed also found it important to know where their child is “from” by learning about the country. As discussed earlier, some of the parents opted to tour the sending country
prior to picking up their child. This sentiment was exemplified by Theresa who expressed that she had “to know his [Christopher’s] country first.” Parents expressed that by gathering information about their child’s birth place, they were better able to understand their child’s history and culture based on their origins.

Parents’ explanations of their children’s birth places include descriptions of landscape, “culture,” poverty, and their embodied experiences of being in this place. In her research study, Howell found parents hold on to superficial and reified notions of their children’s birth places including “cultural markers such as food, dress and artifacts that are easily consumed” (Howell 1999:43). In doing so, parents avoid confronting “real socio-cultural differences” such as the “social, economic or political institutions or conditions of the donor countries” (Howell 1999:43). She argues that adoption officials provide little information to parents about these issues, nor do the parents she interviewed express much interest in knowing such details. In this study, I found both similarities and differences to Howell’s argument. Parents articulated ideas of the children’s birth “culture” based on reified cultural and material artifacts such as food, clothing, and behaviour. However, most parents I interviewed were also aware of the socio-economic and political conditions within their child’s birth place. For example, parents often acknowledged that poverty was a guiding factor in shaping child relinquishment and enabling transnational adoptions from the child’s birth place. Although parents recognize socio-economic inequalities between sending and receiving countries they did not always chose to share this information with their children. One of the reasons why some parents limited their conversations about poverty with their children was because it directly implicates the lived conditions of their birth family. Stephanie and Jason made this point clear when reflecting how much information
they provide to their son; Stephanie stated that, “I mean they have a personal connection. Their birth family’s there so it’s not just poverty. It’s poverty and their family.”

Nearly all the families in the study recognize that their children had birth family in the sending country. This is different from what Howell (2007:29) found amongst adoptive parents in Norway where adopted people have very little information about people within their birth places and are thus caught in a paradox of knowing about a place but not about specific people within that place. She theorizes that because transnationally adopted people could not name specific people or relatives, they focus on “naked places” devoid of meaningful personal ties (Howell 2007:29). Alternatively, I found most of the parents and children are aware of children’s birth family or significant others who cared for the children prior to adoption. Importantly, former caregivers who remain close to the adoptive family can memorably reflect on the child in place prior to adoption. Relationships to these people are particularly important among the adoptive families I interviewed. Attention to birth family, foster family, and other caregivers within the child’s birth place is one way parents construct connections between their children and their birth places.

Parents construct notions of place through various sources and then pass this information to their children through stories of their birth, biological family, migration, and ethnic belonging. Particularly for children adopted as infants, parents become a main source of information about their birth place and more importantly their connection to this place. These stories constitute children’s beginnings and explain their origins. Yngvesson and Mahoney argue, “Proper stories need proper beginnings, must be placed” either “in a mother’s womb” or “on a native soil” (2000:80). Parents ultimately aid in constructing children’s knowledge of the world and their place within it starting from their beginnings located in their birth places. Yanagisako and
Delaney maintain that “narratives of origin tell people what kind of world it is, what it consists of, and where they stand in it” (1995:1). These are stories of how someone “comes-into-being” and are neither true nor false but representations of social and ontological beginnings (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995:2-3). Parents’ narratives of children’s origins are illustrated through photographs and scrapbooks and narrated through written and oral stories parents tell their children.

5.1.3 Place-Making Through Return Visits

One of the most prominent examples of how parents engage in place-making practices within children’s birth places is through return visits. Two of the families in this study had already participated in such a trip while nearly all of the other families indicated they wanted to take such a trip in the near future. As discussed in Chapter Three, parents feel that it is important for their children to at least “see” the country they were born in. Parents expressed differential sentiments regarding what they would do and where they would go in their child’s birth country. Some parents felt that it was most important to take their child to a desirable destination within the country that would provide them an aesthetically pleasing and touristic experience. They often expressed that it would be important for their children to eventually visit their birth places or former residences but not if such an experience could potentially cause distress. Interestingly, some parents expressed that their child’s birth country could be symbolically divided into two; a vacation destination full of beaches, monuments and beautiful sites, or an impoverished, destitute country. In this way the same general geographical location can be imagined and experienced differently depending on parents’ desires. These forms of place-making emphasize that the meaning of place is socially constructed and parents play a key role in shaping children’s view of places by deciding what kind of place their children are going to “see.”
The two children I spoke with who had gone on return visits had done so at the encouragement of their parents. Frankie’s mother, Lindsay, debated when it was right to take Frankie to his Caribbean birth country. Lindsay stated:

*I had to balance whether or not it would be good for him to go back, to force him to go back basically or -- but I thought if we didn’t go back then that it might be even harder for him if we waited later and it was just a good time for the rest of us to, you know. We had some time and we had enough money to go back and I’m glad we did. I know he – you know, it was a difficult time for him.* (Lindsay)

Lindsay thought it was important for Frankie to visit his birth place and felt the trip was valuable for their family mainly because they got to meet Frankie’s birth mother although she recognizes that it was ultimately not Frankie’s preference to go there.

Howell (2002, 2006) argues that most return visits are instigated by parents who encourage their children to participate. She suggests parents take their cue from psychology-based claims that adoptive parents should take their children on return visits “if they wish their child to grow up into a happy and well adjusted person and to feel at ease with what, more and more, is talked of in terms of dual ethnicity, or of belonging to two cultures” (2006:113). These sentiments were reflected in my conversations with parents who often believe that birth culture is or should be an integral part of their children’s identity. In this way, parents impose a particular idea of “healthy” adoptive children based on the assumption that children need to know about both places in order to be normal, healthy, and whole in one place.

Yngvesson (2005:28) points out that in her research with Swedish transnationally adopted people, return visits can be very confusing sites of confrontation between children’s self-identification based on their everyday lives and an imagined other life that could have taken place within their birth places. Yngvesson (2005:28) argues that although parents’ intentions for these trips are to provide children with biographical and cultural information, these trips can in
fact be quite confusing as adopted people confront places that may be entirely unfamiliar. According to anthropological research, parents’ place-making practices can complicate transnationally adopted people’s sense of identity and belonging by focusing differentially on identity as fixed based on origins, and identity as malleable through sociality (Howell 2009, Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000:80). However, as will be discussed in the following section, children are not completely immersed in the meaning-making practices of their parents. Meaning is made interactively between parents and children, particularly as children grow older. As discussed, place-based knowledge shared between parent and child is constructed from multiple sources and underlined by psychology-based knowledge that children should know about their birth places. Within transnational adoptive families, it is common that parents share stories with their children about their birth places, which many children can only imagine since they were too young at the time of their adoption to remember the place or event. Parents attempt to concretize these imagined places through return visits that are meant to provide children with a heightened sense of personal connection to their birth places.

5.2 Children Making Place for their Parents

As argued, parents play a significant role in formulating places for their children. Parents make place for their children within their homes and communities, but they also work to foster a sense of place in distant places of origin, even taking their children on return visits during adolescence. However, these processes of emplacement are not just imposed upon children; they are actively negotiated by children as well. Within Euro-Canadian society it is commonly believed that age progression enables increased autonomy and agency. Parents’ perceptions of their children’s age, development and competency influences child-parent negotiations of
children’s activities. In this section I examine how parents and children co-create children’s places and identifications, focusing on how children resist and transform their parents’ knowledge and practices.

I pay close attention to the particularities of some children’s experiences. Commonalities among parents’ experiences enabled me to make broader generalizations in the previous section; here I address a child standpoint, or their experiences based on their subordinate social positions (Mayall 2002:112). A standpoint approach is shaped by recognizing the subject’s physical location, the interests and activities that are available to them in that location, discourses that shape their narratives and modes of identification, and how their knowledge is valued by other, often more powerful, social actors (Sprague 2005:69-70, Harding 1998). As argued by Sprague, a standpoint is “not the spontaneous thinking of a person or a category of people. Rather, it is the combination of resources available within a specific context from which an understanding might be constructed” (2005:41). She suggests that subjects’ views are not created “from nowhere” because “subjects are specific, located in a particular time and place. This locatedness gives access to the concrete world” (2005:41). Resources available to children, or lack thereof, largely result from their subordinate social positions that often render them subject to adult decisions. The diversity within this study enables me to highlight particularities and ultimately how children are both subject to and transform their parents’ knowledge and practices.

**5.2.1 Children and Parents Co-Creating Place**

Although parents work to make place for their children, creating for them social positions and a sense of familiarity within particular locations, children are also transformative within these relationships and work in negotiation with their parents to formulate their place in the world. According to Howell (2002:85) the very essence of being human is being social and
interactive; from birth, people seek to engage in meaningful interactions with others. She states that “it is reasonable to assume that human beings construct meaning intersubjectively. Both (or more) parties jointly engage in meaning making in a two way process” (2002:85). To surmise that parents make places for their children and that their children unquestionably accept these emplacements would negate how meaning is constituted within these interactions.

In this section I explore two examples of how children are agentive based on the resources they have available to them. Agency is not just demonstrated through resistance but also through people’s capacity to “accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest- sometimes all at the same time” (MacLeod 1992:534, also see Ahearn 2001:115). In one case study I look at Frankie’s participation in, and resistance to, a return visit. In his case, his birth place is relatively unimportant although his birth mother is a significant figure in his life; knowing his birth mother is important but being made return to his birth country is discomforting to him. In the second example I explore how Ashley participated in a return visit with her mother but negotiated what it was they were doing there; she was interested in seeing and experiencing the place but resistant to meeting her birth family or foster family. In both cases the children partially informed their return visit experiences and transformed their parents’ planned activities.

Frankie went on a return visit with his adoptive family several years ago. His mother, Lindsay told me that “he had never expressed any interest” in his birth place but she felt it was important for him to experience it early in his life. Much to Frankie’s hesitation they underwent the return visit and met his birth mother, foster parents, and adoption professionals who had assisted in the adoption. Lindsay recognizes that the trip was difficult for her son but overall was a good experience because they got to meet his birth mother. Lindsay hopes to go on more return visits with her family but she is aware that her son would rather not participate.
During the interviews, Frankie explained that, from his perspective, he was “forced” to go on his return visit by his parents. He told me that he had some interest in his birth place when he was younger, specifically wondering where it was on the map, the poverty level, and about dolphins. However, when it came down to it he was not prepared to actually embark on the trip; it was ultimately the decision of his parents. Going to this place is not something he reflects upon fondly but he is glad to have met his birth mother who he continues to stay in contact with. He told me, “I guess I’m sort of glad to meet my mom but aside from that it’s pretty much the worst trip of my life and I really didn’t like it. And it was during my birthday too.” Frankie strongly opposes the idea of going on another trip and says he would only go if he was made to by his parents.

Interestingly, Frankie has generated connections to other places that are more meaningful to his everyday life. Frankie has grown to strongly identify with Japan. His interest in this country grew from his love of Japanese art. Eventually he also came to like Japanese language, food, and clothing. His newly created “Japanese-Canadian” identity is the result of his own place-making activities that draw himself closer to this hyphenated ethnic identity rather than one that connects him to his birth country. Frankie recognizes and even enjoys the idea that he is “different” from most of his friends. He says, “I always choose to be different from everyone.” Frankie acknowledges that he is “different,” although not in a way that most people would assume. His sense of difference and identity is directed towards a place, “culture,” and activities that he has come to know through his own practices rather than his parents’.

Additionally, Frankie avidly works to draw his family’s attention towards Japan by encouraging them go there, rather than his birth country on their next family trip. His mother suggests that his identification with all things Japanese will pass but as he grows up his
Caribbean heritage may become increasingly important. The interviews with Frankie and his mother reveal that they hold different values towards place-based identities. Lindsay values Frankie’s biological and ethnic connection to his place of origin, yet Frankie plays with his ethnic identity, pulling himself towards unexpected sources of identification. Frankie’s mother was able to direct his attention towards his birth place during his younger years, even taking him on a return visit. However, in an attempt to formulate his own sense of belonging and unique identity, he resists her place-making impositions and draws her attention towards places more important to him.

Ashley and her mother also underwent a return visit to Vietnam several years ago and decided to stay in the country for an extended period of time. Andrea decided that the visit would happen after an unsettling event at her daughter’s Canadian school. She explained to me that she noticed the teacher had placed “white,” “Anglo fairies” on the walls. She asked the teacher about the lack of ethnic diversity represented amongst the fairies and the teacher responded that no one had ever brought the issue up before nor had she ever considered it. Andrea told me that it was at that point she decided to go on a return visit with her daughter. Ashley did not remember how she learned that they were going to go on the return visit but does recall that she was very tired when they arrived. She remembers going out to eat, seeing the place where they would be staying, and the school she would be attending while in the country.

Andrea expressed that she thought it was important for Ashley to “see her culture” not just from the perspective of spectator, but to actually reside within this place, go to school there, and be where “she looked like everyone in her class.” The point of the trip, according to Andrea, was for Ashley to get “a sense of cultural competency” or embodied knowledge of what it is like to live within this place and its associated “culture.” However, Andrea and Ashley both express
the struggles they experienced trying to fit into this unfamiliar place. They experienced a sense of being different primarily through their inability to speak Vietnamese. Additionally, Ashley was observant of some behavioural differences at school that she could not identify with such as taking mid-afternoon naps, using communal bathrooms, and eating “disgusting” food. Although she looked like everyone in her class, she felt culturally and behaviourally distanced from her classmates. Her mother reflects on a comment Ashley once made to her: “Mom, you know, my face and hair and my skin might be Vietnamese but my head is Canadian and Jewish.” This is in contrast to Andrea’s later suggestion that Ashley’s teacher in Canada thought she “was very proud of being Vietnamese.” Although Ashley expressed that she feels a sense of connection to birth place because she “know[s] about it”, she may not envisage herself as having an ethnicity in accordance with her birth place.

What was also interesting about Andrea and Ashley’s story was the discussion around Ashley’s birth mother. While in Ashley’s birth country, Andrea wanted to connect with Ashley’s biological and foster families. Andrea took Ashley to visit her foster mother which Andrea recalls as a “total disaster.” According to Andrea, the foster mother was very “emotional” and “vulnerable,” trying to hug and kiss an increasingly uncomfortable Ashley. When Andrea asked Ashley if she wanted to look for her birth mother, she refused. Andrea recalls that Ashley told her, “Think about it mom. She’s nothing but a stranger to me now. You’re my mother and I won’t even be able to communicate with her.” During the interview, Ashley had very little to say about these people and indicated she felt no connection to specific people in her birth place other than a few friends she made at school. Through these experiences, Andrea came to learn that Ashley likely feels no sense of connection to people in her birth place; rather it was the embodied experience of living in a different cultural context that
was the most memorable part of the experience. Although Andrea instigated the return visit and decided when and for how long they would go, they negotiated their activities throughout their time there. Together, Ashley and Andrea decided what they would do, who they would meet, and what that would mean for each of them.

Attention to detail in the stories of Frankie and Ashley reveal that their sentiments towards their birth places differ. Frankie dislikes the thought of revisiting his birth place, mainly because he feels “forced” to go there. However, he does feel connected to his birth mother. Alternatively, Ashley’s connection towards her birth place primarily relates to her embodied experiences of cultural practices. Unlike Frankie, she expresses disinterest in knowing any people from her biographical past. Both adoptive mothers had similar ideas and expectations of return visits; they wanted their children to know where they came from and thus informed their child’s physical location by taking them on return visits. However, Frankie and Ashley’s activities and interests within their birth places differed due to on-going negotiations between them and their parents regarding their planned activities. Additionally, their stories illustrate the differential role birth places may play within adoptive families since children’s place of origin and associated ethnicity may hold more significance for parents than for the children.

5.2.2 Children as the Purveyors of Knowledge

I have demonstrated up to this point that parents are often the main sources of information for children regarding their biographical past. Parents work to construct origin narratives for their children through the often little information they have on their child’s birth family as well as their own experiences adopting and moving their child. Parents’ influence over these stories is particularly evident among children adopted as infants, who often have little if any direct recollection of their birth places. Alternatively, children adopted at an older age can
recollect their life history on their own and do not necessarily rely on their parents in the same way. Their sense of knowing enables them to choose when and where to share their life stories with their parents. In these cases, children rather than parents are purveyors of knowledge and are agentive in the information they choose to share. In the following discussion, I focus on the stories of two children, Ivan and Polina.

When I began this research study I was aware that age at adoption would likely vary. For example, children adopted from China are often very young when they arrive in Canada; while children from other countries may be adopted much older. Polina’s and Ivan’s families agreed to participate in the study and I looked forward to talking with them about their experiences but felt anxious about discussing perhaps very memorable experiences of abandonment which may be associated with trauma or death. However, I found these children were quite open and willing to talk about their lives in Russia. They were confident they knew a lot about their lives and selectively decided what aspects they would share with me. Their discussions with me regarding what information they chose to share with their parents were particularly interesting.

Ivan had arrived in Canada at the age of seven after living in Russia his entire life. He was able to meet his adoptive parents on two occasions prior to his migration. Additionally, with the help of an English language tutor between his parents’ visits he learned some English and more about what would happen to him in the following months. He recalled meeting his adoptive parents for the first time, going on excursions with them, and eventually coming to Canada. He also discussed his memories of his life prior to these events. Ivan told me stories of his home in Russia, family members who he knew, friends from the orphanage and his seasonal activities like playing in the snow. He clearly remembered cold winters, interactions with his birth family, and
the lonely orphanage where he once lived. He recalls his relationships with other people as well as the sensations of the geographical location.

Ivan’s recollections of life in Russia reveal a very different type of childhood. He and his teenage biological relative lived alone in an abandoned house that may have belonged to his absent grandparents. These children were relatively self-sufficient collecting their own food, water and daily necessities. He did not attend school and did not have regular adult caretakers until he was taken to the orphanage where he resided as an “orphan” until his adoption into a comparatively affluent B.C. family.

Ivan’s parents, Patricia and Andrew, were in the interesting position of being his parents yet simultaneously knowing little about his life in Russia. Although they were aware of many details regarding his birth family, they looked to him for information about his experiences living in Russia. During the interview Patricia and Andrew referred to some particularly memorable stories Ivan had chosen to share with them. For example:

*he tells a story about... going into a farmer’s field and eating a cabbage, a raw cabbage and how wonderful that was. He’ll tell stories about picking mushrooms in the woods, picking blueberries in the woods. Mostly stories like that.* (Patricia)

Like other parents, Patricia and Andrew enact place-making activities by drawing Ivan’s attention towards Russia. They encourage him to cheer for Russian hockey players and point out the Russian President on television. In doing so, they attempt to foster his national connection to Russia. However, Ivan expresses that he finds little interest in this. When he does talk about Russia, he prefers to reflect on and share information about his own lived experiences there among his birth family and other children in the orphanage.

Polina was approximately a year older than Ivan when she was adopted from Russia; during the interviews, she, too, recounted details of her life prior to adoption. Not only is she
aware of how different her life is since adoption but she, like Ivan, confronted two very different experiences of childhood. She remembers residing with her biological mother who was often emotionally and physically absent. Her older biological brother often left home, only to be returned by the police when he was “caught.” For the most part, she recalls relying on herself for most of her needs. She described in great detail living in Russia and reflected on what the space was like in and around her residences. She showed me a photograph of her former home and described in detail its interior including where her bed was and where people would eat and sit. She also described how she used to walk to the store, down many streets, around corners, using landmarks such as trees to identify her path. She explained what it felt like to be in the orphanage and at school which she described as “tight” due to the spatial boundaries set by fences. Her ability to inform my knowledge of this place was also reflective of her ability to inform her parents’ knowledge. Her adoptive father asks her about her life in Russia but she chooses to share only some of the information with him and does not answer all of his questions.

Her parents, Karen and Craig, expressed some frustration over their lack of knowledge about Polina’s life in Russia. While picking up Polina in Russia, they attempted to gather more information from the adoption facilitator:

*When we were in Russia I wanted to know her history. So there was a social worker and the facilitator and... I said, ‘Okay tell me about Polina’s past.’ And she says, ‘Well, she’s very poor.’ ‘Okay. We kind of figured that out. Okay, now tell me about her past.’ ‘Well, she lived in a very poor place.’ ‘Okay, we understand that she was very poor.’ (Craig)*

Karen found this particularly frustrating when she knew there was more to her daughter’s story:

*Well they talked in Russian with each other for ten minutes and then go, ‘Well, she was very poor.’ If I ever did it again, I’d learn Russian. (Karen)*
Karen and Craig both felt as though they were missing information on their daughter’s past. Polina is their key source of information about what her life was like socially, economically, and geographically while residing in Russia. However, they are also aware that Polina is selective about what information she chooses to share.

There are several other cases where children assist in informing and shaping their parents’ knowledge. However, Polina and Ivan’s circumstances are two prominent examples that demonstrate how children adopted at older ages are not just recipients of parents’ place-making practices but also key sources of knowledge for their parents based on their own memories and stories of their past. Children’s experiences and knowledge of these pre-adoption places are enshrined in memories of their lives. Children’s expressions of these memories partially shape what parents know about children’s geographical and social experiences prior to adoption.

5.3 Children Making Places of their Own

Although children’s lives are strongly influenced by their relationships with others, I found that children recognize and articulate their own unique perspectives on place and identity. I have demonstrated that places made for children, such as the family home, school, and even orphanages, are important frameworks for where their lives take shape (Olwig and Gulløv 2003:7). Children’s experiences within these institutions shape how they come to understand their place in the world. However, as argued by Olwig and Gulløv (2003:7), these institutional places made for children do not determine their lives nor do they preclude how other types of places may become of central importance to them. Places for children, often constructed by adults, can be differentiated from children’s places, or localities they come to define as personally meaningful (Olwig and Gulløv 2003). In this section I will examine what meaning
children apply to places and what places they find most important. These places often reflect daily life experiences that involve going to school, being with friends and memorable family vacations. Importantly, although children give some consideration to specific aspects of their birth places, it became clear during the interviews that their current emplacements are of paramount importance for their sense of identity and belonging.

5.3.1 Children’s Perspectives on Birth Places

Birth places are made meaningful for children in numerous ways. They are brought into significance through parents’ frequent discussion of children’s origins, through children’s own recollection of their lives within these places, as well as through interactions with other children, teachers, and even strangers within a multicultural society where migrant children are continuously reminded of their origins. Olwig (2003:218-219) argues dual ethnicity is emphasized through multicultural discourses where migrant people are encouraged and even expected to identify with multiple ethnic, national, and cultural sources. She suggests that in countries that employ multicultural political policies, such as Canada, there is a tendency to focus on “global integration” rather than “monocultural nationalism” (2003:219). As a result, children may “learn to regard their country of origin as their homeland and true place of belonging” (Olwig 2003:219). Additionally, Olwig (2003:226) argues that migration research tends to focus on polarized ethnic and national identities based on sending and receiving countries with little attention to the multitude of other places children may draw on as sources of identification.

When I asked children about their birth places, what they articulated most frequently was not their ethnic or cultural ties to this place but rather details of people they knew, places they lived or events that occurred there. Because many of the children knew some people in their
birth place, such as birth family, former caregivers, or other children residing in the children’s home or orphanage, these places were not “naked” (Howell 2007:28) in the sense that they were devoid of personal relationships. Unlike the adopted people in Howell’s Norwegian study, the children I interviewed are supplied with information about people such birth family or can directly recall their experiences together (see Howell 2007:29) Thus, for many children birth places and former residences are rendered meaningful through personal ties to others. However, as suggested by Howell (2007:29), places can become important with or without these connections to people. Often times, specific locations and events can also serve to construct personal connections to place.

During the interviews, children who resided in children’s homes or orphanages often focused upon these places as important places of their past and affected how they see themselves. In the case of Ivan, he believes he was once an orphan because he resided within an orphanage. Frequently, children named their former institutions as important places, perhaps even somewhere they would like to visit if and when they went on a return visit. Howell (2007:29) argues that many transnationally adopted people cannot name where their birth family or other relatives reside(d), or even the exact place of their birth. However, they are often aware of the place they resided immediately prior to the adoption. The orphanage or children’s home becomes a fixed, known point in their biographical past and thus becomes a site of their beginnings. Howell (2007:29) argues that most adopted people she interviewed expressed satisfaction with having visited the country and the orphanage but harbour few desires to know more or ever re-visit the country again. The children I interviewed express similar sentiments by wanting to see their former residences but not much else.
Another factor that contributes to children’s sense of place is the imagined event of their birth. They are aware that they were born under uncertain circumstances which no one in their adoptive family can directly recall but everyone knows this occurred in a particular country, city, or town. Due to emphasis placed on their origins by those around them, children often articulated that their birth place is important because they are “from” there. In most cases, “from” indicated the event of their birth. Thus, for children it is the specificities of place that enables them to draw connections between themselves and their birth place. As will be discussed in the following sections, when asked to talk about their lives in an open-ended fashion, children often chose to focus on their daily lives and the extraordinary events of family vacations.

5.3.2 Family Vacations as Memorable Places

The families who participated in this study often described themselves as well-travelled. They enjoy visiting different parts of world, seeing new “cultures,” and learning different languages. Their own perceived worldliness was also often related to their decisions to adopt transnationally. The participants in this study were aware that I was doing research on people’s perceptions of places and often chose to discuss family vacations as desirable and memorable places they visited. In this section I will briefly examine children’s discussions of family vacations. When I asked children what some of their favourite places were, many of them identified places they had been to with their families including amusement parks, beaches, and sometimes places that seemed similar to their birth places. Desforge (1998) discusses how travel during youth-hood can work to affirm one’s social position by seeing the Other, highlighting who one is and is not in comparison to other people in other places. Many of the children discussed family vacations according to their likes and dislikes. Family vacations work to affirm
children’s sense of belonging in their B.C. towns and cities as well as foster imaginative ideas about their birth places.

When I asked children what their favourite places were to visit, many of them responded “Disneyland,” “Disneyworld,” or another similar type of amusement park. These places can be defined as idealized locations to experience a Euro-Canadian and Euro-American childhood. According to Moore (1980), amusement parks are bounded spaces where acts of play and fantasy take place and idealized childhood is performed, including the idealized relationship of child to parent. Disneyland works not just to make childhood playful and fun but enshrines icons of American citizenship based on gendered norms of femininity and masculinity, American patriotism of the Founding Fathers, and consumer capitalism (Moore 1980:214). This place represents a very particular type of childhood that is available to a small proportion of the world based on disproportionate access to wealth and resources. These amusement parks also represent a mode of experiencing childhood that may not have been available to many of these children had the contingency of adoption not occurred. Lauren describes what she knows about the Republic of Georgia: “They didn’t have a park that was meant for kids really. Only two of the little rocky rides and no gravel, no wood chips. Cement for the ground.” For Lauren, her description of why the Georgian playgrounds are unsuitable for children is in stark contrast to her favourite place of “Disneyland” and her idealized future which entails “always living in Disneyland... I’d be the only person with a free pass and I’d live in a mansion with a red convertible with white seats."

Other vacation destinations also made children feel out-of-place by removing them from familiar contexts. For example, Ivan talked about how he and his family spent time in South America a couple years following his adoption. He told me that although he enjoys spending
time there with his adoptive family, he found it difficult because he did not know the language and missed his friends. Learning to speak English and finding friends in Canada was part of his emplacement process where he sought to become more acquainted with his neighbourhood and school. This was disrupted by going to an unfamiliar location where he once again had to find a means to communicate and socialize. He said: “But it was hard because they were speaking Spanish.” While in South America, he spoke to other children through his parents’ translation and was disinterested in learning another language having just learned English. This vacation worked to affirm his new found sense of belonging in his B.C. community where he had begun to foster friendships and formulated a sense of belonging.

Family vacations can work to affirm children’s belonging in their Canadian residences but can also provoke curiosity about their birth places. Christopher’s family vacation to Belize was enjoyable to him because he got to spend time with his adoptive family but also intrigued his sense of ethnic identity. By going to Belize, Christopher’s parents recognized that they are taking him closer to his birth place, without necessarily drawing him directly back to Guatemala. Christopher acknowledged that he finds Mexico and Belize to be sites of personal connection. According to him people have “almost the same skin colour” as he does and the places are “really close [to Guatemala]. I guess they could be nearly the same.” The family vacation brought him geographically closer to his birth place and heightened his sense of connection to the region where he was born. This is demonstrated through his statement that he feels a connection to “Mexico. And other Southern countries.”

Family vacations work in dynamic ways to affirm children’s place-based identities. For Lauren, amusement parks are her favourite places to visit. They enable her to engage in play, fantasy and a childhood that she may have otherwise not experienced in Georgia. This place also
provides her with a vision of her future which is ideally in Disneyland. Alternatively, family vacations can work to affirm children place-based identification within their B.C. communities. Although Ivan enjoyed spending time with his family, he longed to come back to B.C. where he felt comfortable at school and amongst his friends. Christopher’s family vacation enabled him to feel a sense of connection to people who looked like him in Belize but did not demand a direct confrontation with issues surrounding his birth family, abandonment, and adoption (see Yngvession 2005:37). Thus, vacations enable children to tour the world, coming to a better understanding of their place within it, without necessary confronting their own direct histories located within birth countries.

5.3.3 Localized Places of Belonging

In this section I examine which local places are most important to children and why. When conducting place-based research with children, many researchers suggest that there is the risk of overemphasizing broad social categorizations that may be of little interest to children themselves (see Olwig 2003). I was aware that researching children’s perspectives on their birth places may negate their everyday sources of identification; thus during the interviews I was open to listening to children’s stories about their localized lives of family, school, and friends. Olwig (2003:226) argues that when multicultural discourse and place-based research focuses in on children’s ethnic identification based on places of origin, other places that children find important tend to get ignored. She (2003:219) suggests that over time, adults adopt the perspective that people can hold dual ethnic identities which is conducive to the policies of multiculturalism that have emerged in North America and Europe. She (2003:226) found that often times (dual-)ethnic categorizations are imposed upon migrant children who may not identify accordingly. Without attention to the perspectives of children, one can lose sight of the
multiple and shifting identifications children create based on context, often anchored in local, everyday places of belonging.

Drawing from the interviews with children, I reflect on which local places are most important to children. When I asked children to tell me about themselves as an open-ended introductory interview question, they most often described what they like doing. These activities include drawing, playing sports, watching television, etcetera. All of these activities took place within their local communities such as at home, at local recreation centres, or at school. When I asked children how they would introduce themselves to their class at school, name and age were common identity markers. This is consistent with the findings of Olwig who suggest that “age [is] an important distinguishing feature among children” (2003:227). Following their name and age, children often described themselves according to the activities they enjoyed, just as they did during the initial interview question. Thus, prior to discussing adoption and migration, children primarily describe themselves locally in relation to people and places they visit frequently.

However, within these local places of belonging when and how children described themselves to others reveals important sites of negotiating and strategically employing modes of identification. Children who are visibly similar to their parents and the wider community could avoid questions about their origins more easily than children who are visible minorities and quite different in appearance from their parents. Although racialized ethnic identities were not prominent in children’s self-descriptions, they recognize that others assume their origins are located elsewhere. Frankie and his mother agreed that he could simply tell people he was from their current city although he knew this may not satisfy people’s assumptions about his origins. Similarly, Peterson’s parents find that he often identifies with ethnically diverse American cities
rather than his birth place of Haiti. According to them, this may be indicative of his desire to identify as African-American rather than Haitian:

Well he’ll even say that he’s American at points. Yeah. I don’t know whether that... I don’t know. I think that it may have to do with being of African descent though. It might be an easier label to wear, to be African American. (Stephanie)

Olwig similarly found that children are sometimes “not able to choose the part of their background they wished to identify with, but had to adopt an identity that suited their appearance” (2003:226).

Interestingly, most children never described themselves to me according to an ethnic identity based on birth place. When asked to talk about themselves in whatever way they most desired, most children described themselves according to their everyday lives. For example, Polina’s father told me that when he refers to her as “Russian,” she corrects him by noting that she feels “Canadian-Russian”. However, Polina later told me that she mostly sees herself as a “cowgirl” because she lives in the country and rides horseback. Polina’s mother realizes that she feels strongly connected to her local home and neighbourhood but when ethnic labels are ascribed to her, she counters by saying she feels Canadian.

When asked specifically about their birth places, children have a sense for this place because it is brought up regularly by parents, teachers, classmates, and others, or because children can recall living there. When children named important aspects of their birth places, they talked about specific people, places, or events that shaped their subjective experiences of this place. However, an ethnic identity based on birth place is not an identity they preferentially choose on a regular basis. Depending on the context of the situation, children employ differential modes of identification based on places that are pragmatic, strategic, and even playful. Overall, children feel a sense of belonging in localized, everyday places in and around
their communities with differential feelings of connection to birth places that do not necessarily form an ethnic identity in the same way their parents may understand it.

5.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the multiple ways parents and children enact place-making activities. Sometimes place is made for children, sometimes their emplacements are negotiations between parents and children, and sometimes children generate ideas about place all on their own and actively construct ideas very different from their parents’ perspectives. Parents often feel that it is important to make place for their children upon adoption by fostering emplacement within their adoptive family and new geographical context. In doing so, they enact place-making and kinning practices that draw places into significance for children and also draw children into family networks. This is a social aspect of making family that is likely practiced when any child is brought into a family, through adoption or birth.

However, adoptive parents also actively work to make children’s birth places significant in their lives. This follows adoption education and advice that indicates a child’s birth place is, or will become, an important part of their ethnic identity. Thus, knowledge of this place including the people and “culture” become focal points within the family. Children’s knowledge of their birth places are constructed through parents’ stories, artifacts, photographs, school projects, and memories of their own. Although specific places within or near the child’s birth place may become important sites of their biographical past, abstract ethnic identities in accordance with their birth places are not necessarily assumed by children.

What becomes clear through interviewing children is that they are not passive to the place-making practices of their parents. Although they may at times be encouraged or made to go on return visits, they can negotiate the activities and meaning of these endeavours. Thus children
can be transformative within these moments of imposition, challenging their parents’ expectations and practices in favour of activities they are more comfortable with. Although birth places are brought into significance for children through parents’ place-making practices, children expressed that the most important sources of their identification and belonging are geographically proximate to their adoptive homes and current social networks. These include geographical locations that are familiar to them as well as social networks where they feel as though they have a well-defined place, such as within their adoptive family networks and friendships at school. Children understand that people have particular expectations of their ethnic identities and they can respond in flexible and strategic ways to accommodate the desires of others to know their origins as well as their own desire to fit into their local communities.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of my main conclusions as they relate to the previous literature review and research problems highlighted in Chapter One. Through semi-structured interviews with nine adoptive families, I found that children have diverse and interesting perspectives on place and identity that are, at times, very different from their parents’ ideas. Through the formation and exploration of their individual perspectives, it becomes clear that even within processes of transnational adoption that inherently treats children as passive, they are competent social actors who assist in shaping their own lives (Prout and James 1990:8).

Following my conclusions, I suggest implications of this research including how this study could inform adoption policy and practice. Lastly, I acknowledge the limitations of this study and suggest further avenues of research that could continue to build upon this body of knowledge.

6.1 Conclusions

The overall aim of this study is to create a better understanding of children’s perspectives on processes of adoption and migration that greatly affect their lives. Ten children and 14 parents from transnational adoptive families were interviewed. The information gathered from these interviews shows that children’s perspectives vary from each other’s as well as from their parents’. Children put differential emphasis on their birth places, as do their parents, but most of the children I spoke with consider their current residence as “home” and important sites of permanency and belonging.

Anthropologists have highlighted the long cross-cultural history of child circulation through adoption and fosterage but transnational adoption is a comparatively recent mode of family formation. Although anthropologists are increasingly drawing their attention towards
transnational forms of child circulation, the people most affected by these transitions, namely transnationally adopted children, remain under researched. Many of the contributors to *Outsiders Within: Writings on Transracial Adoption* (2006) agree that the voices and perspectives of transracially and transnationally adopted people are marginal within mainstream adoption education and academic research. According to Trenka et al., “Over the past fifty years, white adoptive parents, academics, psychiatrists, and social workers have dominated the literature on transracial adoption... the voices of adult transracial adoptees remain largely unheard” (2006:1).

A review of anthropological literature on adoption reveals that not only are the perspectives of adopted adults largely unrepresented but children’s perspectives elucidated through qualitative research are even more marginal. This is not just an issue concerning transnational adoption research, but anthropology more generally; Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Carolyn Sargent (1998:14) note that ethnographies produced by anthropologists have historically not been inclusive of children’s perspectives and ideas. They further note that it is problematic that children have been investigated as objects whose actions, behaviours, and bodies are quantifiable and measurable (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998:14). These approaches negate qualitative analyses of children’s roles as social actors; Alan Prout and Allison James (1990:8) argue that children should be viewed by researchers as active in shaping their own lives. Anthropologists and other childhood researchers increasingly call for greater emphasis on children as “articulate commentators on the social world” (James 2007:261).

Anthropological literature on transnational adoption largely reflects the perspectives of adults living in European countries that are considered culturally “homogenous” such as Norway (see Howell 2007 and Sætersdal and Dalen 2000). Researchers including Howell (2006, 2007)
and Sætersdal and Dalen (2000) theorize that transnationally adopted people residing in North America likely experience identification very differently than those adopted into Norway since the former is considered “multicultural” while the latter is considered culturally “homogenous.” Some researchers argue that it is acceptable, and even encouraged, for people who migrate to North America to identify with dual ethnicities or hyphenated citizenship (see Ackroyd and Pilkington 1999, Olwig 2003). However, identification based on “culture” and “ethnicity” are broad social categorizations largely ascribed by adults who adopt multicultural and national discourses over time. Many researchers have noted that although children may employ terms based on ethnicity, racialization, culture, and nationality to describe themselves in particular contexts, these forms of identification may not have the same meaning to children as they do to adults, nor are they always reflective of how children think about themselves (see Ackroyd and Pilkington 1999, Macleod 2006, Olwig 2003, Stephens 1995).

Qualitative analyses focusing on transnationally adopted children’s perspectives are not only marginal within anthropology but also within psychological research which largely informs adoption education and policy (Howell 2006:10-11). According to Howell, psychological knowledge is regarded as “expert” knowledge informing adoption legislation and professionals such as “child therapists, educators, and social workers” (2006:10). She argues that this is particularly problematic since this expert adoption knowledge attempts to define what is good for all children and in doing so, marginalizes those who experience a deviation from the prescribed “norm” (Howell 2006:87). Following the work of Michel Foucault (1979), Deborah Marks notes “that we only have a notion of what it is to be a ‘pathological’ (or ‘problem’) child in relation to our understanding of what constitutes normality. Both normality and abnormality are social constructs, produced in relation to each other” (1995:92). Kirsten Hoo-Mi Sloth, born in Korea
and adopted to Denmark, similarly finds it problematic that “most researchers in the
Scandinavian adoption field are medical doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers,
so their perspective is clinical and they categorise people according to preconceived ideas of
what is healthy and unhealthy, normal and abnormal” (2006:253). Sloth argues that the norms
prescribed in “mainstream adoption research” are incongruous with the “variety of lived
experiences of intercountry adoptees” (2006:254). She suggests that instead of determining what
modes of identification are healthy or unhealthy for transnationally adopted people, research
should highlight the fluid and multiple modes of identification that are all “perfectly sound

In developing the framework for this research study, I wanted to investigate how children
come to understand place and identity and how their perspectives may be different from their
parents’. What I found is that within the processes of transnational adoption, children are
perceived to be passive, mobile, and alienable since their bodies and legal ties can be relocated
through the formalities of plenary transnational adoption. Social processes of emplacement such
as kinning and attachment enable children to become firmly emplaced within adoptive contexts.
Yet, children are also granted rights to cultural identities based on consideration of their ethnic,
cultural, religious, and linguistic background, highlighting their naturalized place in the world
according on blood and soil (see Olwig 2007:14). Most of the parents I spoke with take this
point very seriously and avidly try to provide their children with information and personal
connection to their birth places. Paradoxically, parents work to make place for the children in
two locations based on different understandings of identity as fixed based on biology and
genealogy, but also malleable through the social processes of kinning and attachment. Knowing
and feeling connected to both of these locations is seen as a means to provide children with a
dual ethnic and cultural identity, providing them knowledge and emplacement in two places in order to become healthy adoptive children within their current places. Thus, parents make place near and far, past and present for their children, offering them paradoxical and, at times, “contradictory values concerning identity” (Howell 2009:256).

As noted in my conceptual framework, I approached this study with the understanding that knowledge, concepts, and ideas are generated by people in order to make sense of the world. Thus, the two main concepts employed within this thesis, place and identity, were investigated as social constructions that are made meaningful by multiple actors. The theoretical lens of place-making particularly highlights the constructed nature of place. Parents make place for their children within adoptive contexts by providing them with social networks, the physical space of a bedroom, toys, outings to child-friendly locations, etcetera. Parents also make place for their children within birth places by providing them with information, knowledge, and objects about their past and personal connection to this place. However, as I have demonstrated, parents do not simply impose ideas onto children; rather, meaning is made intersubjectively.

What I found throughout the interviews is that although parents play a large role in their children’s emplacements, children shape and transform their parents’ practices as well. This was evident among children who participated in return visits. Two children in the study went back to their birth places under the guidance of their parents, but articulated opinions about the trip that were very different from their parents’. Parents found the trips enjoyable and informative of their children’s past, yet children felt these trips affirmed their feelings of belonging within their local, B.C. communities and care very little, if at all, about ever going back again. Similarly, children adopted at older ages greatly inform their parents’ knowledge by selectively telling them stories about their lives prior to adoption. In the cases of Ivan and Polina, they do not learn
about Russia from their parents; rather their parents learn about their children’s experiences in Russia directly from their children.

As discussed, most parents expressed that their children are deeply connected to their birth places through ethnicity and culture but I found these social categories may not be relevant to children themselves. Birth places are differentially important to children but rarely do children identify themselves ethnically with their birth places. Children recognize that people often perceive them to be “from somewhere else” and struggle with the demands of curious inquisitors to find an ethnic or racialized identity that seems to appease others’ curiosity. Children create identities through multiple influences that work at the national, familial, and individual levels; they negotiate multicultural discourses of the nation, perceived ethnic diversity within the family, and their own local places of significance. Through interactions with parents, teachers, peers, and strangers, children negotiate what aspects of their identity they are willing to employ and divulge based on context. Thus, children are strategic in how they identify themselves to others but their place-based identifications are much more complex than dual ethnicities. I found that children render places important based on events, people, and locations that are meaningful to their everyday lives. Children draw from a variety of places in order to identify themselves based on feelings of familiarity, inclusion, and belonging. These places include their local communities and birth places, but also unexpected locations such as child-friend family vacation spots, former family residences, and places that relate to their favourite activities.

Although parents are often aware of social, political, and economic conditions within their child’s birth place, this is not contextual information that they necessarily choose to share with their children. Rather, parents attempt to inform their children’s sense of cultural identity
based on reified notions of food, dress, celebration, and behaviour. Parents construct notions of birth places through stories and photographs that illustrate the country’s “culture” and in this way, parents uphold the notion that children are entitled to and even need a cultural identity based on their origins. As noted by Ackroyd and Pilkington (1999), it is commonly envisioned that children are products of the culture into which they were born as traditions, beliefs, and values are passed down generation to generation. Since transnationally adopted children are removed from their original cultural contexts, adoptive parents attempt to uphold some of what they feel their children are losing or forgetting. What is negated through these practices of making meaning is a deeper understanding of how culture is produced through interaction, and more importantly children’s active participation in this production. Ackroyd and Pilkington suggest that rather than inscribing cultural identities onto children, one can “envisage children as having a right to construct their own cultural identities” (1999:453, also see Olwig 2003:233).

6.2 Implications

There are several implications for these conclusions. First, research and education in the area of adoption should include a broader spectrum of perspectives. Most importantly, adoption literature, both popular and academic, should greatly include the perspectives of transnationally adopted people and more specifically the perspectives of adopted people across a wide age range. Although children, like all people, shift and change their perspectives over time, their experiences as children are just as relevant and important as their experiences during other phases of life. Their heightened inclusion within adoption literature should not negate the perspectives of other adoption actors including adopted adults, adoptive parents, birth parents, adoption professionals, and academics but should be regarded as central to the discussions on adoption as it relates to “children’s best interests.”
Second, by drawing attention to diverse experiences of transnationally adopted children, it becomes clear that not all children think the same way about their birth places or their sense of identity. Children’s individual experiences are intersections of multiple factors including birth place, age at adoption, time spent in institutionalized care, composition of birth and adoptive families, length of time in Canada, level of openness within the family about adoption, gender, current age, and perceived racialization and ethnicity. Being aware of how all of these factors can differentially shape children’s adoption experiences can help dismantle notions of “normality” and “abnormality.” Unpacking what is perceived as “normal” and “healthy” for adoptive children may also impact how post-adoption services are delivered; expert knowledge could grow to include not just psychological perspectives but ideas from a broader scope of disciplines as well as from transnationally adopted children themselves.

Third, by presenting an anthropological perspective on notions of place, ethnicity, and culture I hope to have shown how these concepts become naturalized and salient through processes of meaning making. Ideas of ethnicity and culture are popularly tied to bounded place-based units such as countries and often assigned based on birth place (see Gupta and Ferguson 1992). However, these static notions of ethnicity and culture have been challenged by more recent attention to migration, transnationalism, and globalization where ethnicity and culture transcend national borders. Anthropologists such as Barth (1982[1969]) and Baumann (1999) have made the point that ethnicity is based on dynamic cultural attachments that shift and change over time. Although parents frequently articulated static and reified notions of culture based on birth place, children spoke of identifications that are shifting, fluid, and complex. Although adults may come to comprehend ethnicity and culture as bounded based on birth country, children have the capacity to assert and assign their own forms of identification. Children’s
identifications are not merely transitional and meaningless along the road to adulthood but are important to their understanding of themselves in the present.

6.3 Further Research

My research has raised many more questions that I have been unable to address or answer due to the scope of this project. One limitation to this research study was my inability to conduct full and complete analysis of adoption literature and education that is provided to prospective adoptive parents. I gained some contextual knowledge through educational workshops, resource libraries, anthropological analyses, and by asking parents during interviews about their educational experiences but I was not able to provide a full analysis of the types of information parents receive. Thus, one area of further research could be among adoption professionals at adoption agencies and organizations. Parents are required to make contact with an adoption agency and fulfill educational requirements in order to adopt transnationally. In doing so, they receive information from social workers, educational workshops, adoption facilitators, and other adoptive parents. It would be helpful to interview some of these adoption actors in order to examine their perspectives on concepts explored in this thesis. Along the same lines, it would be beneficial to review adoption literature provided to parents in detail. These avenues of research could examine: 1) the role of authoritative knowledge in transnational adoption discourse and practice, 2) the influence of psychology on this authoritative knowledge, 3) how place, identity, ethnicity, and culture are defined in the context of transnational adoption, and 4) what advice is given to parents regarding attachment and place-making. By investigating these avenues, further research could cross disciplinary boundaries to include the information provided by psychology with anthropological understandings of culture, ethnicity, and childhood. This interdisciplinary approach could provide further methodological tools for examining how adoption is experienced.
by multiple actors. This approach could also expand theoretical frameworks for unpacking rights-based discourses focused on “children’s best interests.”

Similarly, in order to elucidate children’s roles as competent social actors it would be valuable to conduct further research with a similar population, focusing again on the perspectives of transnationally adopted children and building upon similar research questions presented in this thesis. One limitation to this study is a small sample size and narrow age range. Although I find that age and agency are interrelated since older children are granted increased autonomy and may develop interests outside of the parents’ influence, I cannot comment on how children across a wider age range differentially engage in place-making practices. Thus, it would be useful to conduct further research with transnationally adopted children over a longer period of time and spanning a larger age range. This would enable an examination of how expressions of agency change according to age and how parent-child negotiations change over time. It would also be useful to examine how children’s opinions shift and transform. In this study, Frankie suggested he was interested in his birth country when he was younger but lost curiosity over the years as he takes interest in other activities. This is contrary to many parents’ who feel their children’s birth place may become an increasingly important source of identification as children grow older.

Further research could build upon the initial findings and analysis presented here to produce materials made by transnationally adopted children themselves, which would offer a different reflection on their experiences and perhaps be more widely accessible to other adopted children, adopted adults, parents, and professionals. As noted by Trenka et al., work produced by transnationally adopted people including essays and other “cultural production[s]” (2006:1) remain marginal and virtually unknown. Due to my role as an adult researcher “outside” of the adoption triad, my findings and analysis are my subjective interpretations of the relationship
between data and theory. I am aware that I have produced an academic thesis that will likely never be read by many participants or other adopted children. Further research could include a participatory piece that includes children in the project design or produces a piece of work that is made by the children for an intended audience such as other children, adults, parents, professionals, researchers, or policy makers.

To conclude, I briefly reflect on my findings as they relate to on-going debates regarding transnational adoption and children’s rights. Children who move globally for the purposes of adoption are often perceived to be at risk, in danger, or vulnerable. These visions of childhood simultaneously work to support proponents of adoption who feel children need a home, as well as opponents of adoption who see children and birth families as exploitable. The Hague Convention (1993) was put into place “to establish safeguards to ensure that intercountry adoptions take place in the best interests of the child and with respect for his or her fundamental rights...” (Article One). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) further specifies that in cases of child care, including adoption, “due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background” (Article 20). Embedded within this article is the assumption that continuity from a single past is best. This article also illustrates a particularly static way of understanding identity as bounded to ethnicity, religion, culture, and language based on one background or place in the world defined by birth. Such discourses privilege notions of continuity and a single identity which, as I have shown, is not given so much importance by children themselves.

As noted by Stephens (1995:4), international rights discourse based on Western European values of childhood and culture is complicated by critical understanding that childhood is a historically specific social construction and culture is a highly contested concept, both
theoretically and politically. Although discussions regarding “children’s best interests” place children at the centre of political debates, children’s participation in these debates is excluded since they are “conceived as largely outside the realm of politics” (Stephens 1995:10). I hope to have shown that children are not outside the realm of politics but are deeply immersed within it through global processes of circulation as well as micro-level power-over relationships. As suggested by James (2007:261), children are “articulate commentators” (2007:261) who can reflect on their lives in meaningful ways that provide new insights into the effects of migration and identity politics. This research study, as well as the further lines of research I have suggested, could greatly contribute to the incorporation of children’s perspectives into policy and practice by investigating the complex and dynamic ways children experience place and identity.
Bibliography


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Appendix 1: Recruitment Letter to Organizations

Researcher: Jennifer Shaw, BA (honours), MA student
School: Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria
Project Title: Transnationally Adopted Children’s Perspectives on Place and Identity
Research Funding: Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada

My name is Jenny Shaw and I am a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria. I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Arts. I will be researching transnationally adopted children’s experiences of migration, specifically examining their perspectives on place and identity.

I am contacting you to see if (organization) is interested in helping me recruit participants for this research project. I hope to recruit 10 to 15 transnational adoptees between the ages of 8 and 18, and one or both of their adoptive parents. I hope to begin recruitment in May 2009, but for now, I am enquiring to see if you would like to hear more about my research. I would be happy to meet with you in person and I have a complete project proposal which I can send to you.

Background information this research:
My research project will examine how transnationally adopted children come to know places and how these places affect their sense of identity. My research project will explore children’s perspectives on migrating to Canada, their adoption, birth place, senses of belong and identity. I am also interested in examining how parents share in these experiences with their children and how their perspectives may be similar or different to their children’s. This research will contribute to the exploration of children’s voices and experiences and it will also provide further information to the growing practice of transnational adoption.

Who is conducting this study?
I will be the primary researcher. I am a Master of Arts student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria. I completed my Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree in the same department in 2007. I completed my final honours paper on global patterns of transnational adoption. I have completed four research methods courses including ethnographic methods, anthropological methods, participatory action research methods, and an advanced graduate-level course on qualitative methodology. Together, these courses have provided theoretical, methodological and hands-on training for conducting qualitative, academic research.

I have extensive experience working with abandoned children, and immigrant and refugee youth. I worked with abandoned Haitian children as they underwent transnational adoption and met their new adoptive families in Haiti in 2002 and 2004. Additionally, I have volunteered with youth programs at the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society for the past year.

What is involved and methods:
I will visit each child and youth two times for approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. Children and parents can decide the format of the interviews; for example younger children may be more comfortable with their parents present. During each visit with the children and youth, I will ask them questions about their migration, adoption, place of origin, and identity. I will also ask them to draw pictures.

I will interview each adoptive parent once for approximately 1.5 hours. During the interview, I will ask them questions about their experiences adopting their child, their child’s migration, their child’s place of birth, and their child’s sense of belonging and identity.

**Dissemination of information, consent, and right to withdraw:**
The information I gather will be included in my final thesis. The identities and real names of the individuals will not be revealed. Consent to be part of this research project is completely voluntary. Participants can stop an interview at any time or not answer an interview question. If participants consent, they are welcome to withdraw from the research project at any time without explanation.

**Contact information:**
Your assistance in recruiting people to join this study would be greatly appreciated. If you have any questions or concerns, or would like to speak further about the possibility of assisting me, please contact me at 250-370-5573 or shawj@uvic.ca.
Appendix 2: Research Advertisement

I am looking for RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS for:

M.A. RESEARCH ON TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION

ARE YOU A TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTEE?
ARE YOU A PARENT WHO ADOPTED A CHILD FROM ABROAD?
DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO HAS?

I am a graduate student at the University of Victoria in the Department of Anthropology. I am currently working on my Master of Arts thesis research focusing on transnationally adopted children’s perspectives of place and identity.

I am hoping to recruit 10 to 15 transnational adoptees between the ages of 8 to 18, and one or both of their adoptive parents. Participants will be interviewed one or two times for approximately 2 hours each time.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please contact me as soon as possible for more information.

JENNY SHAW, MA CANDIDATE
250-370-5573 or shawj@uvic.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Lisa M. Mitchell at lmm@uvic.ca or 250-721-6282.
Appendix 3: Information for Prospective Participants

**Researcher:** Jennifer Shaw, Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria  
**School:** Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria  
**Project Title:** Transnationally Adopted Children’s Perspectives on Place and Identity  
**Research Funding:** Department of Anthropology at UVic and Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada

My name is Jenny Shaw and I am a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria. As a graduate student, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Arts. My research project will examine transnationally adopted children’s experiences of migration, specifically examining their perspectives of place and identity.

**Background information this research:**  
My research project examines how transnationally adopted children understand place and how place affects their sense of identity. I am interested in understanding children’s perspectives on migrating to Canada, their birth place, and their identity. I am also interested in how parents share in these experiences with their children and how their perspectives may be similar or different to their children’s perspectives on these topics. This research is being funded by the Department of Anthropology and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

**Purpose and benefits of this research:**  
This research will contribute to the exploration of children’s voices and experiences. It will explore how parents participate in their children’s experiences and how their perspectives may be similar or different to those of their children. It will also provide further information to the growing practice of transnational adoption.

**What is involved and methods:**  
I will visit with child and youth research participants two times for approximately 2 hours each time. During each visit, I will ask them questions about their migration, adoption, birth place, and identity. I will also ask them to draw pictures using coloured pencil crayons and paper. The drawings will help us discuss the interview questions and hopefully they can tell me stories about their drawings. I may also take pictures of important objects that they share with me, such as objects that remind them of their birth place.

I will visit with adoptive parents once for approximately 1.5 hours. During the interview, I will ask them questions about their experience adopting their child, their child’s migration, their child’s birth place, and how they may identify their children.

**Dissemination of information and confidentiality:**
The information I gather will be examined, put together into my thesis, and this will be submitted to my professors in order for me to complete my degree requirements. The information may be presented at conferences and it may be published in academic journals. I will also forward a final report to the organizations that assisted me in recruiting participants. The report as well as other aspects of this research may be available through organizational web sites and other locations on the internet. The identities of the participants will not be revealed in the research essays and presentations. I will not use their real names when referring to their interview responses. There are limits to confidentiality because some participants may have been referred by others to this project. Also, I will not be changing some identifying information such as an adoptee’s birth place or age because this information is an important part of the research.

Consent and right to withdraw:
Participants’ consent is completely voluntary. There are no consequences if people dissent or decline to be part of this research project. Participants who consent to the research can stop an interview at any time. They are welcome to take a break during the interview or reschedule the interview for another time. There may be some topics or questions that participants do not want to discuss. If they choose not to answer an interview question, this is fine with me. If a person consents, they are welcome to withdraw from the research project at any time without explanation. If participants decide to leave the research project, the information they provided before that point will not be used in the final research analysis.

Some questions you might want to consider:
Do you have any questions about the purpose of this research project? Do you think you will be comfortable talking about the topics of this research project? Are there any topics you are not comfortable talking about that might pertain to this research? Do you have any questions about the methods or activities I will use in this research project? Do you have any questions about how the results of this research will be disseminated? Do you have any other questions for me?

Contact information:
At any point during the research project and after it finishes, you can ask me questions or discuss any issues by contacting me at 250-370-5573 (home) or 250-891-5667 (cell) or shawj@uvic.ca. You can also contact my graduate supervisor at the University of Victoria, Dr. Lisa Mitchell, at 250-721-6282 or lmm@uvic.ca. In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria at 250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca.
Appendix 4: Information for Prospective Youth Participants

**Researcher:** Jennifer Shaw, Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria  
**School:** Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria  
**Project Title:** Transnationally Adopted Children’s Perspectives on Place and Identity  
**Research Funding:** Department of Anthropology at UVic and Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada

My name is Jenny Shaw and I am a student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria. In order to finish my program at school, I need to do some research. I would like to do research with transnationally adopted children and youth, specifically looking at how adoption and birth places affect who they are.

**Background information this research:**
I am doing a research project that looks at how transnationally adopted children understand place and how place affects how they think about themselves (identity). I am interested in understanding their perspectives about their move to Canada, their birth places, and how these two places affect how they think about themselves. This research is being funded by my department and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which is part of the Canadian government.

**Purpose and benefits of this research:**
This research will provide information on the perspectives of children and youth who have been transnationally adopted. The perspectives of children and youth are very important. I will look at how children’s perspectives might be the same or different from their parents’. Overall, this research will provide more information on transnational adoption since it is becoming more and more common.

**What is involved and methods:**
I will visit with children and youth research participants two times for about 2 hours each time. During each visit, I will ask questions about their migration, adoption, birth place, and who they think they are. I will also ask children and youth to draw pictures about migration and birth places, and tell me stories about these drawings. I may also take pictures of important objects that they share with me, such as objects that remind them of their birth place.

I will visit with parents once for about 2 hours. During the interview, I will ask them questions about their experience adopting, their child’s migration, their child’s birth place, and how they think about their child in terms of places.

**Dissemination of information and confidentiality:**
The information from the interviews will be put together into a research essay. It will be submitted to my professors in order for me to complete my school requirements. The information may also be shared at meetings, and it might be published in academic...
journals, or magazines, for other people to read. I will also send a report to the organizations that helped me find people to be part of this research project. I will not reveal the names of research participants in the research essays and presentations. I will not use people’s real names when referring to interview responses, stories, or drawings. However, some information will not be changed such as the ages and birth places. Someone might be able to identify you from these pieces of information.

**Consent and right to withdraw:**
Consent to be part of this research is completely voluntary, meaning each person can decide if they would like to participate or not. People who agree to be part of this research can stop an interview at any time, take a break during the interview or reschedule the interview for another time. There may be some topics or questions that people do not want to discuss. If they choose not to answer an interview question, this is fine with me. If participants consent to participating in this research project, they are welcome to withdraw from the research project at any time without explanation. If participants decide to leave the research project, the information they shared will not be used in my analysis.

**Some questions you might want to consider:**
Do you have any questions about the purpose of this research project? Do you know why I am asking you to participate in this research project? Do you think you will be comfortable talking about the topics of this research project? Are there any topics you are not comfortable talking about that might pertain to this research? Do you have any questions about the activities we will do together? Do you have any questions about how the information you share with me will be used? Do you have any other questions for me?

**Contact information:**
At any point during the research project and after it finishes, you can ask me questions or discuss any issues by contacting me at 250-370-5573 (home) or 250-891-5667 (cell) or shawj@uvic.ca. You can also contact my graduate supervisor at the University of Victoria, Dr. Lisa Mitchell, at 250-721-6282 or lmm@uvic.ca. In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria at 250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca.
Appendix 5: Information for Prospective Child Participants

**Researcher:** Jennifer Shaw, Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria  
**School:** Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria  
**Project Title:** Transnationally Adopted Children’s Perspectives on Place and Identity  
**Research Funding:** Department of Anthropology at UVic and Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada

My name is Jenny Shaw and I go to school at the University of Victoria. My school would like me to do some research. Research is a way to learn new things and ideas. Being in research is your choice. You can say Yes or No. Whatever you decide is OK.

**Why am I doing this research?**  
In my research study, I would like to learn about being adopted from another place. I would like to learn from children who have been adopted from another country. I would like to learn and ask questions about their move to Canada, their birth places, and how they think about themselves (identity). I am asking children who have been adopted from another country, and their parents, to be part of this research. My school and the Canadian (federal) government have given me some money to do this research.

**What will happen in the research?**  
I will visit with children two times for about 2 hours each time. During each visit, I will ask questions about their move to Canada, adoption, birth place, and who they think they are. I will also ask children to draw pictures about moving to Canada and their birth places, and tell me stories about these drawings. I may also take pictures of important things that they share with me, such as things that remind them of their birth place. I will give the children back their drawings and photos when I’m finished my school but I might keep photocopies of them.

I will visit with parents once for about 2 hours. I will ask the parents questions about adopting their child, bring their child to Canada, the country their child was born in, and how they think about these places.

**What will happen with the research?**  
The things that children share with me, including the stories they tell me and their drawings will be put into an essay. I will look at and think about the photos but I will not show people the actual photos. I will hand the essay into my teachers. I might also share the stories and drawings at meetings and they might be put into academic journals, or magazines, for other people to read. I will also send a short essay to the organizations that helped me find people to be part of this research.

I will not use anybody’s real name in the essays or presentations. I will use pretend names instead. However, some important things about the children will not be changed.
such as their ages and birth places. Someone might be able to tell who you are because they know these things about you.

**What else should you know about the research?**
Being in the research is your choice. You can decide Yes or No. Either way is OK. If you say Yes and change your mind later that is OK. You can stop being in the research at any time. If you want to stop, please tell me or your parents.

There may be some topics or questions that people do not want to talk about. If someone does not want to answer a question, that is fine with me.

**Some questions you might want to consider:**
Do you have any questions about this research study? Do you know why I am asking you to be part of this research? Do you think you will be comfortable talking about the topics? Are there any topics I have mentioned that you are not comfortable talking about? Do you have any questions about the activities we will do together? Do you have any questions about how I will share the information you tell me? Do you have any other questions for me?

**Contact information:**
At any point during the research project and after it finishes, you can ask me questions or discuss any issues by contacting me at 250-370-5573 (home) or 250-891-5667 (cell) or shawj@uvic.ca. You can also contact my graduate supervisor at the University of Victoria, Dr. Lisa Mitchell, at 250-721-6282 or lmm@uvic.ca. Also, you can check that I have ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria at 250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca.
Appendix 6: Parent Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Transnationally Adopted Children’s Perspectives on Place and Identity
Researcher: Jennifer Shaw, Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria

My name is Jenny Shaw and I am currently a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria. I am conducting a research project that examines how transnationally adopted children understand place and how place affects their sense of identity. I am interested in understanding children’s perspectives on migrating to Canada, their birth place, and their identity. I am also interested in how parents share in these experiences with their children and how their perspectives may be similar or different to their children’s perspectives on these topics. My research questions are: How do transnationally adopted children conceptualize their movement from one country to another? How do they imagine their place of origin? How do their perspectives of place affect their processes of identification? This research is being funded by the Department of Anthropology at UVic and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

This research will contribute to the exploration of children’s voices and experiences. It will explore how parents participate in their children’s experiences and how their perspectives may be similar or different to those of their children. It will also provide further information on the growing practice of transnational adoption.

If you agree to participate in this research project, I will visit with you once for approximately 2 hours. During the interview, I will ask you questions about your experience adopting your child, your child’s migration, your child’s birth place, your child’s sense of belonging and how your child may identify him or herself. The information you share with me will be examined and put together into my thesis in conjunction with information and drawings provided by your child. It will be submitted to my professors in order for me to complete my degree requirements. The information may also be presented at conferences and published in academic journals. I will also forward a final report to the organizations that assisted me in recruiting participants. The report as well as other aspects of this research may be available through organizational web sites and other locations on the internet. There is also the possibility that I may analyze the data for purposes other than this research project in the future.

Your identity will not be revealed in the research essays and presentations. I will not use your real names when referring to your interview responses. There are limits to confidentiality because you may have been referred by someone to this project. If this is the case, they may be aware that you are potentially participating in this research project. Also, I will not be changing some identifying information about your child’s birth place or age because this information is an important part of the research.
Your consent and participation is completely voluntary. There will be no consequences if you decide not to participate. If you decide not to participate, you are still welcome to use the services and participate in the organization that sent you the initial information about this project. If you decide to participate, you can stop an interview at any time. You can take a break during the interview or reschedule the interview for another time. There may be some topics or questions that you do not want to discuss. If you choose not to answer an interview question, this is fine with me. If you consent to participating in this research project, you can withdraw at any time without explanation. If you decide to leave the research project, the information you provided before that point will not be used in the final research analysis.

Your permission to use your interview responses in this research project must be voluntary and I want to assure you that there are no consequences that arise from giving or withholding your permission. Should you feel that there are pressures or unanticipated consequences as a result of participating or not, you are free to contact my research supervisor, Dr. Mitchell (250-721-6282), or the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545) to have your concerns addressed. In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

If you have any questions or concerns that arise during or after the research, you are welcome to contact me at 250-370-5573 (home) or 250-891-5667 (cell) or shawj@uvic.ca.

Do you have any questions about the purpose of this research project? Do you have any questions about the methods or activities I will use in this research project? Do you think you will be comfortable talking about the topics of this research? Do you have any questions about how the results of this research will be disseminated? Do you have any other questions for me?

**Written consent:**

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Please circle below if you give consent to do the following:

Record your voice during the interview: Yes / No
Analyze data in the future for other research purposes: Yes / No

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Please indicate by signing below if I have provided you with a copy of this consent form:

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Appendix 7: Parent Consent Form for Child Participant

Project Title: Transnationally Adopted Children’s Perspectives on Place and Identity
Researcher: Jennifer Shaw, Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria

My name is Jenny Shaw and I am currently a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria. I am conducting a research project that examines how transnationally adopted children understand place and how place affects their sense of identity. I am interested in understanding children’s perspectives on migrating to Canada, their birth place, and their identity. My research questions are: How do transnationally adopted children conceptualize their movement from one country to another? How do they imagine their place of origin? How do their perspectives of place affect their processes of identification?

This research will contribute to the exploration of children’s voices and experiences. It will explore how parents participate in their children’s experiences and how their perspectives may be similar or different to those of their children. It will also provide further information to the growing practice of transnational adoption.

Your child is being asked to participate in this study because they were transnationally adopted, meaning they were adopted from a country other than Canada, and because they are under the age of 18. If you agree, your child’s participation will include two interview sessions that will be 1.5 to 2 hours each. You and your child can decide who will be there during the interview; you can be present during your child’s interview, you can be close by or in another room, or the interview can occur between just me and your child. During these interviews, I will ask questions about their migration, adoption, place of origin, feelings of belonging and how they identify themselves. I will also ask them to draw using coloured pencil crayons and paper. The drawings will help us talk about the interview questions and hopefully your child can tell me stories about their drawings. I may also take pictures of important objects that they share with me, such as objects that remind them of their birth place.

The information they share with me will be examined and put together into my thesis. The drawings will be examined and possibly included in the final research write-up and dissemination of the results. The photographs of important objects will also examined and described in the final write-up, but the photographs themselves will not be disseminated with the results. All drawings and photographs will be returned to your child after the research is complete but I may keep photocopies of them. The final research write-up will be submitted to my professors in order for me to complete my degree requirements. The information may also be presented at conferences and published in academic journals. I will also forward a final report to the organizations that assisted me in recruiting participants. The report as well as other aspects of this research
may be available through organizational web sites and other locations on the internet. There is also the possibility that I may analyze the data for purposes other than this research project in the future.

Your child’s real name will not be revealed in the research essays and presentations. I will not use their real names when referring to their interview responses, narratives or drawings. However, I will not change some identifying information such as their birth place and age because this information is important in the research.

Your consent to your child’s participation is completely voluntary. There will be no consequences if you decide that your child should not participate. If you decide that he or she should not participate, you are still welcome to use the services and participate in the organization that sent you the initial information about this project. If you consent to your child’s participation, I will also ask your child for their voluntary consent. If both parties consent, your child can stop an interview at any time and/or withdraw consent at any time. Your child can take a break during the interview at any time. There may be some topics or questions that your child does not want to discuss. If your child chooses not to answer an interview question, this is fine with me. If you and your child consent to participating in this research project, your child can opt to withdraw from the research project at any time. You can also opt to withdraw your child from the research at any time. If your child leaves the research project, the information they provided will not be used in the final analysis.

Your permission to allow your child to participate in this research project must be voluntary and I want to assure you that there are no consequences that arise from giving or withholding your permission. Should you feel that there are pressures or unanticipated consequences as a result of participating or not, you are free to contact my research supervisor, Dr. Mitchell (250-721-6282), or the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545) to have your concerns addressed. In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Do you have any questions about the purpose of this research project? Do you have any questions about the methods or activities I will use in this research project? Do you have any questions about how the results of this research will be disseminated? Do you have any other questions for me?

If you have any questions or concerns that arise during or after the research, you are welcome to contact me at 250-370-5573 (home) or 250-891-5667 (cell) or shawj@uvic.ca.

**Written consent:**
Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Please circle below if you give consent to do the following:
Record your child's voice during the interviews: Yes / No
Analyze and disseminate the drawings provided by your child Yes / No
Take pictures of objects your child shares with me Yes / No
Analyze data in the future for other research purposes: Yes / No

__________________________________________  ___________________________  ___________
Name of Participant                        Signature                        Date

Please indicate by signing below if I have provided you with a copy of this consent form:

__________________________________________  ___________________________  ___________
Name of Participant                        Signature                        Date
Appendix 8: Youth Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Transnationally Adopted Children’s Perspectives on Place and Identity
Researcher: Jennifer Shaw, Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria

My name is Jenny Shaw and I am a student at the University of Victoria. I am doing a research project that looks at how transnationally adopted children understand place and how place affects how they think about themselves. I am interested in understanding your perspectives about your move to Canada, your birth place, and how these two places affect who you are. My research questions are: How do transnationally adopted children conceptualize their movement from one country to another? How do they imagine their place of origin? How do their perspectives of place affect their processes of identification?

This research will provide information on the perspectives of children and youth who have been transnationally adopted. The perspectives of children and youth are very important. I will look at how your perspectives might be the same or different from your parents’. Overall, this research will provide more information on transnational adoption since it is becoming more and more common.

If you agree to participate in this research project, I will visit you two times to do an interview. Each visit will be about 2 hours. You can choose if you want your mom and/or dad to be there during your interview. They can also stay in another room close by, or we can have an interview just between you and me. During each visit, I will ask you questions about your migration, adoption, birth place, sense of belonging and who you are (your identity). I will also ask you to draw pictures using coloured pencil crayons and paper. The drawings will help us talk about the interview questions and hopefully you can tell me stories about the drawings. I may also take pictures of important objects that you share with me, such as objects that remind you of your birth place.

The information you share with me will be put together into research essays and presentations. I will examine your drawings and possibly include them in the essays/presentations. I will also examine the photographs of important objects, but I will not include these photographs in the essays/presentations. I will give you back all your drawings and pictures once I’m finished the research but I might keep photocopies of them. The essay will be submitted to my professors in order for me to complete my school requirements. The information may also be shared at meetings and conferences, and it might be published in academic journals, or magazines, for other people to read. I will also send a report to the organizations that helped me find people to be part of this research project. The report as well as other parts of this research may be available on
the internet. There is also the possibility that I may use the information you share with me for purposes other than this research project in the future.

Your real name will not be revealed in the research essays and presentations. I will not use your real names when referring to your interview responses, stories, or drawings. However, people might be able to tell who you are because of your birth place and age.

Your participation in this research project is complete voluntary, meaning you can decide for yourself whether you want to participate or not. There are no problems or consequences for you if you decide not to participate. During the interviews, you can decide what questions you want to answer or not answer. There may be some topics or questions that you do not want to talk about, so if you prefer not to answer some questions, that will be fine with me. You can decide to stop an interview at any time. Also, you can withdraw from the research project and not continue with it if you chose to, meaning to you decide to leave the research project at any time. If you decide to leave the research project, the information you shared with me before that point will not be used in the research essays or presentations.

At any point during the research project and after it finishes, you can ask me questions or discuss any issues by contacting me at 250-370-5573 (home) or 250-891-5667 (cell) or shawj@uvic.ca. You can also talk to your parent(s) about any concerns you have and they can let me know if you have any questions or concerns about the research. You can also contact my graduate supervisor at the University of Victoria, Dr. Lisa Mitchell, at 250-721-6282 or lmm@uvic.ca. In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria at 250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca.

Do you have any questions? Can you tell what you think this research project is about? Can you tell me about the activities we might do together for this research project? Do you think you will be comfortable talking about the topics of this research? Do you know how the information you tell me will be used? Do you have any other questions for me?

**Written consent:**

Please circle below if it is okay to do the following:

| Record your voice during the interviews: | Yes / No |
| Examine and share the drawings you make during the interview: | Yes / No |
| Take pictures of objects you share with me: | Yes / No |
| Analyze data in the future for other research purposes: | Yes / No |

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Visit #1: _______________________________
Please circle below if it is okay to do the following:
Record your voice during the interviews: Yes / No
Examine and share the drawings you make during the interview: Yes / No
Take pictures of objects you share with me: Yes / No
Analyze data in the future for other research purposes: Yes / No

Visit #2: _______________________________
Please circle below if it is okay to do the following:
Record your voice during the interviews: Yes / No
Examine and share the drawings you make during the interview: Yes / No
Take pictures of objects you share with me: Yes / No
Analyze data in the future for other research purposes: Yes / No

Please indicate by signing below if I have provided you with a copy of this consent form:

__________________________  __________________________  _________________
Name of Participant        Signature        Date
Appendix 9: Child Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Transnationally Adopted Children’s Perspectives on Place and Identity
Researcher: Jennifer Shaw, Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria

My name is Jenny Shaw and I go to school at the University of Victoria. My school would like me to do some research. Research is a way to learn new things and ideas. Being in research is your choice. You can say Yes or No. Whatever you decide is OK.

Why am I doing this research?
In my research study, I would like to learn about being adopted from another place. I would like to learn from you and ask you questions about your move to Canada, the place where you were born, and how you think about yourself (identity). I will also ask parents what they think about these things. Your ideas might be different or the same as theirs. What is most important about this research is finding out what you think about these things because your ideas and thoughts are important. My school and the Canadian (federal) government have given me some money to do this research.

What will happen in the research?
If you want to be part of the research, I will visit you two times for about 2 hours each time. You can choose if you want your mom and/or dad to be there during your interview. They can also stay in another room close by, or we can have an interview just between you and me. During each visit, I will ask you questions about your move to Canada, adoption, birth place, sense of belonging and who you are (your identity). I will also ask you to draw pictures using coloured pencil crayons and paper. The drawings will help us talk about the interview questions and hopefully you can tell me stories about the drawings. I may also take pictures of important things that you share with me, such as things that remind you of your birth place. I will give you back your drawings and photos when I’m finished my school but I might keep photocopies of them.

What will happen with the research?
The things you share with me, including the stories you tell me and your drawings will be put into an essay. I will look at and think about the photos but I will not put the photos in my essays or presentations. I will hand the essay into my teachers. I might also share your stories and drawings at meetings and they might be put into academic journals, or magazines, for other people to read. I will also send a short essay to the organizations that helped me find people to be part of this research project. The essay and some other parts of this research might be posted on the internet. I might also think about and share your stories and drawings with people in the future for another research project.

I will not use your real name in the essays or presentations. I will use pretend names instead. However, some important things about you will not be changed such as your age
and birth place. Someone might be able to tell who you are because they know these things about you.

**What else should you know about the research?**
Being in the research is your choice. You can decide Yes or No. Either way is OK. If you say Yes and change your mind later that is OK. You can stop being in the research at any time. During the interviews, you can decide what questions you want to answer or not answer. There may be some topics or questions that you do not want to talk about, so if you prefer not to answer some questions, that is OK. You can stop the interview at any time. Also, you can leave the research completely. If you decide to leave the research project, the information you shared with me will not be used in the research essays or presentations. If you want to stop, please tell me or your parents.

At any point during the research project and after it finishes, you can ask me questions or discuss any issues by contacting me at 250-370-5573 (home) or 250-891-5667 (cell) or shawj@uvic.ca. You can also talk to your parent(s) about any concerns you have and they can let me know if you have any questions or concerns about the research. You can also contact my graduate supervisor at the University of Victoria, Dr. Lisa Mitchell, at 250-721-6282 or lmm@uvic.ca. Also, you may check the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria at 250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca.

Do you have any questions? Can you tell what you think this research is about? Can you tell me about the activities we might do together for this research project? Do you think you will be comfortable talking about the topics of this research? Do you know how the information you tell me will be shared? Do you have any other questions for me?

**Written consent:**

Please circle below if it is okay to do the following:
- Record your voice during the interviews: Yes / No
- Examine and share the drawings you make during the interview: Yes / No
- Take pictures of objects you share with me: Yes / No
- Examine your stories and drawings for other research in the future: Yes / No

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**Name of Participant** ______________________________  **Signature** ______________________________  **Date** ______________________________

Visit #1: ______________________________

Please circle below if it is okay to do the following:
- Record your voice during the interviews: Yes / No
- Examine and share the drawings you make during the interview: Yes / No
- Take pictures of objects you share with me: Yes / No
- Examine your stories and drawings for other research in the future: Yes / No
Visit #2:
Please circle below if it is okay to do the following:
Record your voice during the interviews: Yes / No
Examine and share the drawings you make during the interview: Yes / No
Take pictures of objects you share with me: Yes / No
Examine your stories and drawings for other research in the future: Yes / No

Please indicate by signing below if I have provided you with a copy of this consent form:

________________________________________  __________________________________________  ________________
Name of Participant  Signature  Date
Appendix 10: First Interview Questions for Transnational Adoptees

Introduction:
• What would you like to tell me about yourself?
• What are some things you like to do? Why do you like to do these things?
• What school do you go to? What are your favourite subjects? What subject don’t you like?
• Imagine it is the first day of school and the teacher asks you to introduce yourself to the class, what would you say about yourself? How does this kind of question make you feel?
• Where are some places that you really like to go? Why?
• What is your favourite place? Can you give me an example of why it’s so special or important?
• Are there other people in this place? How are these people related or connected to you?
• Do you ever dream about any special places?
• What does it mean to you to “belong” somewhere? What are some places where you feel like you belong?
• Do people ever ask you where you are from? Why do you think they ask you this? How does it make you feel?

Family and adoption
• What are some things you like to do with your family?
• What else would you like to tell me about your family?
• Do you have any friends who are adopted?
• What does it mean to you to be adopted?
• What can you tell about when you were born? Do you ever think about it? Do you ever dream about it?
• What do you call the place where you were born?

Migration:
• What would you like to tell me about coming to Canada? How did you imagine coming to Canada? Who were you with when you traveled to Canada?
• Do you hear stories about the day you moved to Canada? Can you give me an example of one?
• When you think about leaving the place where you were born, what do you think of?
• When you think about coming to Canada for the first time, what do you think of?
• What would you like to tell me about moving from one country to another?
• Is there anything that might make this easier for someone else who moved to Canada from far away?

First drawing exercise:
At this point in the interview, I will ask the research participant to draw the first image. I will provide them with blank paper, coloured pencils, and plain pencils with erasers. I will ask them to draw themselves on the day they moved from their birth place to Canada by posing the question: How do you imagine yourself on the day you moved to Canada? The following questions will be asked about the image:

- What would you like to tell me about the drawing? Can you tell me what your drawing is about? Where are you? Who/what are you surrounded by? What are you doing?
- What would you like to tell me about the place(s) in this drawing?
- What would you like to tell me about the people in this drawing?
- What would you like to tell me about yourself in this drawing?
- When you think about what might have just happened in this drawing, what do you think of?
- When you think about what is going to happen, what do you think of?
- If you were to draw a picture of the other place (birth place or adoptive place depending on what was drawn in the first image), can you describe to me what that would look like?
Appendix 11: Second Interview Questions for Transnational Adoptees

Introduction:
• How are you doing?
• Has anything really exciting happened to you since the last time we talked?
• What are some things you remember talking about in the first interview?
• How did you feel after the first interview? Is there anything from the first interview that you would like to talk about?

Place of origin:
• What would you like to tell me about the place where you were born?
• When you think about the place where you were born, what do you think of?
• When you think of this place, do you think of any people?
• When you think of this place, do you think of any specific places like places you might have been to or visited when you were really little?
• Do you think about this place often? Can you give me an example of time you might think about it?

Place-making:
• How do/did you learn about the place where you were born?
• Do your parents ever talk to you about your birth place? Can you give me an example of this?
• Do you ever see images of this place on TV, or in books? Can you give me an example of a time when this happened? What did you learn about this place? How did you feel about this?
• Do your friends or teachers ever ask you to talk about the place where you were born? What do you say to them? How do you describe it to them? How does this make you feel?
• Are there things that you have that remind you of the place where you were born? What are they? What do you think about when you hold them or see them?
• Are there other people or other sources who tell you about the place where you were born? Can you give me an example of this?
• Does anybody ever talk to you about people who may have known you or been related to you in your birth place?
• When you think about people in your birth place, who do you think of? Have you ever met them? How do you know what they look like? How are they related to you?
• Can you give me another example of somewhere or sometime when you learned something about your birth place? Do you remember how this made you feel?

Second drawing exercise:
I will ask the research participants to draw the second image. This exercise will focus on the child’s place of origin and how they came to know about their place of origin. This drawing will expand upon the information gained in the previous questions about place of
origin and place-making practices. I will ask them to draw their place of origin by posing the following question: When you think of your birth place, what do you think of? The following questions will be asked about the image:

- What would you like to tell me about your drawing?
- Are you in this drawing? Why or why not?
- What would you like to tell me about the place in this drawing?
- How did you learn about this place?
- Have you seen pictures or images of it before? Where?
- Have you ever been to this place before?
- What would you like to tell me about the people in this drawing?
- Do you know where you learned about the people in the drawing?
- Are these people related to you? Have you ever met them?

**Significant objects:**

If the research participants do not want to draw, they will also have the option of sharing objects with me. I will ask the research participants: Are there any objects, documents, or items that remind you or tell you of the place where you were born? Would you like to share those with me? I will ask the following questions about the objects:

- What would you like to tell me about this object?
- Where is it from/who did you receive it from?
- Do you remember the first time you received/saw/found the object?
- What do you think about or imagine when you hold or see the object?
- Do your parents know about the object?
- What do your parents say about the object or what stories do they tell about it?

**Place and identity**

- What connects you to the place where you were born? Do you consider this place to be an important part of who you are? Why or why not?
- Are any people within your birth place important to you?
- Do you ever want to visit your birth place? Why or why not?
- If you were to visit the place where you were born, where would you go? What would you do? Who would you visit?
- Are there any other places you would like to go or visit someday? Why?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself before we end the interview?
Appendix 12: Interview Questions for Adoptive Parents

Introduction:
• Can you tell me about your family background? Where were your parents born and where did they grow up? When did your family come to Canada? Where were you born? How long have you lived in Canada?
• Can you tell me about your husband/wife/partner’s family background?
• When people ask you where you are from, what do you say?
• Can you tell me about your family? Who lives in your home with you? How old are your children?
• Please tell me about deciding to adopt a child.
• How old was your child when you adopted him/her? How long did the adoption process take?

Migration:
• What country was your child adopted from? Why did you choose that country? Is there anything in particular that drew you to adopt from that country?
• Have you visited your child’s birth place? When? How many times?
• Can you tell me about your child’s migration from their birth place to Canada? Did you travel with him/her?
• Tell me about being in your child’s birth place. How long were you there? What activities did you do? What places did you visit?
• Does your child ever ask you about moving to Canada?
• Do you share stories with your child about the day they moved to Canada? Can you give me an example of a story you might tell him/her?

Place-making (Canada):
• Did you bring things for your child when you went to pick them up? Clothing? Toys? Any other items or objects? Why did you decide to bring these objects for your child?
• What sorts of things did you do to prepare for your baby/child’s arrival? Did you prepare his/her room? What sorts of things did you have in your child’s room? Why were these items important?
• What are some things you did when your baby/child arrived in Canada to make it a “home” for him/her?
• Do you remember introducing your child in the community? What people and places did you visit first? Why were these places important to visit?

Place-making (Place of origin):
• When you think of your child’s birth place, what do you think of?
• Do you ever speak to your child about their birth place? Can you give me an example of a time where this place came up in a discussion?
• Do you encourage your child to learn about or know their birth place? Why is it important/unimportant for your child to know about their birth place?
• What sorts of activities do you do with your child that may remind or inform them about their place of birth? Do you read books with them about this place? Do you share photographs or look at images of it on TV or the internet?
• Are there objects from your child’s birth place that you share with them? When you talk about these objects, what do you talk about?
• Do you ever talk to your child about certain people in the birth place? Are they related to your child? Do you feel that this is important for your child to know?
• Have you stayed in contact with any people in your child’s birth place? Is it important to you to maintain these relationships and connections? Why or why not?

Belonging and identity:
• What is your child’s favourite place? Can you give me an example of why it’s so special or important to them?
• What people are associated with this place? How are these people related or connected to your child?
• What places provide your child with a sense of belonging? Why do you feel this way?
• Do you think your child feels a sense of belonging in Canada? How about their birth place?
• Do you ever want to visit your child’s birth place? Why or why not? Would you take your child with you?
• If you do visit, what do you hope to do/see/visit when you are there? Are there specific people or places you want to visit?
• Do people ever ask you where your child is from? What do you say? Is your child usually present when this happens? How do you think they feel about this? How do you feel about this?