

Final Post Card

Emma Yaunish

Land Acknowledgement

This ethnographic research project had the honour and privilege of being conducted on the ancestral territory of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, situated in Kamloops, on the unceded, sovereign and ancestral lands of the Secwépemc Nation in British Columbia.

Introduction

There is a photograph sitting in my mother's home in Kamloops, British Columbia. In it, a woman is holding a baby on her lap, and a man stands behind them both. The baby is smiling. It is November 1994, and the three of them are in Vilnius, Lithuania, and the woman has just completed one of the most difficult, bureaucratically obstructed, and institutionally hostile processes a single woman in Canada could undertake in the early 1990s: international adoption as an unmarried woman.

But she did it anyway.

This project began as an academic exercise in learning the finer points of ethnographic method, and during the course of this assignment, it became something else entirely. At its centre is a one-hour ethnographic interview conducted with my adoptive mother, Cynthia Yaunish, an observational study at MacDonald Park and a sustained engagement with scholarship on single-parent adoption, feminist ethnographic method, and decolonized research practice. What emerged from these intersecting methods was not just an answer to a research question, but a more complete understanding of a story I have been a main character within for thirty-two years without ever formally sitting with it.

Postcard and Description



Figure 1: Image of Anthony Yaunish, Cynthia Yaunish and Emma Yaunish, taken in Vilnius, Lithuania, November 11th, 1994. (Yaunish 1994)

When I asked my mother what images or feelings come to mind when thinking about her experience of international, single-parent adoption, she mentioned a photo (C. Yaunish 2026, 53:57). This is that photo. Many times throughout my life, I have been told a story about this photograph. By my aunts, by my grandparents when they were still alive, and by my mother. The story I have been told is that this is the first time anyone saw me smile. Apparently, the nurse taking the photograph was shocked by the event, enough to tell my grandfather and mom that this was the first time they had seen me do it. When I was a child and teenager, I doubted the validity of that account. As an adult who is certainly older and a little wiser, having a full understanding of my origins, the circumstances of my birth, and the socioeconomic realities of my country of origin, I am much less doubtful.

I fully recognize that the nurses of that orphanage did the best that they could with the limited resources they had. However, there are a few realities of that time and place that my mother did not touch on in our interview. Circumstances and realities that truly make my family's lifelong story of this photo all the more remarkable and possible. I was nine months old when this photograph was taken, but what you cannot see from this photograph is the severe atrophy that affected both of my legs. I could not walk, let alone crawl, and my ability to even roll and sit up independently was minimal. I could hold my head up independently, and that was about it. Usually, for a nine-month-old, this would be exceptionally concerning, but this, my reality, was entirely circumstantial. In the orphanage, we were seldom held, and the nurses had limited resources to provide the kind of supervision and support that an individual baby needs to meet growth and development milestones. As you can imagine, I also had a fairly flat head. Having been dropped at the hospital only two weeks after birth, I spent most of my life at this point in the orphanage, in a bassinet. In consideration of this, it does not seem so improbable that I hadn't smiled until this point. It has been thirty-two years since that picture was taken, and it has elicited different feelings through different stages of my life. As a child, I would listen to the stories and soak them up, not really understanding the gravity of them, but knowing it was important to remember.

When my grandfather passed away, this photo became a bittersweet reminder of the life and family relationships I had before he died. At his funeral, a massive falling out occurred between my mom and two of her sisters that was partly centred around feelings of envy and anger around my relationship with my grandfather, which they felt was unfair, given he had biological grandchildren and I was not one of them (C. Yaunish 2026, 22:14). I know this because it was a very public argument at the funeral itself, and the catalyst for this blow-up was the difference in the choice of representative flower between the grandchildren. My cousins were represented by a red rose each, and I, an absolute masterpiece of a rose that had been coloured to be a rainbow. This was something that was apparently requested specifically by my grandfather. My relationships with my grandmother and my aunts were never the same after this occurred, and this picture served as a memory of the person whose death created so much loss and chaos that, at that time, I did not understand.

As an adult, I can forgive the ultimately pathetic and petty selfishness of some of the adults in my family who felt that was an appropriate choice of behaviour towards a ten-year-old over a flower that they did not select. The irony behind this statement by my grandfather was that it was not meant to be a statement of his loving me above my cousins; it was something that he, my mom, and I have always held between us three. It was a sign that I should be myself. Just before my grandfather passed, I was sitting in his hospital bed while he was chatting with my mom.

I can remember they were talking about boys, I was going to turn 11 soon, and he was teasingly asking me if I had any crushes. I remember looking at my mom, slightly terrified, and then back at him before muttering something to the effect of “I do not like boys. I like girls.” I don’t remember exactly what he said to me after this, or even what we talked about, but I do remember that I left that day feeling no shame, just acceptance and love. The motivation my grandfather had behind selecting the rose he did was his way of saying he supported and accepted my queerness. I have always known this about myself, but growing up in a Catholic family, you can never know how that kind of admission will be received. Perhaps the only reason that I did not suppress this aspect of my identity, especially after such a traumatic experience connected to it, is entirely because of the life that I have been blessed to live and the incredible woman who raised me to love myself and do so without judgment. And she is clearly the incredible person she is because of the care and nurture she was shown, most especially by my grandfather.

We went back home to Calgary shortly after this visit, and shortly after that, we received the call that my grandfather had passed away. Although I miss him every day, even twenty-two years later, in some ways I am more fortunate than most because I will never have to forget his voice. My grandfather spent a lot of his life volunteering, and as a RCAF veteran, one of those volunteering positions was with the Memory Project. This project, which can be described as ethnographic, asked WWII veterans to talk about their experiences during the war, and as such, I can hear my grandfather speak simply by visiting a website (The Memory Project 2022). I have done this many times when I have needed comfort or just to not forget him.

What this picture and this project have brought to my awareness, beyond my growing skills as an ethnographer and ever-increasing assurance that I have chosen the right academic

field, is the exceptional gratitude I feel. Even more incredible was the realization that now I possess an audio recording of the voices of both of the most important people in my life! My mother is getting older and one day, she will not be here anymore. One day, our interview will be one of the few things I will have to stop from forgetting her voice, and because of this, I will treasure it and this experience for the rest of my life.

Literature Review, Research Report and Reflections

Research Question and Methodology

My ethnographic research project asked: What are the motivating factors, structural barriers and personal negotiations that shaped one single woman's decision to become a mother through international adoption in the early 1990s, and how did those experiences reflect broader patriarchal and institutional structures? This project, and its research question, were inspired by both my long-standing personal admiration and curiosity about my adoptive mother's experience of becoming my parent, a story I had been told pieces of over my lifetime, but never formally sat with. To answer my research question, I utilized two sources of data: a one-hour observation at a local park and an ethnographic interview as my primary methodologies.

On March 23rd, 2026, I spent approximately one hour observing parent-child interactions at MacDonald Park in Kamloops, British Columbia, using a combination of field notes and field drawings as my data collection methods. I had entered this observation planning to focus specifically on maternal behaviour, analyzed through a feminist lens, as the most direct methodological precursor to my interview research. What I found instead was that a genuinely feminist analysis of caregiving required watching everyone in the scene, not just the mothers and

children. The data I collected on fathers, older siblings, and caretaking companions was often more analytically compelling than the maternal interactions I had originally intended to prioritize, and discarding it would have meant discarding what those interactions had to tell me. The realization that observing through a feminist lens means expanding rather than narrowing the frame was carried directly into my approach to the interview. The observations also surfaced a theme that became more significant in retrospect: caregiving at the park was distributed unevenly, with one adult in nearly every family doing the visible emotional and physical work while the other was present, but peripheral. That pattern of invisible labour and unequal distribution was exactly what my mother had anticipated and planned around when she decided to adopt as an unmarried woman.

Before engaging in the interview, I sought to develop and hone my skills as an ethnographer. To learn how to take high-quality field notes, organize them and analyze them, as well as how to conduct an ethnographic interview, what kinds of questions to ask and when to ask them to elicit the best responses, I leaned heavily on the works and instructions of Emerson et al. (2011) and Mannick and McGarry (2017). The ethnographic work of Alonso Bejarano et al. (2019) influenced my decision to conduct this project under a decolonized framework, and the work by ethnographers Elliott and Culhane (2017) informed the feminist framework underlying this project. The ethnographic and fine art fusion taught by Causey (2017) brought forward a level of self-awareness, observational awareness, and spatial understanding that made both the observation and reflection processes during this project richer and more complete.

On April 30th, 2026, I conducted a semi-structured ethnographic interview with my mother at her home in Kamloops, British Columbia. With her prior, informed consent, our interview was audio recorded and later fully transcribed. I approached the interview with a

pre-designed set of questions that were arranged to move loosely from her early adult life and motivations, through the adoption process itself, into reflections on family, community and what she would want others to know. The questions were designed to be open enough for narrative digression, but specific enough as not to detract too far from the research question, which is central to life history ethnography as a method (Mannick and McGarry 2017). In addition to the observation and interview, I maintained both content and process field notes throughout the course, which informed my analytical approach, my positionality statement, and my reflections on the interview encounter itself. I also completed a literature review of relevant scholarship to situate my findings theoretically. The methodological framework I chose to work within is explicitly feminist and decolonized, centring lived experience as a legitimate and valuable site of knowledge production (Alonoso Bejarano et al. 2019).

Ethical Approach: Collaborators

My primary, although unofficial, research collaborator in this project was my mother, Cynthia Yaunish, who also happens to be the primary participant within the second phase of my project, the ethnographic interview. This dual relationship, researcher and daughter, required careful and ongoing ethical attention. Before the interview, I provided my mother with a complete consent form, which in writing explained the project, its purposes, what would be done with the data and asked for explicit direction and permission regarding how she would be referenced within the work. As the participant, she was informed that her participation was entirely voluntary, she had the full right to refuse or stop the interview at any time, and she was made aware that she could review the transcript, final reports or any other data at any time, and

request changes. Verbal consent for recording was requested and received a second time at the commencement of the interview recording. These practices align with the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent and participant autonomy as outlined in both Athabasca University's ethical research policies and procedures and the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Research Involving Humans (Athabasca University 2016; Government of Canada 2018).

Within this project, I also gave sustained attention to the ethics of my own positionality. My relational proximity to the participant is not a neutral variable; I am the child she adopted, and the story she is being asked to share is as much mine as it is hers. Following the works of Alonso Bejarano et al. (2019), I treated this proximity not as a source of bias to be corrected, but as the generative context through which knowledge in this project was produced. Throughout the interview, I remained conscious of when to probe a topic and when to let it rest. These responses were noted in my process field notes as a form of reflexive data, rather than a conflict of interest to be avoided at all costs (Emerson et al. 2011). I also made the deliberate choice not to pursue certain lines of questioning that felt they might be more tender or potentially distressing, which is consistent with the ethical principle of non-maleficence in research relationships (Mannick and McGarry 2017). This was most directly exhibited in my choice not to pursue lines of questioning around her sisters further.

For the first time in almost twelve years, at the end of May, all of my aunts will be travelling to Kamloops for a week to spend time all together. My mom is already nervous about this event and wants it to go well, so I did not want to ask anything that could lead to a recall of bad memories, which might lead to conflict during this event. I am fine with reflecting on these things myself, and here with you, as I did within my description of the photograph at the beginning of this assignment, but I felt that to probe further on this topic when the exceptional

event of proximity to the people in question was imminent would be potentially irresponsible and inflammatory. A final ethical consideration was the presence of third parties within the transcript. Several people are named or referred to in the interview who did not consent to participate in this research. As such, I have used first names only where necessary and have not included any identifying details in my analysis.

Literature Review

The sources that most directly informed this project addressed single-parenthood by choice, intercountry adoption, ethnographic method, and the ethics of feminist and decolonized research practices. What follows is a synthesis of the most relevant contributions reflected within my research findings. Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik (2007) provide the most precise theoretical framework for understanding my mother's experience. Their study of adoptive single mothers by choice examines the tension between private maternal identity and the public scrutiny these women face, arguing that single adoptive mothers must continuously negotiate the legitimacy of their families within societies that privilege nuclear, biological parental structures and households (823).

This framework was directly reflected in my mother's account, particularly her experience with the Lithuanian embassy official who stalled her paperwork and charged her exorbitant fees because of his personal objections to single women adopting (C. Yaunish 2026, 10:59-11:54; E. Yaunish 2026b, 04/30/2026). Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik (2007) also note that these women tend to develop a strong, stable maternal identity that persists in the face of social challenge (831). I believe this was best expressed in my mother's quiet, four-word

conclusion to the interview, “ I wouldn’t change anything” (C. Yaunish 2026, 47:35; E. Yaunish 2026b, 04/30/2026, 05/01/2026).

Mannis (2000) offered a complementary portrait of single women who pursued international adoption, identifying a consistent pattern of feminist independence, moral clarity and community-building across her participants (37-38, 48-53). Her argument that the choice to adopt internationally as a single person is not just a personal decision but a generative social act resonated strongly with what I found in my mother's story. When my mother could not find an existing support network for single adoptive parents, she built one (C. Yaunish 2026, 32:52; E. Yaunish 2026b, 04/30/2026, 05/01/2026). Mannis's (2000) work helped me to recognize this as feminist agency in practice, not just a pragmatic coping strategy. Poveda et al. (2013) provided a contemporary lens into how adoption professionals construct single applicants as simultaneously capable and deficient relative to married couples, framing them as “exceptional” in ways that ultimately marginalize their applications (36-38, 43-51). The Canadian adoption agencies that my mother encountered at the start of her adoption journey did exactly this by only offering her “special needs” children and citing birth mothers’ preferences for two-parent households (C. Yaunish 2026, 04:45-07:28; E. Yaunish 2026b, 04/30/2026, 05/01/2026). Poveda et al.’s (2013) work helped me name this gatekeeping as structural, rather than incidental.

Alonso Bejarano et al. (2019) grounded my methodological approach within this project, especially their argument that lived experience constitutes a valid and necessary site of knowledge production, which was central to my decision to conduct a single-case, in-depth ethnographic interview (47, 82). Their work (2019) also gave me the language to defend my positionality as the adopted daughter of my research participant: within a decolonized, feminist framework, the proximity between myself and my mother was and is a source of depth, not

contamination (32). Mannick and McGarry (2017) provided practical and theoretical guidance on the ethnographic method throughout this project and course. Their (2017) attention to the ethics of the researcher-participant relationship and the specific quality of reflection that a deliberate, recorded interview produces shaped how I designed my questions and managed the interview itself (69-85, 105-141). The distinction they draw between casual conversation and ethnographic interview, that the latter asks people to sit with their own stories in a structured and consequential way, was borne of my mother's responses, which were much more precise and vulnerable than I had anticipated (Mannick and McGarry 2017, 73).

Emerson et al. (2011) helped design and refine my field note-taking practices as well as my approach to reflexivity. The framing of their concept of 'participating to write' allows for the inclusion of the researcher's emotional responses as data worth noting, rather than noise or subjectivity to be filtered, giving me permission and inspiration to include my own reactions in both my content and process field notes, and in my final analyses (Emerson et al. 2011, 140-158). The five hours I spent transcribing the interview were, following their approach, a form of analysis and reflection in its own right. Finally, Polat (2025) offered methodological guidance on thematic analysis that I applied in reviewing the transcript and identifying the four segments I included within my third assignment for this course (3-8). Her emphasis on staying close to participants' own words and resisting premature theoretical closure was useful in keeping my analysis grounded in what my mother actually said, rather than what I expected to find or assumed beforehand.

Important Findings

This project produced three important findings at each of its stages: one within the interview stage, one within the observation stage and one after the analyses were completed, of a deeply personal and reflective nature. The first finding, deduced after the ethnographic interview had been completed, is one that I had not fully anticipated when I undertook this research question. I had anticipated that my mother would encounter structural and patriarchal barriers during her adoption journey, and this was reflected in her experiences with institutional gatekeeping and obstruction from patriarchal officials. What I did not expect was how she would turn these experiences outward and use her experiences to help others. I had always assumed that my mother had just found the single adoptive parents' support group, perhaps in a phone book or by word of mouth. I never considered or imagined that she could be *THE* founding member of a community that would go on to support hundreds of single mothers and fathers as they underwent the process of adoption. Her experiences and the absence of support she encountered inspired her to build a community to support others going through the process; she became the person that other single mothers looked up in the phone book or heard about through word of mouth. This legacy she created still exists today; the group still exists, albeit with different members and experiences filling and informing it.

Despite my best attempts to enter the interview without preconceived notions or expectations, I did have hope that I would find evidence of feminist independence and resistance, and I was not disappointed. What the interview made visible is that her response to these systems was generative rather than merely defensive. The support group she helped build and sustain was not incidental to her story; it was an expression of those same values that drove her decision to

adopt in the first place. Mannis (2000) frames this kind of community-building as a form of feminist agency, and I think that framing is entirely accurate. In hindsight, the observation at MacDonald Park seemed to be a prologue to this finding. During this stage of the project, I had watched nuclear family after nuclear family in which two adults were present, but only one was actively caregiving at any given time (E.Yaunish 2026a, 03/26/2026). The unequal distribution of labour, so ordinary it was almost invisible, was something my mother had looked at squarely, honestly and had accounted for, before she ever filed a single piece of paperwork (C.Yaunish 2026, 1:36-2:36). She did not expect the caregiving to be shared, and she planned accordingly (C. Yaunish 2026, 03:51-06:01).

What I found in the park that day surfaced a pattern I had not anticipated going in: in nearly every family present, one adult was doing the active, visible work of caregiving while the other was present but peripheral (E.Yaunish 2026a, 03/26/2026). What made this finding more analytically interesting was that the most attentive and engaged caregiving I observed that day was coming from fathers, not mothers; a direct inversion of the social norm I had entered the observation expecting to document. This unequal and often invisible distribution of caregiving labour was not incidental background noise; it became the clearest methodological bridge between my observation and my interview. My mother had seen this pattern, or something very much like it, clearly enough to plan around it before she filed a single piece of paperwork. She did not assume the labour would be shared, and she structured her decision accordingly. The observation made visible what the interview confirmed: that the unequal distribution of caregiving within families is so normalized it becomes nearly invisible to those inside it, and my mother's decision to parent alone was, among other things, a deliberate refusal to enter that arrangement without full awareness of what it would require.

The last finding of this project illuminated is one that a strictly quantitative framework would have no place for, but that a feminist and decolonized ethnographic approach not only accommodates but actively invites as a legitimate site of knowledge production (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019). What this project made visible is how clearly I can trace the things I value most about myself: my instinct to push back against systems that limit what is possible and for whom, my tendency to build the supports I need when they do not exist, my care for people experiencing stigmatization and marginalization, and my ability to define myself without needing that definition complemented by a partner, directly back to my mother and the way she chose to live (E.Yaunish 2026a, 04/30/2026; E.Yaunish 2026b, 05/01/2026). This is not an incidental biographical detail. Within the framework this project operates under, the researcher's own formation is data, and what this project documented is that the values I once assumed were intrinsic to me were, in fact, modelled. That, I believe, is a finding worth naming.

Intended Recipients and Reach

This research is primarily for single individuals of all gender identities, sexual orientations and ethnic backgrounds who are considering becoming parents through adoption, particularly those who are navigating a process that was not designed with them in mind or who may feel isolated in their experience. It is also for practitioners: social workers, adoption agencies, and policy makers who can make these processes more equitable and less adversarial for single applicants. More broadly, this research is for anyone interested in how people move through and against institutional structures that were not built to accommodate them, and what supports individuals can build when they find existing systems and structures lacking. The story my

mother told is specific, but the dynamics it reveals around gatekeeping, patriarchal obstruction, the absence of support structures and the community that gets created to fill that absence are not unique to international single-parent adoption. Similar legacies of patriarchy and colonialism also impact collective and individual autonomy for couples seeking to adopt, both within their country and internationally, often because of factors like sexual orientation, gender identity and colourism.

In terms of reach, the most direct path would be through organizations that support adoptive parents and prospective single adoptive parents, such as parent groups, adoption agencies, and advocacy organizations. A condensed, accessible version of this research could be constructed and shared through those networks. The photo of myself, my mother and my grandfather, along with the accompanying descriptive writing that was submitted as part of this assignment, could also function as a starting point for conversations in those spaces, because it is immediate and visual in a way that a research report is not. The more theoretical aspects of this work could serve as examples or talking points within academic publications in adoption studies or feminist anthropology, as the research question informing this project certainly warrants further exploration within these spaces.

Output Mediums

Within this project, a combination of multiple outputs, including field drawings, audio recording, photography, and descriptive, creative writing, was used to capture and describe the things I experienced and the data I analyzed. I believe this choice was necessary to fully capture contextual and nuanced aspects of my project and its findings. In my initial data collection phases, most notably during my observation assignment, I found field drawings and field notes

most effective to relay my findings. Within the interview phase of this project, audio recording and descriptive field notes were the most effective outputs. Now, at the final phase of this project, where my goal is to present you with the most comprehensive and complete account of my experiences during this project and course, I find myself drawing from a multitude of creative outputs, including photography, creative descriptive writing, audio recording and fine art drawing.

The photograph at the beginning of this assignment, my mother smiling while holding a smiling baby me on their lap while having my grandfather standing protectively behind her, tells a story by itself that no amount of written analysis can replicate. It is immediate. It communicates the joy and relief felt at the end of a long and difficult process in a single frame. It does not explain, it shows. For an audience member or reader unfamiliar with the research or the context, this picture serves as an entry point that creates an emotional connection before a single word of analysis is read. Watts (2021) describes the postcard as a way of capturing the moments that ‘snag and catch’ attention (74), and this photograph serves as exactly that for me and for this project, for it has been capturing my and my family's attention for thirty-two years.

At the same time, a photograph by itself cannot carry the weight or describe everything this project uncovered. The structural analysis, the institutional gatekeeping, the patriarchal obstruction, and the community-building in the absence of support all require written language to be properly conveyed. My personal reflections, especially the section about my grandfather and what his rainbow rose meant, required the use of literary prose to develop and explain. Writing, especially within my field notes, allowed me to hold complexity, make connections between my mother's experience and existing scholarship, and work through my own emotional responses to the materials in a way that a photograph or a drawing could never achieve.

The written description I produced to accompany the photograph served as a bridge between these methodologies: it is more personal and more narrative than the research report, but more reflective and analytical than the image alone. The addition of the audio file from my grandfather, and the reflections and connections this audio file brought forward regarding gratitude, capturing memory and the importance of creative ethnographic methodologies felt like the perfect final creative inclusion to complete this project. Together, these three outputs: photography, creative writing and audio recording, do something that none of them could do individually, but can come together to produce wonderfully: a snapshot of authentic, lived human experience from a completely human perspective.

The final creative output of this project is one still in progress at the time of submission: a hand-drawn portrait of the photograph that opens this assignment. This drawing was undertaken deliberately and for two reasons that are not entirely separable from one another. The first is methodological. Within a feminist and decolonized ethnographic framework, creative and artistic outputs are recognized as legitimate forms of knowledge production and representation, capable of capturing dimensions of lived experience that written analysis cannot fully reach (Causey 2017; Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019). A hand-drawn rendering of this image required me to sit with it differently than I have in thirty-two years of looking at it: slowly, deliberately, with sustained attention to every detail of expression and posture and light. That process is itself a form of analysis. The second reason is relational. My mother gave this project her time, her voice, and her willingness to sit with a story that is as much mine as it is hers. The drawing is a gift in return: something made by hand, from her daughter, that she can keep. Within a research framework that treats the relationship between researcher and participant as generative rather

than extractive, returning something tangible to the person at the centre of the work feels not only appropriate, but necessary.

Personal Reflections

While I could easily fill a dozen pages with insights, revelations and awakenings this project and this course have brought forth in myself, for the sake of conciseness and in consideration of my existing tendency towards lengthy papers, I will focus on two. The first, and perhaps the most important thing that I have learned on a practical level from this project and this course, is that I absolutely love the field I have chosen to study under, I am capable of doing the work that anthropology and ethnography demand from a researcher, and I am capable of doing it well. I feel privileged to have found a discipline that ‘fills my cup’ intellectually and personally, that works to do better than its past and recognizes, now more than ever, that the true discovery of humanity and all its beautiful variations necessitates the inclusion of diverse perspectives, research paradigms and ways of knowing.

The second personal awareness I have discovered through this project is just how much who I am, what I value, and how I hold and carry myself through the world is the result of nurture, rather than nature. I have always suspected that my circumstances, being adopted and not having contact with my birth family until adulthood, were factors that could provide analytically important information around the argument of nature versus nurture. While my case is just one of many, and thus not necessarily statistically significant or applicable to a general population, I do feel this project answered that question for me. What I know now that I did not know before this experience is that I am absolutely more of a product of nurture than nature, as it

was nurture over nature that had a more fundamental and profound influence on who I have become, and still might yet.

Future Ethnographic Research Potential

Ethnography can most certainly be beneficial to both my own community and my research community of adoptive single parents. One of the most clear benefits that my experience conducting this research project has highlighted is that ethnographic methods produce meaningful, relevant knowledge about communities and people that have non-normative experiences. This knowledge can be used to bring awareness, direct policy, alter public opinion and even change legislation (Alonso Berajano et al. 2019). Single-parent families formed through international adoption are a community I belong to, and the story I documented is my own origin story. Ethnography gave me a method for sitting with that story formally and analytically, which produced a different kind of understanding than thirty-two years of living inside it. The deliberate, recorded, ethically-framed encounter of the interview asked my mother to reflect in a way that our ordinary conversations, for all their depth, had not done before.

On a larger scale, I think ethnography, as a research methodology, is particularly well-suited to communities and experiences that do not fit the dominant social norms or for whom issues of equity and access are paramount. It appears ethnography would serve as especially useful within these niches where literature gaps exist and where lived experience contains complexities that surveys and statistics cannot directly capture. The ethnographic method seems custom-built for work that explores marginalized or highly sensitive experiences. Going forward, as I work to develop my skills in this methodology and come into my own as an anthropologist and researcher, I will always remember and hold dear to me this first

ethnographic experience, especially in how my mother, the person responsible for my sense of justice and motivation generally (which I once thought intrinsic to myself), once again helped to build my foundation and start me on my path by being my first ethnographic participant.

Conclusion

My project set out to understand the motivating factors, structural barriers, and personal negotiations that shaped one single woman's decision to become a mother through international adoption in the early 1990s. What it found was all of that, and considerably more. My mother encountered institutional gatekeeping, patriarchal obstruction, and the near-total absence of support structures designed for someone in her position, apart from those inherent in her family circle. Her response to each of these was not retreat, but expansion: she built what did not exist, supported others who came after her, and raised a child who would eventually sit across from her as a grown woman with a recorder, asking her to tell the whole story from the beginning.

The findings of this project point toward a clear gap in both practice and scholarship. Single adoptive parents, particularly those navigating international systems, continue to encounter processes that were not designed with them in mind. Future research into how these variables have or have not changed for single parents pursuing international adoption today offers an exciting opportunity for comparative exploration of these factors against those of the past. Ethnography, as a methodology, is particularly well-suited to documenting these experiences and changes with a nuance and depth that quantitative methods cannot reach, and further research in this space is not only warranted but necessary. On a personal level, what this project made visible is difficult to overstate. I came into it knowing my mother was remarkable. I left it understanding, in specific and documented terms, exactly why that is. The discipline I have chosen gave me a method for sitting with my own origin story formally, analytically, and left me with a deep and genuine gratitude, and that is not something I will ever forget.

There is one final output from this project that I have been working on over the past few weeks: a hand-drawn portrait of the photograph that my mother identified in our interview as the image that comes to mind when she thinks of her experience of single-parent, international adoption. The drawing will be given to her later this week. Sharing this artwork, both in this final postcard and with my parent-participant, feels like the right way to close a project that was never just academic and to reciprocate in some way for all that my mom has done to help me to learn and grow, now and throughout my life. She gave me my origin story, my values, my first experience as an ethnographic interviewer, and the critical self-awareness and empathy that comes from thirty-two years of being raised by someone who built what did not exist when she and others needed it. A drawing seems like a small thing to provide in return for such a contribution. But it is made by hand, hands that she selflessly made capable, and captures her very first moment of motherhood, from which very many beautiful moments have followed and from which the inspiration for this project was borne.



Figure 2: Dotwork Portraiture, an act of both reciprocity and creative representation.
(Yaunish and Yaunish 2026)

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