

GHOST KINGDOMS AND PHANTOM WORLDS:  
NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN ADOPTEE AUTOFICTION

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## DEDICATION

For Emery Rose, my favorite human who I know will someday read this and everything else.

For the adoptee community, a warm and fierce group of people I am honored to be a part of. It turns out I'm not the only one. Thank you for all you do.

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## ABSTRACT

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### GHOST KINGDOMS AND PHANTOM WORLDS: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN ADOPTEE AUTOFICTION

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In this thesis, I investigate Betty Jean Lifton's theory of the Ghost Kingdom as it appears in adoptee-written narratives. Lifton describes the Ghost Kingdom as a "psychic reality" where what-if projections of lost or wished for persons (often conceptualized as characters) reside. Her theory describes both the ontological position of the adoptee situated in reality and the possible worlds they create within themselves through mental activity. Adoptees exist in both of these worlds simultaneously. Using primarily narrative theory, I argue that Lifton's Ghost Kingdom is a narrative framework adoptees use to compose narratives that blur the distinction between reality and fiction. When the narratives of such Ghost Kingdoms are written, they serve as a representation of a nexus of possible worlds where the imagined and the real can coexist. I demonstrate with this thesis how adoptee Ghost Kingdom narratives fill "the gap" between what could have been and what is with an imaginary world where characters and possible worlds "haunt" adoptees in reality. These fictions are adoptee responses to trauma and ambiguous loss, so they serve as an important building block for identity development in addition to acting as a substitute for a significant gap of knowledge about the self. To fill this gap, they create narratives that are fictional, yet they make up very real aspects of the adoptee's identity.

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## CHAPTER I

### AN INTRODUCTION TO GHOST KINGDOMS

In the fifth season of *This is Us*, a popular NBC drama, Randall explains to his brother, Kevin, what a Ghost Kingdom is according to Randall's transracial adoptee support group. Randall describes a Ghost Kingdom as "like an alternate reality in your mind where you imagine the life you would have had if you were never adopted" ("Brotherly Love"). In his Ghost Kingdom, he imagined that the friendly librarian who let him check out extra books and the weatherman on television, the only two Black adults he saw regularly who looked like him, were his true parents. He goes on to explain that as a child he felt guilty about the daydreams he had in his Ghost Kingdom, which is why he never spoke about them.

Shedding light on this kind of inner adoptee narrative the way *This Is Us* does is not only a rare moment that such a complex adoption issue is accurately brought to light; it is also important to the adoptee community because it helps validate those with similar experiences to Randall's. Adoptees like Randall often endure a critical lack of knowledge about themselves and their biological history. Ghost Kingdom narratives bring to light the creative ways in which adoptees often build their realities by implementing fiction in place of unknown facts. Because of the ways in which they rhetorically employ fictional strategies in the construction of their life narratives, these narratives are worth investigating as a unique combination of both lifewriting and fiction writing. Additionally, other narratives concerning critical gaps of knowledge about the self, like those adoptees experience, might benefit from an investigation of this narrative model.

## What Are Ghost Kingdoms?

While the explanation of Ghost Kingdoms in *This Is Us* is, as the writer Jon Dorsey said in an interview, “melt[ed] ... down to the most basic kind of concept,” Randall’s explanation is the primary definition of Ghost Kingdoms that most commonly reaches the general public (Hunt). However, the full and more nuanced explanation of what a Ghost Kingdom is in adoptee psychologist and activist Betty Jean Lifton’s third book, *Journey of the Adopted Self: A Quest for Wholeness*, which narrates the internal adoptee experience. Primarily, a Ghost Kingdom is an internal psychic construction that all members of the adoption circle, the birthparents, extended birth family, adoptive parents, extended adoptive family, siblings, and the adoptee, may create consciously or unconsciously. This internal realm often includes characters who may or may not exist in real life but are represented in a fictionalized manner so that each family member might have a private space in which to fantasize about the possibilities of a life not lived.

For the purpose of my project, I focus on case studies that either engage with or can be interpreted with Lifton’s Ghost Kingdom theory from an adoptee’s perspective. I do so because I myself am an adoptee and feel confident that I can speak on such a subject with authority, given my own lived experience. Furthermore, Lifton herself was an adoptee, so I prefer to examine narratives that interact with her theory from an adoptee perspective. Additionally, I feel that adoptee-written narratives specifically give their audiences a unique perspective on the importance of exploration of the actual self via the act of fiction-making.

Though I focus exclusively on the adoptee’s perspective of this phenomena, internal fiction-making does span across the triad, affecting each family member, especially the birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptee, differently. Lifton explains in her book that



The adopted child is always accompanied by the ghost of the child he might have been had he stayed with his birth mother and by the ghost of the fantasy child his adoptive parents might have had. He is also accompanied by the ghost of the birth mother, from whom he has never completely disconnected, and the ghost of the birth father, hidden behind her. The adoptive mother and father are accompanied by the ghost of the perfect biological child they might have had, who walks beside the adopted child who is taking its place. The birth mother [and father, to a lesser extent] is accompanied by a retinue of ghosts. The ghost of the baby she gave up. The ghost of her lost lover, whom she connects with the baby. The ghost of the mother she might have been. And the ghosts of the baby's adoptive parents. (*Journey of the Adopted Self* 11)

I leave Lifton's explanation intact here because she explains the many different possibilities for ghosts from each different perspective of the adoptive family in a concise way. These collective ghosts, Lifton contends, are part of the internal fantasy world she refers to as a Ghost Kingdom. But the ghost characters that exist here are not the entire psychic scenario she lays out in her book. Many adoptees, she claims, retreat into this Ghost Kingdom to play out fantasies about what could have happened if the life events for all involved had happened differently or to test scenarios that might play out in the future. Would the adoptive parents have adopted a child if they had no fertility issues? Would the biological parents have kept a child if they had more financial support? Would the child exist at all if abortion had been accessible? How might a birth parent react upon a surprise reunion? There are endless possible worlds that might exist internally when an adoptee explores these counterfactuals.

She also states that adoptees have the choice of leaving one's internal world and facing the ghosts, if you will, by "crossing over" (142). According to Lifton, "Crossing over means building a bridge between the material world one has lived in and the shadowy Ghost Kingdom one has fantasized about" (142). In other words, adoptees cross over when they seek out reunion or go searching for their biological relatives. When they do so, they build a bridge between the fantasies they have had of these relatives and the actual people they may find. The fantasies and the ghosts that haunt adoptees during periods of unknowing hold the potential to turn into actual people later on (like, for instance, if the adoptive parents are suddenly able to reproduce or if biological relatives are found via reunion); but the opposite can also be true, that these ghosts may never manifest in what we call reality or the actual world.

To clarify, Ghost Kingdoms are not situations where people are being literally haunted by actual ghosts. Instead, the language used in this theory is highly metaphorical. The use of the metaphor allows people to expand their imaginations to understand previously unknown experiences. In this case, people outside of the adoption circle may not automatically be able to imagine what the experience must be like to have such significant gaps in the knowledge one has about oneself, but when members of the adoption circle use the metaphorical language of ghosts as they do in these narratives, their audiences may have a better understanding of the experience. The idea of ghosts in fiction is one so common that it has essentially been naturalized as a metaphor. In other words, when a reader encounters a ghost in a narrative, they come armed with a schema or a general idea of ghost functions and possible metaphorical meanings. According to Shuying An, schema theory "is an explanation of how readers use prior knowledge to comprehend and learn from text" (130). Because of readers' previous interactions interpreting

texts with ghosts and thereby a collective schema concerning ghosts, readers already possess an advantageous pre-built conception that aids them in successfully interpreting the narrative.

Ghost Kingdoms or internal fantasies that arise from a lack of information materialize in narrative in a myriad of different ways that I explore in three separate case studies of adoptee-written narratives that integrate Ghost Kingdom themes. Whether a person consciously visits their fantasies, only wonders about their circumstances fleetingly, or simply lets the emotions lie repressed, Ghost Kingdom fantasies seem to be a fundamental piece of cognition that aids a person in establishing a sense of self and putting their life into a narrative order. Amid so many unknowns in their own lives, adoptees are drawn to create stories and worlds that not only affect their identities but also help create their narrative identities, a concept defined by Dan McAdams as “the internalized, evolving story of the self that each person crafts to provide his or her life with a sense of purpose and unity” (233). These daydreams are especially prevalent to adoptees whose adoptions are laced with secrecy, deception, and shame or, in other words, situations that allow a significant gap of knowledge about the self to exist.

### **The History of Ghost Kingdoms**

Although Lifton developed the Ghost Kingdom theory in 1994, she was actually writing toward this idea in her earlier publications. In her memoir, *Twice Born: Memoirs of an Adopted Daughter* and another book on adoption in 1979, *Lost & Found: The Adoption Experience*, she detailed her reunion experience and explored the experiences of all three primary members of the triad, adoptees, birthparents, and adoptive parents. In these two books, there are clues as to how she began building her theory of Ghost Kingdoms based on not only her experience as an adoptee, but also the fragments of myth and science she thought were relevant to the adoption experience. Among the most important of these clues are her references to Joseph Campbell’s

hero's journey; a term coined by a Finnish psychiatrist, "hereditary ghost;" a mesmerizing chapter by a naturalist, Loren Eiseley, that interrogates man's need for exploration of both the world beyond him and himself; and Freud's family romance.

In 1949, Joseph Campbell, a mythology professor at Sarah Lawrence College, published his book, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, where he introduced the concept of the hero's journey (also called the monomyth), which is a story template that generally follows a hero who is called to go on an adventure, overcomes obstacles, then returns home changed. His theory became wildly popular and was famously the basis of the plotline for the Star Wars franchise built by George Lucas. Part of the allure of the hero's journey was that it claimed to be a universal explanation for myths told by humans across the world, a metaphor for humankind's inner journey, and a metaphorical map of sorts that could help guide storytellers to appeal to a wide variety of audiences. Frequently cited throughout all three of Lifton's book, the hero's journey largely sets the stage for Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory in that there is an unavoidable quest in store for adoptees if they want to find meaning in their lives by accepting the call for adventure and diving into the dark abyss of their unknown hereditary past.

Lifton was not the first to use the metaphor of ghosts in relation to either the adoptee's internal struggle or mankind's more general search for knowledge. In 1964, both Max Frisk and Loren Eiseley wrote about ghosts. Frisk, a Finnish psychiatrist, wrote an article about the behavior of adopted adolescents, and in it, he used the term "hereditary ghost" to describe the lack of a "genetic ego" in adopted children (Frisk 9). He claimed that adopted children had no "genetic concept of self" which, he suggested, made identity development elusive and difficult (10). He explained that "In order to rid themselves of this ghost, a great need arose for seeing their real parents, to discover what their true character was" (10). This recommendation for

adoptees to seek out reunion would be repeated in Lifton's theory of Ghost Kingdoms. In both Frisk's article and Lifton's later work, the metaphor of genetic ghosts led to the question of whether those ghosts could be laid to rest. The term "hereditary ghost" struck a chord with Lifton, and she used it to expand on H. J. Sants' conclusion that "adopted children have ... the burden of adoption stress," and something called "genealogical bewilderment," which is when "one ... has no knowledge of his natural parents or only uncertain knowledge of them" (Lifton, *Lost & Found* 48-49). For Lifton, a woman deeply interested in myths (she published several children's books over her lifetime), the metaphor of a ghost seemed the most understandable symbol for the kind of confusion adopted children face when establishing their identities with no genetic history to aid them. Like the story of the ugly duckling, she suggested that hereditary ghosts cannot be put to rest until they are discovered and integrated into the self in reality.

Loren Eiseley's contribution to Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory can be found in his book *The Unexpected Universe*, which includes a chapter called "The Ghost Continent." In it, he likens the mysterious and unexplored Antarctica of the 1800s to the existential crisis that many people experience when they are seeking meaning in their lives, which we often attempt to do through discovery, but, as he argues, we would do better by consulting the lessons of the past. By comparing Captain James Cook's expedition of Antarctica and the journey into space going on at the time of his writing to Odysseus' famous ten year journey home in *The Odyssey*, he lays out the case that man's simultaneous searches for knowledge and tranquility are at odds with one another because, as we explore and discover cartography previously labeled terra incognita, we face inwardly our own desolation. In his opening line he says, "Every man contains within himself a ghost continent" (Eiseley 3). It is this quote that Lifton references in *Lost & Found*, as she explains that "everyone but the adopted has caught a glimpse, however fleeting, of his own

ghosts” (*Lost & Found* 5). Though Eiseley’s chapter is at once a history of exploration and a commentary on the journeys that humans embark on, in the world and within themselves, Lifton interprets his poetic musing, especially his interpretations of Odysseus, as the painting of a larger picture, one that depicts the basic human drive propelling us to seek out meaning, and truly, for adoptees especially, that journey is exactly as Eiseley portrays it: “Knowledge without sympathetic perception is barren” (13). That is to say, adoptees already face an insurmountable lack of knowledge about themselves, but even if they pursue their history or seek reunion, it is a solitary journey that is widely misunderstood except by their fellow adoptee peers. So, building on the idea that adoptees must confront those “strange shapes amidst [our] interior ice floes,” Lifton began the construction of that inner world that adoptees (and others) might build as they prepare for their own journeys toward knowing themselves (3). Her theory would not be a ghost continent, though; it would be a Ghost Kingdom.

Thus far, I have established the history of the term “ghost” and how it derives from Frisk and Eiseley’s use of it in their work which Lifton integrated into her theory, a psychic reality largely built on the foundation of Campbell’s monomyth. However, the term “kingdom” has a much more elusive history. Though there are many anecdotal records of adoptees who say they often daydreamed as children that they might secretly be royalty, there is only one other speculation I can make about Lifton’s terminology here, and that is to speculate that she adapted the idea of a kingdom from Freud’s famous notion of the family romance. In brief, Freud’s theory of the family romance contends that children may fantasize that they are not their parents’ children, but actually have parents elsewhere, often idealized, of better social standing or even royal blood (239). But as Lifton explains in *Lost & Found: The Adoption Experience*, “there really are two other parents out there” for adoptees, so while this may be a fantasy for kept

children (kept children are children who grow up with their biological family), it is not a purely fictional fantasy for adoptees because the possibility of a discovery like this is completely possible in reality for the adoptee (Lifton, *Journey* 28). Though the use of the word kingdom invites connotations of the afterlife (Kingdom Come) or of false fantasies reeking of Happily Ever After, Lifton has coined her theory with this word and the adoption community has accepted it as such. As to why the adoption community has accepted this theory at face value largely has to do with the underlying cause for the creation of such an internal world.

### **The Why of Ghost Kingdoms**

In the 1970s, when Lifton and others forayed into the unknown territory of speaking out about adoption, adoptions were still largely secret and shameful affairs. Records were sealed upon the adoption of an infant or child (and in most states, still are), unavailable even to adult adoptees unless they had a court order proving “reasonable cause,” or in other words, it depended on the judge’s mood that day. While not so direct as stamping a birth certificate with the term “illegitimate” as was the case before the 1940s, the hush-hush nature of begetting a bastard out of wedlock and the negative ramifications for both the mother and the child in such an event continued to haunt the adoptive family.

The social history of the climate of adoptions is imperative to understand, especially because when Lifton was active, most adoptions were closed and records were unavailable to adult adoptees, and therefore, shame and secrecy within families, biological and adoptive, thrived. In part, Lifton’s theory on Ghost Kingdoms reflects this culture of shame and secrecy because in such a family atmosphere of sealed lips and lies, it makes perfect sense that an adoptee would retreat inside themselves to consider the questions they know they could not ask

their adoptive parents. In an internal fantasy, they are free to imagine their other possible lives and relatives in safety.

The creation of fictional inner-narratives—what Lifton calls the Ghost Kingdom—and the textual evidence of these narratives I engage with, is due in large part to gaps in memory, pre-verbal trauma caused by maternal separation, and secrecy about events prior to memory formation. In an article about Holocaust descendants and concepts of memory, Marianne Hirsch coined the term “post-memory,” which she defined as the handed down traumatic memories that children of survivors inherit. Adoptee children do not receive specific or accurate traumatic memories via storytelling, but as Nancy Verrier argued in her 1993 book, *The Primal Wound*, when babies are separated from their mothers, “a wound which is physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual” occurs (xvi). In addition to this traumatic wound, I argue that the absence of post-memory or the sudden discovery of it can also be debilitating.

Furthermore, because of the trauma of the separation of mother and child, adoptees experience what Pauline Boss and Donna Carnes call “ambiguous loss,” which they define as “a unique kind of loss when a loved one disappears in body or mind” (456). Boss and Carnes say that “mystery persists with ambiguous loss, sometimes forever—and even across generations,” but that “rather than closure, the goal is a search for meaning” (457). Adoptees, specifically those adopted during infancy or early childhood, know what ambiguous loss is. They grow up hearing things like, “you’re so lucky,” when in reality, they have lost ties with their physical mother and emotional bonds with biological relatives who are very much alive, but lost as if dead to the adoptee. Because of the dominant narratives surrounding adoption, mostly told by adoption agencies and adoptive parents, adoptees do not often have the space to even grieve their losses without being shamed for acting ungratefully.



The pain of their loss becomes a buried and misunderstood trauma, especially in situations where the adoptee overwhelmingly hears the perceived positives of their adoption but are given no space or words for the negatives. As Cathy Caruth says, “The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). What this means for adoptees is that with the loss of their biological ties, their birth stories, and more, their personal histories become impossible to understand. Because adoptees carry a truly devastating trauma, to be separated from their biological and social history and implanted into a new one, their histories are complicated and fragile. David Kessler has said that everyone has “a need for their grief to be witnessed” and by writing their stories, even fictionalized versions of them, adoptees are allowing audiences outside of themselves to witness various versions of grief from their adoption. That is where Ghost Kingdom fantasies and possible worlds may help alleviate some the denial of adoptees’ right to grieve. The narratives that result from the memory gaps adoptees grow up with beg to be filled, even if they are fictitious. By filling in these memory gaps with fantasies of what could have been, based on any small amount of information about their adoption that they have, adoptees can begin to build the foundations of their identity.

Unfortunately, adoptees’ identities are often unsteady given the ambiguity of the information given freely from adoptive parents or even the government. To fill this informational gap, they create narratives that are fictional, yet as to how they relate to the adoptee’s identity, they are real. Building identity is complicated and the process of building identity depends largely on the stories adoptees are told about themselves, which turn into the stories they tell about themselves as they learn what their relationships will be with the world. As Jerome Bruner says, “It is far more important, for appreciating the human condition, to understand the ways

human beings construct their worlds” (46). The very fact that people create possible worlds as part of their inner lives speaks to the ways in which they are everyday building themselves and their realities from the story pieces around them that they prefer, much as birds build their nests out of the materials they deem the sturdiest, the prettiest, or the softest. All humans are constantly building our inner worlds and our identities, but as Erik Erikson explained, his initial study of identity crises in individuals found, beneath the surface, a tangled mess of traumatic historical events and the emigrations that followed them (43-47). When Erikson was beginning to formulate his theories on identity in the 1930s and 40s, families were migrating to America, leaving one national identity behind in order to form a new one, yet there was still need to hold onto the old identity (44). In other words, identity had a social aspect. Instead of understanding his patients’ “originological” issues (an idea that rested on finding “where it all started”), he said “The question was also what world image they were sharing, where they were going from where they were, and who was going with them” (44). In this way, he mapped out a new framework that said identity must be built upon the histories of a person’s cultural background and those who might travel to new places (and therefore create new identities) with them. And if identity is built upon histories that adoptees know little of and the migrations to new families they make before memory has developed, it should be no surprise that their identities are forming in unusual ways. If they have little information about those histories, those lost families, they simply retreat inside themselves and build one from their imagination. Unlike the narrative identities built by people who have the memories to reconstruct “the autobiographical past and imagine the future in such a way as to provide a person’s life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning,” adoptees are often given little to no information of their biological past (McAdams, 233). Ghost

Kingdoms are created by adoptees to fill these gaps, to salve these wounds, to attempt to build an identity in a place where there is more mystery than fact.

### **How Ghost Kingdom Narratives Work**

The conception of Ghost Kingdoms and the inner narratives that go along with them highlight several narrative intricacies that open up a whole new realm of discussion for literary, rhetoric, and narrative scholars. For instance, the ghosts help the audience visualize how one might craft narratives with metaphors to apply to life stories. The written or performed narratives are the perfect example of how fictive discourse enables writers to communicate and engage rhetorically and ironically. And Ghost Kingdom narratives, in general, ask the audience to ponder how they think about the actual world they inhabit versus the possible worlds they imagine and create, whether those worlds are close to reality as we understand it or fantastical so that the creator might have someplace warm to escape to.

Discussions of the narrative implications of Lifton's Ghost Kingdom do not fully exist yet. Because Lifton framed her theory as a psychological phenomenon, it has been received as such, which means that academia at large has not interacted with the concept. As for therapeutic practice, there are a few scattered therapeutic studies available, but none explore the theoretical implications in depth. Yet the Ghost Kingdom still haunts adoptee culture to the point that, named or not, it is present in adoptee narratives of all kinds, blurring the line between fiction and reality. Lifton's Ghost Kingdom provided the adoptee community with a metaphorical map that continues to influence adoptees as they begin deconstructing and reconstructing the narratives of their lives. In fact, the Ghost Kingdom is relevant to the adoption conversation as recently as this past year. At the 2021 Adoption Knowledge Affiliates (AKA) Conference, two artists shared their work, both exclusively dealing with Lifton's Ghost Kingdom ("Elevation"). Instead of

interpreting these adoptee-written works through a psychological frame, I aim to discuss their narrative components.

Studying adoption narratives with the tools of narrative theories is not a new interdisciplinary focus, but it is a small one. One of the most relevant scholars to this intersection of study is Margaret Homans who deconstructs several adoption narratives using narrative and trauma theory in her article, "Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origins," where she argues that "adoption is a fiction-generating machine" because "it presents in a particularly acute form the problem of the unknowability of origins and the common tendency to address that problem with fiction making" (5). She goes on to investigate adoption narratives as similar to or as trauma narratives that "are often obsessively oriented towards an irretrievable past" and therefore "compel[ed to] the creation of plausible if not verifiable narratives" (7). Because adoptees have so many unknowns in their biological pasts and physical origins, there is no other logical way to fill in that gap of self besides fiction-making, which is how fantasies like Ghost Kingdoms take form. Homans claims that "the adoptive compulsion to search for origins becomes a compulsion to create them" (13). That compulsion to create narratives is a deeply human act, especially in terms of origin stories; think of all the origin tales of mankind's ancestors, no matter the culture, that seek to explain the beginning of the world. As adoptees compose the stories of their lives and build the foundations of self, they must account for, in some way, what has happened to bring them to the present moment and then, perhaps, look to the future. Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory accounts for this trek through time because she describes the Ghost Kingdom as a psychic realm, but also describes the act of crossing over as a journey through time. Lifton's conception of the Ghost Kingdom is not only a psychological theory, but a story outline which itself is made up with metaphorical language and fiction-making.

One of the primary functions of Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory is to illustrate the emotional experience of being an adoptee with the use of metaphor. Though the ghosts that Lifton claims haunt an adoptee are not literal ghosts, the metaphor of a ghost to describe the ambiguous loss of family and history aids the audience in making a connection between what they know about being haunted and the idea Lifton introduces, being haunted by ambiguous loss. The metaphor of ghosts representing the loss of ambiguous characters significant to one's life is a unique perspective because while the creation of these fantasy characters and worlds are a clear definition of fiction, they also directly affect the lived realities of the adoptee. Lifton does not stop at the metaphor of ghosts. The Ghost Kingdom theory is also an allegory. The journey from unknowing to "crossing over" via reunion to confront the ghosts created in the wake of memory gaps is an entire story outline strongly reminiscent of Campbell's hero's journey. This story framework is constructed loosely enough that it is beneficial as a structure for those in the adoption circle to use as an outline for the telling of their own stories. By giving shape to the ghosts that haunt adopted families through metaphor and allegory, specifically by saying that these Ghost Kingdoms arise from secrecy, Lifton seems to argue with her theory that if more openness was encouraged in adoption, Ghost Kingdoms would be less likely to turn pathological. Notably, Lifton was, during the 1970s and onwards, an advocate for adoption reform, specifically for open adoptions so this rhetorical strategy makes sense in her theory.

Using fiction to make an argument about the actual world is a rhetorical strategy that allows for social commentary to be made on a topic with hypothetical scenarios. The fictionality of Ghost Kingdom narratives is worth investigating because without their origins, adoptees, according to Homans, say they are seeking out the truth, but they may as well be creating new, more relevant fictions to build their identity upon (5). But although Homans claims that the

fictions adoptees build “trade places” and “become competing realities” with previously unknown stories, she does not address how the fictions themselves function beyond filling a traumatic gap (11). I agree with her assessment thus far. However, Richard Walsh says that fictionality “functions within a communicative framework: it resides in a way of using a language, and its distinctiveness consists in the recognizably distinct rhetorical set invoked by that use” (*Rhetoric of Fictionality* 15). In other words, by creating fiction, writers are communicating rhetorically; therefore, we should be asking what Ghost Kingdom narratives are communicating and what rhetorical strategies they use to do so. In the case of Lifton’s theory, which is in itself a narrative, an argument for open adoption is prominent, and the way she emphasizes this argument is by highlighting the ghosts that serve to replace a gap of knowledge which could be lessened if adoptions were more open. Henrik Skov Nielsen et al. further contends that fictionality, (including “what-if projections, if-only regrets, thought experiments, and hypotheses of all kinds”) is a “communicative strategy within some context ... which informs an audience’s response to the fictive act” (Nielsen et al. 62-63). In short, fictionality gives rhetorical context to how an audience responds to the narrative.

In this sense, it is important to consider who such an audience might be that such narratives seek to engage, especially if the writer is concerned with changing minds and progressing social reforms. For works that directly engage with Lifton’s theory, the audience is mostly the discourse community. A discourse community is a categorization of ongoing conversation, specific to a certain topic that, over time, continues to build on and create new ideas. The adoption community is one important discourse community to consider in Ghost Kingdom narratives, which is evident by not only the works that Lifton cited in her writings, but also in the way that adoptees continue to build upon her theory. By exhuming the history of

discourse in the adoption community, specifically concerning Ghost Kingdoms, I have found that Ghost Kingdom narratives serve two distinct purposes: first, they use rhetorical narrative strategies to share social commentary that can be directed towards any general audience; second, they use discourse relevant to a specific discourse community, the adoption community in this case, to further build on previous notions of loss and grief. In doing so, Ghost Kingdom narratives employ rhetorical narrative functionalities that not only bring awareness to the gap in memories adoptees experience (something a general audience may not be aware of), but also that the fictions that result from ambiguous loss in adoptee experiences serve as a rhetorical argument for adoption reform in the actual world.

One of the most important clarifications about Ghost Kingdoms narratives is their position in relation to the actual world, specifically through possible worlds theory. Most textual examples of Ghost Kingdoms, including all three case studies I engage with, are fictional representations of the actual world, which include a separate impossible kind of fiction created from the protagonist's imagination. When thinking of Lifton's Ghost Kingdom through a possible worlds theory lens, Ghost Kingdom narratives accurately depict both the ontological position of the adoptee situated in reality and the possible worlds they create within themselves through mental activity because adoptees exist in both of these worlds simultaneously. From the literary perspective, Ryan explains in the *Living Handbook of Narratology* (LHN) that "the foundation of PW [possible worlds] theory is the idea that reality—conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists physically—is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds." With this in mind, the Ghost Kingdoms that adoptees create are *both* the sum of the imaginable together with the reality they exist in physically. These fictions are adoptee responses to trauma and ambiguous loss, so while they can be categorized as

possible worlds created fictionally by mental processes, they are also very real in that they are a result of and continue to affect lived reality. And when the narratives of these possible worlds are written, they serve as a fictional representation of an actual adoptee's cognitive process in which they exist simultaneously in a plethora of possible imagined worlds in addition to the actual world.

Imagined worlds, or imaginary worlds, in fictional narratives are exactly what they sound like, and, according to David Langdon, are all "created by human, knowable intelligence, utilizing tools that can be described, replicated, and in turn, studied" (141). Most often, discussion about imaginary worlds coincides with world-building fictional narratives such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or other such fantastical tales, but creating an imaginary world is second nature to most children, and, arguably, in the case of extensive and detailed imaginary world-building, especially spanning from childhood to adulthood, it can be viewed as a coping mechanism against trauma. In her thesis for a master's degree in counseling psychology, Serena F. Konkin proposes that paracosms, a type of intense imaginary world-building, act "as a dissociative function in which the person escapes the body when it is in a state of traumatic stasis, providing a holding pattern to protect a fragile ego" (12). This is most certainly a relevant note to make in the context of Ghost Kingdom narratives because they primarily do fill a traumatic gap, but in Ghost Kingdom narratives, imaginary worlds are only part of the narrative structure.

Furthermore, many of the imaginary worlds, both in Ghost Kingdom narratives and otherwise, rely heavily on hinge moments that a what-if query seeks to answer. This can result in alternate timelines or counterfactual imaginations taking the spot of the created fiction in an otherwise realistic narrative. Since adoptees, as infants and minors, have no way to consent to the



drastic decisions made about their lives, it is quite common for them to wonder about what could have happened if different decisions had been made. Sometimes referred to as *uchronia* or allohistories, an alternate timeline is a work of fiction that “emerge[s] from the different between an established narrative timeline and a “what-if” scenario: if a given event is assumed to have gone differently, then the change in that event has repercussions for the flow of time beyond the point of divergence” (Carstocea 184). When an adoptee wonders what could have happened if they had not been adopted, for example, an entire scenario, character, or both can be constructed as an alternate timeline. These scenarios can also be understood as counterfactuals, which are “most often considered in connection with thought experiments ... that cannot be realized” (Albrecht & Danneberg 12-13). This means that counterfactual narratives interrogate questions that seek to answer what could have happened if something had gone differently, for example, but the fact of the matter is that whatever scenario is considered is impossible for the narrative it is a part of. Andrea Albrecht and Luz Danneberg say counterfactual imaginations are “when at least one of the assumptions is, at the moment they are made and relative to a certain (shared) knowledge, *obviously false* to both the author and the addressee of the imagination” (14). In the case of Ghost Kingdom narratives, alternate timelines and counterfactual narrative strategies are clear signposts of fantastic fiction, and they also serve as a rhetorical strategy to emphasize the need for fiction at all in wake of a traumatic gap in critical information in an otherwise realistic narrative.

Realistic narratives are stories that could potentially occur in the actual world in addition to featuring a narrative style focused on mimesis or a representation of the real world. But in Ghost Kingdom narratives, the emphasis is on the fictional aspect of the narrative even if the frame of the narrative is realistic. In many cases, the fictional aspect of these narratives present

themselves as possible or imaginary worlds, alternate timelines, or counterfactuals, but any kind of extreme departure from an established realistic narrative style can function as an indicator that fiction is being used to fill a gap and regain cohesiveness in an otherwise reasonably possible narrative. Unnatural narrative elements can achieve such a strategy. In their essay on unnatural narratives, Alber et al. note that Stefan Iversen “ties the notion of the “unnatural” to narratives that present the reader with clashes between the rules governing a storyworld and scenarios or events producing or taking place inside this storyworld—clashes that defy easy explanations” (Alber et al. 103). This clash is normative for a Ghost Kingdom narrative to emphasize because the more drastic the clash between storyworld rules, the more emphasis that is placed on the gap that such a fiction is meant to fill. Additionally, Alber et al. point out that Nielsen says that unnatural narratives “cue the reader to employ interpretational strategies that are different from those she employs in nonfictionalized, conversational storytelling situations” (104). Of course, depending on the narrative, these interpretations strategies can vary wildly, but so long as they are needed, especially in contrast with other parts of the narrative that do not require such cognitive gymnastics, Ghost Kingdom narratives can achieve an effective rhetorical move that essentially uses some fantastical fiction of this nature in order to make its point.

Additionally, an explanation for the realistic framing that so neatly encapsulates an obvious fiction within it is that Ghost Kingdom narratives are often written as a form of autofiction, which is generally defined as “the fictional status of self-narration: even if the events and facts recounted are ‘strictly real,’ the “adventure of language produces a fiction” (James 41). For my purposes, however, I call Ghost Kingdom narratives a form of autofiction because they are fictionalized representations of real life as experienced by adoptees. They are not autobiographies or memoirs, though they certainly use fictionality to establish that tone, yet they

are also not a simple version of fiction as they are largely mimetic and represent realistic adoptee experiences. As Alison James explains, works of autofiction “bring new attention to the interactions of the factual and the fictional” (56). Because Ghost Kingdom narratives use both realistic fiction and impossible versions of fiction simultaneously, there is a distinct meshing of narrative styles that occurs, which, as James argues for autofiction, “allow[s] for a range of configurations of the fact/fiction relationship” (42). As a psychological theory, Lifton’s concept of Ghost Kingdoms has already rhetorically argued that fiction-making can be an instinctive coping mechanism for dealing with critical gaps of knowledge, but understanding Ghost Kingdom narratives as autofictions gives light to the symbiotic, not binary, relationship between reality and imagination. As Grishakova et al. say in their article, “Imaginary Scenarios: On the Use and Misuse of Fiction, “In its double-edged capacity, fiction may help molding the “real” into a subjectively more acceptable format of truthfulness or verisimilitude that resonates with felt experience” (116). I intend to argue towards this point as I examine three Ghost Kingdom narratives that all engage in this kind of interplay between fiction and reality in order to reveal the traumatic gap they all have in common.

As I demonstrate in the three case studies that follow, Ghost Kingdom narratives take many different forms, but all serve one singular purpose: to fill some kind of traumatic gap of critical information that affects the perception of the self. There is portrayed, in the narratives that I examine, queries that reflect the cognitive narrative theory that posits that our minds are programmed to understand and interpret life through narrative. For instance, we can all relate to asking ourselves what-if questions, escaping into daydreams, or making something fictional a part of our identities. And yet, very specific to the plight of the adoptee, these Ghost Kingdom narratives use possible worlds, imaginary worlds, alternate timelines, or unnatural narratives in

conjunction with a realistic autofictional style to ask that one question that will hang over an entire life: what if there is more to know about me?

## CHAPTER II

### POSSIBLE FATHERS, POSSIBLE WORLDS: BRIAN STANTON'S *@GHOSTKINGDOM*

Inspired by Betty Jean Lifton's presentation at the American Adoption Congress Conference in 2007, Brian Stanton's film *@ghostkingdom* draws on Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory through the main character's attempt to reunite with his father. Stanton's film provides an autofictional example of Lifton's Ghost Kingdom. His film portrays how adoptees reconcile truth and fiction: how, in the absence of their biological truths, they live simultaneously in many possible worlds in addition to the actual world. Explicitly named after Lifton's theory, Stanton's film illuminates a gray area between fiction and reality where impossible scenarios can also be true when they serve the purpose of filling in a gap of crucial self-knowledge. The implications of possible worlds theory suggest in this case study that while an adoptee may construct fictional characters and possible worlds to fill in gaps, those fictions also work to inform an adoptee's reality. In this way, fiction and reality work together instead of as opposites. In doing so, this film effectively portrays the use of fiction as a necessary cognitive process that aids in building identity and giving narrative order to a person's life.

In the film, Brayden is an adoptee at mid-life with a wife and children. Fifteen years prior to the plotline, he searched for and found his birth mother, but after being in reunion and establishing a relationship with her, he decides to also seek out his father. The film opens with the scene of a graveyard and a voiceover borrowed from Lifton's presentation at the American Adoption Congress Conference in 2007, explaining what the Ghost Kingdom is, who resides there, and why adoptees must "cross over" into the Ghost Kingdom. As Lifton says, the Ghost Kingdom is "the land of the 'as if' dead because these ghosts are not dead like any respectable ghost is." Her voiceover ends with, "when we go and search, we have to cross over into the

Ghost Kingdom” (Stanton). The story is therefore poised from the beginning to focus on the “crossing over” aspect of the Ghost Kingdom concept, which is the part of an adoptee’s journey where they begin actively searching for the people represented by the ghosts in their psychic realm. Armed with anecdotal recollections from his birth mother, access to mail-in DNA test tubes, and the internet, Brayden considers four major possibilities of who his birth father might be. Throughout the film, Brayden leaves emails, voicemails, and text messages to his suspected (and often unsuspecting) biological relatives. He communicates with two possible fathers (and one possible sister) and, as he does, depicts the creation and destruction of the expectations he brings to each potential relationship. This film raises awareness about and reveals what it is like to be an adoptee in search of roots, reunion, and biological truth.

### **Heroes and Scapegoats in Ghost Kingdoms**

As created by Lifton, the Ghost Kingdom theory has three major parts: the development of ghosts in periods of stasis, the movement towards seeking out truth often through search and reunion, and the reconciliation between the ghosts and whatever reality is found. Though overall this film focuses on Brayden’s movement beyond his reunion with his mother as he searches for his father, we do get a glimpse at his childhood Ghost Kingdom to see how it served him. In a monologue addressed to his presumed death father’s gravestone, Brayden talks about the fantasy ghosts of his biological parents he had as a child, back before he even had the plans or the means to move towards finding them. In his monologue he explains, “I’ve always fantasized about you, who my father is, who my mother is” (Stanton). He goes on to say, “If I was ever pissed at my adoptive parents, I dreamed my perfect, beautiful biological mother was going to save me and take me away,” but on the flipside, if he was angry at his birth mother, “she was just an ugly, trailer trash, fucked-up drug addict who couldn’t even take care of her own little boy” (Stanton).

These opposing daydreams represent different possible worlds. In Marie-Laure Ryan's chapter, "From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds" in her and Alice Bell's book *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*, Ryan explains that fantastic stories, which we can categorize as imagined daydreams with relative safety, "may not be actualizable in the real world . . . , but they remain imaginable and logically consistent. PW [Possible Worlds] theory would regard their worlds as possible" (Bell & Ryan 66). The fantasy ghosts he describes of his birth parents are, in themselves, possible worlds because while their existence might be improbable or even impossible, they are still technically possible because they are imaginable. Because his Ghost Kingdom allows the young Brayden to cope with his external reality by either daydreaming about his birth parents as heroes or scapegoat, the process of creating this fluid Ghost Kingdom is a cognitive one and directly contributes to his identity. The Ghost Kingdom shows the liminal space between lived reality and fantasy in a situation where fantasy fills in missing knowledge of the self.

Though these are not the full sum of possible worlds depicted in the film, they do introduce the question the film circles around which is: Who is my father? As Brayden works through his search, virtually meeting possible relatives and taking DNA tests, viewers experience the dissonance between Brayden's fantasies of what his biological family could be and what he actually finds to be true. Furthermore, the film uses the Ghost Kingdom theory itself as a narrative framework, creating possible worlds to portray the liminality of adoptee experiences by emphasizing the role of fictional possibilities in an otherwise real life situation. In other words, the Ghost Kingdom is an imaginary world, a psychic space, where lost and wished-for characters are created. By implementing the structure of Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory, the film provides

a new avenue for exploring how such a narrative structure might blur the line between life-writing and fictional writing.

### **Autofiction**

In a post-screening conversation during AKA's 2021 Elevation Conference, Brian Stanton explained that the plotline is also based on an experience he had during his actual search for his birth father in which he formed an online relationship with a woman he thought was his sister ("Elevation"). Knowing even a little bit about the artist responsible for the film can help illuminate the motivations behind the storyline and, for the purposes of this research, explain just how tangled the web between reality and fiction actually is.

Thanks to Stanton's explanation, we know that even though the film itself is fictional, it is loosely related to the author's experience. This is a common occurrence in both Ghost Kingdom narratives and adoptee narratives at large. Adoption is such an intimate family experience; as such, it is often difficult to share about a particular experience, especially the ones tinged so heavily with grief, without also sharing the intimacies of other family members' experiences. In many ways, fictional depictions of adoptee experiences are a safe and more veiled route to sharing the story without hurting anyone's feelings. That being said, fictional narratives are in no way a cop-out; in so many ways, they free the author to pursue expressing the arguments they want to make in bolder and more artistic ways. This is true for Stanton's film.

The film's loose foundation in reality is not the only aspect I want to focus on. Ghost Kingdom narratives themselves play with the concept of reality and fiction because in the actual world, adoptees create Ghost Kingdom fantasies as a way to self-soothe, comfort themselves, or even escape reality momentarily (like a good book). Without access to what Brayden calls "my



truth” in the film, adoptees are left with holes in their life narratives and their identities. Yet these fantasies—constructed to fill these emotional gaps—are not simply fictional escape methods. Rather, depending on the adoptee and how much information they do or do not have about their specific adoption situation, the Ghost Kingdom they construct for themselves also works to inform their concept of identity. In this way, the fiction affects the reality.

The film takes place in a time and space that is recognizable to the audience as a mimetic depiction of reality. Everything about the setting aligns with the actual world; Brayden could be Mr. Every Adoptee in the sense that many adult adoptees have some of the same desire to better understand their genetic history in order to build their identities, and he makes use of his phone, computer, and internet in order to seek out that genetic history. There is even an allusion to the current political turmoil in America when he and his possible sister make reference to blue states and red states. Because of the way the film fictionally depicts a plotline that could be possible in the actual world and is also structured around real-life experiences, even if they are not what some might call true like a memoir, it can be helpful to define this piece as autofiction. As defined by Alison James, autofiction is a kind of fiction about the self. While scholars still debate whether it falls more squarely into the life-writing camp (because of the “auto” which refers to the self) or the fiction camp, I am primarily interested in how autofiction allows “for a range of configurations of the fact/fiction relationship” (42). As a result, defining this film as autofiction points toward the ways that the film is a piece of realistic and mimetic fiction that, while reflective of a real adoptee’s experience, employs a considerable distance in order to freely demonstrate the complexities between fiction and reality through a fictional character’s experience.

## **Truth and Language**

The opening of the film reveals the title's significance. During this sequence, Brayden reaches out to possible relatives via email, social media, and phone calls. As is common with online messaging systems of all sorts, prefacing a username with the @ (at) symbol usually functions as a way to initiate contact with somebody. In this case, Brayden is reaching out to his Ghost Kingdom ghosts by whatever means he can in order to find his birth father. The allusion to internet communication emphasizes both the way the internet has revolutionized how adoptees seek reunion with their biological families and the way in which such connections can often feel foreign or distant. As Brayden explains to one of the people he contacts, "I'm simply seeking my roots, my genetic heritage, my medical history, and . . . my truth" (Stanton). Braydon's emphasis on truth reveals a crux of the film as it explores the tensions between biological truth and legal truth. Legally, in adoption, biological relationships are severed, original birth certificates are sealed, and the adoptive parents are recognized as the adoptee's parents, even on the amended birth certificate. This legal act effectively erases the birth parents completely and creates a fictional reality, in a sense, because the amended birth certificate shows the adoptive parents as if they gave birth to the child.

However, the act of searching defies the legal contract and fictionalized legal truth of adoption because a search emphasizes the importance of biological relationships. The concept of truth as it is portrayed in this film relies heavily on the idea that biological truth is superior to legal truth, especially as it pertains to Brayden's identity. There are simply some things that, without access to generational memory, medical history, or even likenesses between family members, are essentially missing in a person's identity formation process. The distinction of biological truth in this film is important because it pushes back on the cultural assumption

present in mainstream perceptions of adoption that “love is enough” to make a family. When adoption agencies or adoptive parents say this, what they mean is that simply providing an adoptee with a loving family is enough, when actually they are minimizing the genetic component of the adoptee’s identity.

One significant scene in the film emphasizes this by referencing the idea of genetic mirroring. Genetic mirroring is a more recent explanation of what one psychiatrist, E. Wellisch, discussed in a 1952 *Journal of Mental Health* article. In Wellisch’s article, he states, “Knowledge of and definite relationship to his genealogy is therefore necessary for a child to build up his complete body-image and world-picture. It is an inalienable and entailed right of every person” (41). In other words, the lack of biological relatives with which to compare the self to, creates a strongly felt absence. Before the term genetic mirroring, even Max Frisk explained a concept much like it when he argued that adopted teens needed to meet their biological parents in order to deal with what he called “hereditary ghosts” (Frisk 9).

In the scene, Brayden is talking to Keely, his possible sister, about physical characteristics. He sits in the front of the mirror and analyzes his looks, attempting to see if maybe he does have family traits as she describes them. In this way, he is holding out hope that Keely is in fact his sister. Genetic mirroring is a vital aspect of growing up that adoptees specifically miss out on, so as Brayden tries to connect to Keely by comparing physical traits, he is also attempting to recover what he has lost through his adoption. As he does so, he is building yet another possible world in which he is related to Keely and her father, Max, the federal inmate. The reason he is compelled to create such a possibility is because of the lack of biological truth he has access to about himself. From what the audience can glean about his childhood, he knew his adoptive parents and he knew about his adoption, but not in full. In this

way, knowing and not knowing, Brayden lived in a reality bolstered by internally created fiction for many years.

Related to both the ideas of biological truth and of fictions in adoptee narratives, scholars of adoption often point to the fictive language present in descriptions of the adoptive family, saying that the adoptive family is, itself, fiction, and therefore, the language that demonstrates truth is that of the “real” or biological family. Marianne Novy explains that “adoption has repeatedly been called a fiction of parenthood,” and goes on to note the contrast between “considering adoption itself as a fiction in the sense of pretense, or constructing it as something that should imitate the traditional biological family as closely as possible in appearance, in the so-called ‘as-if’ family” (4). The language surrounding adoption can be problematic and reflects the narrative complexities inherent in adoptive families because when the word “real” is employed to signify the biological parents, does that mean that, in contrast, the adoptive parents are “fake?” Equally problematic is when adoptive parents insist that they alone are the adoptee’s “real” parents by emphasizing the fact that they have raised the child. This attitude effectively silences what is also true, that the adoptee has another biological family. Amidst all this, adoptees are left to figure out or define for themselves who their real family is and how to voice that, often worrying about how to do so without deeply offending other parties.

It is necessary, then, for us to also investigate how adoptees create their own fiction, often opposing from other family members. These fictions are necessary for adoptees to shape their reality and they do so by retreating, as it were, to a fictional psychic realm in order to escape momentarily from their lived reality, which could be itself, arguably, a fictive environment based on the language claiming opposing realities that surrounds it. The fictions that adoptees themselves engage with are often primarily focused, not on which parent pair is “real,” but

instead on the truth of their origins, most often in story form. Margaret Homans argues that adoptees look towards their origins, but because their origins are often unknown, there is “the common tendency to address that problem with fiction making” (5). She goes on to say that “adoption stories can demonstrate the creative lengths to which it is possible to go . . . in the endeavor to make or reconstruct an origin” (23). It is in this way that adoptees seemingly engage in fiction making of their own to fill the gap of an irretrievable past.

Where scholars such as Novy and Homans have focused on language in adoption and the fictions that spring from such situations, no one has examined at length how exactly the fictions adoptees create during their lifespans shape their realities. This is precisely the purpose a Ghost Kingdom serves. Despite external forces disagreeing about an adoptee’s reality, an adoptee can retreat to their Ghost Kingdom to play out the possibilities of what their reality could be. These counternarratives and possible worlds, then, serve as a substitute for what is missing in their lives and can be readjusted as necessary as an adoptee progresses through life. This readjusting is especially important as an adoptee moves beyond the stasis of the Ghost Kingdom into both the search and, if all goes well, some kind of additional information about one’s circumstance.

### **Possible Fathers, Possible Worlds**

The most prominent interpretation of Lifton’s Ghost Kingdom theory and example of possible worlds in *@ghostkingdom* is the strong focus on the idea of “crossing over” into the Ghost Kingdom via seeking out reunion or, in other words, the act of willfully shattering the previously established fantasy of biological relatives by meeting said relatives in reality. In his search to find his birth father, Brayden must sort through the information available to him which points to four possible fathers. In preparation for making the discovery he hopes for, Brayden creates four internal possible worlds revolving around each of these possible fathers. These

possible worlds adjust as he takes new possibilities into consideration as new information presents itself to him during his search.

For a long time, fifteen years at the very least, Brayden had a clear depiction of his birth father's ghost, thanks to his birth mother's anecdotal account. He discusses during a monologue at a gravestone how difficult it has been for his mother, being asked to revisit such a traumatizing past of both rape and relinquishment. For quite some time, her traumatic past and the idea of potentially making her revisit it is one of the reasons Brayden prevents himself from seeking out his birth father who could potentially be a rapist. The other reason is simple: Brayden is not interested in meeting a man who most likely raped his mother, which is completely understandable. Because there was previously an absence of story in the place where Brayden's birth father was concerned—not counting, of course, Brayden's childhood fantasies of his birth father—he readily accepts the story from his birth mother that whoever his birth father was, his conception was not a pleasant moment filled up with heartwarming love. But eventually, as time goes on and after the relationship with his birth mother has settled into familiarity, he realizes that he still needs to seek out his birth father, rapist or not, in order to fully know his biological truth. The result of this search is the blossoming of not one but four possible worlds because, as he finds out from his birth mother, there were three men who raped her at a party, which was around the time he was conceived and, as he later finds out, a summertime boyfriend from around the same time. Each of the possible fathers—the summertime boyfriend, federal inmate, an unnamed guy from the party, and the guy who is already under a headstone—represent four primary examples of possible worlds.

Each possible world constructed is a fiction built on a sliver of truth that is, at once, both impossible until proven true, and yet very real for Brayden, so real in fact, that the fiction in

question directly affects how he engages with his reality. The sliver of truth in the first example of a possible father actually contains two possibilities, the first of which is Jim. In the very first graveyard scene, Brayden tells Jim's headstone that his mother told him "about that night at the party, where you, your ol' buddy Max, and some other I-don't-know-who decided to have some extra-curricular [sic] fun with an impressionable younger coed during a night of debauchery" (Stanton). Neither Max nor Brayden's birth mother know this other possible father's name, which is why this first possibility is such a complex scenario. Brayden goes on to tell the gravestone that Max has given his side of the story already, saying that his birth mother was not forced, but that he is inclined to believe his birth mother. In the possible world in which Jim is Brayden's father, Brayden must accept two simultaneous possibilities. First, that if Jim is not his father, the third unnamed man must be and without his name, he will probably be unable to find him. At least, it will be considerably harder. Second, since the rest of Jim's family he attempted to contact is not interested in corresponding with him, he may never get confirmation that Jim is actually his father. He bemoans this possibility by saying, "Fuck, I tried. You've no idea. I contacted your kids, Jennifer and Patrick. Talked with your brother Travis. He actually agreed to take a test with me but changed his mind at the last minute" (Stanton). If Jim is his dead father, there are answers Brayden might never receive about his conception or half of his heritage. The same is true if the unnamed man is his father. Thus, the ghost of what could be threatens to remain stagnant and Brayden is left with only possibilities.

As Brayden continues on his search to find his true birth father, the audience sees his different fantasies about each possibility adjusting in real-time (or, at least, real movie time) to his situation as he makes discoveries. The next possible father is Max, the federal inmate and the other person Brayden's birth mother mentioned by name when she revealed the incident at the

party all those years ago. Though Brayden does not interact directly with Max for much of the time that he considers Max a strong possibility, he does develop a friendship with Max's daughter, his possible sister, Keely. As their friendship develops primarily online and over the phone, the audience is privy to the sometimes rapid adjustment of Brayden's expectations as he hopes that the possible world in which Max is his father and Keely is his sister could be the actual world. Though he begins the relationship with doubts, the longer they correspond, the more his hopes inflate that they might be related. When Keely's DNA test returns with an uncertain percentage, his doubt sets in and he apologizes to her for wasting her time. The significance of Brayden's ever-adjusting possible worlds is important to recognize because, in the searching phase, all he is armed with is small bits of possibility which turn into hopes that he must test against reality. Unlike the ghosts of his birth parents from when he was young, these possible worlds must move with him as he learns more during his search.

After Keely's inconclusive DNA test, Brayden gets a phone call from yet another possible father, his birth mother's summertime boyfriend from around the same time, Dale. This example of a possible world is actually an example of a Ghost Kingdom from outside the adoptee perspective in that Dale, as Brayden finds out, spent his entire lifetime since his relationship with Brayden's birth mother considering, even hoping for, the possibility that Brayden might be his son. As Dale explains the situation to Brayden, Brayden finds himself tearing up at the sudden entrance of a brand new possibility, especially one where his possible father has spent years hoping to welcome him into the family. Because this possibility is unexpected to Brayden, he quickly cycles through feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in response to the possibility that Dale could be his father.



We see how these moving stories, as they go back and forth between fictional possibilities and their actual world, affect the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of someone as their internal narratives shift. This order of mental events is important to notice. First is the feeling, which is often where a possible world begins; then the person takes the time to contemplate that feeling, which is analogous to when a person considers the implications of such a possibility. Finally, after feelings and contemplations, the person can be moved towards actions and behaviors. In the instance where Dale is introduced to the storyline, Brayden cycles through all three of these stages in rapid succession. The last thing to do, after he has adjusted his hopes and expectations for this possibility, is to confirm with a DNA test. Unfortunately, it comes back negative so he is left with the task of accepting this and letting down Dale as well. This shattering of expectations is part of the third phase of Lifton's Ghost Kingdom. She explains that after reunion (or at least coming to some new understanding about the family), "adoptees must weave a new self-narrative out of the fragments of what was, what might have been, and what is" (Lifton, *Journey* 259). This is no easy task, but as each possible world of Brayden's is disproved by DNA tests, he must let go of his previous fantasy and keep moving forward in his search.

After the summertime boyfriend possibility falls through, Brayden returns to ask Keely to help him communicate with Max in federal prison. After he achieves this, the paternity test (which is supposedly the most reliable DNA test) for Max returns negative as well so Brayden must reconcile his hopes with reality. His tearful laughter at the 0% DNA results indicates how disappointed he is to have to face the scientific fact that his possible world turned out to be impossible. Finally, he has no options except for Jim, the dead man, and the unnamed man left. With all his viable options gone, Brayden returns to his imagination to ponder the only two possibilities that remain.

This film makes an important contribution to the adoption community, continuing Lifton's conversation about Ghost Kingdoms while also providing an example of it. It both demonstrates a possible experience of a Ghost Kingdom and makes commentary on the many possibilities Ghost Kingdoms can contain and how they change over time. In order to achieve this, the film makes several assumptions about the audience, including that they are familiar with adoption community discourse, the unique difficulties of reunion, and the emotions that adoptees must learn to navigate over a lifetime. The film speaks directly to the adoption discourse community both in how it references previous collective knowledge of the adoption discourse community and how it goes about interpreting that knowledge in a new way. By portraying the Ghost Kingdom elements in a way that demonstrates their evolution from a childhood escape method and the drive to seek reunion as an adult, Stanton shows the complexity of Ghost Kingdoms through the exploration of possible worlds. Both the character and the textual actual world he inhabits are realistic fiction, and the possible worlds he creates with each expectation of every new possible father are purely fantasies yet they directly impact his emotions and behaviors. In order to reconcile the gap of information about himself, Brayden uses Ghost Kingdom possible worlds as a cognitive process to aid in building his identity and making his life narrative more cohesive. The possible worlds within this autofictional narrative emphasize a gap in knowledge about the self, thereby demonstrating how the creation of fiction can directly impact a person's lived reality.

## CHAPTER III

### IMAGINARY WORLDS IN MAGGIE GALLANT'S *BETWIXT & BETWEEN*

Maggie Gallant's play *Betwixt & Between* is named after a chapter from Betty Jean Lifton's book *Journey of the Adopted Self: A Quest for Wholeness* where Lifton likens adoptees to Peter Pan, fantasy fiction's canonical lost boy. As Lifton explains, "adoptees recognize Peter Pan . . . They, too, became lost children when they separated as babies from their natural families and disappeared into a place very much like never-never land" (*Journey* 3). The play debuted as a Zoom play at the AKA 2021 conference and portrays the protagonist, Lucy, and two imaginary characters interacting in adult Lucy's imagination, which is referred to as *Betwixt & Between* ("Elevation"). The audience witnesses several of Lucy's childhood fantasies relating to her adoption unfold in her imagination as she sits in the Bureau of Vital Statistics at New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene after the New York State Senate's 2019 passage of the Clean Bill of Adoptee Rights. Although the play is fictional, the bill—which allows adult adoptees to obtain their original birth certificates—was passed in reality and went into effect in January 2020. Much like Brian Stanton's film, this play argues for adoptees' access to biological truth; in this case, focusing on access to sealed birth records. The setting of Lucy at the Vital Statistics office on her birthday protests the reality that adoptees in 40 states are still not legally entitled to their original birth certificates. Additionally, the title also pays homage to what Lifton wrote about shifting adoption practices: "We are *Betwixt and Between* change and stasis in the adoption field. We are between two systems: the traditional closed one that for almost half a century has cut adopted children off from their heritage, and an open one in which birth mothers choose the adoptive parents of their baby and maintain some contact with the family" (8). Setting the play immediately after the S3419 bill passed thereby keeps alive Lifton's hope

that records be made more available to adoptees, further reducing the amount of secrecy surrounding the practice.

*Betwixt & Between* demonstrates a wholly different interpretation of Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory than Stanton's film. Both were influenced by Lifton's work, and Gallant says in a guest blog post that, "When I read Betty Jean Lifton's description of the Ghost Kingdom, I experienced an incredible moment of recognition and understanding. I wasn't alone. It wasn't my fault" ("Living"). Instead of focusing on crossing over into the Ghost Kingdom by seeking reunion as Stanton's film, however, her play focuses on the introspective Ghost Kingdom where Lucy's what-if scenarios and ghost characters reside. The entire play takes place in Lucy's daydream, which can be interpreted as her Ghost Kingdom, as she sits in a Vital Statistics office waiting to receive her original birth certificate. In that Ghost Kingdom, which is an example of an imaginary world, she interacts with counterfactual characters from her own Ghost Kingdom and her adoptive father's Ghost Kingdom who help her walk through some of her previous fantasies about her adoption.

Dominating the narrative are several what-if scenarios and thought experiments that, in the absence of truth, hang empty and haunt Lucy, who as an adult has shut herself off from her fantasies until now. This play uses counterfactual characters, possible worlds, and an imaginary world as narrative strategies to reflect the real-life consequences of being haunted by the gap of personal and biological history. The play walks viewers through two of the possible scenarios that could have happened had she not been adopted or if her adoptive parents had their own biological child. Instead of depicting alternate timelines to represent such counterfactuals, as many such narratives do, the play instead introduces two imaginary characters. The first of these characters, Eloise, is the person Lucy might have been had she stayed with "mama," her

biological mother. The second character, a caseworker, turns out to be the “phantom” daughter created by her adoptive father. These two characters help Lucy process some of her fantasies so that Lucy can uncover the real reason she took the time to gain access to her original birth certificate.

Like Stanton’s film, Gallant’s play is a piece directed towards a specific discourse community. Built on the premise of Lifton’s Ghost Kingdom theory, the play seeks to engage with and add onto the ongoing conversation that Lifton initiated. It does so by portraying an interpretation of a Ghost Kingdom by using several narrative models which, in turn, allow the audience to explore not only Lucy’s adoptee-centered Ghost Kingdom, but also the Ghost Kingdom of her adoptive father. In this sense, not only is Lucy exploring the possibilities of scenarios that affect her and her life, she comes to realize that she is not the only person in her family that has suffered because of her adoption.

When she is introduced to the audience, Lucy has deeply repressed her fantasies and feelings about her adoption. She is cynical, defensive, and seemingly disinterested in pondering what-ifs. She makes several remarks to Eloise and her caseworker including “I’m sorry that I’m a realist,” (Gallant, *Betwixt* 5) and “Better drowned than adopted,” (Gallant, *Betwixt* 15) in response to their inquiries about how she feels about her adoption. Her irritation with the other characters’ inquiries emphasizes her reluctance to engage with her feelings about adoption. As the play progresses, the audience watches her begin to slowly engage with the various kinds of trauma she endured and never took the time, until now, to process. The fantasies that she explores in her Ghost Kingdom illuminate some of the ways in which she has experienced harm because of adoption. As she continues to engage with the characters in her Ghost Kingdom, she

gains more control over her fantasies until finally she allows herself to feel all the emotions she has long been repressing.

### **Possible Worlds**

Topics including the trauma of separation at birth, betrayal, fear, and more all come under the microscope as Lucy converses with Eloise and the caseworker, Sabrina, in between replays and reworkings of her childhood fantasies. These fantasies all represent possible worlds inside one larger possible world, Lucy's Ghost Kingdom, and primarily focus on the complex emotions that adoptees must learn to navigate because of the complicated nature of their existence. For example, Lucy finds it difficult to believe that she was born: she assumes that she must have been, but it is a gap of memory that affects how she sees herself. She jokes, "Maybe I was left behind by aliens, maybe I was found in the drawer of an antique dresser. Maybe I'm a robot. Or was hatched from a file marked Top Secret. Maybe I was created by Dr Frankenstein in a lab" (Gallant, *Betwixt* 27-28)." While Lucy's comment is sarcastic, it does reflect the kinds of fantastic stories that adoptees often imagine to fill the gap in their own birth story.

The caseworker's response is to point out to Lucy that being separated from her birth mother was a traumatic event. The adoption community is familiar with this argument as it echoes Nancy Verrier's proposed "Primal Wound" theory, which argues that when infants are separated from their mothers, a deep psychic wound occurs (xvi). This kind of birth-related trauma is emphasized when the audience finds out that the entire play takes place on Lucy's birthday. Adoptees often struggle with birthday celebrations, because what is a traditional celebration for many is a reminder of that initial loss for adoptees. Unlike kept children, the event of their birth may not seem real to them, as they often have only heard their adoptive parents' stories about when they came home; some adoptees may not even know their exact day

of birth, given their circumstances. Lucy and the characters in her Ghost Kingdom discuss the dissonance Lucy feels has between *knowing* she was born (because she exists) and *believing* that she was born, despite the lack of a coherent birth story. The caseworker attempts to persuade Lucy that even if she does not know her birth story, she is still connected to her birth mother. She encourages Lucy to touch her belly button, explaining, “You’re real. You’re not imagined, or dreamed up or wished for. You’re here. This is how you were connected to your birth mother and you’ll always wear the scar” (Gallant, *Betwixt* 28). This moment is significant because it focuses on how Lucy needs to recognize and process her loss.

Lucy’s conversations with Sabrina, the caseworker, and Eloise, her alternate self, also reflect adoptees’ often complicated feelings of fear and betrayal. Through talking with them, Lucy considers the possibility that her adoptive mom lied to her about the letter she received the day before her thirteenth birthday. Lucy’s adoptive mom opened the letter sent from the adoption agency without her. Then came downstairs crying and told Lucy that her birth mother had died in an accident. Eloise then plays out a fantasy-within-a-fantasy reliving Lucy’s childhood fear that her birth mother had died in a car crash on her way to come get her. Eloise then pointedly suggests Lucy should have read the letter for herself. She drops a bomb that contradicts what Lucy has chosen to believe about that moment, suggesting that the letter from the adoption agency simply asked for picture of her to help her birth mother cope with difficult times (Gallant, *Betwixt* 19). Considering the possibility that her adoptive mom could have lied to her angers Lucy and spurs her to begin asking the kinds of questions that eventually lead her to better understand her previously repressed feelings about her adoption. The audience can speculate that, if the space that Lucy is occupying is her own Ghost Kingdom, perhaps some part of her

always feared that her adoptive mother had lied to her about the contents of the letter, but had repressed it in order to shield herself from the pain.

These complex fantasies-within-fantasies in the form of conversations with Eloise and Sabrina are manifestations of Lucy re-working her Ghost Kingdom. We see Eloise re-enact one of Lucy's former possible worlds, a fear-induced fantasy Lucy previously concocted of what life would be like if she had stayed with "mama," including homelessness and meth addiction. By suggesting Lucy should have read the letter, Eloise now creates another possible world, one where Lucy's birth mother may still be alive. This possible world forces Lucy to confront her fear that her adoptive mother may have betrayed her by lying to her, and that she left a possibility open by not demanding to read the letter for herself when she was thirteen. The playwright is using this imagined conversation as a narrative device to show us exactly what kinds of possible worlds—even worlds within worlds—that adoptees create in their Ghost Kingdoms.

The play also reminds us, however, that the adopted child is not the only person in the adoption circle that may create possible worlds. There is a moment in the conversation between Eloise and the caseworker that both Lucy and the audience realize at the same time, then, that the caseworker is Sabrina, the phantom daughter created by her adoptive father. As Lifton explains, adoptees are not the only ones in the adoption circle haunted by ghosts (11). Talking to Sabrina, Lucy considers that her father might also have had daydreams of the daughter he never had. As Sabrina describes his fantasies of her as the "daddy's girl" that Lucy never was and how they were complicated by Alzheimer's before his death, Lucy is able to confront her feelings about her relationship—or the lack thereof—with her father. Through replaying fantasies and conversation between the three of them, finally Lucy realizes that instead of repressing or relying



on the fantasies in her Ghost Kingdom, she should confront her adoptive mother and seek out her birth mother in order to seek out the truth.

### **Portal Fiction**

The play begins with narration introducing the setting of the play with the date (significant to New York's recently passed Clean Adoptee Rights bill) and the location of the Vital Statistics office where Lucy sits and waits for her number to be called in order to claim her original birth certificate. Because the introduction of the play depicts a lifelike character amidst a real historical event, the play can be described as realistic fiction. In other words, the beginning of the play indicates to viewers that even if the character is fictional, the setting is mimetic, with a complex protagonist and recognizable society.

After the setting is established, Lucy closes her eyes and the narrator describes the scene transition as a chalk circle emerges on the screen. When she opens her eyes again, another character has appeared, a thirteen year old girl sitting in front of a birthday cake with the chalk circle behind her. The young girl plays both herself and her mother as she reenacts a mother singing "Happy Birthday." Lucy's vacant facial expression indicates that perhaps she is daydreaming as this plays out. It is soon confirmed that this is indeed the case, but for the moment, both the audience and Lucy are unaware of the transition from reality to daydream.

Suddenly, the birthday scene turns into horror as the young girl bites into her cake and finds it filled with bugs. The third character enters at this point, trying to calm down the young girl as Lucy watches, smirking. After the young girl is calm, the third character calls out to Lucy who, unsure at first how to react to this woman speaking directly to her, eventually cooperates and speaks with the two other characters. Lucy recognizes the young girl as Eloise, an imaginary version of herself she created when she was young. This recognition most likely confirms

viewer's suspicions that Lucy is somewhere that is not the Vital Statistics office. The other character, who she is unfamiliar with, introduces herself as Lucy's caseworker. The caseworker coaxes Lucy to cross into the chalk circle, which Lucy stumbles over. She begins to wonder if she is hallucinating, but the caseworker reassures her that she was daydreaming and informs her that she is now in "The Gap," or what many in the play's initial audience in the adoption community may have recognized as her Ghost Kingdom.

The chalk circle represents an entryway or a portal into Lucy's fantasy, so the play can therefore be understood as what Farah Mendlesohn calls a "portal fantasy" (xix). Many pieces of fantastic fiction use portals to signify that a character is leaving the world previously established in the narrative and entering an alternative, usually fantastic, world. A portal can be any kind of entrance—a door, closed eyes, a wormhole, or even a rabbit hole—that signifies a move between spaces with different ontological significance within the narrative. Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is an excellent example. In his novel, the rabbit hole Alice falls through is the portal to the fantasy world known as Wonderland. As Jennifer Harwood-Smith explains, "Portals can serve an important narrative purpose, as they allow the protagonist to move to new locations instantaneously or at least faster than would normally be allowed" (57). Since the play's setting in the Vital Statistics bureau immediately attunes viewers to a real historical moment, there must be a relatively quick transition into the imaginary world where Lucy will realize, as the audience has, that she is daydreaming.

Even after Lucy stumbles over the chalk circle and enters into the new space, the audience still needs a little bit more context to understand the transition from the seemingly real world they were introduced to and the fantastic world Lucy has entered. After Lucy gets over the shock of seeing her childhood imaginary self, the so-called caseworker proceeds to tell Lucy that

she is in The Gap, which she explains as “the space in between who you were the day you were born and who you became from the day you were adopted” (Gallant, *Betwixt* 4-5). The Gap is also a play on words because the playwright grew up in Britain, and it alludes to the London Underground’s famous “Mind the gap” message.

This explanation is beneficial to both Lucy and the audience. Audience members who are a part of the adoption discourse community will likely recognize the caseworker’s explanation as reminiscent of Lifton’s Ghost Kingdom theory. The caseworker goes on to confirm that Lucy is actually in a daydream, explaining to her that “a lot of children do go through a phase where they fantasize about having better parents. They create their own version of a fantasy self. [...] but you adoptees tend to hold on” (Gallant, *Betwixt* 9). This line is an allusion to Freud’s family romance theory, where he argued that all children fantasize about having better, even royal, parents. Lifton references this theory in her book, when she explains that the problem is that an “adoptee really does have another set of parents out there somewhere” (*Journey* 61). When the caseworker says that adoptees hold on to such fantasies, she is referring to the lifelong impacts of missing personal information that incline adoptees to create and maintain fantasies for longer than other children.

Lucy’s unfamiliarity with the imaginary world she has entered is common in portal fiction. As Benjamin Robertson explains, “Because the world of a portal fantasy must be entered, that world will likely, if not always, be unfamiliar to the one who enters (and the reader as well). Moreover, the presence of the portal itself, which serves as a threshold between one world and another and thus between one set of rules and another, signals a difference in backstory” (Robertson, “Backstory” 40). In other words, the chalk circle, as the portal, signifies the difference between Lucy’s daydream and the world she just left where she sits in the Vital

Statistics office. Once she utilizes the portal to travel to a different world, she will need some context to understand where she has arrived. The caseworker provides this explanation to her and as such, serves as an important narrative device to help both Lucy and the audience navigate the new space. As Robertson points out, “portal fantasy nearly always involves explanation *by* a character familiar with the world *to* a character not familiar with the world” (“Backstory” 40). Just as Hagrid helps introduce Harry Potter to the wizarding world, the caseworker helps explain the space she calls both The Gap and *Betwixt and Between* to Lucy in order to orient not only Lucy, but the viewers as well.

In analyzing Lucy’s travels to and from this other world, it is also possible to interpret *Betwixt & Between* as a quest narrative. Mendelsohn argues “Modern quest and portal fantasies rely on very similar narrative strategies because each assumes the same two movements: transition and exploration” (2) and suggests that most portal fantasies are indeed quests. Knowing that Gallant was directly inspired by Lifton’s theory, it comes as no surprise to find elements that recall Campbell’s hero’s journey, a critical influence on its creation. The play’s narrative follows the three major arcs of the hero’s journey, strongly reminiscent of tales like *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, as it depicts Lucy entering her daydream at the beginning (Departure), interacting with her own inner fantasies (Initiation), then returning to the real world a changed woman (Return). Although Lucy is surprised to find herself in her imaginary world conversing with fictional characters, these characters have a purpose in visiting with her: they guide her through an inner journey that leads to insight, wisdom, and a changed resolve by the time she returns to reality. The purpose of her quest, though she does not initially realize it, is for Lucy to identify her true feelings about her adoption so she can gain the courage to seek out the truth instead of allowing what-ifs to haunt her. The play concludes with Lucy’s stumbling once

again out of The Gap, a liminal space between reality and fantasy, as she exits the chalk circle with new knowledge of herself and returns to the Vital Statistics office where her number is called so she can finally receive her original birth certificate.

### **Counterfactual Characters, Alternate Histories, and Possible Worlds**

The two characters that Lucy engages with in her daydream (or Ghost Kingdom) are symbolic representations of what George Carstocca refers to as *uchronias*, alternate or counterfactual histories. He defines *uchronias* as “works of fiction that emerge from the difference between an established narrative timeline and a ‘what-if’ scenario: if a given event is assumed to have gone differently, then the change in that event has repercussions for the flow of time beyond the point of divergence” (184). In the case of *Betwixt & Between*, all three of the characters represent a different timeline. Lucy represents the established narrative timeline, the mimetic storyworld where she was relinquished and adopted and now waits in the Vital Statistics office. Eloise and Sabrina signify two separate “what if” scenarios, but rather than the play depicting two diverging scenarios laid out as a speculation in plotline, the characters themselves serve as embodied representations of those possibilities. Each character is a projection of what might have been. Eloise, who Lucy admits to having created as a child, is the person Lucy might have become had she stayed with her birth mother. The caseworker, on the other hand, is the wished-for daughter that Lucy’s father might have had if he and his wife did not struggle with fertility issues.

Besides the two characters who embody these counterfactual alternate histories, though, this play also explores what-if thought experiments by replaying some of Lucy’s past fantasies. For example, Eloise plays herself in one of Lucy’s dark fantasies in which she stays with her birth mother who she imagines struggling with substance abuse and abject poverty. Because

Lucy did not stay with her birth mother, this is an imagined possible world that serves as an alternate scenario to what has occurred in Lucy's actual world. Another example is the fantasy in which Eloise plays Lucy's birth mom who is driving in the rain on the way to Lucy but crashes instead. Lucy conjures this alternate scenario out of fear and guilt. She explains that she thought her birth mother died because she used to wish her adoptive mother would die so her birth mother could come and take her. She says, "I thought my birth mom dying was god's punishment for me being ungrateful and wanting something so horrid" (Gallant, *Betwixt* 20). In the absence of truth from her adoptive mother and the lack of open communication, Lucy has conjured this possible scenario in order to cope with her guilt and grief.

Lucy's fantasies represent different possible worlds, all counterfactual in their own way, but that does not mean they are disconnected from the actual world. Understood from the perspective Matt Hills calls "moderate realism," it is possible to "view alternative worlds [...] as abstract, hypothetical scenarios within our actual world" (433). Within this framework, as George Carstoccea explains, "alternate worlds exist only through the exercise of the imagination rather than as ontological fact, but their speculative impact may well teach us something about our real world" (187). For my purposes, Lucy's Ghost Kingdom in its entirety can be called an alternate world because it is built from her imagination, but it also benefits her perspective towards her real-life situation to have considered the scenarios presented as both character representations of different possible timelines and what-if scenarios presented as fantasies. By entering into her Ghost Kingdom daydream, Lucy is able to visualize the consequences of different timelines and experiment with different scenarios through her fantasies, both helping her come to terms with the past and potentially lessening her uncertainty about the future. Because the act of adoption itself is such a significant hinge moment on which infinite possible

worlds rest, it makes sense that an adoptee might explore those possibilities by conjuring them as thought experiments.

### **Imaginary Worlds**

All of these what-if scenarios and possible characters occur in Lucy's Ghost Kingdom which is, in itself, an imaginary world. The beginning and end of the play, set at the Vital Statistics office, are what Marie-Laure Ryan would call the "textual actual world," what we might call the "real world" inhabited by the protagonist ("Ontological" 74). Once Lucy crosses the threshold into her daydream, the narrative experiences an ontological shift to the private universe of her Ghost Kingdom, where it is difficult to judge exactly what is fantasy and what is not. As Ryan explains, "imaginary worlds can be situated at variable distances from the world we regard as actual or primary" ("Ontological" 74). And yet, even as the narrative's move into the imaginary world of Lucy's Ghost Kingdom signals an exaggerated fantasy, the audience can still accept there is a truth quality to the experience. On one level, this is a simple function of the immersive power of fictional narratives. As Ryan argues, "[if] we immerse ourselves in the storyworld, then the textual assertions become automatically true in the storyworld by virtue of the performative power of fiction, a power that enables fictional texts to create imaginary objects and worlds by simply referring to them" ("Ontological" 74-75). Gallant's use of the fantasy portal facilitates that immersion: we can easily move from our world to a "textual actual world" just like it, and the portal device then helps us move seamlessly, as Lucy does, into the imaginary world of her daydream. Within the play's storyworld, Lucy's daydream is just as real as any encounter she might have in the Vital Statistics office. It becomes, then, a viable space to engage in a more fantastical version of the kinds of thought experiments that explore possible scenarios and counterfactuals that all daydreams represent.

Lucy's imaginary world is constructed entirely by her imagination, sometimes actively, sometimes unintentionally, where what-if scenarios and other fantasies play out about her adoption. As the play progresses from Lucy's bug-filled birthday cake fantasy to the final fantasy where Lucy almost drowns Sabrina, there is a gradual shift in how much control Lucy has over the fantasies she creates in her imaginary world. Although the caseworker and Eloise seem to be able to converse on their own with Lucy, often chastising Lucy for having such dark fantasies or being miserable, they are not fully in control of the fantasies as they play out, especially towards the beginning, signifying that this imaginary world is still Lucy's. This progression of Lucy's ability to purposefully control her fantasies as they play out signifies her emotional transformation. The shift in her interactions with Eloise and Sabrina clearly show she has gone from suppressing her Ghost Kingdom to using it as a space to explore her emotions. Only once she has played out these scenarios is she prepared to return to the Vital Statistics office and pursue the truth of her birth mother.

This play gives its viewers a very intimate looking-glass with which to experience the inner world of an adoptee who wants more information about themselves yet also has retreated into fantasies to cope with the lack of information. By establishing the play's textual actual world in New York in 2020, the play makes a strong argument that adoptees should have access to their original birth certificates and have the opportunity to seek out the truths surrounding their adoptions. The play uses strategies from portal fiction to transport Lucy from her actual world into her Ghost Kingdom where she plays out fantasies that are all derived from one question: what if?

From the outside, all these layered possibilities and thought experiments can be understood as Lucy's cognitive process to cope with and prepare for all the unknowns about her



adoption. By creating an internal imaginary world, or as Lifton would call it, a Ghost Kingdom, she has a space to explore the possibilities she has been discouraged from examining in the actual world where laws are still in place to keep information about adoptees away from them. With her play, Gallant successfully illustrates the different kinds of Ghost Kingdoms that adoptees create in order to process all the trauma of adoption, especially in lieu of access to their records.

## CHAPTER IV

### REAL GHOSTS AND UNNATURAL NARRATIVES IN MATTHEW SALESESSES' *THE HUNDRED-YEAR FLOOD*

Matthew Salesses' novel, *The Hundred-Year Flood*, is an exploration of how unprocessed trauma and grief can affect people's lives, threatening to drown them if they do not learn how to swim. Tee, the main character, deals with several levels of traumatic grief: he witnesses 9/11 in America; then his uncle commits suicide after years of his aunt and father having an affair; and finally, he is a Korean adoptee in a dysfunctional transracial adoptive family and will never get to meet his dead birth mother. After 9/11 and his uncle's suicide, he goes to Prague where most of the drama of the novel unfolds. The novel introduces him in the hospital as he attempts to regain his memory after a head injury he sustained in Prague. In addition to his brain injury, Tee has a lack of generational memory, in that his parents kept secret his true adoption circumstances; this leads to the consequences of the sudden appearance of traumatic post-memory when he finds out from his adoptive mom that he is a result of one of his father's affairs. The plotline is disordered much like the information and memory he has and is given about himself. The disorder of the chapters and the plot is reminiscent of what a disjointed memory might look like in action, which is precisely what much of the narrative revolves around: traumatic memory and the lack of traumatic memory.

In the first two case studies, the authors were directly influenced by Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory, but that is not the case for *The Hundred-Year Flood* as Salesses was not directly inspired by Lifton's work. This chapter instead argues that the textual evidence of coping mechanisms adoptees employ to process the trauma of missing information about themselves often reflect Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory, regardless of any explicit influence. I argue that applying the lens of Lifton's Ghost Kingdom reveals the cognitive processes the main

character of Matthew Salesses' novel, *The Hundred-Year Flood*, employs to process his trauma, using narrative structures including possible worlds and unnatural narratives. This novel also shows the ways in which the act of fiction-making can substitute gaps in real-life narratives. In other words, this book shows how fiction-making to fill in a gap, even by a fictional character, generates something that is real, even if it is not true, in the face of a critical gap of knowledge about the self.

Throughout the novel, Tee calls attention to the information he is missing about his life. Eventually, the novel reveals that his parents have kept this information from him, lying to him, often by omission. Most prominently, information about his birth mother is missing. Though he is forced to deal with his adoptive family's generational trauma, the lack of his biological post-memory is equally as distressing. Salesses portrays the consequences of these missing memories through Tee's exploration of his life narrative. Tee's unique inheritance is an intergenerational trauma where the relationships within a family can be empty or covered with lies, each a trauma of its own, in addition to a complete lack of post-memory where his birth mother's story is concerned.

The novel addresses Tee's lack of post-memory in three different ways. The first is that he hides his emotions in what he calls his "container." The second occurs after he suffers a brain injury and attempts to write a fictional version of his birth story. Finally, he is haunted by a ghost. Each of these approaches lends itself to a reading through a particular theoretical lens. The container can be read through a trauma lens; his birth story can be read through possible worlds theory; and the ghost itself can be read as an unnatural narrative. Additionally, all three of them are literary manifestations of coping mechanisms that can be read through the lens of Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory.

## Tee's Container

The first introduction to Tee's mental cognition is the mention of his container. The novel is written mostly through a first person omniscient point of view, and in the first chapter, the narrator explains, "He was filling a container inside of him. Into it, he put the things he couldn't say—about the seduction of forgetting. When his container was full, he would dump himself out in one dramatic move" (Salesses, *The Hundred-Year Flood* 6). At various points throughout the novel, his container is filled up, or completely empty, given his emotional state. When Tee's emotions hit one extreme or another, usually feelings of being overwhelmed or wishing to disappear, is when his container fills or empties.

Additionally, Tee's container is how he processes his emotions, deals with gaps in his identity, and processes trauma. As Salesses explains in an interview, Tee's container also represents "Tee's relationship with passivity and action" (Brown). With all that in mind, Tee's container works as a kind of crutch for his identity when he is passive about it and perhaps an energy source when he is attempting to process the missing parts of his identity. Because he is a transracial adoptee, he also lacks the genetic mirroring of his Korean biology, which also contributes to the pieces of broken identity he hides in his container. Many moments occur when the dissonance of being a Korean man interferes with moments between him and his white mother or even in Prague when people assume things about his history given his Asian features. As Tony Corsentino writes of the need for genetic mirroring that

Various likenesses 'overlap and criss-cross' among family members. Mirroring consists in these family resemblances. We cannot summarize them. There is no such thing as 'what it is,' definable in terms of a unique conjunction of attributes, to be a member of

my or your family. We gain a more or less full sense of our mirroring of our relatives through experience of them.” (Corsentino, “Mirroring Part 2”)

Tee recognizes some of this, but what he does not know how to deal with ends up repressed in his container.

Tee’s container also aligns with two different features of Lifton’s Ghost Kingdom theory. First, as Lifton explains in *Journey of the Adopted Child: A Quest for Wholeness*, the Ghost Kingdom is a “spectral place . . . located only in the adoptee’s psychic reality” (57). Like a Ghost Kingdom, Tee’s container is a secret place inside of himself that holds all of his unnamed and repressed emotions that he does not know how to deal with. Although he is aware of this emotionality inside of him, he does not seem to have the capacity until the conclusion of the novel to evaluate this inner part of himself.

Second, like the Ghost Kingdom, the container is a narrative demonstration of a cognitive process of a fictional character. This novel employs such realistic fictional attributes that when the narration introduces Tee’s container, it follows that the reader may interpret such a function as a kind of cognitive process. In reference to this place inside of himself, the narration explains at one point, “there had always been something itching inside him, fluttering like a bird in his throat, waiting to fly out” (Salesses, *The Hundred-Year Flood* 32). Readers familiar with Lifton’s Ghost Kingdom theory might make the connection between Tee’s container and a Ghost Kingdom, but readers without this context can still understand the wobbliness of emotions Tee has around his parentage and how to deal with such heavy grief in the wake of two major losses: his uncle and his birth mother, not to mention his parents’ divorce and all the secrets that have finally been set free in his family.

At different junctions in the novel, readers witness Tee attempt to process what he has been told about his adoption in the past. Based on his ruminations throughout the novel, readers learn the story that his parents told him about his birth. The story was told heroically, that his father had promised his dying birth mother that he would take care of her son. Then, there is another moment when Tee is very young and he goes into the forest with the only picture of his birth mother he has in an attempt to find her, but he gets sick from the cold. After he gets sick, his father intervenes before the priest can say last rites, which Tee interprets as a second kind of rescue on top of the perceived rescue of his adoption. Each of these moments build up into a false narrative of how Tee arrived with his family because these moments are more about Tee's parents than Tee.

### **Tee's Birth Story**

Understanding Tee's story as it was told to him contextualizes the second introduction to Tee's inner life. When he sits in the hospital in Boston after everything has happened in Prague, he decides to write a fictional version of his birth story on a typewriter. By the point that this occurs, however, it is not just the lack of knowledge that he is attempting to reconcile with this act of fiction-making; he also has received an email from his adoptive mom during his time in Prague where she explained to him that he is, in fact, his father's son from an earlier affair after his adoptive mother found out about her infertility.

In life-writing, which is what Tee attempts with the creation of his birth story, storytelling is a common way for people to cope with trauma. It allows the storyteller to witness their grief. The problem for Tee is that he does not have the data about what actually happened at his birth event, and therefore cannot actually compose a piece of life-writing because he cannot ever *really* witness his own trauma. He can only witness the lack of the story, so his witnessing is

always only *possible*, not *real*. When he goes to knowingly compose a fictional version of what he imagines his birth event was like, the typewritten story becomes a material manifestation of the container itself. This provides Tee with a physical and external conception of the traumatic lack of memory he has been attempting to reconcile inside of himself.

Unfortunately for Tee, writing the story himself is insufficient. Without a true account of his birth event from his father or birth mother, he is unable to resolve the trauma of both lacking the memory in the first place and then later having to face traumatic post-memory when his adoptive mom tells him he is his father's son. Secrets and withholding biological truths from adoptees cause a multitude of emotional problems. As Lifton says, adoption trauma is "further compounded when [adoptees] are denied knowledge of the mother and father to whom they were born" (*Journey* 7). When adoptees are denied such knowledge, a gap opens up which must be filled. Because adoptions like Tee's happen in infancy, the loss of such knowledge and relationships along with the primal wound of being separated from the mother turns into an ambiguous loss for the adoptee since it occurs before long-term memory develops. Ambiguous loss is even more difficult to process because, as Lifton explains, "adoptees have no pre-traumatic self" (*Journey* 260). In other words, they have no coping mechanisms mastered before the trauma of separation and loss because it happens so early in life. Tee's attempt to fill in this gap of knowledge and traumatic ambiguous loss with a fictional rendition of his birth event, then, seems to be the only coping mechanism he can execute safely. This coping mechanism of creating a fiction works as an example of both a counterfactual (what if it happened this way?) and a possible world (it could have happened this way). In this way, his fictional birth story can simultaneously only be possible, but is real in how it affects his perspective of himself.

## The Ghost

However, writing his birth story does not resolve the problem of the ghost that haunts him. The ghost that haunts Tee appears and disappears after two important moments in the plot. The first time he sees it is after his lover, Katka, pulls him into the closet to kiss him in the beginning of their affair, and he mistakes the ghost for her husband, Pavel. Even as it is beginning, Tee recognizes this affair as a reenactment of his father's behavior, yet he cannot stop himself. Then, the day before the ghost disappears during his time in Prague, Tee receives an email from his mother. In it, she says, "You're your father's son, Tee. I mean his biological flesh and blood. You would have found out eventually" (Salesses, *The Hundred-Year Flood* 96). This small bit of information is a blow to Tee as it both exposes part of the truth about his conception, and further damns his affair behavior as inherited from his father. The ghost reappears after Tee returns to Boston with his head injury, and he sees it increasingly in the hospital, but both of these appearances symbolize both the inherited intergenerational trauma and the bit of story, not the complete story, that Tee's adoptive mom has given him. Additionally, the ghost reinforces the limitations of traditional coping mechanisms, especially when the full knowledge necessary to process such complicated trauma tied to identity is lacking. The interactions with the ghost make Tee's gaps of information about himself visible because he only catches glimpses of the ghost here and there. In fact, in both spans of time that he sees the ghost, beginning after his affair with Katka until his adoptive mom emails him and again in the Boston hospital after all of Prague, he never catches more than the tail of a dress or the curve of a leg. Finally, the ghost reveals itself as his birth mother. When Tee finally says to his father, "Tell me about my birth mother," the ghost of his birth mother fully materializes next to his father (Salesses, *The Hundred-Year Flood* 228). The end of the novel suggests that to end the haunting, he must hear



the story of his conception from his father to fill the gap previously filled with both lies and emptiness.

In contrast with Tee's container, the fictionalized story of his birth he composes by typewriter and the ghost that haunts him are external manifestations of his trauma instead of internal. However, there is no evidence in the narration that the ghost is directly created or controlled by Tee the way his container or his typewritten story is.

### **Theories of Ghosts**

What is unique about this ghost is that the reader is free to interpret it in several different ways. The first interpretation of the ghost is fairly straightforward. Because of how ghosts have been culturally conceptualized in a wide variety of literature and media since the late 1700s beginning, arguably, with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, many readers arrive already familiar with what a ghost may mean for a story (Morton). According to cognitive schema theory, readers use "prior knowledge to comprehend and learn from text" and therefore, when they encounter a ghost in a narrative, they may already have cognitive tools available to interpret what the ghost may mean for a narrative (An 130). In the case of this novel, both knowledge about ghosts and Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory aid in the interpretation of the ghost. Readers can make sense of the idea of Tee's mother haunting him from previous experiences with ghosts represented in popular culture. Unlike the previous two case studies, this novel reaches beyond the adoption community into a more general audience, so readers may be more expected to interpret the ghost as simply a person who is dead, especially because Tee's biological mother is, in fact, dead.

Ghosts, scientifically speaking, are not a proven part of our real existence in the actual world, despite their popularity in our storytelling. Therefore, readers are presented with the

problem of interpretation. How should they interpret the ghost, the only unnatural element, in an otherwise realistic narrative? As Alber et al. claims that Stefan Iverson defines it, an unnatural narrative will “present the reader with clashes between the rules governing a storyworld and scenarios or events producing or taking place inside this storyworld—clashes that defy easy explanation” (103). In other words, because the ghost defies easy explanation and sticks out in comparison to the rest of the novel, readers are given the task of figuring out how to interpret it, based on the contextual clues available. Unlike Tee’s container or his typewritten stories, the clues surrounding the ghost are more elusive throughout this book, in part because Tee himself is attempting to figure out who or what the ghost is, but also because the ghost is the core dilemma of the novel, revealing it in whole sooner than the end of the novel would undermine the effect of this narrative element.

If Lifton’s Ghost Kingdom theory is added as an interpretive lens, there is more to the ghost than simply a dead person haunting an alive one. According to Lifton, the ghost of the birth mother is “as if dead” to the adoptee, even if she is actually still alive (“The Inner Life” 419). Tee’s family did not openly talk about Tee’s dad and aunt’s affair, nor about the truth about Tee’s conception. Whether the birth mother is dead or not, the lack of memory that Tee has about her drives much of his inner turmoil which, like a flood, rises up to drown him even as he closes himself to hide away from it.

By bringing in Lifton’s Ghost Kingdom theory to read this text, we can see something beyond what a normal ghost might tell us in other narratives. Because the ghost that haunts Tee is so unnatural compared to the rest of the novel, its unnaturalness calls attention to the very real gaps in his memory about his birth mother and by extension, the gaps that hinder him from contextualizing his own life narrative. In this sense, the ghost represents the very real lack of

information that Tee must deal with; therefore, even if the ghost is impossible, it is still very real as to how it relates to Tee's perception of his identity.

Metaphorically, the unnatural ghost serves as a signpost to notify readers that they must figure out how to interpret such a departure from an otherwise realistic autofictional narrative. In this case, the ghost points out the gap of memory about his life that hinders Tee from successfully forming a sturdy identity. Additionally, according to an interview with Salesses, he views ghosts as a "possibility" (Hagerty). So we can also interpret the ghost as a representation of a possible world in which he might have had the opportunity to meet his birth mother or perhaps ask her the questions he can only ask his father since she is dead (Hagerty). The idea that a ghost might represent a possibility speaks directly to Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory where she explains that "all of these ghosts are members of the extended adoptive family, which includes the birth family" and each is a person or relationship that could have been (Lifton, *Journey* 11). This is also the perfect example of possible worlds theory in narrative because the creation of these counterfactuals demonstrate the cognition of a person who is attempting to cope with a severe lack of information about themselves.

As I have pointed out in this chapter, Salesses' novel demonstrates the cognitive coping mechanisms of a fictional character in an internal way with Tee's container, an external way with Tee's typewritten birth story, and further emphasizes Tee's gaps in his life story with the inclusion of a ghost that, in comparison to the rest of the novel, is completely unnatural and therefore a signpost for readers to interpret the metaphorical meaning. Although the author does not reference Lifton's Ghost Kingdom anywhere, both his container and his typewritten story can be interpreted as internal and external versions of a Ghost Kingdom. Furthermore, it is not a terrible stretch to infer that *The Hundred-Year Flood* is a literary manifestation of the author's

Ghost Kingdom as well. The many layers of reality and impossibility in this novel work together to demonstrate that even if something is made up to fill a waking gap, it can still be very real to the person who has composed such a thing.

## CHAPTER V

### GHOST KINGDOMS AND PHANTOM WORLDS: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN ADOPTEE AUTOFICTION

When adoptees write, perform, and film narratives that represent Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory, they open up doors that challenge us to renegotiate how we define fiction and how it interacts with reality and truth. Because of the trauma of adoption, the loss of biological family, and the lack of generational memory, adoptees often struggle to build cohesive identities and structured life narratives. When adoptees create Ghost Kingdoms or fictional inner worlds, they are filling a gap in their life narratives with a fantasy as a coping mechanism. In textual examples of Ghost Kingdoms, not only is the cognitive process of this coping mechanism demonstrated, but the text becomes a literary manifestation of unlived possibilities.

The discussion of Ghost Kingdoms, the psychological phenomena proposed by Betty Jean Lifton, is currently limited to the adoption community. This is most likely why discussions about or practices directly reflecting Ghost Kingdoms are few in number outside the adoption community itself. However, even if not explicitly recognized as such, the cognitive process of building fantasies and imagining counterfactuals to fill gaps in a life narrative has been addressed in both adoption and trauma scholarship. For instance, Elizabeth Alice Honig contends that adoptees "live with phantom lives, lives defined as possible but unlived" (215). These phantom lives, as she calls them, are similar to what Lifton calls the Ghost Kingdom; they are imaginings conjured by adoptees of those lives they might have lived. Just like Ghost Kingdoms, they are fictional possibilities and require readjusting if and when an adoptee might seek out more information about their history. Crucial to this identification of phantom lives, Honig explains, is the idea that they are "fictions through which identity is tested, adjusted, and defined" (216). In

other words, these phantom lives that adoptees construct directly affect the ways in which they perceive and construct their own identities.

In addition to Honig's proposed phantom lives, in her analysis of the "(im)possible lives" of adoptees, Eleana Kim references Laurel Kendall's chapter, "Birth Mothers and Imaginary Lives," where Kendall identifies several alternative scenarios that adoptee and birth mothers may consider. From Kendall's discussion of "possible stories" and "other might-have-beens," Kim extracts the idea of "antiautobiographies," adding the modifier "imagined" for those narratives that depict how "the phantom lives of adoptees are . . . marked by impossibility and haunted by the specter of social death—of having lived an abject, better-off-dead life" (117). In this way, there are two types of possible life stories that adoptees might imagine for themselves: one, another life where they remained with their families of origin, or the other, where social or even actual death could have occurred in the absence of being "rescued" (119). If the latter, as an "injunction to be grateful for being saved from a life of abjection" is used by adoptive parents as a weapon, this kind of counterfactual reasoning can leave adoptees feeling oppressed (119). Additionally, as Kim explains, "Adoptees' struggle for personal and biographical coherence is often performed through a process of searching for and reuniting with birth parents as they seek definitive accounts of their adoption histories in order to 'repair the broken narrative'" (127). Each of these scholars point out what most adoptees already know: that, as Kim says, when adoptees consider the counterfactuals of their lives, they "at least have control over a narrative of possibility" until that time when they must face reality in reunion (117). Having control over a narrative, no matter how realistic or far-removed it might be, is sometimes all an adoptee may have, especially if reunion may not be a realistic option. As Honig says about phantom lives, "Such narratives of possibility are familiar to anyone who has experienced a tremendous trauma,

particularly one in which they were in fact powerless” (215). Infants cannot advocate to remain with their mothers for themselves, after all, and for any human, mother-loss is a devastating event.

The concept of trauma is important to include in discussions about adoption narratives. In Anne Whitehead's book, *Trauma Fiction*, she explores the intersection between trauma narratives and fiction. In her introduction to the first part of her book, she notes that Cathy Caruth's work “suggests that if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear space” (6). This fits in neatly with the narrative forms I have encountered in my case studies, where another impossible kind of narrative is interjected into an otherwise realistic narrative. Whitehead goes on to explain that “the irruption of one time into another is figured by Caruth as a form of possession or haunting. The ghost represents an appropriate embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past in the present” (6). In other words, the entire idea of a ghost, especially as it relates to trauma, metaphorically represents a painful past, even a painful gap from the past, surfacing in present time.

Though Lifton and the specific theory of Ghost Kingdoms are missing from these discussions, the repetition of terms like “phantom lives” and “ghost” indicate the likenesses among these ideas. Likewise, the concept of possible lives is similar to the possible worlds in fiction that often contend with thought experiments and counterfactuals. In both static imaginings of “phantom lives” and active searches for reunion with biological family, adoptees are seeking to address a fundamental gap in their life stories. By combining all of these ideas—Ghost Kingdoms, “possible lives,” ghosts, and trauma—there emerges a specific kind of coping mechanism and with it, specific narrative strategies that allow adoptees and their audiences to

better understand the consequences of their trauma and even, perhaps, how to reconcile such gaps. What Lifton coined as a psychological theory is recognizable as its own form of narrative when adoptees use her theory as a framework for their stories.

I aim to move the Ghost Kingdom discussion from psychological theory into narrative theory. I argue that Lifton's concept of Ghost Kingdoms can help us understand both the coping mechanisms of adoptees and the symbiotic relationship between fact and fiction as it relates to adoptees' narrative identities. Ghost Kingdom narratives demonstrate the cognitive need for fictional models within otherwise life-centered writing like biographies, memoirs, and autofiction. In adoptee-written works that employ fictional strategies to reflect such a need, the impossible fiction is a replacement for a crucial gap in knowledge about the character's own identity. Perhaps, also, the work of fiction is itself the author's replacement for their own crucial gaps of knowledge about themselves. To avoid empty speculation, I focus on the adoptee narratives analyzed in this study; however, this model can be applied to other life-writing that deals with knowledge gaps, particularly those related to trauma.

The narrative gaps that exist in adoptees' life narratives are born of trauma, loss, and a lack of generational memory, among other things. Inherent to every adoption, there occurs a legal (or illegal) severance between biological family members, which is the one common thread of loss in all adoptee stories. Nancy Verrier famously called the separation of mother and infant the "primal wound" (xvi), but as Konkin notes, psychologists such as Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere have argued that infants "cannot distinguish between 'me' and 'not-me'" (qtd. in Konkin 8); and according to Donald Winnicott, when the mother is "away for too long, the child 'is altered,' becoming traumatized" (qtd. in Konkin 9). For instance, some adoptees have very little information about the actual event of their birth. They may eventually, depending on the laws in



their state or country, possess their original birth certificate or other medical or legal documents, but even these cannot tell the full story of such an event. Whereas kept children (children who are not adopted) might hear the story of their birth from immediate family members, the adoptee lacks such a foundation for the story of their life. The perfect example of such a gap being filled in with fiction can be found in Salesses' novel, *The Hundred-Year Flood*, where Tee writes a fictional rendition of his own birth story in lieu of knowing the true details.

Other common gaps in adoptee-written Ghost Kingdom narratives demonstrate a lack of knowledge about biological relatives, medical history, cultural history, generational memory, or genetic mirroring (which is regularly seeing someone you are related to and recognizing similarities). Consider, for example, the scene in *@ghostkingdom* where Brayden makes faces in the mirror in an attempt to correlate his possible sister's physical features with his own. In hearing about and seeing resemblances between them, he is demonstrating his own lack of genetic mirroring. Adoptee narratives also often depict the distinct pain of knowing there is information being purposefully withheld or discovering lies. An excellent example is the scene in *Betwixt & Between* when Lucy considers the possibility that her adoptive mother lied to her about her birth mother, which leads Lucy to realize how little she knows about her own situation. The different way each of the adoptee protagonists in these three case studies highlights their unique gaps of knowledge emphasizes how traumatic the myriad kinds of loss in adoption can be. Even in the best of adoption circumstances, there is loss and grief. This is where the fantasies of the Ghost Kingdom are created.

In each of my case studies, the main characters struggle with a gap in knowledge that is traumatic because it directly impacts their perspective of themselves. In order to reconcile the missing pieces of life narrative and salve the emotional wound the adoptee characters withdraw

into themselves. In a myriad of nuanced ways, adoptees do not have a cohesive narrative about their lives. The lack of this cohesive narrative directly affects the cognitive processes by which they build their identities.

Understanding the relationship between lived reality and fictions created to escape or fill in the gaps of that reality are important to recognize as a cognitive process and coping mechanism. According to the APA (American Psychological Association) Dictionary of Psychology, cognitive processes are defined as “any of the mental functions assumed to be involved in the acquisition, storage, interpretation, manipulation, transformation, and use of knowledge” (“Cognitive Process”). Additionally, they define a coping mechanism as “any conscious or nonconscious adjustment or adaptation that decreases tension and anxiety in a stressful experience or situation” (“Coping Mechanism”). In the context of Ghost Kingdoms and the literary manifestations of them, the creation of an inner psychic realm is both a cognitive process and a narrative playground for what-if thought experiments like possible worlds, counterfactuals, and the like. In addition, the reason some adoptees may engage, consciously or subconsciously, in such a cognitive process is that they are lacking a significant piece (or pieces) of their life narrative, whether it is a birth story, the gift of genetic mirroring, or any other kind of critical information that, if possessed, might better inform them about themselves.

Though creating a fictional fantasy or seeking out reunion to track down lost stories are not the only coping mechanisms adoptees might resort to in order to attempt to fill the narrative gap in their lives, it is an important one to consider because when these types of coping mechanisms are demonstrated through works of fiction, they can demonstrate the ways in which reality and fiction work not as opposites but in tandem. Even if fictional, an imagined possibility is true to the adoptee because it affects their actual world perspective.

I cannot identify any of the three artifacts I examined with a strict definition of life-writing because none of them are purely autobiographical, in the sense that they portray the actions and events of a known person's life. They are not memoirs or biographies, and their authors do not claim them as such. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain, "When we recognize the person who claims authorship of the narrative as the protagonist or central figure in the narrative—that is, we believe them to be the same person—we read the text written by the author to whom it refers as reflexive or autobiographical" (8). That is not the case for the film, the play, or the novel. Instead, these three case studies are versions of what Alison James calls autofiction which "allow for a range of configurations of the fact/fiction relationship" (42). Though autofiction remains a contested definition because some scholars prefer to emphasize either the auto (the self) or the fiction, what matters to this thesis is the combination of the two. Stylistically speaking, each of these texts all employ realistic fictional characteristics yet they also focus on a removed analysis of the self.

However, I must still address the connections between the cognitive process of Ghost Kingdoms created by actual adoptees as coping mechanisms with the ideas of life-writing, because the texts I examined as case studies do portray, if fictionally, real-life cognition. Often, the genres of life-writing and fiction are viewed as opposite, but in cases like these, fiction is a necessary component for an author to employ when writing realistically about a life that could have been theirs.

In order to portray the cognitive process of Ghost Kingdoms, these narratives use an intricate mix of narrative structures to portray deeply intimate constructions of adoptees' inner lives. In the same way that Richard Gerrig defines a narrative gap as "a gap between what the narration reveals and the underlying story," so too must the adoptee take what they can from

what their circumstance reveals and accommodate the gaps in some way to make sense of their their life narrative (20). Furthermore, even though the pieces I have studied are fictional, there are two separate kinds of fiction in each of them. One kind of fiction is mimetic; it portrays a character and a world that could absolutely be real in our world. I have already argued that although each of my case studies reflect in some way the real life experiences of the author, even if indirectly; this realistic fiction can be called autofiction, or fiction about the self. The other kind of fictional narrative employed is a kind of impossible fiction that the character creates, often inside themselves, to fill a critical gap of knowledge regarding the self. The kinds of impossible fiction that may be so employed to portray a gap can vary, but as demonstrated in my three case studies, I have identified possible worlds, imaginary worlds, alternate timelines, counterfactuals, and unnatural narratives.

Brian Stanton's film, *@ghostkingdom*, for example, takes place in what looks like the real world to the audience. Filmed during the pandemic, the setting is limited to a home office, an apartment stairwell, and an empty cemetery and the conversations he has with potential relatives on the phone and online make light mention of current events in America. The character, however, is how the audience knows that the film is not a self-reflective narrative, but a fictional one. It is only through interviews that the audience may discover the ways in which Stanton's experiences led to the decision to write such a narrative. The plotline of *@ghostkingdom* follows Brayden, an adult adoptee, as he recalls the fantasy parents he imagined as a child while actively seeking out his father to address the gaps in what he calls "my truth" in his life narrative and identity. By raising the question of who out of three men might be Brayden's father, Stanton uses possible world constructions to show how the character conjures up possible outcomes when he has no verified record of what could be real in the actual world. In

doing so, a shift in narrative strategy from realistic to latent possibilities emphasizes the gap of knowledge itself that drives Brayden to both imagine fantasy versions of his mother and father. He does so both in periods of stasis with no available information, then actively seeks them out one by one later in life in what Lifton referred to as “crossing over.”

This distinction between stasis and movement in an adoptee’s emotional journey processing all that their adoption encompasses is also significant in Maggie Gallant’s play, *Betwixt & Between*. In the play, viewers are introduced, again, to a world that resembles our own where recent New York legislation has allowed the main character, Lucy, to request her previously sealed original birth certificate. The majority of the play, however, takes place inside an imaginary world she finds herself in as she waits at the Vital Statistics office. She enters and exits this world through a portal, the chalk circle, much like Alice and the rabbit hole. In contrast with Stanton’s film, Gallant’s play reflects a potential identity that Lucy might have become had she remained with her birth mother instead of being adopted. Interacting with this imaginary character, Eloise, is a vital part of what convinces Lucy to move past her imaginary world and resolve, by the end, to seek out the truth when she exits her imaginary world.

Matthew Salesses’ novel, *The Hundred-Year Flood*, also depicts a character in stasis who retreats in many ways to the use of fiction and internal realms to cope with a lack of information about himself. Not only does Tee hide the mysteries of his misunderstood emotions and ill-defined identity into an internal space he calls his container, he also knowingly composes a fictional rendition of his birth story in an attempt to fill the gap in his life story. Though these two coping mechanisms are realistically portrayed, the fantastic element of a ghost defies this narrative structure in order to portray the crux of Tee’s dilemma, which is that the ghost of his birth mother haunts him. It is not until he realizes he must ask his father for the true story that

she materializes in full at the end. This ending suggests that for Tee to move out of stasis, he must confront the truth.

In so many different ways, each of these narratives explores and emphasizes the main character's gaps through fantastic fictional elements. Through possible worlds, imaginary worlds, and unnatural narrative elements, the audience can see that these fantastic elements function as filler for the holes each character struggles to reconcile in their life narratives.

According to Henrik Skov Nielsen et al., "the use of fictionality is not a turning away from the actual world but a specific communicative strategy within some context in that world" (62). In other words, the use of fiction in and of itself is a rhetorical move that communicates something to its audience. They continue with: "Fictive discourse invites the reader or listener to imagine something—to ask, often tendentiously, 'What if?'" (64). In the cases I have presented, not only has the audience been invited to ponder what-if scenarios in regard to the fiction itself; they have been asked to consider several layers of fictionality including "what if projections, if-only regrets, thought experiments," possible worlds, and more within already fictional pieces (62). These case studies, in how they are structured and how they work as pieces of fictionality, include effective arguments such as moving from closed to open adoptions as Lifton first argued; allowing adoptees access to their birth records and ways to seek reunion as Stanton and Gallant's pieces demonstrate; or simply opening others' eyes to the grief and trauma adoptees are often left alone to untangle as Salesses portrays in his novel. Thus, the fiction allows the audience access to perspectives very relevant to conversations in the adoption community.

However, this narrative phenomena should not be limited to adoptee-written narratives that feature Ghost Kingdoms; these are not the only narratives that might engage with such narrative tactics. I propose that, instead of the term Ghost Kingdom, which applies specifically to

the adoption circle and alludes to Freud's family romance, we instead move forward with what I call Phantom Worlds theory. Phantom Worlds theory acknowledges that any person who may experience a traumatic lack of knowledge about some critical aspect of their life that leads to grief, especially those that impact their self-perspective, might engage a cognitive process of fiction-making to fill in the said gap of knowledge. When this process happens in fiction, it effectively merges fiction-making of the impossible sort and life-writing which results in a kind of autofictional narrative that serves as a representation of how fiction is integrated as a part of a person's lived reality.

The name Phantom Worlds represents two notions. The first is an allusion to both Lifton's theory and ghost schemas in general, with the word "phantom." Though Phantom Worlds theory is not limited to the use of ghosts, the idea of ghosts in fiction is one so common that it has essentially been naturalized as a metaphor. In other words, when we encounter a ghost in a narrative, we come armed with a general idea of ghost functions and possible metaphorical meanings. Because of those schemas around ghosts, we can more readily interpret the narrative. Similarly, familiarity with Lifton's Ghost Kingdom theory is equally as imperative to understanding Phantom Worlds theory. Beyond being another word for ghost, "phantom" is also etymologically related to words like phantasm and fantasy. They all trace back to the word *phainein*, which is the Greek verb for "to show," "to bring to light," or "to reveal." This is important because, as I have demonstrated in my work thus far, the Ghost Kingdom narratives do not limit themselves to depictions of ghosts; they also use fantasy in order to emphasize a critical gap of knowledge pertaining to one's perception of themselves.

This connection to fantasy leads me to the second notion of Phantom Worlds theory, which is the connection to possible worlds theories. As I have pointed out, the Ghost Kingdom

itself is an imaginary world, internal to the adoptee (and others in the adoption constellation) where a person may interact with counterfactuals and what-if possibilities in order to cope with the lack of information pertaining to one's self-perception. These possible worlds are thought experiments as well as coping mechanisms that allow the person a way to fill a gap in their life narrative with fictional possibilities. As I have demonstrated in the preceding case studies, life-writing, especially realistic autofiction that interacts with impossible fiction, can effectively demonstrate a traumatic gap of knowledge about a character's self and thereby share with audiences an example of the cognitive process associated with Ghost Kingdoms. Generally speaking, we usually separate life-writing like memoirs and biographies from fiction; however, in cases like the narratives I am focusing on, it is clear that fiction and reality exist in a symbiotic relationship with each other—especially when the writing concerns a significant lack of information to understand the self fully. Defined as literary manifestations, Phantom Worlds phenomena may also allow for a point of entry for other gap-related narratives to enter the discussion. I have high hopes that better understanding this phenomenon in adoptee-written works can open up new discussions of narratives that address other critical gaps of knowledge, too.



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