

Joy Ride: A Guide for Community Discussion

By Korean adoptee and therapist Cam Lee Small, MS, LPCC
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***SUMMARY:** Joy Ride is a movie that features a plot largely centered on an adoptee. Adoptee-themed movies are multi-layered and our reactions to them can be just as nuanced. As we seek to increase inclusive, justice-oriented adoptee representation in film and media, this guide is meant to help adoptees and allies gather and discuss what we actually need and want as a community [MAJOR SPOILERS INCLUDED]

Key words: adoption, transracial adoption, activism, child welfare, mental health**

What's the relationship between life and art?

Does one imitate the other? How do we protect and empower marginalized communities through that process; what's our role in that journey?

Can there be activism without forgiveness? Or forgiveness without activism?

I heard someone say *people pleasers often start out as parent pleasers.*

For adoptees, I might add that we *always* start out with different parents. Sometimes, we start out on different continents.

Joy Ride takes time to address that. Maybe? Let's talk about it.

For whatever reason, you've seen or are considering a screening of Joy Ride.

Adoptee-themed films like Lion, Return to Seoul, and Broker are multi-layered and our reactions to them can be just as nuanced. Through ongoing community dialogue together, we advance the way we as adoptees tell our stories both on and off the screen.

**CONTENT NOTE: adoption, trauma, loss, grief, death

Cam Lee Small, MS, LPCC is an international adoptee from Korea, currently active as a licensed professional clinical counselor and founder of Therapy Redeemed. This publication was launched to address the intersection of adoption, mental health, and social justice.

That's why I created this discussion guide, which is combined with some of my initial reflections as an adoptee and mental health clinician. Full disclosure: I've only seen the film once at the date of publishing this guide (7/12/23). I'm going off of what I scribbled down in a little notebook I used in the dark. So, thank you in advance for bearing with me.

This guide is not perfect. It's a start, though. To help you draw connections between information, learning, and action portrayed in the story/screenplay - and to present circumstances that adoptees could be facing right now, that *you* could be facing right now. But not just any present circumstances. To realities associated with your needs and wants - and dimensions of self revelation inevitable for anyone who finds themselves on a journey of tension and growth.

You might also find some language and tools with which to critique this and any other film constructively, and thus assess your own lived experience, along with the characters and messages and narratives therein/you're in.

***NOTE: this guide is a combination** of *personal reactions* to the film, professional observations about *the film*, and my ongoing curiosity as an adult adoptee about where I'm situated in the arc of critical adoption studies. I'm continually learning more about my role and responsibility as previous generations of advocates, organizers, and scholars so diligently and compassionately entrust us with their labor of adoptee consciousness, that we would be a collective community that works together toward an honored history, an engaged present, and a future lineage of citational practices that help build a better world than any one of us could imagine on our own, without forgetting how we got there. Special thanks to Sarah Park Dahlen, Ph.D., M.S., M.A., Kim McKee, Ph.D., and author Sun Yung Shin for helping me see how this guide fits into that larger universe and for inviting me in to these necessary conversations. For more in-depth dialogue related to Joy Ride, the work of Asian American women, and foundational legacies of Black activists, please refer to their upcoming scholarship as it become available.

We want to know ourselves better so that we can show up in the world better. So, we examine our assumptions, cognitive distortions, black and white thinking, how we see things through a mental filter, all or nothing tendencies, the binary, jumping to conclusions, deficit-based language, etc.

How might a film like Joy Ride activate that process for us?

AUTHOR BIAS & MOTIVE

There's no such thing as seeing something without bias. As a cis het Asian American faith-based male adoptee with layers of both advantage and disadvantage, I enter this dialogue with my own set of lived experiences. Feedback and support are certainly welcomed as I offer this discussion guide to the adoptee community. In a conversation like this, the more the better, in my opinion. The film did/will resonate differently with every single person who views it. That's why your voice counts. It will also carry different meanings to folks depending on the personal and social identities you embody and are connected to. That's why our collective voice counts.

I made this guide because Joy Ride involves adoptees (maybe because it *doesn't* involve as many adoptees as we would have hoped?). It takes time to organize these thoughts and choose what to share and what to leave out. Someone could make a guide like this for many other films, too. I'm taking time to make this particular guide because I see a need for an increased adoptee presence in the domain of film and storytelling and Joy Ride is intersectional in that it moves the needle forward for some communities and discussions while simultaneously holding others back. Whether intentional or not, it's both a catalyst for celebration as well as constructive analysis.

AMERICAN STEREOTYPES

Ke Huy Quan (*Goonies*, *Indiana Jones, Everything Everywhere All At Once*) plays Jamie Yao, an actor in the ABC universe who played "Freddy Wong" in a 90s sitcom they called "Beyond Repair."

Freddy was a distorted, offensive caricature of Asian immigrants. His famous line in each

episode was, "*What could go wong??*" before a fan would fall on his head and render him unconscious. A repetitive meme to which the hefty audience laugh track was as redundant as the racism that brought his character to life.

Disney+ viewers can watch Freddy Wong's meme today and cringe because we know, explicitly, how harmful these stereotypes can be to all of us. Some of the characters within the show seem to get that, too. Especially the ones most marginalized by those stereotypes.

I went into Joy Ride wondering what kind of adoption stereotypes would be presented this week around the world in the form of this road-trip buddy-love story. From the trailers, we know the main character, Audrey (played by Ashley Park), is adopted and wants to find her birth mother. The "no-holds-barred, epic experience becomes a journey of bonding, friendship, belonging, and wild debauchery that reveals the universal truth of what it means to know and love who you are."

I cannot write this without giving credit to the adoptee elders who've inspired me and who I've learned from through books, conferences, mentorship, fellowship, partnership, and their willingness to speak into my life and work throughout the past decade up to this very hour. Just to name a few (and there are so many more!) huge shoutout to folks at The Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network ([KAAN](#)), Dr. JaeRan Kim, Dr. Kimberly McKee, Dr. John Raible, Steve Kalb, Angela Tucker, Amanda Woolston, Rosita Gonzalez, Sun Yung Shin, and most recently the team I've been honored to partner with through The Very Asian Foundation to publish [guidance on covering transracial adoptees, birth search, and belonging](#); [Patrick Armstrong](#), [SunAh Laybourn](#), [Kira Omans](#), [Megan Schellong](#), and [Michelle Li](#).

And of course we wouldn't be talking about this if it weren't for the folks who poured their time, heart, energy, resources and faith into making Joy Ride in the first place:

Directed by Adele Lim

Screenplay by Sherry Chevapravatdumrong & Teresa Hsaio

Story by Sherry Chevapravatdumrong, Teresa Hsiao, & Adele Lim

Starring Ashley Park, Sherry Cola, Stephanie Hsu, & Sabrina Wu

Produced by Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, James Weaver, Josh Fagen, Cherry Chevapravatdumrong, Teresa Hsiao, and Adele Lim

LET'S PLAY

Opening Image: Audrey (Ashley Park) and Lolo (Sherry Cola) on a children's playground surrounded by white people.

Soundtrack starts before the scene opens: Ants Marching by Dave Matthews Band (brings back a lot of high school and beyond memories for me and probably/maybe many others that the script/film was marketed to? Same with the soundtrack in Beef)

Text on the screen once camera opens up, "1998"

A park in "White Hills" - the scene from the trailer where Lolo punches boy for saying "No ching chongs allowed."

Audrey's parents ask Lolo's "are you Chinese?" and they ask if their daughter could play with theirs because Audrey is from China.

During this part I wondered "Do they have to be Chinese for Audrey to play with her? What if they would have answered 'Korean' or something?" There's that sense/process of cultural reclamation (education, experience, immersion) that many adoptees may go through in terms of their birth culture, but here it brings up the question of how important is it for adoptees to connect with specific "affinity" groups specific to their racial-ethnic identity, and what are the benefits/implications of connecting through broader themes like "Asian American" (rather than solely Chinese American, Korean American, Korean Adoptee, etc.)

Opening image is about Audrey surrounded by whiteness. It's the flashback that allows us to see she's been getting the gamut of interactions that many adoptees face, the kid at the park, the kid in the classroom talks about her mother not wanting

her, Lolo gets up in front of class to assure Audrey she doesn't have to "prove to these losers" who you are. Flashback. But cut to present time, where Audrey has become a professional "prover" (lawyer), seemingly at home in the world of whiteness... "fully assimilated" as Dr. Amanda Baden's framework describes. She's still surrounded by whiteness, still adopted, and in a way still beating the crap out of her peers, and now her boss, at least at the gym playing racquetball and at the law firm where she's about to make partner.

Theme: at dinner with Lolo and all of their parents, Audrey states that she doesn't need to worry about her connection to China and/or her birth mom because "Look I have the best parents right here!" points to her APs... is that statement true? To me, this is what the movie was going to be about. We'll see. It explores the subject of identity. Dialogue on being Chinese and American. Can you be both? It's an essay on the pros and cons of embracing your birth culture, birth family, processing your adoption story, giving space for your history to come alive, "success" without having to sacrifice parts of who you are. [there's a twist in Act 2 that adds / brings more nuance to this]

NOTE: I realize that one film can't perfectly represent all people at all times throughout the story. In a way that gives one person too much credit and doesn't give enough credit to the next person who needs to tell *their* story. If a creature from outer space came to base their worldview from their analysis of one human from earth, it would be incomplete. Each new person they interview would give them a more refined, robust picture of what it means to be human. With film especially, we can't expect one survey of one character's life to give us a fully accurate representation of what it means to be adopted. Instead, one film will give us a slice, a snapshot, a byte of understanding that we must add to an ongoing openness for continued revelation not just about what it means to be adopted but what it could look like to walk alongside, love and be loved by others who are on that journey too. And Adoptee is just one of a handful of personal and social identities that we navigate - advantages and disadvantages included - that culminate into each person's lived experience. That's why the idea, "There is no singular story" is so important to

acknowledge as we see and walk with one another.

Need and Want: I'm thinking about layers of need and want here that drive the story, but could become places where the adoptee experience could become portrayed in less-than-helpful ways. What does Audrey need? Seems like she needs to confront her adoption story and the impact that separation from it (and her family/culture) has had on her sense of self, which seems to be (and this is a stretch) personified in her three allies (more on this soon). Audrey needs to see her *self* beyond the way White Hills sees her. So, she wants to make partner and close this deal in China. FYI: "The typical definition of a [law firm partner](#) is an attorney who buys an ownership interest in the firm and receives a share of the profits." In real life, I've sometimes asked clients, "What does the money mean for you? What/who does it connect you to, what does it rescue you from, who do you become with(out) it, where would you go if you had enough, where are you now because you don't have enough, how do you feel when you make that purchase, who do you feel without having made that purchase, how does it play a role in your overall worldview and expression of your values and beliefs, etc. We're not here to make judgments from the reflection, simply observing what comes up and seeing how it fits into or relates to their presenting concerns. Similar to sex (we'll address that soon), we don't always feel comfortable talking about money, so when we create space to talk about it we open up new avenues for self-revelation and increased capacity for meaning- and decision-making.

Ok, so, need and want are on the table.

Here are some main beats to discuss:

China: Ronnie Chieng's character welcomes Audrey and her crew to the "new world." Which also includes a cocktail of old and strange world visualized in the aged egg shot. Audrey rejects it. Was this scene necessary? How does it position adoptees in our quest to connect with our origins? Dragon births a dragon... what are adoptees?

Plan: go to Lolo's family and get help to find Audrey's birth mother... so she can close the deal. How many expectant woman / birth mothers have been used to close deals in Adoption Land? Yes we'll learn more about Audrey's birth mom later

in the film, thankfully, and, how will Joy Ride and other films deal with providing a more dignified portrayal of the Birth Mom archetype?

Lolo's family: What's different here? How is this some kind of "new world" for Audrey? Any interactions / script dialogue that stuck out to you? Character quirks, voice, features, etc. What does Audrey learn about herself, family, China, etc. Did you find yourself having any thoughts during the family gathering scenes?

Midpoint: "China looks good on you." What do you make of that statement?

Conflict closes in: "This birth mother search is bullshit" - how does Audrey get to this point? What makes her say that? Are there any real emotions that you can identify with, related to the/ any new information she just received?

[Watch this opening clip from the Side By Side documentary in partnership with I Am Adoptee.](#) What are the differences and what are the similarities compared with Audrey's experience? [hint: person thought she was a Korean adoptee until she took a DNA test, "The results I got back were really surprising... it stated that I was 100% Japanese..."]

New plan: the brainstorm scene in the kitchen about all the ways we could get to our birth place... sound familiar? Why is getting back so much harder than getting adopted? And that's just the legal aspect of having to have a passport, etc. What about the antics they had to perform in order to just attempt to go. And the lifelong complexities of negotiating that question of "who am I?" Can you think of barriers that adoptees have faced within their adoptive families when they consider a birth search? Joy Ride helps us explore a slice of that. I'd love to know more about split loyalties, jealous adoptive parents, disenfranchised grief related to wanting to know more about our histories, especially the people who are a part of them...

All is lost: the world has seen Kat's tattoo, which connects all four characters to a major point of suffering, defeat, potentially meaning something unique for each one of them. We know it's never as bad as it seems, because we're a third into the movie and something will change for the better soon. Unfortunately, for adoptees in real life, we

can only wish a comeback was that guaranteed. How will future films about adoptees address this piece of our journey?

More conflict: Audrey found her birth mom, but she's deceased. And Audrey can't read the file. It's in Korean language. Not only are there barriers to accessing our records many times, there are barriers to being able to read and understand them. Barriers that shouldn't be there. And, now, the barrier of death. In many cases, this is where adoptees are expected to just be thankful for what they do have, or we're expected to simply accept it as an artifact of the past and live unaffected by it. Joy Ride seems to face this by taking Audrey to the cemetery. It's fascinating that Audrey is only allowed to think about her mother and pay these kinds of "respects" to her only after finding out she's dead. In the beginning of the film, they're with Audrey's parents and she comforts her parents, "Why would I want to search when I've got the best parents right here!" Of course, maybe for the script's sake, her parents join along. But there's an opportunity to ask how adoptees might need some kind of affirmation about birth search even when our behavior does not elicit that affirmation overtly. What do you make of that dynamic? Where or how have you experienced that in your own story? APs could have said, "What do you mean! Of course go and see, we support you 100%, that's a real important part of your life!!" But instead, and whether this was part of the designing principle I'm not entitled to say or judge, adoptive parents sip wine and sing along to their own praise. The "love sandwich" is just for the three of them. When will "love is enough" include our birth families?

Dark night of the soul: Audrey visits her mother's grave. At the cemetery she meets her mother's partner, played by Daniel Dae Kim. He informs Audrey that her mother left behind a message for her to see. They go to the home and she gets to view it sitting at the dining room table. One piece that has stayed with me and even made me physically move/squirm in my seat for a second was the sudden full screen view of birth mom as Audrey/adoptee watches her birth mother's posthumous message. Especially coming right after the cemetery, for any adoptees who may already feel emotionally weathered from whatever context and then seeing the grave sight visually like that along with getting to see the birth mother from Audrey's seat, as if we were her

and perhaps, because many Asian adoptees have never seen their mother and she could look like anyone... wow. It makes sense the culmination of these plot lines and sequences could feel upsetting/emotionally activating. I can also understand if the scene gave you something you didn't know you wanted, or needed. For Audrey, she seems to arrive at the self-revelation of her connection to her past, her family, to Korea, to the fact she is/was loved and cared for, she doesn't need to go around arguing her case that she's lovable and worthy and qualified in order to get that sense of security... now she has it, it's right there on the laptop.

Was she loved and cared for? How does Korea love and care for its vulnerable citizens? The 250,000 of them who've been relinquished and sent away from Korea. Who is willing to produce that film? Or mention it in their existing screenplay? Or mention how adoption touches systems of "*anti-blackness, settler colonialism, imperialism, and militarism.*" (McKee) Maybe that's not what Joy Ride was meant to be... on the other hand, they did talk about Audrey's mother being sent to china to deliver her. Was that a way of inviting us to think about China's role in international transracial adoption? What do you make of that?

I'm curious about the decision to have a deceased birth mother, yet a living image of her in video, along with an avatar/representative of sorts (through Daniel Dae Kim's character), to help transmit birth mom's hope/message/legacy to Audrey - to help Audrey receive it.

Personally, my birth mother has not mentioned me at all to her family. And that's a common scenario for many adoptees. How does Joy Ride reveal or even challenge some of those cultural patterns? And how else do characters in Joy Ride personify beliefs and actions that we as adoptees experience, embody, and manifest in our own lives? Regarding adoptees, birth family, and birth culture, what changes would you suggest if you were in the writer's room?

Kim's character represents, perhaps, a new way of thinking... People who are open to humanizing sex, bodies, adoptees, Asian communities; those who can see pregnancy, mothers, expectant mothers, birthmothers, pre-marital relationships through eyes of grace, a bit like Daniel Dae Kim's

portrayal of warmth and affection... “she talked about you all the time.” Eventually, Clarence turns a page, too, as if his God gap has room to hold these layers of lament, shame, guilt, fear, and our hope for intimate connection with someone who can handle all of us, past and present included.

Is the adoptee experience, as a character, too complex for one person to carry? Before we get into the final act/finale, let’s think about archetypes.

ARCHETYPE

Audrey’s three friends could be seen as a personification of her sense of self. Yes, this could be interpreted as such for any main character, in any movie, but since Audrey is an adoptee, let’s take a look. I’ll describe each through a lens of *barrier* and *strength*.

Lolo Barrier: she saves Audrey at White Hills park. This immediately sets up Audrey as a likable friend. For a storyline based on an adoptee, this is important. Could this be contrasted with the way her adoptive parents “saved” Audrey *into* White Hills? Or/and is it parallel? Historically, “orphan rescue” has been a mark of sainthood among adoptive parents and those in our society who praise them for their benevolence. And, in film, having a character “save” someone at the beginning of the story is a common technique writers use to make them more likable. It’s not an absolute rule, but go ahead and think of any shows or movies (Disney/Marvel especially) where we see characters help, assist, or literally save something or someone from trouble at the beginning of the story (even if they’re reluctant about it at first). Lolo is a personification of “Adoptee as recipient of charity” as well as “Adoptee stripped of agency and choice.” Lolo initiates the birth search without consulting Audrey at all. Lolo’s decision made without Audrey’s consent reveals the Adoptee’s lack of choice in and through the process of birth search but also relinquishment, adoption, geographic displacement, and relational erasure locally and abroad. It also gives us a clue to the inherent flaw in producing a film about adoptees without consulting the living testimonies of those who’ve actually been and are adopted. The problem with Lolo is that the plot suggests this kind of non-consensual behavior is

permissible if everything works out in the end. Unfortunately, not all adoptees are living a Joy Ride narrative.

Lolo Strength: she talks about it. I wonder how many children have been adopted *because* no one was willing to talk about it? No support. Only stigma. How many laws and child welfare practices and relinquishments and secrets are still operating because that’s just the way it’s always been and no one dared or thought to challenge it? If art defines excellence for how to acknowledge and navigate reality, she’s using art to help us be excellent to one another through dialogue. Inspiring us to *want* to speak, and inviting us to bring the conversation wherever we go (asks about Kat’s tattoo in the airport, taxi cab, talking around, etc.). And, if Joy Ride was an individual character, among the endless cast of characters who exist in the story world of the adoptee diaspora on planet earth, in our quest for full, inclusive, realistic justice-oriented trauma-informed adoptee-led representation... I wonder if it’s Lolo? Whether it’s through her sex-positive art or her multi-scene montage asking about Kat’s tattoo, which grew from a “small” flower on her upper thigh to a picture of the devil on and in a very intimate part of her body, she’s giving us the thought bubble and a pen to add something. Like, “What do *you* wanna ask about? Go ahead.” The process itself challenged the motion picture association through their advocating for it to be rated R. The double standard around female/male nudity in film is evidenced in how movies like *The Hangover* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* get a pass; how men get a pass and women are subject to an imbalance of power and control (which relates to the way birth mothers are often treated). [According to the writers](#), the original showing of Kat’s tattoo would have bumped the rating up to NC-17, only after cutting a few frames they received their R rating. Ps: what feelings/actions do adoptees have to cut in order to receive their “well adjusted” rating? Lolo wants to talk about these things. In the scene where she’s talking with Baron Davis about her art, she tells him something like, “I make the art this way because I want people to talk about it, I want to get the dialogue going.” She has no problem asking questions. She’s so comfortable asking questions. Can you think of situations related to being an adoptee where it would be a lot better for us if the world allowed us to ask questions? And if we felt confidence asking them despite what the

world thinks? Lola personifies Audrey's adoptee-related wish to ask and talk about areas of our lives (and bodies) that society deems taboo, off limits, against the family rules. But where does Joy Ride touch us [morally](#)? How do we negotiate this tension between the need to share our art with the world and our responsibility to pursue justice in the world? How do we reach both? Can we? Where has Joy Ride taken liberties at the expense of the oppressed? Where have they degraded something that many adoptees consider sacred? And how have maximized ticket revenue at the expense of the vulnerable? Lolo doesn't suggest that adoptees speaking about adoption is a harmful act. However, she does invite us to examine how Joy Ride silences the adoptee voice, especially as an adoptee-centric film that lacked adoptee expertise during writing and production.

Kat Barrier: She's Audrey's shame and guilt personified, specifically related to history and our need to recognize our origins. Mask. Persona. Facade. "The good girl." Of course she is so much more! Remember we're talking about archetypes related to adoptees. She helps us see how shame and guilt keep us apart. Fear, too. They keep us from ourselves and hidden from others. For Korean adoptees especially, the stigma of sex outside of marriage was a significant barrier to many of our families staying intact. Additionally, paralyzing fear about past decisions, circumstances, and experiences has prevented many of our birth families from mentioning or carrying us with them into post-relinquishment seasons of their lives. The church and "faith" play a significant role in that. Kat's tattoo is a vivid representation of the way birth mothers (and birth culture to some degree) have been and are demonized at the expense of connection and care that every living person needs to survive, both physically, relationally, emotionally, and spiritually. Kat's character embodies love without truth. In a space where "love is enough," adoptees especially need opportunities to say, "Hey, actually, I might be interested in exploring my history," without having to say things like, "but who would wanna do that when I have the best parents anyone could ever ask for??" [points to her APs sitting right there across the table and goes in for a love sandwich]. There are many other reasons an adoptee might feel shame [as an identity] or guilt [as a consequence for actions/behavior]. Kat represents both an internal need [Audrey needs to have space to explore the truth

about her past; also needs to learn how to hold tension(s) related to it] and external/moral need [her barrier is potentially hurting others as she presents a kind of false self that involve major life decisions and life transitions]. The problem with Kat is that she justifies the domino-trail of lies in order to get the life she wants, the status she wants... how many adoptees face those barriers today, where caregivers in their life pressure them [or fail/struggle to recognize] to keep up appearances, going so far as to keep an adoptee from accessing mental health support because of the way it might make the family "look bad," as if needing/wanting mental health support should bring some kind of reproach upon a family. Kat's job as an actor fits with the way adoptees are sometimes forced to wear a mask throughout their lives; birth families, too.

Kat Strength: She's Audrey's willingness to learn/try new things; young/emerging adulthood. And she's Audrey's connection to China. There's harmony. Although there are dimensions to Audrey's life that she does not talk about or feel a desire to explore, Kat embodies stages of adoptee development in which an adoptee meets people outside of "White Hills," people who gladly invite them into new spaces and places. While our adoption/origins may not be central to those friendships and connections, they're not off limits. In fact, they are on call and quite willing when we're ready to go there. Audrey herself portrays a personification of accepting those parts of ourselves that others may struggle with. Through her assumed role as Audrey's translator, she provides Audrey with a window, mirror, and tools she can utilize to develop her identity. Lolo and Deadeye have this, too. Through each of their histories as friends, they all offer a unique aspect of this form of education, experience, and immersion (various shared and unique experiences, incidents and memories in their friendship with Audrey, etc.). Although the realities of China's One Child Policy and Korea's role in marginalizing single mothers and unwed partners weren't directly addressed (should they have been addressed in Joy Ride?), the devil's face on Kat's vagina is pregnant with symbolism. Her fiance, Clarence, at the end seems to finally embody the notion of moving toward (instead of away) this conversation, this history, with a dual sense of compassion and curiosity. Acceptance and collaboration. How many Korean birth mothers have yet to tell their "new" families

about the children they relinquished for adoption, through coercion or otherwise? Daniel Dae Kim's character speaks to this layer, too. Kat helps us see language and beliefs (from birth/heritage culture) as a symbol to represent both Audrey's distance from China and her inevitable, irreversible connection to it. Of course there's information that's been withheld from Audrey that will be revealed later on. I wonder how Clarence's initial reaction to Kat's tattoo/history provides us with a visual emotion, the act of running away out of the nearest door, avoiding whatever it was "in here" - to pursue whatever exists "out there" away from the truth. Kat feels torn, but ultimately wants to reconcile her past with the present. Can there be harmony? Kat's strength, which is Audrey's strength personified, is that she's willing to press into that dialogue. Facing and talking about our history is not the devil it was once thought to be. Many wonder, why couldn't Joy Ride, for all its "raunchy" courage to bring explicit content to viewers' attention, double down and really say some explicit, true things about adoption that adoptees have been speaking about for decades?*

Ironically, it was Clarence's "faith" that kept Kat from revealing parts of her self in an intimate relationship. Where and how do adoptees face a similar kind of captivity for fear of not living up to someone's prescription for the way we should live? Or their expectations of us? ["We're your real parents. We don't see color. You're taking it too personally. Stop overreacting. It's all in the past, your parents didn't want you. If we hadn't adopted you, you'd be..." - where and when does it stop? Where and when can we show our true questions, thoughts, feelings about what it means to be adopted?]

*Maybe their agenda wasn't to preach a message. That's fine, they have that freedom, don't they? And if anyone tries to preach a message through their film, should we have to believe it?

Deadeye Barrier: Deadeye is Audrey's isolation. The hunger for belonging and friendship. For connection. Misunderstood. Unseen. Different. Audrey would have felt more comfortable if she would just not come along on the trip. How many adoptees feel that way about their sense of "otherness," being othered, outed, interrogated about their origins, left out of experiences most people take for granted, "Oh wow you look just like your mom! "Oh you don't know how to

speaking Chinese?? Korea?? Where are you from? Happy birthday! Phoenix gives birth to the phoenix..." Deadeye makes friends with people online and her relationships with them are questioned, as if digital/virtual means of connection are not legitimate or effective. Deadeye is Audrey's internal longing for someone to understand her socially disenfranchised way of being, her non-connection to China along with her inherent connection to China, it doesn't make sense to Ronnie Chieng's character, so much so that she might lose the deal over it(?). What a fascinating catalyst for a birth search. Yes, it's true that most "Hero" journeys begin with some form of inciting incident that sends them on a quest for something. In some ways, though, and this doesn't apply to everyone, Deadeye's desperate yearning to go on this trip with them is a personification of a deep desire to know truth about our origins juxtaposed with our deep desire to stay invisible entirely because of what it means for our survival in White Hills. Deadeye is Audrey's childhood pain. We see some of that when she's playing cards with the young boy at Lolo's family party. What's it like for Audrey to have a conversation with her inner child? Yes, Lolo was paramount to Audrey's "success" or survival in a place like White Hills, but the "rescue" seems to have left Audrey, like many adoptees, with a sort of unfinished business to confront/honor during future life stages and transitions. What if Joy Ride, as a film, could have caught the profound nature of the fact that adoptees in the film industry feel this isolation, too? Well, maybe they did know it, and that's why we are stirred in the opening scenes and throughout the movie. But few if any adoptees were consulted for the film. They've managed to position themselves in a place of power without taking time to hear from or invite those with the marginalized identity to the table. It's ironic that we relate with Deadeye. They show her on screen, yet contribute to the conditions that make her so relatable to us. We jump at scraps and vomit because we're so desperate for connection and representation. Audrey jumps at performative allyship and the chance to prove herself because she's so hungry for... cocaine? Maybe. But even the most basic research on trauma and addiction will tell you the relationships between early adversity and the brain's struggle to negotiate authenticity and attachment; that [cocaine feels like a warm hug](#), a hug that an adoptee may have had to lose at some point in their journey.

Deadeye is our yearning for attachment and authenticity, personified. For some adoptees, maybe that is some kind of Joy Ride. Others aren't so fortunate to embody such a logline. I wish the film would have addressed that a bit more in the midst of its "we're so great and nothing raunchy is off limits!" attitude. Then again, it's a comedy. Are there any other socially acceptable ways to tell an adoptee's story?

Deadeye Strength: Untapped resources. Unacknowledged strengths and skills. Brownie Tuesday. Her friends show up, and *they* even become a personification of the creativity that comes alive when we're allowed to be part of the plan. Deadeye is also the modern day 21st century tech-connected adoptee. Social. Media. Deadeye speaks to the potential reach we have as adoptees, to one another and into causes that impact our community. Can you imagine what stories we've been missing out on because adoptees remain hidden in such a way. And can you imagine what transformation will be made when storytellers who include adoption in their portrayals would invite adoptees to be a part of their plan? Who among us and what stories that need to be told would finally come alive, not just for the sake of entertainment but the intentional proposal for how to show up for the adoptee community. Deadeye is a personification of Audrey's capacity to create, connect, love, lead, see, and say things in a way that only she can. She's a restoration of innocence lost through adoption. The honesty. The authenticity that stands even when it means people might avoid or walk away from us. She's Audrey's need for attachment without condition. She pictures that basic bid for connection, for someone to be with us, looking for a warm, kind partner for a serve and return interaction. Deadeye brings to the forefront parts of the self that we eventually learn how to "regulate" and keep hidden from others.

COUNTING OUR LOSS

We get a deeper look at each character's core need/want right before Act 3. But we can learn about Audrey here too. That scene in Korea where it's as if they're all worse off than when they started. The big fight. Everything is lost.

Lolo finds out about Audrey moving and not telling her, calls Audrey selfish: Practicing autonomy is not always a "safe" act. There will be

many forces, without and within us, that will resist an adoptee when they begin making decisions and growing into their own personhood with agency that exists outside of the patterns they had to develop in White Hills.

Kat weeps over the video that went viral, her career, based on appearances and reputation, is on the line: what do adoptees have to gain by pretending? What do we have to lose by not acknowledging the truth about our stories, about our histories and identities and our lived experiences in the world? See? I told you. Look how awful life can be when you let others see who you really are. Adoption may touch every single part of us, like, *every* part. Inside, too. How is that going to turn out for us in the context of our relationships, vocation, faith...

Deadeye drops the drinks she ordered for the group: not only does this picture the friends' relationship in that moment (good thing it's plastic cups and not glass!), it pictures a physical aspect of our relationship with others and ourselves. How does overwhelming threat have an impact on our nervous system, our ability to cope with stress, our blood flow, our consciousness, ability to stay present, executive functioning, our mind gut connection, our cortisol levels and flood of hormones when our body is (not) healing from trauma? Our worst fears, separation from care and those close to us, have come true.

We see how, maybe, each character either wants the same thing as Audrey but they were just going about it in different ways... (control over how much they're connected to one another, control over what truth others believe about them, the a form of autonomy without sacrificing a sense of security, etc.) Or, in some ways, they want different things and at each step they block Audrey from reaching her goal. How do you see that play out?

Between now and the finale, Audrey, and each character, seem to experience their "aha" moment and apply whatever "lessons" they learned/ discovered during the *joyride*.

Lolo accepts help and sells her art.

Kat tells the truth and reconciles with Clarence.

Deadeye works at the restaurant with Lolo.

Audrey...

FINAL IMAGE

How is this an opposite of the opening image? Audrey is surrounded by her friends, still on a playground, but it's a different kind of White Hills. And it doesn't matter if "ching chongs aren't allowed here." We can be Asian anywhere on the planet. We don't have to eat French food. We can eat noodles or whatever. Audrey has her own practice. Still proving things, but maybe now it's more about how she can serve others. All those facets of self (choice, history, origin story, authenticity and desire for true connection) are synthesized here in this "new world." The Eiffel tower shows us a sense of visibility, of capacity and willingness to face and embrace the hard, soft, in between, not one-and-done but ongoing questions of who we are, where we've come from, and where we could go from here, which, invites us all the way down into Deadeye's very new, present, interactive new tattoo. To me, it gives us permission to be a city on a hill through our willingness to speak candidly about adoption. Would neighbors and allies empower us with as much agency as possible to share our stories with all who need to hear them, ourselves especially. Regardless of whether or not that process was, is, or will be a Joy Ride, my hope for adoptees is our continued advocacy, first pioneered by adoptee elders who've moved mountains for us to speak, for you to have space and place and platform to tell us the version of the narrative that only you could tell. The more important joy, in my opinion, comes from inviting as many folks to the "prepared-for-you" room as possible. That adoptees would be among the first ones invited to the banquet of adoptee-centered film production. Without us, there'd be no Joy Ride. With us...

I thought it could be a story about an Adoptee learning how to advocate for their needs. From the opening scene, Audrey seems to be rescued, helpless, and infantilized.

By the closing scene I was hoping her dependence on that dynamic would have been reconciled or different... but was it? Of course, would there be a story without a person learning something new and finding new ways to get their needs met? She had to start somewhere. And maybe a joyride can only take us so far.

And what about Audrey's adoptive parents? How does character web work to preserve their role and status? Or change them? Have they learned at all? When do we get to see more of that growth... because it's certainly part of the adoptee journey... but at the same time we don't want to center them... so maybe flip the script and don't feel the need to tell us their whole background story, most adoptees already kind of know it because of, like, the way adoptees have been silenced in the past in favor of white adoptive parents as "experts" on adoption (example exercise: Google an adoption agency and see who's on the board and leadership for the organization. Nothing wrong with white folks - and - how many transracial/international/transnational adoptees are actively a part of programming, pre- and/or post-adoption).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE

Perhaps the writer and Director have given us a disclaimer through the exposition/dialogue - that moment where Lolo is sharing about her art with Baron Davis. She isn't trying to do this solely for shock value. She's trying to get the conversation started. She's trying to get us to talk about it. And look at us... Here we are... Talking about it.

In a way, Joy Ride has not lied. It has simply done what it said it was going to do/trying to do... the producers have given us a "hilarious and unapologetically explicit story of identity and self-discovery centers on four unlikely friends who embark on a once-in-a-lifetime international adventure."

There's not really a layer of adoptee activism in the longline. Doesn't mean there shouldn't be. But for whatever reason, it's not the focus of *this* film.

Does it still hold value for us? What do you think?

As a form of art, perhaps it leaves the door open for us to ask, "Where do we go next?" Who's going to make the next film? Not to just fill in the gaps Joy Ride missed, but take us to new worlds, new stories, old stories with more clarity, deeper meanings, and to transformed, refined, and even redefined versions of our selves... No singular person or book or screenplay or film can do that. It's going to take all of us working together to

build that. And some of us stepping back, myself included as a Korean American male adoptee, to not just *allow* space but fight to make space for our kin whose personal and social identities have not been automatically afforded the luxury of being seen and heard.

There's a scene near the end of the first season of American Born Chinese. Jamie [Ke Huy Quan's character] and the rest of the cast members are brought into a studio and interviewed about his life after the show. He names his struggle with "the industry." The whole system. The only parts he was offered were nerds and neighbors, "And sometimes ninjas." The interviewer jokes, "So you're saying the people at Batman never called?" [audience laughs]

Jamie [played by Ke Huy Quan]: When I say I wanted to play a hero, I mean, I just wanted to be someone who goes on a journey. Show some courage. Helps others. A hero can be a person with super powers, or they can be someone who fights for something that matters. My parents were heroes. But as I said, people like that weren't on TV back then.

Interviewer: Well... hopefully that's changing...

Jamie: [tearfully] I hope so. And I hope that there's a kid out there watching this, who feels he doesn't have to be a punchline. Who believes... that he can be the hero.

Joy Ride shows one fictional person's birth search, how they came to be on that journey, and how they got from point A to point B. Most box office film productions can be boiled down to three acts: a) chase main character up a tree, b) throw rocks at them c) get them down from the tree. Not to minimize or dismiss the immeasurable talent and sacrifice involved in making a box office film, but for adoptees, if we expect more than that, I wonder if anything anyone attempts to create on screen will fall short right out of the gates? And yet, yes, totally and without doubt, unless we're willing to ask one another how to invite more nuance and truth and compassion and justice into this process, no one's journey is enriched for the better. Especially adoptees, in the context of this reflection. Our thoughtful examinations will assist us for as long as we decide to walk beside one another, in the journey of life, and certainly in our journeys before, during, and through adoption.

In Joy Ride, I hear the questions, "What has your journey been like? What parts are relatable? Where/how is yours different? Who have you decided to walk with and who has decided to walk with you? What are the reasons for your actions and not actions? What makes you feel upset and separated, and uplifted and reborn? Are those ideas even something on your mind? Should they be? Could they be? Would they be if...?"

Having a "chosen" family in your life does not discount or replace the family you were forced to lose through relinquishment and adoption. Some families had no choice to relinquish. Some didn't have enough information to believe or act otherwise. We ask the world not to minimize adoptee grief by highlighting who we *do* have to be thankful for.

I'd love to imagine what the next steps would be for someone like Audrey. The worry is that Joyride wasn't about Audrey or adoptees at all; that the story was only there to give us a reason to fly around the world and have a blast with our best friends. The hope - the encouragement I refuse to leave behind - is that it *could* be about adoptees, and so could future films like it, if we'd be willing to apply the skills and courage that Audrey and each of her friends have taught us.

- 1) That we would *talk about it*. In a way that empowers the vulnerable and makes space for the truth.
- 2) That we would *show up*. Join with honesty in a way that cultivates harmony and connection.
- 3) That we'd *accept and honor* our strengths. *Believe* the best about ourselves and *amplify* the potentials in one another.
- 4) That we would *find and create* more places on earth for all kinds of people to be seen and tell their stories, not hide from them. Where each aspect of their lived experience is welcomed, without condemnation, with open arms, and the promise of dignity that every adoptee, every person, needs throughout their journey.

May our vision never be confined by adoption, but set free to journey through and beyond it.

Is that kind of joy worth pursuing together?

I hope so.

SYMBOLISM & END CREDITS

If you're going into the movie, take a look at this potential symbol web and try to notice which meanings become attached to them as the story unfolds. Do any meanings shift, change, grow, intensify?

White Hills Park
Law
Being a lawyer
Audrey's boss
"David"
Airport
Travel
Passports
Losing passports
Exit and entrance between countries
Legality and illegal passage of human beings
Working at a family restaurant
Acting / theater / celebrity
Art
Lucky Cat (licky cat?)
Character names
Food/noodles
Red bean cake
The train
White person on the train
The suitcase
The basketball team
The Eiffel Tower
Tattoos
Music / KPOP
Allies
Opponents
"Old world"
"Bad guys dispatched."
"New world order"

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Cam's personal experience as an international adoptee from Korea informs and inspires his current professional work. He formed his own private practice, Therapy Redeemed, in 2018, to raise awareness and respond to the mental health needs of adoptees and their families wherever they may be in their adoption journey. Cam's vision for adoptee-centered advocacy is evident through his 1:1 counseling services, live workshops and support groups, Masterclass trainings, and his active content creation/collaboration in and through various media platforms. His work has been featured in [National Council for Adoption](#), [Christianity Today](#), [University Minnesota School of Social Work](#), and [Center for Adoption Support and Education](#). He is currently working on a manuscript for a book to be released through InterVarsity Press to address the intersection of adoption, mental health, and social justice. Cam brings value and much needed perspective to the adoption community, personally and professionally.

1. [Cam Addresses Adoption Trauma with CBS News](#)
2. [10 Facts about Adoptees](#)
3. [Currently accepting speaking requests for Summer and Fall 2023](#)
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