

## **Critical Adoption Studies Transforms Students' Worldviews**

By Josie Clark

Critical Adoption Studies focuses on the practice of adoption and the effects that it has upon those involved. It examines adoption through a lens that differs from the classic "happily ever after" narrative most commonly associated with adoption. Professor Jinny Huh brought Critical Adoption Studies to the University of Vermont this semester through her class "Adoption Narrative."

Huh became interested in the study of adoption eleven years ago, following the adoption of her daughter. "I wanted to get myself informed and found that I had to do all the research independently because I didn't really know anyone on this campus who was working on adoption," she said. "So I thought, why not? Why shouldn't there be a class on adoption? There has never been one and we have a lot of adoptive families in Burlington and in Vermont."

Adoption Narrative is being offered as an English class, but Huh explained how the field itself is interdisciplinary. "If you untangle all the conversations, themes and topics that we are discussing in this class on adoption, it does really fit into almost any discipline that you could think of," said Huh. Themes of gender, sexuality, health, social work, education, race, psychology and even environmental justice are all present in Critical Adoption Studies. "It's related to almost every field. I think this class can be taught through multiple perspectives or even in different colleges. They would just have a different angle, but it would still be focusing on how adoption has really impacted that field of study or expertise and vice versa. The field of Critical Adoption Studies is filled with works by adoptive parents and adoptees, which allows for it to transmit past academia and into the public sphere.

Adoption Narrative is being offered as a 200-level senior seminar. This way, seniors taking the class can spread the word to students in the grades below. Another motivating factor in this decision is that senior seminars typically have around 20 students. "It's important to have such a small classroom setting for this topic because you want to feel safe in voicing your opinion," Huh said. "You also want to be able to listen to an opinion that's not something that you may have been aware of, and be able to process that opinion in a very intimate setting, not just dismiss it and move on." She also mentioned how a smaller class size was important to creating a sense of intimacy between students where everyone felt safe because the topics brought up in class are emotional and difficult to talk about, especially with adoptees present.

"I think one thing that we can't forget, is that even though we're all sitting in a classroom and looking at the adoption industry critically and trying to be outside observers, it's a very personal topic. We're talking about ethics and humanity and how you treat other humans even though they're newborns, or foster kids. We're still talking about what we do with humans and a lot of times when we talk about it academically, we forget that perspective. I think this class is making sure that we don't forget."

Huh knew that most students wouldn't have lots of previous knowledge about the subject of adoption. "To start off with the kind of history, the historical perspectives and the legal kind of aspects of it made sense," She said. "I also made sure that the focus was primarily on readings by members of the adoption triad, specifically BIPOC birth parents or adoptees or adoptive parents. I wanted to make sure that those were all there."

Students conclude the semester with a final project in which they explore themes discussed in class through either a research paper or something more creative. Huh said that she is looking forward to seeing what students have learned after thirteen weeks of processing the types of heated, personal and controversial conversations that take place within the classroom.

When asked what she hopes students take away from this course, Huh said, "I think one takeaway is to be careful, as well as open-minded. I will help students learn not to make assumptions about kinship, reproduction, gender, and even race. About what we assume to be normative definitions of mother, or good mother. When you think about these issues via an adoption perspective, it really questions a lot of those assumptions. Another takeaway is that I hope students go out and read widely on topics that they don't really know anything about because they'll be surprised."