Korean Looks, American Eyes:
Korean American Adoptees, Race, Culture and Nation

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to two Peters,
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Abstract

This project positions Korean adoptees as transnational citizens at intersections within race relations in the United States, as emblems of international geopolitical relationships between the United States and South Korea, and as empowered actors, organizing to take control of racial and cultural discourses about Korean adoption. I make connections between transnational exchanges, American race relations, and Asian American experiences. I argue that though the contradictory experience of Korean adoptees, at once inside and outside bounded racial and national categories of "Asian," "White," "Korean," and "American," the limits of these categories may be explored and critiqued. In understanding Korean adoptees as transnational subjects, single-axis racial and national identity are challenged, where individuals have access to membership and/or face exclusion in more than one political or cultural nation. In addition, this work demonstrates the effects of American political and cultural imperialism both abroad and domestically, by elucidating how the acts of empire-building nations are mapped onto individuals though the regulation of immigration and family formation. My methods are interdisciplinary, drawing from traditions that include ethnography, primary historical sources, and literature. My dissertation work uses Korean adoptees' own life stories that I have collected and recorded in three locations: 1) Minnesota, home to the largest concentration of Korean adoptees in the U.S.; 2) the Pacific Northwest, home to the many of the "first wave" of the oldest living Korean adoptees now in their 40s and 50s; and, 3) Seoul, Korea, home to hundreds of adult Korean adoptees who have traveled back to South Korea to live and work. In addition, I use Korean adoptee published narratives,

archive materials documenting the early history of transnational adoption, and secondary sources in sociology, social work, psychology and cultural studies to uncover the many layers of national, racial and cultural belonging and significance for and of Korean adoptees.

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A Note on Terminology

Transracial or *interracial* adoptions are the adoptions of children of one race by parents of another race; these adoptions take place *domestically* or *in-country* (used interchangeably here). *Transnational, international, or intercountry* (used interchangeably here) adoptions are the adoptions of children with citizenship in one country by parents with citizenship in another, and are often also transracial adoptions. In this dissertation, as in much of the related literature, transracial adoption could refer to both domestic and transnational transracial adoptions, because most (but not all) transnational adoptions are transracial.

I also acknowledge that the terms *adoptee*, and *birth parent* are considered politically inappropriate by some when used to name adopted persons, and biological parents of adoptees, and that sometimes *adopted Korean* or *adopted person* and *first mother* or *biological parent*, respectively, is preferred terminology. I use these terms without meaning to attach political or social significance to them. I prefer the term *adoptee* in particular, partly because it is still in common parlance inside adoption communities and in the general public, and simply because it is a descriptive noun that simplifies the task of writing about this population. I do not use these terms with the intention of opposing any group or groups of activists in adoption-related communities.

Except where noted, a reference to *Korea* is meant to indicate *South Korea*. This is not intended to suggest a primacy of South Korea over North Korea, but instead reflects the way Korean American adoptees, who have only ever been adopted from South Korea, refer to the nation of their birth.

Introduction

When I began contemplating this research ten years ago, I was living another life. As an earth sciences graduate student, I was in one of the whitest disciplines in the academy. Some might argue that I was already living my second life, my first left behind when I departed Seoul the first time as a seven-month-old infant. In some ways, my investment in a project that seeks to understand the experiences of other Korean American adoptees is a return to that first life, but I have not entirely given up the life I was living ten years ago. Instead, I argue that this is—in fact a third life for me—not as a Korean or as an American adoptee, but as a Korean American adoptee. Though this work is not about me or my specific experiences, it very much is about a community of which I am a part. Many of the other adoptees I have met and with whom I have worked also understand what it means to have a life with many facets or many stages, and to understand one self, finally, as a Korean American adoptee.

Most Korean adoptees, whether they are part of the small group of biracial adoptees, or they are (to the best of their knowledge) so-called "full-blooded" Koreans, have "Korean" looks, meaning they appear to others to be Korean, or at least Asian. Their outward appearance, which is usually markedly different from other members of their American adoptive families, is an important factor in their self-understanding because it plays a large part in how they are perceived by those around them. When they are seen by people outside the family, they are often immediately understood to have been adopted, for there seems no other explanation for a White family with Asian offspring. Away from their adoptive family, they are understood as Asian or Asian

American, with all the baggage of cultural stereotypes that accompany that racial designation. Within the family and immediate community, Korean adoptees are often seen as White. Sometimes this can help reinforce the belonging of adoptees as part of White families and communities, instead of placing them in the awkward position of being the racial odd ones out.

Since Korean American adoptees are usually raised in the United States, and almost always came into American families at very young ages, they also have "American eyes," meaning they have viewpoints and identities very consistent with those of other Americans. Indeed, they can be understood by the homonym, "Americanized." Though they are technically first-generation immigrants, they generally have few if any memories of Korea and have no co-immigrant Korean family with whom to share the immigrant experience. Because of this, their life stories differ greatly from those of other immigrants, and the Americanization that non-adopted immigrant groups experience over the generations is completed by Korean adoptees in a few years. Some adoptees' immigrant pasts are folded in with or totally obscured by adoptive family stories of immigration from Europe generations earlier; more frequently, any immigrant identity is entirely erased. Perhaps the most important difference between transnational adoptees and other immigrants is that they do not leave their birth countries in response to political or economic pressures, but because they are wanted overseas to be the children of new American parents. In this way, they can become prized commodities in the big business of the international adoption industry.

This dissertation represents almost ten years of questioning, listening, theorizing and research about the social, cultural, and political positions of Korean American adoptees. I initially approached the project as a scholar dissatisfied with published accounts of the adoption experience and as an adoptee seeking more information about the group with whom I had come to identify. Though the project began as a query into the lived experiences of adult Korean American adoptees (a group that I found, had been much written about, but not often listened to) it quickly expanded into a social, cultural and political exploration of the practice and experience of Korean adoption in America.

My interview subjects were all adult adoptees born between 1949 and 1983. Although I had not originally intended to look at Korean adoption from a historical perspective, I found that Korean American adoption had changed so much in that period, along with American society and culture, that it would be imperative to highlight the very important historical connections between adoptees' experiences and changes in American culture. This multilayered exploration has led me to understand Korean American adoption in multiple contexts: as a process and product of American race relations; as a phenomenon which informs us of the state of Asian America; as a practice of historical political significance created through the post-Korean and Cold War relationships between South Korea and the United States after the Korean War; as evidence of the growing trend towards economic and cultural globalization; and as a community of people deeply touched by their personal experiences of adoption.

All these contexts have profoundly affected how Korean American adoptees' life experiences as American people of color, as Korean Americans, and as adoptees. The

Korean War produced the first Korean adoptees as war orphans and GI babies. The Cold War gave cultural impetus to humanitarian projects in Asia such as "child-saving" through adoption. The changing state of American race relations pushed Korean adoptees and their families into mainstream ideologies of assimilation, color-consciousness, and then colorblindness, changing how Korean adoptees experienced their racial identities through the years. Finally, in some ways the practice of Korean adoption, a sustained practice of immigration and transmigration that began even before the liberalization of American immigration in 1965, was a precursor to globalization. In the current practice of Korean adoption, where adoptees easily and legally cross borders and into national belonging, many adoptees see the gaps between Korean birth families and American adoptive families as more significant than the division of countries by citizenship, borders, or oceans.

Through the experiences of Korean adoption, I critically examine race, both as it is understood by Korean adoptees and their (usually) White families and as it is understood and produced in American society. The understanding of the importance of race has shifted since the 1950s and I pay special attention to the mainstream embrace of popular concepts of "multiculturalism" in the 1980s and 1990s. As Americans have changed from being color-conscious to colorblind, Korean adoptees—who often describe themselves as "raised White,"—see themselves racially in every possible permutation of Asianness, Whiteness and racelessness, even though most were raised in almost entirely White families and communities. Most Americans identify Korean adoptees as Asian or Asian American on sight by phenotype, an identity that some adoptees embrace and

others abhor. While some adoptees welcome the opportunity to be identified with a group, others reject it, perhaps because of the heavy baggage of racialization in America. Until recently however, the discipline of Asian American Studies was largely silent on the existence of Korean and other Asian adoptees, despite the fact that Korean adoptees comprise a significant fraction of the Korean American population in the United States, and Asian adoptees have been made highly visible in the American media. There is little agreement on the meaning of racial identity within Korean adoptee communities, and little commentary about Korean adoptee identity in Asian American Studies, but if we accept race as a social construct, are Korean adoptees Asian American? If they claim they are White, are they White? Are Korean adoptive families, if they claim they are Asian American, Asian American? How is the performance of race (Whiteness or Asianness), or the lack of such a performance beneficial or detrimental to racialized individuals like Korean adoptees? Though an examination of Korean adoption, we can better understand the effects of race and colorblindness works on the individuals who are asked to enact it, largely in the absence of a community of people of the same race.

For more than fifty years, Korean adoption—and all other transnational adoption, which is largely based on the Korean model—has been rooted in American foreign-relations policy. Of course, no nation without close diplomatic ties with the United States could sustain an international adoption program. However, sustained programs of transnational adoption to the U.S., such as those of South Korea, Vietnam, Guatemala, and the formerly Communist bloc, have always been in nations which have political and economic dependence on the United States. As the U.S. only receives children through

transnational adoption from counties which are inferior in wealth and power, a model of inequity between sending and receiving nations is reinforced and reproduced. Since the current practice of transnational adoption casts weak or poor countries as sending nations, and powerful or rich ones as receiving nations class differences between nations reify power differentials in adoption that are all too often exploited when children are relinquished for adoption only because their families are poor. Since procuring children for transnational adoption depends on child relinquishment by birth families, who are often poor or otherwise disenfranchised single women, transnational adoption since the 1950s has also depended on the exploitation of women in sending nations.

The practice of creating a family by adopting children from halfway around the world is inherently "global." But the cultural and economic spaces that have opened as a result of the long-established and increasingly widespread practice of transnational adoption make it a powerful example of "globalization," punctuated by a series of global exchanges. There is the initial exchange when American parents send for Korean children, facilitated by permissive U.S. immigration policies, followed by the later exchanges of Korean adoptee return migration, facilitated by extremely permissive South Korean immigration policy for Korean adoptees. These exchanges make it possible for Korean adoptees to be transnational, moving freely between the countries of their birth and rearing.

Early in 2005, I helped a Minnesota Korean adoptee friend, who had decided to make a permanent move to Korea, ship some 14 boxes into which the last of her American belongings were packed. As I stood with her in front of a Minneapolis post

office with stacks of boxes she had addressed to herself in Korea, I couldn't help but remark, "Wow, this is a truly transnational experience." For my friend, an almost lifelong Minnesotan (when she visits the U.S., she still tries to get me to go to the Old Country Buffet with her), the desire to move to Korea and the visa status she enjoys as an "overseas Korean" (a foreign national of Korean heritage, according to the South Korean government), are deeply connected to her adoption experience. Time spent at government control points for people and belongings (consulates, adoption agencies, post offices) marks the experience of transnationality with the official stamp of red tape, and this is what I got a tiny glimpse of by helping my friend mail her packages to Korea.

The globalized economic exchanges of adoption for the U.S. and Korea may be even more significant through the exchange of individuals. As Korean and other transnational adoption has become more common and more lucrative, powerful and profitable adoption markets have opened in many countries, where children are readily available for overseas parents in rich countries like America. Many of that have used transnational adoption as a way to solve overwhelming child welfare problems and as a component of socio-political relations with the United States have also realized healthy profits, and are accused by some critics of using transnational adoption to purposely shirk expensive national child welfare responsibilities.

Finally, the aspect of my work closest to my heart is an exploration of identity and community building among Korean adoptees themselves, and this draws the most of my intellectual attentions in this work. These communities make a space for adoptees by naming and making places for adoptees within, outside or in-between birth and adoptive

families, communities and countries. In some ways, these communities represent a distinct new family of Korean adopted persons. In these communities, Korean adoptees wrestle with many of the historical and political issues raised in this work, or just find a place where they can be themselves without having to explain their race, family, or identity. In 2006, I was invited to speak at a conference commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the *Adopterade Koreaners Förening* (AKF, Adopted Koreans Association) of Sweden. During the celebration banquet, Association president Daniel Lee, who was living in Korea at the time, called in to address the group. Amidst his congratulatory statements, he remarked that "Korean adoptees need to stick together. After all, I could be you, you could be me, and he could be she." In acknowledging the seeming randomness with which Korean adoptees are placed in adoptive families, Lee identified one of the most important things that connects the Korean adoptee community. While there are many shared cultural experiences of being Korean adopted, a particularly poignant realization is that any of us could have ended up in another's country, family, or even identity. Since most adoptees accept adoptive families as primary, it is not that great a leap to understand other adoptees, who could have ended up as our siblings, or at least as our own parents' children in our stead, to be a kind of family as well. From an ethnographic standpoint, Korean adoptee communities across the United States and in many countries around the world have cultural and social significance as uniquely hybridized. However, I have found that ethnographic exploration of this group also yields compelling evidence of connections between the experience of being a Korean adoptee and the broad and multiple historical, political, and social events outlined above.

I have also employed a multitude of methods in my inquiry, all connected facets of Korean American adoption and adoptee experiences. By drawing on practices and methods from history, narrative studies, popular culture studies, economics, political theory and ethnography, my intent is to understand the depth and breadth of a long and complex story. As a multidisciplinary scholar, I have attempted to follow any and all methodological and intellectual leads. While the centerpiece of this work is ethnographic material in the form of adult Korean adoptee oral histories, I have explored cultural production by and about Korean adoptees, looked at materials in archives, and researched the geopolitics, history, and cultural theory of Korean American adoption.

Several themes emerged from the rich and voluminous ethnographic material the many Korean adoptee participants in this project volunteered. Since Korean adoption has been ongoing since 1953, adult adoptee populations today span at least two generations, and adoptees are generationally marked in their understandings of race, identity and adoption itself. The oldest Korean adoptees, born of the Korean War and the early Cold War, are a small minority among Korean adoptees, yet this generation has greatly influenced the way Korean adoptees after them are understood by the public. Many Americans still understand Korean and other transnational adoptees as the pitiable orphans of sad circumstance, even though South Korea is over fifty years removed from war and is now one of the richest nations in Asia. The subsequent, larger generation of Korean adoptees built on this public identity. In a social atmosphere of burgeoning multiculturalism, they grappled more than their predecessors with issues around identity as Asian Americans, Koreans, and adoptees. Their experiences led them to create a

number of Korean adoptee social organizations, and opened the way for a growing adoptee culture. A small subset of this generation has moved back to South Korea to live, permanently or semi-permanently, and their experiences place them at the leading edge of an emergent Korean adoptee transnationality as they live, work and travel back and forth between the United States and South Korea.

In order to ground my research, I looked at research published on transnational and transracial between 1977 and 2002. Gaps in this research motivated me to argue for a new way of understanding Korean adoption by including the perspectives of adoptees themselves. Much of the literature I reviewed was framed by questions and methods from the behavioral sciences, designed to inform adoption policy and practice and dominated by the perspectives of adoption agencies and adoptive parents. While I still consider the sixty-five life histories of adult Korean American adoptees I collected to be the core of my research, I was struck by the similarities between what I heard in interviews with adoptees and the themes of adoptee cultural production, both in written and filmed narrative. This led to a literary analysis of two prominent Korean adoptee autobiographical works, *First Person Plural* and *The Language of Blood.* While researching the mechanics of transnational adoption operates, I wrote a critical economic analysis of the worldwide economic engine of the adoption industry.

My opening chapter, "A Korean American Adoption Ethnography: Method, Theory and Experience" outlines my ethnographic procedures, and also discusses my position as a Korean American adoptee and researcher in the local, national and international communities of Korean adoptees. In this chapter, I discuss my many

positions as ethnographer, source, object and community member. The remainder of this dissertation is organized into three sections: *Korean Adoptee Icon*; *Scenes of Korean Adoptee Racial and Cultural Politics*; and *Transnational Exchanges of Korean American Adoption*.

The first section, *Adoptee Icon*, explores public perceptions of Korean adoptees based on their public identities, and investigates the establishment of some of the foundational cultural norms in Korean adoptee communities. I explore these foundations by examining academic literature that focuses on transracial and transnational adoption, and by studying the experiences of the first generation of Korean adoptees and explaining commonalities in the Korean American adult adoptee community.

In Chapter 2, "'Eligible Alien Orphan': The Cold War Korean Adoptee," I examine the first generation of Korean adoptees (those who came to the United States shortly after the end of the Korean War) to show how contemporary popular understandings of Korean adoptees were set during this time, by and about this generation. I recount the factors that led the U.S. to begin its first and longest-lived transnational adoption program and discuss how adoptees respond to and reflect these U.S.-Korea policy decisions. I also discuss how images of the transnational adoptee in need of rescue from a destroyed or disadvantaged homeland, and of American adoptive parents as saintly saviors, were transmitted through the popular press and in film, as well as by adoptees themselves.

Chapter 3, "Misrepresentation, Appropriation, and Assimilation: A Critical Literature Review of Social Work and Policy Research on Transracial Adoption,"

contains a review of social work and other behavioral science research on transracial and transnational adoption from 1974-2000. During this period, there was an abundance of mostly outcome-based research on the then-new practice of transracial and transnational adoption in the United States. Although there had been some research on transracial and transnational adoption since the practice began in the late 1940s and early 1950s, new debates about the cultural implications of transracial adoption (especially domestic transracial adoption) as well as the growing popularity of transnational adoption sparked interest in the research community. Probably partly in response to critiques of tranracial adoption that were articulated from within American Indian and African American communities during the 1970s, much of this research aimed to settle the question of whether or not transracial and/or transnational adoptees suffered measurable harms, either related to their pre-adoptive experiences or as a result of their adoption. Usually, this was to be discerned through their or their adoptive parents' reports of their adjustment and well-being and sometimes based on adoptees' perceived degree of correctness in claiming the appropriate racial and cultural identities. The overwhelming majority of these studies showed that American transracial and transnational adoptees were "well-adjusted," implying that there was no social or psychological harm in these adoptions. If negative outcomes were noted, they were usually attributed to pre-adoptive conditions instead of to conditions after adoption, though most of this research was not designed to discern the cause of negative outcomes, only their presence or absence. I critique both the design and goals of this body of research. Most of this work was done to support the needs of adoption agencies and adoptive parents by "improving" the

practice of transracial and transnational adoption within the adoption industry and does not query cultural or social effects of the practice. In addition, most of this research uses adoptive parents as its primary informants; when adoptees were themselves consulted, most were young children still living at home. Despite these limitations, this research has been understood as definitive in its scope. In many ways, explosive growth in the numbers of transracial adoptions, especially transnational adoptions, was made possible by the establishment of the practice as positive, or at least as not harmful to adoptive families or adoptees, in this foundational research.

My fourth chapter, "I, Transplanted, Make Race, Nation, Soar: Becoming Korean American Transnational Adoptees," explores cultural and social norms around the emergence of an American Korean adoptee identity. In their oral histories, many adoptees spoke prominently about the development of their identities as Korean adoptees, and this chapter is largely based on that material. I examine how and why adoptees claim this identity, and why they participate in iconic adoptee activities like joining Korean adoptee organizations, visiting Korea, searching for birth family, and engaging in public discourses about adoption. While most adoptees probably engage in few or none of these acts, many do—and in doing so, they enact the predominant public image of the Korean adoptee.

The second section of my dissertation, *Scenes of Korean Adoptee Racial and Cultural Politics,* explores the many cultures of Korean adoption, focusing on three key cultural and historical sites. In this section, I critically analyze adoptee cultural production that focuses on reunion with South Korean birth family, examine the

experiences of adoptees growing up in the new era of American multiculturalism, and investigate the phenomenon of cultural Whiteness among Korean American adoptees.

Recent narrative works by transracial adoptees focus on sadness, loss and trauma as central life experiences. In Chapter 5, "'Loss is more than sadness:' Reading Dissent in Transracial Adoption Melodrama in *The Language of Blood* and *First Person Plural*," I look at two prominent Korean adoptee memoirs, one written and one filmed. The idea of sadness as an integral part of the transracial adoption experience stands in contrast to the dominant representation of transracial adoption as an overwhelmingly positive experience marked by familial fulfillment, generosity, and unconditional colorblind love. Because the dominant view of transracial adoption emphasizes fulfillment, happiness, and success, transracial adoptees whose adoption experiences include pain and loss are motivated to contest dominant narratives by sharing their stories of sadness and tragedy. In this chapter, I discuss these transracial adoptee interventions through the production of their life narratives in print and film. I focus on Jane Jeong Trenka's written memoir *The Language of Blood* and Deann Borshay's film memoir *First Person Plural.* As witnessed in these transracial adoptee narratives, the most effective intervention can sometimes be made by engaging in sentimentalist or melodramatic conversations already well-established in transracial adoption cultures.

In Minnesota (whose state motto is "The Land of 10,000 Lakes," Korean adoptees often say, "There is a Korean adoptee for each of our lakes." In fact, Minnesota has more than 10,000 Korean adoptees, the largest per capita (if not overall) population of Korean adoptees of any state in America (and any country in the world, except Sweden). In

Chapter 6, "An Adoptee for Every Lake: Minnesota, Multiculturalism and the Korean Transracial Adoptee," I explore Korean adoptee experiences in Minnesota and the many historical, structural and sociocultural reasons for the high concentration of Korean adoptees in Minnesota, which has become an American homeland of sorts for Korean adoptees. For many of these Korean adoptees, the process of configuring an identity as an adoptee includes a reconciliation with experiences as Asians in a largely White family and community. In addition to their experiences, many of which are culturally and socially multiplicative in between racial and cultural boundaries, many have also sought identity formations that addressed the racism they experienced as Asian Americans and the infantalization they experienced as adoptees. For many Minnesotan adult adoptees now in their 30s and 40s, this complicated identity formation process took place in an environment of weak liberal multiculturalism, as popularized in the 1980s, and is rendered using logics of and reactions to ideologies of multiculturalism. This chapter discusses some of the common cultural experiences of Korean adoptees in Minnesota, including stories of growing up in Minnesota, experiences with racism in a "multicultural" environment, and adoptee encounters with Asian America.

Chapter 7, "'White' Koreans: Korean Adoptees, Racial Visibility and the Politics of Passing," is a discussion of the multiple and shifting racial identities among Korean adoptees. In this chapter, I examine Korean adoptee racial and cultural identity, especially approaches taken by Korean adoptees as they navigate and challenge their roles as racial minorities within White society and family, as cultural minorities in Asian and Korean American communities, and as symbols of racial harmony in an American

society increasingly focused on an ideal of "colorblindness." I query the racial roles set for Korean adoptees by White family and community, by Asian Americans in their midst, and by one another. Central to this chapter is a critique of the idea that there is a "correct" or singlar racial or cultural identity for Korean adoptees, many of whom have been subjected to lifelong social pressures to conform to existing socio-racial categories of "White" or "Asian," both of which fail to address the many characteristics of Korean adoptee experience.

My final section, *Racial and Economic Currencies of Korean Adoption*, explores the transnational nature of contemporary Korean adoptee culture. Jon Cruz writes, "As capitalism expands, so do new identity formations."[1] This is certainly true in the cultural and economic landscapes of Korean American adoption; the increased economic outsourcing of conception and childbirth has resulted in an explosion of new identities. In addition to more conventional identities of parent and child, White and Asian, native and immigrant, transnational adoption exchanges have necessitated the creation of identities (or at least the modification of old identities) for birth parents, adoptive parents, adoptees who identify as White, adoptees who identify as Asian, adoptees who identify as neither, and a number of other new and in-between identities. In this section, I offer two chapters that critically examine transnationality and its effects with respect to Korean American adoption through an examination of market behaviors among the transracial

[1] Cruz, Jon. "From Farce to Tragedy: Reflections on the Reification of Race at Century's End." In *Mapping Multiculturalism*, edited by Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, 19-39. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 21.

adopting public, and an exploration of the social experiences of Korean adoptees who have repatriated to Seoul, South Korea.

The first chapter in this section, Chapter 8, "Shopping for Children in the International Marketplace: The Economics of Transnational Adoption," critically examines the sociopolitical patterns of racialization and related economic pressures in the world of transnational and transracial adoption. In this chapter, I analyze cultural and market forces that create the demand for adoptable children worldwide, and the supply in nations needing a solution for both child welfare and diplomatic issues. I also focus on international adoption guides—how-to books written by and for adoptive parents—as one representation of what takes place in the public discourse about transnational adoption. I argue that these guides, used as both practical and cultural instruction, reinforce the tendency for adoptable children to be both racialized and commodified.

My final chapter, "*Uri Nara*, Our Country: Korean American Adoptees in the Global Age" follows Korean American adoptee repatriates who are living in Seoul, South Korea. This chapter explores Korean adoptee identity as transnational by examining immigration policy for adoptees in both the United States and South Korea and by querying Korean resident adoptees about their national and cultural identities as both Koreans and Americans. To do this, I put forth my depiction of Korean adoptee social and cultural life based on interviews with adoptees living and working on a permanent basis in Seoul.

Through their position as both a marginalized and a privileged group of Korean immigrants, adoptees have been used as examples both of the best and the worst

outcomes of imperial practice—either as beneficiaries of a benevolent imperialism (saved from the barbarities of their birth country through relocation to superior societies) or as victims of involuntary relocation and cultural commodification (as cultural assets to be acquired) by richer, more powerful nations. In this sociopolitical context, I see transnational adoption as an undeniably imperial process born of military, cultural, and economic domination through which individuals (usually White) from rich and powerful nations adopt individuals (usually not White) from poor nations that are under the political influence of the adopting nation. The positions of adoptees in adoptive nations are more complicated and contradictory in their roles as commodities, immigrants, citizens, and racialized others.

Chapter 1

A Korean American Adoption Ethnography:

Method, Theory and Experience

> [I] *can see you can understand and you understand why I feel the way I do and why I'm talking about what I'm talking* [about]…*Thank you...I don't have to worry about explaining myself…I think a lot… I think you know ninety nine point nine percent of it all is… (sigh) I was a misplaced human being. I don't think that I should have come here.*[1]
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> -Nadine, 52 , on why she chose to participate in this oral history project.

When I embarked on the project of collecting oral histories from a population (Korean adoptees) of which I am a member, I had two major goals. The first was to understand, and help others to understand, the experience of Korean American adoptees as a powerful lens through which to understand American race relations, U.S.-Asian foreign relations, the many faces of Asian America, and the ever-changing American family. The second goal of my research was to expand, correct and augment stories about transnational and transracial adoptees; much of the previous research in this area is positioned to influence policy and decision making for transracial and transnational adoptees and claims to be "for" adoptees, but does not emphasize the perspectives of transracial or transnational adoptees themselves. In an industry (and, I would argue, a body of research as well) that privileges adoptive parents and rich nations over birth parents and poor nations, supporting adoptees in a research context is crucial. Now, I have come to realize that I also have a third goal: to develop a methodological niche as a within-group researcher, and to understand and describe the benefits and liabilities of such a position.

In the interest of transparency, it is necessary for me to disclose my position as a Korean adoptee active within the local transracial/transnational adoption community and

[1] Oral History 22.

as a scholar at odds with many of the current methods and findings within transracial/ transnational adoption research. I am a former board member of my local adult adopted Korean organization and have a broad network of connections to many others in the Korean adoptee community nationally. My primary criticism of current transracial adoption research is that it tends to focus on parents as the primary agents of adoption processes even when the research claims to focus on adoptees. In addition, I have critical concerns about the tendency within the adoption industry (adoption agencies and social workers, parent groups, national governments) to interpret high cultural assimilation and normalization of adoptees as a measure of adoption success. I am ambivalent towward the practice of transracial adoption; the more I learn, the more objections I have to how these adoptions are carried out; however, I also understand that these adoptions do continue to take place, probably at increasing rates. I continue to advocate for changes within the profoundly flawed structures of transnational adoption that would acknowledge the difficulty of the transracial adoption experience for many adoptees and the lack of a feeling of belonging many transracial adoptees experience within their families and communities. However, in my view, a broad rejection of the practice of transnational and transracial adoption does not help adoptees or those who will become adoptees, whose interests I most deeply share.

This research has deep personal implications for me. My initial motivation was born of my own impassioned response to the lack of information about my own experience. I felt that my experience had been overlooked and that the experience of thousands of transracial adoptees was being disregarded and subsumed into a middle American (which I broadly defined as White/straight/middle-class) experience even

though I strongly believed the life experience of transracial adoptees is generally distinct from that of most White Americans. Of course, for many transrcial adoptees, the envelopment into Whiteness was the prescribed goal. As I became more academically interested in the work, I saw the potential to examine intersections of race, culture, class, gender, and sexuality within a transracial adoption context. Particularly in regard to race and culture, we transracial adoptees are in the unusual position of developing our racial identities separately from our cultural identities. Furthermore, transracial adoption, which today is most often transnational adoption, complicates projects of imperialism and nationalism as transnational adoptees become emblems of differences between the global West and East, North and South, between rich and poor, between imperial and colonized, and between White and non-White. I concluded that the identities and identity formations of adoptees could serve as a framework around which any or all of these intersecting categories could be analyzed and problematized.

The Decision to Collect Oral Histories

In his introduction to *Cultural Compass: Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America*, Martin Manalansan notes that much of Asian American Studies research and theory has focused on literary and popular media rather than on ethnographic work. As an Asian Americanist anthropologist, Manalansan articulates the need for ethnographic work in Asian American Studies as another way of knowing. While his discussion of the influence of postmodern theory on ethnographic work acknowledges the importance of literary and cultural criticism to the field, he calls for multi-sited ethnographic work and

"community based research" in Asian American Studies.[2] Likewise, Burroughs and Spickard stress the importance of community narrative in the understanding of ethnicity, particularly in groups with multiple ethnic or racial identities.[3] Frances Winddance Twine's introduction to *Racing Research, Researching Race: Methodological Dilemmas in Critical Race Studies* advocates a transformation of ethnic studies fieldwork by considering complexities around the significance of "insider" and "outsider" positions occupied by researchers working in community contexts.[4] Both Manalansan's and Twine's approaches have been valuable to me in analyzing my own oral history-based research. Both Manalansan and Twine consider the critical importance of "native" researchers; Manalansan writes that both researchers and their subjects "…are now apprehended as producers as well as products of history, and shapers and builders of culture."[5] Their suggestion that researchers from within communities may empower those communities is critically tempered with the reality that this situation also necessarily complicates research.

The focus of my research is on adult adoptee oral histories, and in choosing this as the most important source in the work, I am consciously privileging adoptee voices. In addition, the oral history methodology I have chosen gives me access to subjects who have not previously been heard from; more than one of the adoptees I worked with told

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[2] Manalansan, IV, Martin F. "Introduction." In *Cultural Compass : Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America*.
[3] Burroughs, Jeffery W. and Paul Spickard. "Ethnicity, Multiplicity and Narrative: Problems and Possibilities." In *We are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity.*
[4] Twine, Frances Winddance and Jonathan W. Warren. *Racing Research, Researching Race : Methodological Dilemmas in Critical Race Studies*.
[5] Manalansan, IV, Martin F. "Introduction." In *Cultural Compass : Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America*.

me that they would not consider participating in research with any other format than the oral history, or with anyone not adopted themselves, for precisely this reason. This might be partially explained by the fact that the oral history process is not totally outside cultural norms within the Korean adoptee community; exchanging stories is an informal ritual of socialization among Korean adoptees. Making connections based on personal adoption histories forges relationships which become the foundation of adoptee community. The process of giving an oral life history (especially to another adoptee) mirrors this practice to a degree. The overall research design and methodology answers Manalansan's call for critical "native" multi-sited research, in that it is a response to my own knowledge of and connections with a local and global Korean adoptee community.

I chose to learn the stories of transnational adoptees by collecting oral histories (rather than completing traditional interviews) to because I wanted my adoptee informants to have as much autonomy and as little imposed structure as possible in telling their stories. After obtaining human-subject consent from each narrator, I told them that the choice of what to include or exclude from their oral histories belonged to them. They were each told they could stop whenever they wanted to and that they could structure their stories however they wished. I did tell them I would ask clarifying questions if something was not apparent to me, or if I felt the topic of identity development was not coming forth. I also invited them to ask questions of me, about my research or my experience as an adoptee, before and after the oral histories had been taken.

While this method is often imprecise, historian Gary Okihiro advocates for oral history as significant to the contribution to the history and knowledge of an ethnic group whose histories may not have been valued enough to be preserved in mainstream history

and society,[6] and I agree. In the case of Korean adoptees, it is not only a question of who owns history, but also of who owns Korean adoptees' histories in terms of birth records, birth country culture and experiences, and understanding the adoption experience within American family and society, all of which may or may not be known to and/or believed by individual Korean adoptees. In addition, I have been influenced by a long tradition of feminist ethnographers who acknowledge their positions as women to access other women's experiences and use so-called "feminized" interviewing skills in order to gather information. Feminist approaches to ethnographic work might include research design that acknowledges research participants as empowered and knowledgeable actors, rather than positioned beneath the "expert" researcher, including the encouragement of open-ended responses.[7]

Casting subjects in an autonomous role was important to me for several reasons. First, the stories of Korean and other transracial adoptees have not been told often (especially in the academic arena) from the perspectives of adoptees. Instead, the perspectives of parents, social workers, and adoption advocates have taken center stage, even in research that supposedly focuses on the experiences of adoptees. Work framed around "the best interest of the child" comes to mind most immediately, although in my experience even work themed this way usually does not take adoptee perspectives into account. I am motivated to fill this significant gap in transracial/transnational adoptee research with adoptee voices and perspectives, my own included. If this body of research

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[6] Okihiro, Gary Y. "Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History." In *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*.
[7] Oakley, Ann. "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms." In *Doing Feminist Research*, and Reinharz, Shulamit. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*.

describes and analyzes us and will play a role in determining what happens to future generations of adoptees, our voices should be a major part of the discussion—and currently, they are not.

Second, I wanted to make sure I was not shaping the replies of my subjects though the interview process. This is an important consideration for any qualitative researcher using interviews; acknowledging subjective biases and removing them from research questions is delicate business and always warrants serious attention. For me, this is a concern of special importance because I am conducting research within my own group. Because I cannot expunge my own personal experiences as a Korean adoptee, I know I may be susceptible to fusing my own story with those of other adoptees. I hoped to avoid this by asking them to tell their own stories outside the context of my experience. While I did ask some clarifying questions in which I included some of my own experiences, I tried to make clear to my sources that the oral histories were about them, not about me or my questions. In addition, I know that presenting myself as someone who understands the Korean adoptee experience in its entirety (or at least more than I do) because of my own experience as an adoptee could be leading or censuring for other adoptees. Avoiding interview conversations (as opposed to oral history conversations) where I might be in any position to control content seemed a good way protect against these types of transgressions.

Third, the oral history process seemed to put most subjects at ease. Because the adoptee subjects were in control (and had been told they were in control) of the process of telling their stories, they seemed to be relatively unconcerned about how they would be represented or how what they were telling me would be used. The narrators' feeling

of power and autonomy seemed to allow them greater expressive freedom in describing their lives. This autonomy, in combination with a trusted listener with similar experiences, elicited extremely detailed and very personal histories. I expected to hear a lot of personal information but was still surprised at how much these informants opened up. In addition, several adoptees remarked that they had never been given the opportunity to tell their stories at such length or in such detail, as if my interest in their lives was a great compliment. The experiences seemed to be both cathartic and difficult for them at times, though I have no doubt the narrators' personal investments in the oral history process added to the experience both for me as a researcher and for them as narrators.

In making these choices to frame my research, I focus on oral history narrative as a way to understand meaning in the everyday details, the social and political beliefs and the behaviors of this vibrant community. The oral histories that are central to this research are meaningful in political, social and intimate spheres, as lived experiences of adoptees in the many overlapping Korean adoptee communities in the United States and around the world. These stories reveal much about American race relations and about transnational relations between the United States and South Korea, because they examine the ambiguous and in-between positions of transracial adoptees in these locations. Through their stories, adoptees explain how they have coped with and taken control of their identity formations, despite the absence of ready-made roles for them in the strictly enforced and categorized world of racial and national identity. This methodology is particularly useful in illuminating the balances and imbalances of power that exist between adoptees, as real and symbolic racial and national entities, and the respective

racial (White, Asian American) and national (American, Korean) groups to which Korean American adoptees ostensibly belong—despite the fact that they are frequently excluded from these groups because of their perceived status as racial, cultural and/or national minorities.

Accessing Korean American Adoptees

When I decided to take on this project, I was fairly certain that I would be able to access adult Korean adoptees locally who would be willing to give their oral histories. I grew up and resided during my research in the Minneapolis-St.Paul area, which is the largest metropolitan area in the American state with the largest number of Korean adoptees. Since this area has a large population of Korean adoptees, it is a particularly rich location for this work. Two large local adoption organizations, Children's Home Society (CHS) and Lutheran Social Services (LSS), both located in St. Paul, facilitated transnational adoption in the area for over 30 years. Many people making the decision to adopt in Minnesota or in the adjacent states of the Upper Midwest would likely consider using one of these agencies, and anyone in the area wanting to adopt transnationally more than 20 years ago would almost certainly have had to adopt through one of them. It is believed by local adoption agencies that facilitate Korean transnational adoptions that Minnesota currently has a larger population of Korean adoptees than any other state, upwards of 10,000, and the possibility of transnational adoption through LSS or CHS is certainly at least part of the reason why there are so many adult Korean adoptees in the area; I myself was adopted though Lutheran Social Services of St. Paul and attribute my Minnesota upbringing partly to this fact. Any survey of Korean adoption in the United

States would have to include Minnesota for these reasons. I considered myself lucky to be there among so many other Korean adoptees, and to have preeminent access to the local Korean adoptee community.

Partly because of my own interest as a Korean adoptee and partly in anticipation of my research interests, I had become more active in the Korean adoptee community in the years before I formally began research; I participated in activities such as attending and planning national Korean adoptee conferences, attending Korean adoptee social and educational events, and serving on the board of the local adult Korean adoptee non-profit organization, AKConnection (AK is an abbreviation for "Adopted Korean"). Certainly, my relationship to and interaction with a recognizable community of Korean adoptees (and for this research, especially Korean American adoptees) has been instrumental in securing the relatively free access to adoptee interview subjects, information about organizational history and conflict, and knowledge of community current events that I have utilized heavily in my research process. Perhaps contrary to conventional wisdom, this relationship has been neither lifelong nor innate for me; though I am myself a Korean American adoptee, I did not purposefully or professionally associate with other adoptees until well into my adult life. Though I well understood the experiences of growing up transracially and transnationally adopted in America, like many other adoptees of my age group, I learned what it meant to be part of a community and a generation of Korean adoptees not from my adoptive parents and the White community in which I was raised, but from other adoptees, who I only found through my own initiative, as an adult. That said, it was not difficult for me to get involved once I decided to do so. Adult Korean adoptee organizational groups are constantly welcoming "new" members, some whom

are new because they are very young adults, others who are older adults seeking community around their adoptee identities for the first time.

In many ways, the four years I spent on the board of AKConnection paved the way for my research in that I developed relationships and credibility within Korean adoptee communities. At the time that I joined the board, AKConnection had a strong web presence among American Korean adoptee organizations, and its events were well-attended by the large population of Korean adoptees who lived in the Twin Cities and in the surrounding region. I initially saw my volunteer work with the AKConnection board as a way for me to contribute something to the community of adoptees with whom I had begun to identify, but my tenure on the board also conferred on me some legitimacy within this community to which I had been an outsider for most of my life, even though I had technically been a "member" since my infancy. By the time I began my formal research, a few years after joining AKConnection, I had met most of the Korean adoptees in and around the Twin Cities who were active in Korean adoptee networking efforts, as well as many adoptees around the country who were doing similar work in their own regions. This organizational volunteer work, and the friendships and networking relationships that grew out of it, helped me gain access to large populations of adoptees who were interested in contributing to my research with their oral histories. Most of these relationships, at least at their inceptions, depended to some degree on my own identity as a Korean adoptee. However, the organizational efforts and the support I lent to fellow Korean adoptees, as individuals and as a community, made accessing others in the Korean adoptee community easier when the time came for me to collect oral histories.

In addition to the information I was able to collect directly from oral histories, this dissertation has been informed by interest in, connections with, and interactions within and outside Korean adoptee communities. Some (but not all) of this information was available to me because of my own status as an adoptee. As a (sometimes) insider in Korean adoptee communities, I have had steady access to Korean adoptee groups and networks that might not have been readily available to a non-adoptee researcher. Through my work in an adoptee networking organization, I learned about the issues and problems affecting Korean adoptee organizations in the United States—and, to some extent, throughout the world. By the time I left the board of AKConnection, I had gained enough credibility among adoptee groups, both because of my work with AKConnection and because of the research work I had begun, that connecting with groups of Korean adoptees in many cities in the United States was a simple task. I took advantage of my position in order to collect the oral histories that became the foundation of this research.

Choosing to study adoptees in the Twin Cities area was easy, but deciding whether or not to use my personal contacts within the Korean adoptee community was more difficult. Starting with my volunteer work, I have developed relationships with a number of adult adoptees as friends and co-volunteers. My dilemma was whether or not to take advantage of these relationships to further my research, considering how this could both help and harm the research—and the relationships. In the end, I chose to collect oral histories from adoptees I already knew, and for the period of two or three years asked virtually all the adult Korean American adoptees with whom I had become acquainted to participate in the project (unless logistical factors made collecting an oral history difficult or impossible).

When I first began this project, I was overwhelmed by many things. Most of all I was very concerned with the responsibility of "doing it right." I keenly felt the huge responsibility of representing my community, which I believe has been so frequently misrepresented in research. However, at the beginning of any large project, when new ideas serve to broaden rather than narrow, the huge scope of the work can obscure the best next steps to get the project rolling. I knew I needed to figure out how to conduct my work logistically and how to handle the personal and emotional issues the work would raise. I also knew I needed to find and define my position within the work personally and as a within-group researcher and use this position to define my work to my subjects, my audience and myself as I conducted it. With all these research concerns, I thought, at least I shouldn't saddle myself with finding new subjects. This is how I decided to work with people I already knew.

Of course, this decision also created some problems, though I think they were more manageable than the problems I would have encountered had I chosen to try to find adoptee subjects that I did not previously know. Because I sat on the board of AKConnection and the majority of my personal relationships with adoptees at that time had developed through that organization, I had the responsibility of discussing my research plans with the other board members to make sure they did not feel my membership on the board created a conflict of interest. All of them had always known that I had research interests within the field of transnational adoption, and they had always expressed support. However, collecting my first oral histories was the first real work I had done, and I wanted to explicitly acknowledge the difference between saying I would do research and actually doing it. If any of the board members felt my position on

the board could be exploitive or inappropriate, I was prepared to step down from the board and/or reexamine my research design. But after speaking to each board member individually and to the board as a group, all said they did not think it was inappropriate for me to do the research while on the board as long as adoptees were protected by confidentiality. I assured them that this was part of my research protocol. So I stayed on the board, and in the end several board members agreed to give me their oral histories. It was in these initial oral histories that I began to understand the work that I was undertaking, and the enormous privilege I was being granted by those who agreed to share the details of their lives with me.

As I continued to collect oral histories over the next four years, my relationship with different adoptee groups and individuals deepened and broadened. Eventually, I made the decision to collect oral histories in the Pacific Northwest of the United States in order to include populations of adoptees that were demographically or experientially distinct from those in Minnesota. I also collected oral histories in Seoul, South Korea from adoptees living there. The methods I used to find informants did not change in the two other locations I eventually chose to work in: I used my own social and organizational networks to spread the word about my project and collected oral histories from adoptees who responded. I also asked most of the adoptees with whom I became acquainted, and some of these people agreed to participate as well. To date, about half of the 65 oral histories I collected for this research were given by adoptees who I knew socially or organizationally beforehand. The other half volunteered without having known me first.

The Oral History Encounter

After identifying informants, the next step in my oral history project was to start collecting the oral histories from those who volunteered, which I started to do as soon as I could schedule them. In the first several weeks I took one or two each week and prepared transcripts afterwards, but eventually, especially when I travelled to distant locations to collect oral histories, I found myself taking one, sometimes even two a day and waiting to transcribe until later. While the process of taking many oral histories in a short time is probably inadvisable, it was necessary because I was only able to be in the Pacific Northwest and in Seoul for limited amounts of time (about a month at each location).

Even though I had at the outset staked out a position as a within-group researcher wishing to excavate and advocate for my group, my position shifted as the stories told to me by my informants changed my view of the adoptee experience. Much in the tradition of feminist social researcher Marjorie DeVault,[8] I chose to capitalize on my position within my group of study, and borrowing from historian Peter Friedlander,[9] I still maintained flexibility and adaptation to my subjects by listening and responding to what I was hearing. Through this process I came to better understand the additive nature of self-reflexive[10] and community-based research; even though I necessarily came to the research with some knowledge and assumptions based on my own and other adoptees' experiences, each oral history added to my idea of what constitutes the transnational adoptee experience and informed my beliefs about the significance of events in my life

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[8] DeVault, Marjorie L. *Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research.*
[9] Friedlander, Peter. "Theory, Method, and Oral History." In *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology.*
[10] Hertz, Rosanna. *Reflexivity and Voice.*

and other adoptees' lives. The fact that my foundational ideas about the adoptee experience are "moving targets" complicates the research, but maintains an honesty to and about the adoptee experience that could not be approximated if a more static set of foundational ideas was unwaveringly maintained.

I had made the decision to start with the most accessible Korean adoptees I could, and this meant I began with people I already knew, either socially or organizationally. From the beginning, I knew that working with friends and acquaintances has both positive and negative implications for a research project. The most obvious benefit of working with people I knew was the ease of access I had to them. I already knew them, so I didn't have to find them, I just had to ask them if they would sit with me for a couple of hours and talk about themselves. I discovered that several of my informants wanted to participate because they knew me, and let me know that they might have been less willing to participate if I had been a stranger to them. Some said they would certainly not have been willing to participate if I were not also a Korean adoptee. Developing rapport was not a problem with any of the subjects. I felt these subjects were more open with me when sharing their stories than they would have been had I not been a friend, because they knew and trusted me already.

My greatest concern as I worked with my adoptee subjects/friends was knowing that most would wish to maintain a relationship with me after giving an oral history. I wondered if they might censor their remarks based on that fact. Even though I thought my narrators were more open to me than strangers might have been, I knew strangers are sometimes more honest than friends. Each adoptee friend had to gauge how my judgment of their story might affect my view of them. On my end, I am invested in my

relationships with my subjects and consider them my friends, before and after the oral history process. It occurred to me that I might be in for a rude awakening when I began working with people I didn't previously know.

It is also notable that I did not know many of these subjects well. Most I met in the initial years of the study and only a few would I count any among my closest friends. In many of these instances, I think this may have benefited the friendships (and the research) because the oral history process deepened my relationships with them. While I knew some details of the lives of my adoptee friends, after they had told their life stories, I knew much more. In some ways, I think the oral history process took me to the "next level" in my friendships with some subjects. I now know things about them that, as a friend, I probably would not have known until we had known each other longer. In most oral history encounters, I felt the adoptee subject wanted to tell me their story at least partly because they wanted to get to know me better as a fellow adoptee.

The most awkward difference between a more typical adoptee exchange of adoption stories and an oral history is that the oral history process is mostly a one-way flow of information. I found out about them, but they did not find out much about me. Not wanting to fall back on the rules of formalized research (which makes life easier for the researcher, but in my opinion, does not adequately acknowledge the emotional content or exchange in the oral history process) I tried to compensate for this by acknowledging this imbalance and asking each adoptee at the end of their oral history if they had any questions about me or my experiences. Some had questions, most did not, but I suspect that most of my subjects were too exhausted from giving their own oral histories to want to talk more.

While I have no doubt that all of these adoptees have exchanged stories with other adoptees, most remarked that they had never before been asked or had the opportunity to talk about their lives at such length in one sitting. Though the process of giving and receiving oral histories is often difficult, I hope that my oral history project will eventually have a positive impact within this community by strengthening the idea that adoptees' stories are indeed important. In this way, one of my personal goals is to help build community by including its members in my work.

On the other hand, I also felt the responsibility of evoking honest responses in these oral histories. I believe that many of my subjects thought they were signing up for a conversation with me, in the course of which they would tell their stories. I suspect that some adoptee informants found the process difficult in unexpected ways. Often, the narrators' candor stirred up emotional reactions in them as they talked about difficult events in their lives. Certainly the process was exhausting for all of my narrators. Many of the oral histories I heard were intensely sad; this was true even for adoptees who didn't seem to be sad at the time of their narration. I was surprised by this at first, but soon learned to expect it. After I had completed several oral histories, I wondered if I should change the terms of my human-subjects consent form, which states that participants "will be subjected to no harm" to one that discusses the possibility of emotional trauma. In the end, I chose not to make this change, because I thought it presumed too much. Since not all of my informants had sad stories to tell, I did not want to hint that this was a necessary or expected part of the process for everyone.

This research is similar in methodological considerations to other community-based studies such as Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis's work in the Buffalo lesbian

community.[11] Numerous researchers note the intellectual and social importance of processing emotional issues around fieldwork (see Reinhartz's chapter "The Stress of Detached Fieldwork,"[12] as well as work by Marjorie DeVault,[13] Norman Denzin,[14] and Susan Krieger's work[15]). Because of the high emotional content of many of the life stories I heard, this work was exhausting for me as well. This phenomenon has been identified among psychological workers as "compassion fatigue," caused by (usually therapeutic) listening to a subject whose experiences the listener connects with closely. Though this project was not designed to have a therapeutic benefit for adoptee participants, several participants remarked that telling their life stories to an interested listener did have just this kind of effect for them. In any case, to safeguard my own psychological well-being, and to protect my ability to continue the project in the future, I had to find ways to release the emotional pressures the oral histories brought out in me; failure to do so would risk sabotaging the project and damaging my relationships with my subject-friends. The work of processing both the experiential and emotional content was present after each interview, and I soon learned to take time to intellectually and emotionally comprehend what I had heard.

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[11] Lapovsky Kennedy, Elizabeth and Madeline Davis. "Constructing an Ethnohistory of the Buffalo Lesbian Community: Reflexivity, Dialogue and Politics." In *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists*..

[12] Reinharz, Shulamit. *On Becoming a Social Scientist: From Survey Research and Participant Observation to Experiential Analysis*.

[13] Devault, Marjorie. *Liberating Method*.

[14] Denzin, Norman K.. *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*.

[15] Krieger, Susan. *Social Science and the Self: Personal Essays on an Art Form* and Krieger, Susan. *The Mirror Dance*.

For me, one of the most difficult tasks of working with adoptee subjects (and especially with friends and acquaintances) has been "judging without judgment." As a researcher, I must judge the material I collect; I need to assess what my subjects say, how they say it, what it means—both by listening to exactly what is said during oral histories and by "reading between the lines" for other meanings afterwards. As suggested by England,[16] this work is dialogical, or based on dialogues between myself and the project particiapants as I digest their life stories. Because I also have an adoptee experience, I wanted to avoid projecting my own experiences and opinions life onto other adoptee subjects—but I can't allow myself to become paralyzed by this concern, because without judging and assessing the material I collect, I would have no research project, just a set of interesting conversations.

At the same time, I wanted to be very careful not to exercise too much judgment, either during the process of collecting oral histories or while analyzing them. I heard a number of things I personally disagreed with or objected to as Korean adoptee, as a scholar with left-to-radical leanings, and as a woman of color. While I believe that honesty and transparency as a researcher are essential to the success of this project, this is an area where I believed it was crucial that I attempt to keep my personal opinions from my subjects, because any offer of unsolicited advice or proselytizing could prevent subjects from being completely truthful or break the trust between myself and the subject. Though I am interested in the positive development of the adoptee community, this is not a project of recruitment and I remain pointedly aware of that fact.

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[16] England, Kim V. L. "Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research." *Professional Geographer*.

I did find that it was easier to proclaim my ethics in this project than to follow them absolutely. After transcribing a number of oral histories and presenting one transcription to fellow students in a methodology class (for which I began this research), one of the class participants (and a close friend) voiced an objection to a moment during the oral history when I had labeled the subject's father "a racist" because of the judgmental nature of my commentary. Certainly one of the grave problems in transracial adoption is racism or racist misunderstanding within the family and I know this is a painful difficulty for many adoptees. Many adoptees described painful experiences with family members they saw as racist or bigoted (against one racial group or another) without an acknowledgement that such beliefs are hurtful to adoptees, themselves people of color. Here, in an effort to support my subject as a friend and a fellow adoptee, I verbally passed judgment on her father. The following is an abridged version of a part the oral history in question (the subject's remarks are in italics):

> So did you feel like you experienced racism in your family, and obviously I'm thinking of a different kind of racism than name-calling.
> *Right. I didn't feel racism. Because my parents, like a lot of other parents I've heard talk, said, "Well we just love you for who you are." I don't think there was that kind of racism, but there was racism in our family. My dad is racist.*
>
> He would express racist ideas about other people…but not about you?
> *Right. About other people but not about me. And I've always struggled with that, and I struggle with that today. We don't talk about it too much anymore.*
>
> What kind of stuff does he say?
> *A big thing for my dad is that he was in the Vietnam war and I think that he, because of the time, being in the 60s and early 70s, there was civil rights movement and there was a lot of tension between Whites and Blacks and he developed a very negative feeling towards African Americans. I think he's done a lot to curb that, but it's always bothered me. He knows it's bad behavior, so he doesn't act on it, but he still thinks…He harbors*

> *it. He harbors it. And I never got that just as long as I ever remember knowing it, "You don't get it. If you're racist towards them, then you have to understand how that affects me. Because somebody else could be racist towards me because of the way I look." We just go around and around and around.*
> But you don't think he harbors racism towards you.
> *Oh no*…[Here she talked several minutes about the other acts of racism she sees her father has perpetuated and that what she has done to educate both her parents.]…*I'd rather take the time to teach my parents but there are clearly things that we just don't talk about because they're not going* to…
>
> Like the fact that your dad is a racist…
> *Right, I know who he is and I know that he means well, I don't agree but he's going to harbor it inside, but he wouldn't do anything….*
> He's never going to hurt anybody.
> *Right. He's never going to hurt anybody.*
> Right, but I do think it's an important thing. I mean, it hurts you.
> *It does. And I think that what he's been able to realize is how and why it hurts me. Because I can articulate that now in a way that I couldn't when I was fifteen and sixteen. They are starting to get that association that maybe because I'm Korean, I may experience things this way or that way. I think we have a really positive relationship now and I think that they've been really supportive, which is I know more than a lot of people have.* [17]

In this example, because I know this is an area where adoptees (including this friend-informant) have difficulty, I found myself positioning the subject's father against her in an effort to support her. Even though she herself had referred to her father's statements as racist earlier in the conversation, my reappropriation to "a racist" from "racist" was certainly a moment of judgment on my part, not of my subject, but of her father. The phrase "a racist" is more damning, suggesting a person essentialized in their racism, while "racist" is more expressive of racist tendencies or beliefs as part of a whole. Even though I did not perceive this transgression as causing any problems between myself and this subject, this is one reason why the ethic of non-judgment is so crucial. In the messy

[17] Oral History 7.

world of interpersonal relations, it is a hard ethic to consistently maintain, and I have to make a constant effort to acknowledge any lapse in order to keep this ethic from slipping away. At the same time, I realize that my transgression of this important rule was also telling about my position at that moment; the impulse to support fellow adoptees, even if by judging parents as racist, outweighed, for me, the rule of non-judgment.

Another potential problem with working with this group of adoptees, my friends and acquaintances concerns how I have come to know them. I met many of these subjects through an adopted Korean social and informational organization. Even though I make no claims of representing all adopted Koreans, I must assume there is some selection bias at work here. These subjects, because of their involvement with an adopted Korean group, are likely to possess a high degree of "adoptee identity," meaning they view the adoption experience as a formative part of their identities; this may be less true of the adopted Korean population as a whole. The majority of my subjects have been back to visit Korea, an experience that seems to further cement the adoptive experience as formative for adoptees. Though it is unknown how many Korean adoptees have returned to Korea, a number which constitutes under 8% of the worldwide Korean adoptee population returned in the five year period between 2000 and 2005,[18] though it is unclear if multiple visits by the same individuals were counted more than once. Even using a liberal estimate, I would surmise perhaps one in four (or even fewer) will visit Korea in their lifetimes.

Finally, one benefit of working with friends and acquaintances early in the oral history collection process was that I knew these subjects would be more forgiving of the

[18] *International Korean Adoptee Resource Book*, ed. Jeannie Hong.

mistakes I was bound to make as I learned how to carry out this research. My initial subjects were most kind in their entrusting me with their stories, even though I was new to the work, and what I learned from them proved invaluable in collecting the later oral histories.

VARIABLE POSITIONALITIES

Throughout the ethnographic process that built this research (and in this, I include everything from the conception of the project to my present work of writing it up), I have made adjustments as my position relative to my own work and to the adoptee community of which I am a part has changed. A key concept in interpreting these shifting sands of positionality is my location as either (and sometimes neither) an insider or an outsider in the community and world of Korean American adoption. This is especially true in communities of Korean adopteees, within which I have access to so-called "native informants," complicated by the possibility of my own position as a native informant.

I see myself as part of a generation of ethnographers, as acknowledged by Fontana and Frey, who "…have realized…that researchers are not invisible, neutral entities; rather, they are a part of the interactions they seek to study…"[19] Much of my work with and within groups of Korean adoptees depends on my understanding of the complexities of individual and group identity within Korean adoptee discourses. This understanding is likely as much a product of my own life experiences as an adoptee as it is a result of my academic training, but I suspect it is the fusion of the many elements that

[19] Fontana, Andrea and James H. Frey. "The Interview: From Structured Questions to Negotiated Text." In *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials.*

constitute my own layered identity as both a scholar of adoption studies and as an adoptee myself. When I ponder the scholarly and sociocultural significance of the research I write about here, the question of the importance of my position as an adoptee is ever-present: to what degree do my experiences as a Korean adoptee shape this work as both an intellectual and community project? In an effort to answer this question, I have endeavored to track the many ways in which my position as a member of the community that I am researching is both an asset and a liability.

Insider/Outsider

In *Decolonizing Methodologies,* Linda Tuhiwai Smith provides a thorough discussion of the complexities of being an "insider" (meaning from within her own community) researcher and the benefits and detriments of being either insider or outsider. She writes that, "[i]nsider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research. It also needs to be humble. It needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position."[20] Like Smith, Williams acknowledges that superficially being an insider in her research did not make her in insider all the time, or free her from the responsibilities of outsiders doing research.[21] Treading the razor's edge of insider/outsider has been a major consideration of my work in my community.

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[20] Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*.

[21] Williams, Norma. *The Mexican American Family: Tradition and Change (Reynolds Series in Sociology)*. See also Marie Smyth's "Insider-Outsider Issues in Researching Violently Divided Societies." In *Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences.*

Certainly, the most obvious benefit of my position is the access I have enjoyed to other Korean American adoptees, but this does not mean non-adopted researchers could not and have not produced insightful and important work about this community, especially if they have worked to gain the trust of the adoptee individuals they are studying.

In the more than 50-year history of Korean adoption to the United States, there have been several survey and interview studies of Korean adoptees; most of these studies have aimed at ascertaining whether adoptees were adjusting well in their adoptive placements, and assessing the "success" of the practice of transnational and transracial placement. The fact that the agencies facilitating these adoptions are almost always private, and most (very appropriately) do not allow access to adoption records, even for the purpose of research presents an additional barrier for identifying transnational adoptees. Much of the research on Korean adoptees has instead relied on calls for volunteers, disseminated through public adoption-related channels. As a result, Korean adoptees who participate in research on Korean adoption tend to be publicly identifiable, meaning they are part of a Korean adoptee networking group, attend adoption-related conferences, or subscribe to adoption-related Internet groups like listservs, bulletin boards, or email lists. Not surprisingly, this means that there are some Korean adoptees who have been approached and/or surveyed multiple times for research purposes; some of these adoptees are sharply critical of how this research has been conducted, or of the fact that it is conducted at all, mostly because of a perception that adoptees are objectified in the research, or used as "lab rats." I had to work to gain and maintain the trust of adoptees who held this opinion in order to get their participation in my study. This was probably easier for me than it would have been for a non-adoptee researcher, but only

because I was able to access "adoptee-only" spaces. Once in these spaces, I think I did no more than any other conscientious ethnographer who had been allowed into the space of any subculture. While other adoptees recognize me as a fellow adoptee almost without exception, I also know a few other Korean American academics who study Korean adoption in the United States who are erroneously assumed to be adoptees. These researchers make a point to "out" themselves as non-adopted, but have enjoyed similar access to Korean adoptee communities when they have been supportive, respectful, and responsive to the wishes of Korean adoptee individuals and groups.

For this project, I do not see how I could possibly exclude some explanation of my emotional state and its effect on the intellectual and theoretical processes that intimately informs my work.[22] As a Korean adoptee, each story I heard from another adoptee evoked an emotional, psychological and intellectual reaction. Whether the elements of other adoptees' lives echoed my own or were very different, I compared what I heard repeatedly to my own story, and eventually to the stories of other subjects. Some moments in the oral histories were especially meaningful or poignant for me, and it has been a challenge to figure out why. Unraveling whether a particular experience resonated with me emotionally or intellectually often proved impossible because so much of what was emotionally charged for me was also of intellectual significance.

The most striking example of this was the sorrow which descended over me as I began to collect and transcribe the oral histories. While the stories I was hearing did have some sad elements, I did not recognize these as particularly sad as I first heard them, so I

[22] This response is much in the tradition of Feminist Studies scholar Susan Kreieger, who acknowledges the necessity of emotionally processing in the context of her research in *Social Science and the Self.*

did not understand why the collection process was affecting me this way. Only after other researchers read some of my transcripts and reacted to them with sadness themselves did I realize that much of my subject matter is indeed very sad. In retrospect, I think I had so normalized the painful events of adoptees' lives in light of my own experience that I did not immediately recognize them as painful. Of course, this realization further defined my position as a researcher, and since then, I have listened more attentively to the painful experiences I have heard in oral histories. Understanding this initial reaction of extreme sadness led me to realize that tracking my emotional states throughout the life of this project would be an essential task. While the work of collecting oral histories from other Korean adoptees eventually became less emotionally trying for me, I learned to acknowledge the depth of emotional labor the work required and began to allow for my own needs in preparing and recovering from each oral history collection session, which helped me progress more effectively. Because my emotional and intellectual processes were constantly informing one another, failure to understand and manage either process would surely cause the other to suffer.

At first glance, it might seem obvious that a researcher who is a Korean American adoptee would be an "insider" within the population of Korean American adoptees, but this is not always the case. The role of the sociocultural researcher is inherently an "outsider" role; regarding a social group with academic scrutiny and analysis is not usually part of standard social relations, and the value of such activities to the subject group is often called into question. While my intention has always been to conduct, create, and share my work within my Korean adoptee community, the process of doing

intensive research within the community was sometimes met with suspicion, despite my adoptee status.

In addition, when I began the oral history collection process in 2003, very few other Korean adoptees were engaged in Korean adoption research, so I was very much outside the "normal" experience and interest of other adoptees. In fact, because most of the academic research on Korean adoptees has been conducted by researchers who are themselves either adoptive parents or adoption professionals (both groups which are made up primarily of White people), Korean adoption research was in many ways a White act until the early 2000s and not part of the "insider" activities of Korean adoptee society—though this has started to change in the past five years as more Korean adoptees have started to pursue their own research projects.

The Native Informant

The importance of the native informant, "…the person who translates her culture for the researcher, the outsider,"[23] has long been established in the ethnographic methodologies of Social Science disciplines such as Anthropology and Sociology. The native informant is the person who allows the (Western, usually White, often male, always positioned as objective) researcher to "discover" her culture, or at least to describe it for an academic audience. Therefore, the native informant is a valuable asset for a researcher in search of the cultural truth of a community, society, or other subculture. While the researcher might be indebted to the native informant, during much of the

[23]Khan, Shahnaz. "Reconfiguring the Native Informant: Positionality in the Global Age." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2022.

positivistic history of ethnographic inquiry (what Norman Denzin calls the "Traditional Period" and "Modern Phase" of qualitative research, which together spanned a period from the late nineteenth century until about 1970),[24] the intellectual and cultural superposition of the researcher over the native informant was implicit in the tendency for ethnographers to "study down," in cultures considered less advanced than their own, and in the assumption that the researcher himself was objective, and therefore able to discern the true nature of the native informant's culture. The native informant was seen as too immersed in her culture to be objective and could serve only as the window through which the objective researcher could explain that culture to others.

With the formalization of new disciplines of Ethnic Studies and Women's/ Gender/ Sexuality Studies, and entrance of scholars from these disciplines into mainstream academic discourses, the separation between researcher and researched began to close. This marked the fourth moment in Denzin's history of qualitative research: the Crisis of Representation, in which qualitative research became more reflexive and the objectivity of the ethnographer could no longer be assumed, as the researcher often became part of the story he or she told. This moment was to open to the possibility of the researcher *as* native informant and/or the possibility that the figure of the native informant could disappear altogether.

Women's Studies ethnographer and scholar Shahnez Khan writes about her position working with Pakistani women in Pakistan as a Pakistani Canadian woman, and her position as both an outsider and as an insider, a native informant. Khan discusses the

[24] Denzin, Norman K. "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research, Second Edition.*

condition of mutable positionality and its effects on research and the researcher, explaining how she is considered a native and an expert (as both a scholar of and a native to the experiences of Pakistani women) by her Canadian colleagues, but an outsider who lives in the West by the Pakistani women whom she studies; she understands her position as one of high access relative to other researchers, but also knows she is often misread, and her work misused, in popular political discourses about the Muslim East. She states, "Situated as the other of the other, I am reminded that the position of the native informant is precarious."[25] Here Khan acknowledges how her positions as researcher, co-ethnic, academic, westerner, and woman are always changing—not because she herself is in a constant state of flux, but because of different understandings of her position from the various perspectives of individuals and groups around her. In Khan's example, as in my own, it has become increasingly clear that it is often the context in which research is rendered, much more than the content of the research itself, that speaks most meaningfully to the "reader." The situationality of the reader, whether she be another academic, a person in or related to the community being researched, or a member of the general public, influences how she will understand and identify with the work being produced.

The "Adoptee/Adoption Expert"

I have attempted to create a research project that incorporates communitarian, feminist, ethnic studies and postmodern methodologies, partly because the values in these

[25] Khan, Shahnaz. "Reconfiguring the Native Informant: Positionality in the Global Age." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2025.

ideologies appeal to my own intellectual and ethical sensibilities, but more importantly in an effort to do justice to the complex and multilayered reality of Korean adoptee communities and individuals in the United States and around the world. In my approach, communitarian (or community-based) research must also be ethnically sensitive and feminist in nature, and not only because the population of informants with whom I am working is majority female and ethnically Korean. The reflexivity of feminist qualitative methodologies has guided my work as a member of the group I am researching. A commitment to making available the voices of Korean adoptees, long silenced in White-dominated popular discourses as well as within the discipline of Asian American Studies, binds me to ideologies and methodologies in Ethnic Studies and to the overarching goals within that discipline of documenting and correcting lost or silenced histories of American people of color. Finally, postmodernist ideology and methodology is reflected in my work through my understanding of the oral history as a constructed narrative, and one that has complicated, intersectional and multilayerd meanings. The meanings in the autobiographical life stories of adult Korean American adoptees may be understood differently by the adoptee as storyteller, by myself as a fellow adult Korean American adoptee and as a researcher, by the reader of my finished work (who will add their own contextualization to that which I provide) and by the communities and individuals I discuss.

At the same time, it was (and is) important to me as a researcher and an adoptee to give back to the individuals and groups that have so generously facilitated my research; even though the role of the researcher has long been the role of an outsider (both from a social standpoint and, historically, in practice) it is of great importance to me to behave as

an insider in my work with the adoptee community. On the individual scale, this means treating each study participant with respect and warmth, making sure the process is as comfortable as possible, and honoring the participants' needs and wants with respect to the use of their life stories; from an ethical and methodological standpoint, this should be no different than the relationship between any qualitative researcher and their subject(s). At larger scales, the role of behaving as an insider becomes more important and complicated—and I would argue—more complex. While ethical researchers always treat their human subjects with respect, academics rarely take the initiative to share their research with the communities they study in order to create collaborative work and to improve the base of knowledge about that community. This situation is commonly said to result from barriers around academic knowledge and expression, but I fear it is also often due to the tendency of researchers to become isolated "experts" positioned to analyze and comment on the communities they study from a supposedly objective perspective outside the group.

Because there is a small (but growing) body of scholarly research available about transracial and transnational adoption, academics who study adoption are frequently called upon as experts by adoption agencies, groups of prospective and current adoptive parents, and, to a lesser degree, by adoptee organizations. Such is the dearth of current information available to these very interested publics that the designation "adoption expert" could be (and is) applied to almost anyone in an adoption triad (meaning birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents) who is willing to talk about adoption, as well as to adoption professionals. Adoptees or adoptive parents who have produced creative work in the form of books, films, or Web content are especially likely to be identified as

experts. While academics who study adoption are also called upon to talk about adoption at adoption agencies, at culture camps, in classrooms, and in the media, it is noteworthy that the role of academics is usually different than the roles of these other experts. The voice of academics can carry more weight, due to the perceived depth of their investment in the topic as researchers, scholars, and intellectuals. However, in the world of "adoption experts" the respect awarded to academics is often also tied to an assumption that their views are objective, though they usually are not. This view is bolstered by the fact that many of the academics who research adoption are not adoptees, and therefore can be assumed not to have been negatively affected by the adoption experience. So, while the adoptee is commonly read as being one kind of "expert," the transition to being understood as a scholarly authority is challenging.

In my case, this discontinuity is particularly salient when dealing with journalists; as I have become more widely known as a Korean adoption researcher, as well as a Korean adoptee myself, I have been contacted more and more by journalists looking for a new "angle" on Korean or transnational adoption. Though in many ways I am well equipped to operate as an "adoption expert" (for instance, I developed and twice taught the first semester-long undergraduate-level course on Korean adoption, and in preparation for this project have compiled a reasonably comprehensive corpus of information about the history of Korean and other transracial adoption in America), most of the journalists who contact me are not interested in tapping into my knowledge bank, but in hearing me recount my personal experiences growing up as a Korean adoptee. I always marvel at the way reporters seek me out, usually because they have been directed towards me as an "adoption expert," only to ask me what they could ask any adopted

person. In dealing with journalists, the "inside" position of adoptee always trumps the "outside" position of researcher, and I get asked a lot of the same stock reductive questions: "How old were you when you were adopted?" "Did you have any problems being adopted?" "Have you found your Korean family?" "Do you speak any Korean?" I have come to believe that this is not because the position of researcher or expert is unimportant; but rather because my work as a researcher somehow makes me a "super-insider," extra qualified to tell the (hopefully) melodramatic tale of my own adoption and subsequent assimilation into America. If I tell reporters I am happy to talk about my work or to be a source for information about Korean adoption history, policy, or community and identity formation, but am not willing to speak about my personal life, I usually never hear from them again. The decision not to discuss my personal adoption history seems to limit the media's interest in me, and thus restricts my access to popular media outlets.

To blur the lines between my insider and outsider status even further, I have also participated as an adult adoptee subject in other people's research. Because I have depended on the participation of adoptees in order to complete my research, and because I believe that research on adoption and adoptees could and should be informative and important to the community under study, I feel it is my obligation to volunteer for such research if I am able. To date, I have been interviewed three times and filled out many survey questionnaires. The most prominent of these research projects is that of anthropologist Eleana Kim, whose dissertation *Remembering Loss: The Cultural*

Politics of Overseas Adoption from Korea[26] has been both a valuable resource and a meaningful touchstone for me. We met through a mutual Korean adoptee acquaintance who recognized similarities in our work, and quickly developed both a friendship and a valuable collegial relationship in which we are always on the lookout for opportunities to collaborate. Though Kim is not an adoptee, she is probably my closest colleague, both because of our shared area of expertise, and because we take similar methodological approaches to it. In Kim's dissertation, I am positioned firmly as an insider within the adoptee community, through my introduction as a member of the AKConnection board and through quotes from an interview from the very beginning of our acquaintance.

In the end, whether or not the researchers in question are themselves adoptees, I can probably claim insider status with them as a researcher myself. However, as much as they maintain collegial relations with me (which I appreciate greatly), none (to my knowledge) has ever accounted for my position as an insider in the community of academics to which we both belong as part of their examination of me. Though none of the research in which I have participated was focused on the small community of adoptee researchers, and I never expected this of any of these researchers or their projects, I do wonder what all of their research might have looked like if this question of inside and outside in the changeable and overlapping positions of researcher, community member, Asian American, and adoptee was more prominently in play.

Adult Korean adoptee organizing can also be understood through the international gatherings of adult Korean adoptees. The first of these gatherings (all referred to in

[26] Kim, Eleana. "Remembering Loss: The Cultural Politics of Overseas Adoption from South Korea."

Korean adoptee parlance simply as “The Gatherings”) took place in 1999 in Washington, D.C., the second took place two years later in Oslo, Norway, and the third and fourth Gatherings were in Seoul, South Korea in 2004 and 2007. These gatherings, which brought together unprecedented numbers of adult Korean adoptees, were the result of extraordinary community-building efforts by a few Korean adoptee volunteer leaders. Each Gathering has grown in scope and number of attendees.

I only heard about the first Gathering in 1999 after the event occurred, despite the fact that I was living within driving distance of Washington at that time, and for the second, I was unable to attend because of work obligations. So the first time I attended a Gathering was in 2004 in Seoul. Although by that time I had begun my research efforts in earnest, and had already collected several oral histories in the Twin Cities, I was determined to refrain from collecting any at the Gathering. I think adoptee conferences are one of the worst locations one could possibly take an oral history. While the logistical opportunities to meet adoptees are tremendous at such events, attendees are likely to have an extremely overdetermined sense of their own identity as adoptees; such a conference, with its adoptee-centered programming and huge numbers of adoptees in close quarters is not in any way a typical experience for most Korean adoptees. I prefer that adoptees tell their life stories in settings that are as normal and comfortable as possible (for instance, in their own homes). I also very much wanted to experience the Gathering myself as an adoptee—which at the time, meant not working too much while I was there.

By the 2007 Gathering, my situation and outlook had changed. In 2004, I was still on the AKConnection board, I had only marginal organizational connections to the

Gathering, and attended the organizational leadership meeting but did not participate in the planning or execution of programming. In 2007, despite that fact that I was no longer formally part of any Korean adoptee organization, I had been asked to chair the organizing committee for the First International Korean Adoption Studies Research Symposium, a one-day academic conference devoted to Korean adoption research from several disciplines, which was specifically planned to coincide with the fourth Gathering so that the research being presented would be available to the hundreds of Korean adoptees from around the world who would be in attendance. In many ways, the work of presenting academic research back to a population of adoptees was the ultimate culmination of my shared but rarely overlapping roles as adoptee and researcher.

The organizers of the Gathering made clear to me during the planning process that they preferred to highlight and support the work of adoptee academics. After all, the Gatherings are and have always been a venue by, for, and about adult Korean adoptees. Certainly, my status as a Korean adoptee was a key factor in the organizers' decision to ask me to lead the Symposium. Although I was and am excited about the entry of other adoptee-scholars into the arena of adoption studies (or at least studies that include a discussion of adoption) I recognize that many of the academics leading the way in Korean adoption studies are not themselves adoptees. I concluded that a symposium of Korean adoption studies could never be intellectually complete without including non-adopted scholars, and had to argue (though not very hard) for their equal inclusion. So in this example, the values of being an academic guided my decision to position myself not too far inside the adoptee-only perspective of the Gathering planners, though my own

status as an adoptee probably helped legitimize my claim that non-adopted scholars were as important to include in our symposium as the adopted ones.

Letting Go of the Illusion of Objectivity

I believe that when humans study each other, they always bring their own cultural attitudes and beliefs into the process. This makes objectivity difficult, if not impossible, to maintain. In that light, I believe that as an active participant in my current community of study (one who may share the community's cultural attitudes and beliefs based on life experience), I will almost always know more about my community than an outsider. What I already know and what I want to know will almost always be substantively different from an outsider researcher, because it is informed by my experience within the community. If, as an active participant, I am trained in human research methodologies and in cultural theory, my potential to know more about my community is even greater. Scholars from outside my community can still know and learn about my community, but will probably lack the "inside information" necessary to develop the same body of knowledge as I.

I certainly don't expect all cultural communities to be researched only by insiders, but I am an ardent advocate of the practice for several reasons. If insider and outsider scholars were given and had always been given equal access to cultural research, I imagine each of the two approaches would fill gaps left by the other. In fact, however, outsider research and objective methodologies are far more common in social and cultural research. This is not to say I do not believe in the validity of outsider research, but that I have and have always formulated (even as a natural scientist) critiques of

objective or outsider research. For my research on Korean adoptees, I see myself as advantaged for the reasons discussed above and disadvantaged only by the doubts of those who question the validity of my work because of my lack of objectivity. I believe that all cultural scholars should have access to the topics of their choice, but that the researcher's status as an outsider or insider should be considered at the inception of any cultural research project and throughout its execution. I have some self interest in this belief; I imagine I may one day want to end my own research on Korean adoptees and may turn to other topics outside my cultural group. Ideally, cultural topics should be researched and analyzed by persons of varying levels of subjectivity, in order to yield the most complete set of observations and investigations. At the very least, all cultural researchers should take the fundamental considerations of positionality and subjectivity into account.

The remedy I envision to help mitigate problems resulting from researcher subjectivity is virtually total methodological transparency. Research methodology, including an assessment of researcher subjectivity, should be made available as a part of the research project. Ideally, this should include the position of the researcher within the community, motivations for the research, personal beliefs of the researcher concerning the research, the issues and problems of the research that might be present in a community context, and the impact on the community of study. Transparency in methodology does nothing to lessen researcher subjectivity, but does provide context within which scholars, students and other readers of the research may place the research and researcher.

TRANSNATIONALITY YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

The use of the term "transnational" is much debated, and I use Glick-Schiller's basic definition (as cited in Lee and Shibusawa), which "refers to 'political, economic, social and cultural processes that extend beyond the borders of a particular state, include actors that are not states, but are shaped by the policies and institutional practices of states.'"[27] Using this definition, Korean American adoptees are inherently transnational, in that their life experiences are shaped by state policies of at least two countries, which has led them across borders at least once, though many cross and re-cross these borders again and again. Within the framework of Basch, Glick-Schiller and Szanton Blanc's transnationality, as defined in *Nations Unbound*, the authors argue that national identities continue to be in common use, but they critique the category of the nation-state as a primary element in transnational study. This is in no small part because of the significance of race in the establishment of nation, emphasizing the key role of race in nation-building and the identification of a "racial order" within national identities. They also point out the forced transnationality of many immigrants, who often become identified as racial minorities in receiving countries where they are classified as "subordinated people" and are thus more likely to maintain national and cultural adherence to another other home, the place from which the migration took place. Alhough Basch, Glick-Schiller and Blanc-Szanton were not writing about transnational adoptees, they might have well been. Korean American adoptees as a group exhibit all of

[27] Glick-Schiller, Nina. "Transmigrants and Nation-States: Something Old and Something New in U.S. Immigrant Experience." In *Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience.* As quoted in Lee, Erika and Naoko Shibusawa. "Guest Editors' Introduction: What is Transnational Asian American Studies? Recent Trends and Challenges," *Journal of Asian American Studies*.

these characteristics that make it impossible to understand them in a single-nation framework, like many other migrant groups and individuals, although they rarely self-identify as transnational. While in 1994 Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc pointed to literature as the primary venue for the expression of "in-between" identity, I have found Korean adoptees constantly and commonly identify this way in their daily lives.[28]

Shamian Island, the Chinese home of the U.S. consulate, is a Chinese space physically and culturally designated as in-between China and the West. It is reserved for those engaging in foreign marriage or adoption between Chinese and non-Chinese and is used as a way-station for Western adoptive parents who have adopted Chinese children; no other Chinese are allowed on the island.[29] The island is a Chinese border space for those on the way in or out of China, with a Chinese-fueled economy designed in part for Americans who are exporting part of China to the United States in the form of their Chinese daughters. In many ways, the limited space of Shamian Island is analogous to the borderless space of transnational adoption cultural, social and political experience. The plane of transnational engagement within cultures of adoption is economic, emotional, and littered with paperwork; this is certainly true of the Korean adoptees I have encountered.

Because my work on Korean adoptees relies to some degree on my understanding of them as transnationals, there is the additional query: Who is "native" in

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[28] Basch, Linda G., Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton. *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States.*
[29] Dorow, Sara K.. *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*.

a transnational population? This query is a rephrasing of Anderson and Lee's question of so-called displaced Asian Americans—"Where is 'home?'"[30]— as they attempt to qualify what could constitute "home" for diasporic Asians politically, socially, and spatially. Superficially, the answer might seem easy: those "native" to more than one place, or perhaps "native" to no one place are, by default, "native" to transnational experience. Of course, this is something of a trick question, in that theorizing about transnationality implies problematizing the concept of exclusively rendered nation-based identity. Are Asian transnational adoptees displaced? I am not sure if I can assert that they do not belong in America or in Asia, but it is impossible to ignore their own articulations in the oral history setting of displacement, or at least of feeling in-between.

Understandably, transnationalist theory has often been applied to immigrant populations, or used them as examples to support the theory. For instance, Grewal uses the example of South Asian H-1B visa migrants, highly skilled, high-tech workers chasing the "American dream" of unlimited upward economic and social mobility in Silicon Valley using their new economic access to "consumer cultures."[31] Technically speaking, transnational adoptees are immigrants, but they differ from members of other immigrant groups in important ways. What if the "American dream" is unlimited family building not by immigrants but through immigrants, acquired as children through transnational adoption? In the context of Asian transnational adoption, Grewal's American dream "…linked…to American discourses of multiculturalism and diversity

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[30] Anderson, Wanni W. and Robert G. Lee. "Asian American Displacements." In *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas.*

[31] Grewal, Inderpal. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms.*

through proliferating target markets and diverse lifestyles, "[32] is achieved not through the marketing and acquisition of material commodities, but of the adoptee immigrant him or herself. The transnational adoptee, usually raised with in and assimilated into White families, might be the ultimate expression of Grewal's American dream, since this dream, as articulated by Grewal, also includes the achievement of equivalent-to-White social status enjoyed by many Asian adoptees.

Foremost among the differences that further separate transnational adoptee immigrants from other transnational immigrants is the lack of cultural connection to the adoptee's "sending" or birth county. While many groups of immigrants to the United States become isolated or disconnected from motherland and/or acculturated to the United States, adoptees often experience this as the sole immigrant (or perhaps one of two or three other transnational adoptees in the family) in their immediate surroundings. While it may be true that most adoptive families have immigrants in their family histories, the demographics of transnational adoption are such that transracially adopted children will almost always be the only recent immigrants in their families. The isolation-as-immigrant that transnational adoptees face is often compounded by their additional isolation as the only person of color in the family. Transnational adoptees, unlike children in other immigrant families, often are exposed to "native" country culture, when it is addressed at all, through non-adoptee, non-immigrant, and non-person-of-color experiences. Power differentials in American society between immigrants and non-immigrants and between Whites and people of color increase the potential for isolation for transnational adoptees. I postulate that it is this very potential that creates such

[32] *Ibid*, 7.

urgency around the erasure (legally, and often culturally) of any vestige of immigrant identity for adoptees in order to acculturate them into American family and society. It is as if the possibility that a Korean adoptee might slip into a Korean immigrant identity threatens the primacy of family, which in the case of most Korean American adoptees is a non-immigrant family.

Tobias Hübinette, a close academic colleague who is also a Korean adoptee, is also heavily involved in his Korean adoptee community. He sometimes appears in the films of Jane Jin Kaisen, a Danish adoptee artist. In one of these films, *Tracing Trades,*[33] Hübinette walks out alone into a bleak and snowy landscape. His voiceover narrates, "We are a one-generation immigrant group." Truly, this is a profound particularity about transnational adoptees; the adoptee cultural and social production that is so important to so many adoptees cannot really be passed on to an adoptee's children. Since the defining characteristic of a transnational adoptee identity is having been adopted—experiencing the rupture caused by the loss of birth family and country and the reabsorbtion into another family and country—an adoptee identity is by definition not heritable. It can only be imposed upon a subject through the process of familial rupture and relinquishment, followed by the permanent placement into another family through adoption. Because a seminal part of the experience of being adopted for so many adoptees is the lack of understanding and acknowledgement of issues surrounding adoption within the family, adoptee identity is not reproducible even for adoptees whom choose to adopt themselves. Thus, in American transnational adoption, the "next

[33] Kaisin, Jane Jin. "Tracing Trades." In *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Five Act Interdisciplinary Art Project*.

generation" of adoptee transmigrants is not the generation born to the first, as it is with other groups of migrants (e.g. first-, second-, and third-generation Korean Americans), but is instead the next group of new adoptees, born and relinquished in foreign countries and transported across borders for adoption in America. The next generation will be raised not by today's adoptees, but by the next younger generation of adoptive parents, who sometimes harshly judge the generation of parents that preceded them as backward and uninformed. In the case of Korean adoption, the end of the practice of Korean transnational adoption will signal the last generation of Korean adoptees to America or anywhere else. This outcome, which I think is inevitable[34] considering the shame transnational adoption evokes among an increasingly wealthy South Korean populace, looms equally large among both activists who support the practice and those who oppose it. So far, neither group has succeeded in fully addressing the cultural or demographic consequences of this future for Korean adoptees. For those proponents of adoption who maintain that transnational adoption is a "win-win" solution for parentless children and childless parents, the end of transnational adoption from any source is disastrous. However, even the staunchest supporters of adoption would be hard pressed to argue that adoption, and its effects in the family, are meant to be reproduced; by the time adoptees reproduce, no one would want them to reproduce themselves as transnational adoptees

[34] A headline in the October 9, 2008 issue of the *New York Times* read "Korea Aims to End Stigma of Adoption and Stop 'Exporting' Babies" and reported that South Korea plans to phase out international adoption completely by 2012. Though South Korea has planned to end out-of-country placements in the past, the increase in the domestic Korean population's willingness to adopt (which the article also reports) may enable the South Korean government to follow through with its current plans to end international adoption from Korea forever. By Onishi, Norimitsu. "Korea Aims to End Stigma of Adoption and Stop 'Exporting' Babies.

and give up their children to be parented by foreign strangers. For those who work to end transnational adoption, many of whom are adoptees themselves, the disappearance of a viable community of Korean adoptees is a necessary result of their activism. Although adoptee community and identity is of great value to many of these activists, they are also silent on their ideal future for these communities; realistically, anti-adoption activism rallies against the very existence of future Korean adoptees, and of Korean adoptee communities.

Conclusion

About two weeks into the oral history process, after I had taken three oral histories and finished transcribing one, I had a very telling dream. At the time I was very concerned about how the process was going and was just starting to have very emotional reactions to the work. I had also come down with the flu and was feverish in bed.

In the dream, I was taking an oral history from myself, and realizing as a researcher that there were three different stories that I as the narrator was telling. As the researcher, I was having a lot of trouble keeping these three stories straight. I was not just talking to myself, but was actually two different people—a listener and a narrator. There was no visual element to the dream; rather I was listening to the recording of an oral history I had given to the me that is the researcher. I responded to my voice as a narrator with the sound of my thoughts as a researcher. As the researcher/listener, I was not conscious of myself as the narrator, and as the narrator, I was not conscious of myself as the researcher. I was a subject and I was a researcher and as the researcher, I was

confused. This situation was so frustrating for me that I eventually woke up. I never figured out what my three stories were or what they represented, but I know this dream was a meaningful message sent by myself to myself.

I am still not sure exactly what this dream meant, but I think that through the research process I have reclaimed myself as both an adoptee and a researcher. The confusion and frustration I felt in the dream are mirrored by the anxieties and challenges evoked by this project in my waking life, but I feel certain that any reclamation I have now made will generate enormous returns in my work. This work of self-reclamation will undoubtedly facilitate my role in the reclamation of the transnational adoptee experience through my ability to understand myself as researcher and subject, and to understand the lives of my subjects as significant, complicated and profound.

Section 1:

Adoptee Icon

In this section of my dissertation, I seek to explain and describe the way Korean adoption—and, by extension, other kinds of transracial and transnational adoption—has come to be understood and experienced in American historical, political and social contexts. I explore how tropes of Korean adoption became iconic of all transnational adoption and how Korean adoptees became recognized as icons within the practice of transnational and transracial adoption. I analyze how the practice of Korean adoption evolved from a practice only exercised in an immediate post-war context to the oldest and most sustained "successful" transnational adoption program in the world. In doing so, I also examine how adoptees have been produced by historical and political factors. In order to do so, I compare the experiences of adult Korean adoptees from two defined generations of adoptees with one another to show how the differing political, cultural, and social circumstances of both Korea and the United States at the time of adoption seems to have produced different experiences for adoptees. I also contrast these Korean adoptee experiences with formal adoption research that has been produced continuously since the 1970s, about the same time that it became clear that Korean transnational adoption would continue past South Korea's post-war period well into its current socio-economic condition; a nation which shares many characteristics with the highly developed countries to which it sends children for adoption including: high GNP, high-

technological development, low birth rates, low infant mortality and high life expectancy.[1]

In the three chapters presented in this section, I critically examine iconic images of the Korean adoptee. These images include the very prevalent representation of Korean and other transnational adoptees as rescued (first by America and Americans, then by other Western nations) from the horrors of war, the evils of communism, or (perhaps most importantly) the misery of poverty. In "'Eligible Alien Orphan:' The Cold War Korean Adoptee," I argue that this almost universal image of the transnational adoptee as rescued through the kind and/or righteous acts of White benevolence is rooted in adoption policy and early representations of Korean adoption in the popular media, but can also be sourced in the experiences of the earliest Korean adoptees who were, indeed, removed from dire social and economic circumstances in the aftermath of the Korean War. I argue that this population, though they constitute only a tiny fraction of the total population of over 100,000 Korean adoptees in America, and despite the fact that their experiences are very distinct from generations of adoptees who would follow them, became the Korean American adoptee of record in cultural, social, and policy terms.

Behavioral science and social work researchers who have examined transracial and transnational adoption have long tasked themselves with determining whether there are negative outcomes for transnational and/or transracial adoptees and adoptive families. Most studies have found few, if any, negative outcomes in these adoptive families. In my chapter, "Misrepresentation, Appropriation and Assimilation: A Critical Literature Review of Social Work and Policy Research on Transracial Adoption," I argue that this

[1] "Korea, South." CIA World Factbook, 2009.

body of research, which has worked to influence the broader acceptance and practice of Korean and other transnational adoption over decades, makes many questionable assumptions and has multiple blind spots, not the least of which is the general failure to consider and measure for the possibility that the adoption itself may create problems in adoptee and/or adoptive family well-being. Though this body of research initially considered Korean adoptees who came to the United States as part of small groups entering in the 1950s and 1960s, it effectively made way for growing numbers of Korean adoptees as the practice grew through the 1980s.

In my final chapter in the section, "An Adoptee for Every Lake: Minnesota, Multiculturalism, and the Korean Transracial Adoptee," I explore Korean adoptee experiences in Minnesota, a place known for its long tradition of social progressivism and cultural homogeneity, which is also the state with the highest rate of Korean and other transnational adoption in the United States. Here, I analyze the prevalence and practice of multiculturalism in the lives of Minnesota adoptees, and I consider the experiences of progressive Minnesota as iconic in the social and cultural world of American transnational adoption. Certainly, Minnesota was an "early adopter" of transracial and transnational adoption, and has remained a leader in transnational adoptions as the practice has become more common throughout the United States. In much of the research carried out in the fields of social work and other behavioral sciences, the parental practice of so-called multiculturalism was prescribed as one of the ways adoptive parents could address the (supposedly already very rare) problems experienced by transnational adoptees and adoptive families. Among Minnesota adoptee life experiences, I investigate the usefulness of popular practices of multiculturalism and critique its

limited usefulness for alleviating issues around racist and isolationist experiences commonly reported by adoptee participants in this research.

Chapter 2:

“Eligible Alien Orphan:”

The Cold War Korean Adoptee

> *I was definitely United States material. I didn't fit in so well … in Korea, I spoke English and I adapted and assimilated…readily. And I wasn't accepted…I was really taunted by the Korean children and spit at cause I was told I was White and things. And this was my chance. This was my ticket to come.* [1]
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> -Mabel, 53, born in Korea, adopted in the United States in 1956.

A POST-(KOREAN) WAR ADOPTEE

The first generation of Korean adoptees, created as adoptees from Korean War orphans in the immediate aftermath of that Cold War conflict, constitute a tiny fraction of the current overall population of Korean adoptees (less than four percent of the current Korean American adoptee population was adopted before 1962).[2] Nevertheless, they have become iconic in Americans' understandings of Korean adoption and adoptees. The broadly understood narrative of the child orphaned by war and rescued through adoption by benevolent Americans has its roots in this generation. In many ways, the current cultural role of the Korean American adoptee was set during the 1950s and 1960s, largely as a result of popular media coverage of this small group of Korean immigrants who came to the United States when almost all other Asian nationals were barred from legal American immigration by a strict policy of Asian exclusion that had been in effect in some form since 1882. It follows that the trope of the Korean adoptee as exceptional (in terms of cultural assimilation, psychological adjustment, and/or social success) among American peoples of color and/or among immigrants thus began with this small group of

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[1] Oral History 21.

[2] From demographic sources compiled by Tobias Hübinette for 1948-78 in his dissertation, "Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture." and from Weil, Richard H. "International adoption: The quiet migration." *International Migration Review*.

adoptees—who are now the elders of the Korean adoptee community in the United States and throughout the world.

Although they have not been as heavily studied as the larger population of Korean adoptees who came to the U.S. starting in the late 1960s, it is this generation that social work and adoption researchers, as they began their examination of adoption in the 1970s (described in Chapter Three), had in mind when they argued that adoption should continue. The victim-orphans, enmeshed in an American-fueled web of Cold War political upheaval, needed advocates, and were imagined to have a place in American society under the protective care of White Americans, assimilated into White families and society.

Children of War

In examining this first generation of Korean American adoptees, it is essential to consider the political, historical, and cultural realities of the Korean War. Among these was a growing interest by the United States in Asia as a location Cold War investment and political interest in the 1950s. In order to secure the strategically located Korean peninsula against communism, the U.S. deployed American troops to the Korean peninsula and the limited occupation of South Korea by American troops has continued to the present day. The transnational adoption program that began between the United States and South Korea in 1953 was a direct response to American involvement in the Korean War.

Ramsay Liem characterizes the Korean War as the "first 'hot' war of the Cold War…[the United States'] first encounter on the Asian mainland; it was also the first

failure to achieve victory [for the U.S.],"[3] and this is a common popular perception of the War. However, other scholars, such as William Stueck, argue that in ideological terms, the West "won" the Korean War because it "…averted the global bloodbath of the previous decade and positioned the West advantageously in the ongoing Cold War,"[4] when compared to its Soviet adversary. Certainly the Korean War served to heighten Cold War anxieties stateside, as the first conflict in the Cold War in which the United States was to support a foreign government in order to exercise anti-communist foreign relations. To do so, it had to attempt to keep a careful balance between stateside and Korean politics, as well as with the relatively young political power of the United Nations.[5] Stueck notes that anti-communist response in the United States in the 1950s was disproportionately high in relation to the actual military threat to the West of North Korean and Soviet aggression.[6] This led to American anti-communist political action in Korea, but also to anti-communist social, cultural, and ideological action in the States.[7] Though America only engaged in a "limited" war in Korea, it was more fully committed to anti-communist ideologies at home, including child salvation of Korean children through adoption. Eleana Kim highlights the history of Korean adoption as an anti-communist effort when she notes that "Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision International, an evangelical Christian aid organization…explicitly used the adoption of

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[3] Liem, "History, Trauma, and Identity: The Legacy of the Korean War for Korean Americans." *Amerasia Journal*, 114

[4] Stueck, William. *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History*, 216.

[5] Stueck, William. *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History*.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Casey, Steven. *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950-1953*.

[racially] mixed Korean children as part of an anti-Communist, Christian propaganda program,"[8] by using ads in American newspapers headlined "A Korean Orphan for You. Yours for the Asking!"[9]

The image of Korean adoption as child salvation came from the immediate postwar South Korea. The impoverished state of Korea in the dawn years of Korean adoption was very real, and war orphans were commonplace. Korean historian Bruce Cumings notes "South Korea in the 1950s was a terribly depressing place, where extreme privation and degradation touched everyone…[c]adres of orphans ran through the streets, forming little protective and predatory bands…[and there were] beggars…often traveling in bunches of maimed or starved adults holding children or babies."[10] By the end of the Korean War, American sympathies towards South Korea, America's ragged ally in the fight against communism in Asia, ran high.[11] The image of the orphaned Korean war waif became a key image in the American emotional and ideological struggle against communism.[12] The symbolic value of humanitarian action in Korea, through which America reinforced its self-perception of superiority over its communist adversaries, is especially significant in light of the muddy resolution to the Korean War. From an American perspective, North and South Korean forces seemed to move back and forth over the Korean peninsula without defining clear victor. Indeed, the War never officially

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[8] Kim, Eleana. "Remembering Loss: The Cultural Politics of Overseas Adoption from South Korea," 64.
[9] *Ibid*, 108, from *Los Angeles Times*, January 17, 1956.
[10] Cumings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History, Updated Edition*, 303.
[11] Casey, Steven. *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950-1953*.
[12] Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*.

ended, it merely entered an armistice that continues to this day. It is not surprising, then, that Korean adoptions began immediately after the war ended, as a remedy to the ambivalence of the resolution of the war, and the shame of failing to achieve victory.

American understandings of Korea through the aftermath of the Korean War were shaped by many different sources, including several different kinds of news media and certainly through film. Though the Korean War has not been as widely celebrated in film as other American conflicts, of the ninety-one English language feature films made about the Korean War, ten have plots or subplots concerning war orphans,[13] revealing the war orphan a significant element in the American popular mindset about the Korean War. Between 1951 and 1966, as Korean transnational adoptions were being negotiated and codified in Korean and American law as international economic, immigration, and social exchanges, six English language features (*The Steel Helmet,*[14] *Mission over Korea,*[15] *Battle Hymn,*[16] *War Hunt,*[17] *The Young and the Brave,*[18] and *Marine Battleground*[19]*)* were released that included Korean orphans as an important part of the plot. The very first feature film about the Korean War, *The Steel Helmet* (1951) included a Korean orphan subplot, and in *Battle Hymn* (1957), one of the best-known feature films about the War, the plight of Korean orphans was a primary focus. In each of these films, the Korean

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[13] Lentz, Robert J.. *Korean War Filmography: 91 English Language Features Through 2000*.
[14] Fuller, Samuel.
[15] Goldsmith, Martin, Jesse Lasky Jr., Eugene King and Richard Tregaskis (story), directed by Fred F. Sears.
[16] Evans, Vincent B. and Charles Grayson, directed by Douglas Sirk.
[17] Whitmore, Stanford, directed by Denis Sanders.
[18] Beirne, Lay Jr. and Rondald Davidson (story), directed by Francis D. Lyon.
[19] Mann, Milton, Han-chul Yu and Kook-jin Jang (story), directed by Manli Lee and Milton Mann.

orphan character or characters, who are often "adopted" by American characters as military mascots, symbolically represent Americans' responsibility towards children, and through these children, towards war-torn Korea. American sympathy towards Korean child-victims is valorized as a sign of humanity; conversely, Americans who lack this sympathy are depicted as having already lost themselves, and the War. By the early 1960s, the U.S. began to position itself in a helper role in South Korean politics, and promoted itself in a parental role in which South Korea would become an economic dependent;[20] it is easy to make the connection between symbolic parent (America) and child (Korea) and actual adoptive (American) parent and adopted (Korean) child by the 1970s when the number of Korean adoptions began to increase dramatically.

Liem notes that the War separated (and continues to separate) as many as 10 million Koreans across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).[21] Through oral histories of Korean Americans in the United States, he finds that the trauma of civil war for Korean Americans is very much a part of the memories of first-and-second-generation Korean American immigrants.[22] However, the Korean War also served as the germinal event that has led to the permanent separation of tens of thousands of Korean children from their biological parents through adoption abroad. War orphans were configured as (and sometimes emigrated as) "refugees" from war, and they were stigmatized as being born mixed-race of Korean and American parentage, a socially unacceptable situation in Korea in the post-war period. While early evangelical efforts valorized Korean transnational

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[20] Stueck, William. *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History*.
[21] Liem, "History, Trauma, and Identity: The Legacy of the Korean War for Korean Americans." *Amerasia Journal*, 114.
[22] *Ibid*, 126.

adoption as anti-communist, the Korean people were also depicted as intolerant of mixed-race children, striking a chord among Americans who saw themselves as more tolerant and progressive. American intervention (during the War and in its aftermath) yielded the solution of transnational adoption placement for both problems. It was (and in many cases, still is) believed that it would be far better for these children to be placed in the United States than to remain in Korea, a nation that was imagined as war-torn, culturally backwards and impoverished in the American consciousness. Whether the political motivation for adoption was right-wing anti-communism or left-wing anti-racism, Korean transnational adoption was a way for Americans to reinstate their pride in being American in the face of the humiliation of the lost Korean War.

Though the existence of some of the first Korean adoptees, biracial children largely of American paternity, was a direct result of the presence of the American military, transnational adoption out of Korea to the United States was sustained by the popularity of the practice among the American public, whether motivated by sympathy, a sense of obligation, national pride, or convenience. Although policies governing the relationship relationships between the U.S. and South Korea have been hotly debated in both nations (though probably more so in Korea), both the occupation of South Korea by American military personnel and the emigration of Korean children for transnational adoption have continued without interruption since the Korean War, reflecting the political and sociocultural influences of American expansionistic hegemony in Korea.

While transnational adoption did start out as a solution for children in crisis, it has become a national custom; it is estimated that over 200,000 Korean children have now been transnationally adopted worldwide over a period that exceeds 50 years. This is

partly because of a pull factor: American parents were and are desperate for adoptable children, and they are willing to pay. The South Korean government has been, for the most part, extremely compliant in meeting this demand. In many accounts, the lack of a comprehensive social welfare system in South Korea is directly linked to that nation's export of babies and children by the thousand. This is despite South Korea's falling birth rates and its rising GNP, which is among the highest of any "sending" country in the transnational adoption network of exchange.[23]

Korean transnational adoption was the first sustained intercountry adoption program in history (all previous intercountry adoption programs were temporary, in response to national disasters or emergencies); the current permanent practice of transnational adoption, whereby prospective adoptive parents in the United States or another receiving country can expect to have a choice of countries from which to adopt children, can be traced to Korean adoption. Indeed, most countries that seek to develop transnational adoption programs have used the South Korean model on some level, since South Korea has the longest-running, most reliable, and most stable overseas adoption program in the world.

The fact that transnational adoption has sustained itself for more than 50 years is also attributable to changing racial preferences and beliefs among the American adopting public, and to social changes in the public perception of what constitutes an acceptable American family during that time period. In addition, transnational adoption is encouraged by current immigration policy that privileges transnational adoptees over any

[23] The United States also sends a small number of mostly African American children for adoption, so therefore is "sending" country with the highest GNP.

other type of immigrant. However, the current migration of thousands of children a year for the purposes of transnational adoption can all be traced to the first wave of Korean adoptees who arrived in the United States shortly after the Korean War into an American cultural environment of racial assimilation, social conformity, and Cold War sentimentalism about Asia and its children.

Oral Histories of Korean Adoptee "Elders"

I made the decision to collect oral histories from Korean adoptees outside the state of Minnesota because I wanted to hear the experiences of older adoptees—that is, older than most of the adoptees I had found in Minnesota. Only one adoptee who participated in my Minnesota-based research was over 40 when interviewed. While I knew this generation of Korean adoptees would be significantly smaller than the twenty-and-thirty-something generation that was prevalent in Minnesota (about ten times smaller, as the population of persons sent for adoption from Korea who are now over 40 is only 6% of the total population, or just over 6,500, while the population of Korean adoptees currently in their twenties and thirties is over 68,000, about 63% of the total number of Korean adoptees),[24] I also suspected that these adoptees, having grown up in

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[24] Population data for Korean adoptees compiled by Tobias Hübinette in "Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture."
1948-78: Weil, Richard H. "International adoption: The quiet migration." *International Migration Review*.
1979-88: Pilotti, Francisco. "Intercountry adoption: Trends, issues and, policy implications for the 1990's". *Childhood*
1989-2002: U.S. Department of State. Immigrant visas issued to orphans coming to the U.S.

an America with different attitudes towards race and racial difference, would report different life experiences than later generations. Indeed they did, and their experiences are deeply significant, and not just as the first Korean American adoptee experiences. The experiences of this first generation was highly formative, both within the new Korean American adoptee community, and as a population around whom the identity of all Korean adoptees have been cast in the greater public view.

During the summer of 2005, I spent approximately one month in the American Pacific Northwest with the sole purpose of collecting oral histories from Korean adoptees over age 40. As with the other adoptee participants in my research efforts, I found these adoptees through word of mouth with the help of a few adoptee friends and colleagues. Most of the adoptees I contacted agreed to meet in order to tell their life stories; only one declined. In all, I interviewed twelve Korean adoptees over age 40 on this trip. Previous to that summer, I had met one of the Pacific Northwest participants, and I re-interviewed that person while in the region. I also had interviewed one person who lives in the American Midwest who was over age 40. After collecting oral histories in the Pacific Northwest, I also met two additional adoptees over age 40 who volunteered oral histories.

Choosing the age of 40 to separate this group of Korean adoptees from the others who participated in the project was somewhat arbitrary, but there was a natural break in age between this older generation who I mostly found in the Pacific Northwest, and the younger group in Minnesota. Although I did interview a single subject in Minnesota who was 39 at the time of the interview, all the members of the over-40 group were actually

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2003-2006: U.S. Department of State. Immigrant visas issued to orphans coming to the U.S.

44 or older. So, aside from the one person aged 39, the next oldest subjects were 37, seven years younger than the youngest 40+ group member; there were no significant gaps in the ages of the adoptee informants in their twenties and thirties. I also found some social and cultural differences between the older and younger generations, as members of the older generation often had been adopted under different circumstances than those who came later. Of course, the social climate in the United States also changed between the time Korean adoption started in the mid-1950s and when it became more popular in the 1970s; these changes are also reflected in the stories of this oldest generation of Korean American adoptees.

Altogether, the collection of oral histories upon which this chapter is based consists of fifteen life stories: twelve collected in the Pacific Northwest, two collected in the Midwest, and one collected in South Korea. The oldest participant was 56 years old at the time of interview, the youngest 44; the average age of the group was 49. Thus, although these Korean adoptees are, demographically, the "elders" in the Korean adoptee population, they could be described more accurately as middle-aged. There were eleven women and four men in this group. This breakdown of 27% men 73% women mirrors the gender makeup in the overall study, which collected 64 oral histories from 44 women and 19 men: 29% men and 71% women. The gender composition of the older generation in this study is also very similar to the overall gender breakdown of Korean adoption during the period when this generation was adopted: until 1971, 69-71% of Korean

adoptees were girls.[25] Ten interviewees in this group were married or in long term-partnerships, seven had been divorced, and ten were parents.

Memories of Korea

Because the practice of Korean transnational adoption has changed in order to accommodate demands of adoptive parents, who increasingly have wanted to adopt infants rather than children, most Korean adoptees who participated in my oral history research were adopted as infants. However, in the elder population, many had been adopted as children and retained clear memories of Korea or of Korean family; members of this age group were the only study participants who had such memories. Vivian, age 56, recalls her Korean mother:

> *I do remember my Korean mother and I know it was hard for her to keep me because I'm obviously not full Korean and it was very evident in Korea, it's not so evident here I don't think, but in Korea I would be just walking down the street and other people would be passing by and I would always expect, or at least be on my guard, thinking that well they are either going to yell at me or hit me or if I'm really fortunate they'll just not see me at all, so I would always try hang my head and hope that they wouldn't see me because—I think and most people have heard and that it—and it's true—that when you're not full Korean and if you're a by-product of a Korean woman getting together with Caucasian men they just won't accept…either you're just a outcast everywhere and…if I was with her yes they would yell at her because they would assume that she was a prostitute and you know I'm thankful that she kept me for so long as she did.*[26]

[25] Hübinette, Tobias. "Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture." Hübinette references the South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare in his compilation of these numbers.
[26] Oral History 31.

David, aged 52, also remembers his Korean mother and the circumstances of her death, which led directly to his being adopted:

> *Ah, well, my mother that had me, she started getting sick and she knew she was going to probably die, and I think it was TB or something…it was some kind of lung disease. …there was an army base right there, so…she ah she just got sick and um they wanted um she wanted someone to take care of me because she did not want me to go to America…She wanted, she wanted me to be with her forever. And I think that perhaps that she, you know, loved my father or whatever and that I was, you know, a part of that so she didn't want me to go. So she tried everything she could to keep me, you know, keep me there and it just didn't work out then when she died …when I was three and a half, so she was 18, 19 years old.*[27]

Though he was young when his mother died, he stayed in Korea for some time longer. When he returned to Korea in 2004, the return to his childhood hometown stirred additional memories for him:

> *But I went back into my village. Then I remembered. I remembered many things. They showed me places where, "Well you lived here and you lived here and you lived here,"…It came together, everything that had been in there all these years and I had never, ever told anybody about it 'Cause my memory pretty much stopped then after World Vision but after I got over there I remember the plane. I remember. I can remember GIs giving us candy bars. I remember a little girl who sat next to me. They dropped eight of us off at SeaTac on that day on Thanksgiving Day and I can remember crying because I can remember wanting to hang on to her… I told people about that and "Oh no no you're crazy you don't remember that." And I was reading, I was reading on one of the sites this Korean niece was looking for this woman…She was born in '52, taken to the orphanage in '57, adopted to the US in '57. You know of course I was born in '53 and taken into the orphanage in '57, adopted in '57, so to me that's proof that that's her. And I remember her sitting next to me.*[28]

[27] Oral History 28.
[28] Oral History 28.

Clear and detailed memories such as this are quite uncommon among the adult Korean adoptees who volunteered life stories for this research. Much more common are stories about Korea and the circumstances of adoptees' relinquishment that the adoptees do not actually recall, but which have been passed to adoptees, presumably by adoptive parents. However, these "memories" of Korea are very important in many adoptees' understandings of their adoption and origin stories. The effects of the poverty and destruction of the Korean War is apparent in the stories of this generation of Korean adoptees, whose adoption stories were filled with reports of scarcity, illness and stigmatization for being mixed-race. Edward, 52, told his pre-adoption story, which consisted mostly of memories of his orphanage placement:

> [I] *was only there* [at the orphanage] *for a couple of months. Few months and I was shipped right back out again. And a lot of the stuff that I have knowledge* [of], *no one knows the accuracy…I was told I was abandoned at birth and my grandma raised me as long as she could. And then she couldn't take care of me anymore. And that's how I ended up at the Holt, uh, the Seoul Sanitarium…When I first came from Korea, I of course remembered it real well. Things faded, but they weren't real happy memories either so because there was never enough food and people weren't happy to see us…because I looked light. I didn't look very Korean, at least not then I didn't…If you look at the mortality rate the babies that were born in '52,'53 that whole era. The mortality rate was pretty high. So no, I am extremely thankful that I am adopted…At that point it was such a stigma to have mixed-race children…and I wanted to really fit in, but I didn't fit into that orphanage. And I, um, was kind of spit at, at being White. You know, I was and that was like a bad word …the Korean children in the orphanage gave me a bad time, because I was lighter…*[29]

Pam, 49, shared her adoption story:

> *I have no way verify this but my understanding is this is the story that I was found in a ditch or something like that in Korea half frozen half*

[29] Oral History 29.

> *well… very cold very hungry … basically half frozen half starved and who knows and I was in…two different orphanages before I was sent World Vision sent from World Visions to an orphanage in Seoul Korea … for Holt, so as soon as I was adopted through Holt International Services Children Services and the date that I was given for my date of birth was one that was given to me since there was no way to determine exactly when I was born.*[30]

Mabel, 53, recalled what she was told about her adoption:

> [T]*he story was, is that my mother was in an affluent family… She had-she was married to a Korean soldier, kind of a high-ranking official. And…I don't know if my mother was raped, or if she fell in love with an American soldier. But, she was reduced to kitchen help. And, so, uh… I think she kept me as long as she could, and it might of been a few years. [This is] what I had been told, [b]y my [adoptive] mother.*[31]

In the first two examples, both adoptees talk about the lack of resources; there being very little food and being "half-frozen." Many adoptees born in the 1950s talked about these kinds of conditions. Some remember it this way, and others were told of these hardships.

In all of the examples above, another remarkable characteristic is the lack of certainty with which any of these adoptees claim they can know of what happened before their adoptions. In the first example, even though the narrator is the adoptee quoted above who has memories of the Korean orphanage/hospital from which he was adopted, he is still unsure of some of the details of his story and has to rely on his adoptive mother, who he seems to doubt when he says, "*I think sometimes my* [adoptive] *mother just assumed that some of this stuff…"* The women in the second and third examples don't claim to have any memories before they were adopted, so their pre-adoption stories were almost certainly relayed to them by adoptive parents, who may or may not have received

[30] Oral History 23.
[31] Oral History 21.

accurate information about their children. The adoptee in the second example was told of the physical jeopardy she was in while living in Korea, and of the several institutions through which she passed, but was not given any information about her Korean family or even her own birthday. In the last example, the adoptee's pre-adoption story is quite detailed in its account of the married Korean mother who either committed adultery with or was raped by an American soldier, but lacks much more easily knowable details such as the amount of time the adoptee spent with her birth mother. In this particular story, the victimization of the Korean mother provides a simple reason for the relinquishment of the child, without suggesting that the mother herself was from a bad family. In such examples, it is easy to wonder if adoptive parents don't create part of their children's stories, replete with drama and intrigue, or if these stories were created for the purpose of helping adoptive parents understand the perilous nature of their children's lives in Korea.

Barry, age 44, who was adopted with a twin brother, told me of his first few days in the United States:

> *Our parents came and met us. Um, we were eight months old but we were only ten pounds each…we were very, very ill, and we were actually rushed to the hospital …And, we were in the hospital for at least six weeks…They* [the adoption agency] *had made our parents sign papers saying that no one was liable if we* [died in transit] *or if we died as soon as we* [arrived]*…my parents wanted to have us as soon as possible…thinking about the situation from afar, the thing was, they were paying people in an orphanage to care for us when of course they wanted to be our parents and care for us…they really wanted us and you know, desperately wanted children…What we were told was that our mother died in childbirth. We weren't told anything about our father. Now, I have since found out, uh, through a friend, who you know, who lives in Korea and helps facilitate uh, birth searches that um…while it's plausible that our birth mother died in childbirth, it's equally plausible that we were given up for adoption.*

> *Uh, in fact she told me a couple of years ago that twins are considered a bad omen.* [32]

It might seem questionable that twin infants with such low body weights and who were obviously in poor health would be deemed fit for overseas travel (which, at the time, was much more arduous then than the 12-hour journey from Seoul to the American Midwest today), but this account is consistent with Holt International practices of the time; the chance of survival for ailing children was estimated to be greater in the United States than in South Korea, so despite the health risks of travel, many children were sent to the United States sick in transit.[33] From the details of this adoptee's story, it is clear that the agency facilitating the adoption was aware of the risks of transporting these very ill infants, because the adoptive parents were asked to sign liability waivers to limit the agency's responsibility in the event that one or both boys died en route or shortly after arrival.

These memories of survivors dovetail with public understandings of adoption from Korea as an act of child salvation and patriotic duty in aiding victims of the war in Korea, as well as the symbolic paternal duty of American servicemen who may very well have had biological fathers of some of these war waifs in their ranks. In her examination of 1950s images of Korean adoptees in the American media, Rebecca Burditt notes depictions of Korean adoptees progressing from "…war waifs, the homeless, the parent-less, often filthy and malnourished children who wandered the streets [to images which] …stressed the emotional connection between orphans and their American father

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[32] Oral History 12

[33] International Social Service, American Branch Papers, Box 10. "Children-Independent Adoption Schemes, Holt, Harry, Vol.I 1955-1958."

figures,"[34] who operated as symbolic fathers, but could possibly literally be the orphans' fathers as well.

For these adoptee war survivors, painful memories of Korea helped to cement the American experience as positive in comparison. Though they may not have specifically desired it, their own memories and understandings of Korea, overlaid with popular perceptions of poor living conditions living in postwar South Korea, helped create the longstanding image of Korean American adoptees as saved children, lucky to have been embraced by a stable, civilized, and prosperous America. This is despite the fact that later and larger generations of Korean adoptees were adopted from far less desperate conditions: by the end of the twentieth century, South Korea became the most prosperous country that still sent large numbers of children abroad for adoption. But by the time Korean adoption had become more common (and, therefore, less newsworthy) public perceptions about Korean adoptees and their role in American culture had been set.

Immigration Policy for Korean Adoptees

In light of the policy of Asian exclusion practiced in United States immigration standards before 1965, significant legal changes had to be enacted to allow Korean children into to the United States for adoption and naturalization. Because of the family-oriented nature of the transnational adoption-related immigration measures, transnational adoption immigration policies of the 1950s and 1960s represented a departure from older, more established anti-Asian immigration policy. For instance, the Refugee-Escapee Act

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[34] Burditt, Rebecca. "Seeing is Believing: 1950s Popular Media Representations of Korean Adoption in the United States." In *Proceedings of the First International Korean Adoption Studies Research Symposium.*

of September 11, 1957 was the first legislation that allowed for the admission of foreign adopted children to the United States as refugees[35] and was extended by the Fair Share Refugee Act of July 14, 1960 to June 30, 1961.[36] This legislation was enacted specifically to allow Korean adoption to the United States, as Korea was the only country sending significant numbers of children to the United States through adoption during this period. After the June 30, 1961 expiration of the Refugee Act, several Korean adoptees were adopted through individual special acts of U.S. Congress until the Immigration and Nationality Act of September 26, 1961 passed, amending the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 to make permanent provisions for foreign adoptees to be admitted on nonquota immigrant visas.[37] These changes in immigration policy served the mission of engaging the American public in the Cold War through sentimental acts: Korean adoption was sold to American women as a call of duty to adopt the orphans of the Korean War,[38] and were designed to serve adoptive parents and prospective adoptive parents involved in child-rescue-through-adoption efforts. American adoptive parents were (and still are), for the most part, White, native-born American citizens whose desire to adopt from Korea operated outside Asian exclusion discourses; accordingly, the race and national origin of the adoptee immigrant was all but erased—both in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of society as White American parents assimilated their adopted Korean children. The social naturalization that the first generation of Korean adoptees experienced in the highly assimilative 1950s and 1960s helped ensure their social and legal separation from other

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[35]"Legislation from 1941-1960." U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.
[36] "Legislation from 1961-1980." U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.
[37] *Ibid.*
[38] Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*.

groups of immigrants, especially in light of the fact that other groups of Asian immigrants were not allowed entry into the United States in significant numbers until the legislative reform of national immigration policy in 1965.

Changes in immigration policy that created exceptions for Asian immigration in the case of adoption made it possible for Korean adoptive families to exist, and the Korean adoptees from this generation with whom I spoke experienced these policy changes as important parts of their adoption stories.

One of the innovations in Korean adoption was the regular use of adoption by proxy, a technique pioneered in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War period to facilitate the adoption of children from Greece and Japan.[39] Adoption by proxy allowed Harry Holt to bypass many of the economic and logistical barriers to adoption for adoptive parents deemed suitable by his organization, often on the basis the families' evangelical Christian beliefs. In proxy adoption, an agent of the adoption agency becomes a child's legal guardian in Korea; following transport to the United States, the child is then re-adopted from the proxy agent by the adoptive parents. Proxy adoption became controversial because child welfare social workers took issue with the lack of child welfare protocols in some proxy adoption schemes, including Holt's.[40] Holt was compelled to remove as many Korean children to American families as possible, and worked closely with his legislators in his home state of Oregon to encourage the passage of federal immigration legislation that would admit Korean adoptees, including those

[39] "Proxy Adoptions." The Adoption History Project.
[40] Lyslo, Arnold. "A Few Impressions on Meeting the Harry Holt Plane, the "Flying Tiger," Which Arrived in Portland, Oregon, December 27, 1958."

adopted by proxy.[41] Among the opponents of the measure was, International Social Service, an international social and family welfare and aid organization. International Social Service first formally opposed the practice of proxy adoption in 1954, having filed and documented several cases of adoption by proxy in which the adoption failed because adoptive parents rejected their Korean children after adoptive placement.[42] However, because an agency staff member completes the legal adoption process in Korea, the introduction of proxy adoption made it possible for adoptive parents of Korean adoptees to adopt without having to travel to Korea, and often without even leaving their home states. The costs and inconvenience of travel outside the country no longer had to be barriers to adoption of Korean children by Americans.

Mabel, one of the adoptee participants in this project, believes she and her sister, both adopted in 1956, were the first to come by proxy:

> *My sister and I were the first that came from Seoul Korea Orphanage… an orphanage. And we were the first children that came adopted by proxy. Senator Wayne Morris was the… senator then of Oregon. And he helped pass legislation to, um, for us to be adopted by proxy. We came-- we were quite newsworthy because we came after the Holts…So we, um, got a lotta news attention and things about that.*[43]

For many, the special legislation that was necessary to facilitate their adoptions made them feel special and privileged because of the high contact they (through their adoptive parents) had with their U.S. legislators, as if laws were being enacted just for them—which, in many ways, they were.

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[41] International Social Service, American Branch Papers, Box 10, Children—Independent Adoption Schemes, Holt, Harry, vol. I 1955-1958."
[42] International Social Service, American Branch Papers, Box 10, Folder: "Proxy Adoptions."
[43] Oral History 21.

As Korean nationals, Korean adoptees were effectively barred from obtaining permanent residence visas. Because Korean adoption initially began as a response to the child welfare problems caused by the Korean War, those adopted before 1957 were able to enter the United States as refugees. When the refugee legislation expired in 1957, adoptees slated for travel to the U.S. for most of that year had no legal way to immigrate into the United States. Therefore some of the adoptees in this age group had to be individually admitted into the United States by special acts of the United States Congress. Frances, age 47, talked about the legal acrobatics that her parents and their U.S. Senators went through in order to adopt her from Korea. Her family had kept all the paperwork that they had from the time of her adoption and passed these documents to this adoptee, who had also saved them. Unlike the adoption files of transnational adoptees today, her adoption files also contained numerous legislative documents concerning her travel and admission to the United States. Like many other prospective adoptive parents of Korean children at the time, Frances's parents had asked their U.S. Senators to sponsor legislation that would allow the infant they wanted to adopt from Korea into the U.S. She remarks:

> *…we had two Democratic … senators and* [they] *put together a bill that specifically would allow me only to come to the United States because I was dying…So here's the bill…see this was all because at that time everything was all through proxy... all the bills were written so it was enabling the parents to adopt the child via proxy.*[44]

While the bill that would have allowed Frances and only Frances into the country was being ratified, new legislation according non-quota immigrant visa status to foreign

[44] Oral History 10.

orphans was also being drafted. This temporary measure allowed Korean adoptees to bypass prohibitions against Asian immigrant entry into the United States by permitting Korean orphans under age 14 to be admitted as refugees. In the end, Frances was among the first to be adopted under the new legislation, passed in 1957, making the bill for her singular entry obsolete. Referring to additional legislative documentation, she continues:

> [On] *September 11th*, [1957] *that is the day Eisenhower signed it during the closing days of this session of Congress* [reading from a letter from her U.S. Senator] … *"Among other things this bill provides for the issuance of special non-quota immigrant visas to certain eligible alien orphans under 14 years of age who are adopted by United States citizens or who are coming to the United States to be adopted. The President approves this bill to date, consequently the private legislation that I introduced for* [name of adoptive parent's] *daughter will no longer be necessary. They will be able to bring her into the United States under the provisions of the new law as outlined in the above paragraph. I am happy that I was able to co-sponsor and co-support this legislation and make it possible to bring* [the adoptee, referred to by her American first and middle name] *into this country. With all good wishes, sincerely, Henry M. Jackson, U.S.S." I was on the first plane under the new legislation … at the time that they were waiting to get Eisenhower to sign that legislation they had over 250 orphans waiting to go and the majority of those were already assigned they were just waiting… for…when Eisenhower signed it. It was only good for two years so they had to redo all of the letter writing for 59 and do it again for 61; every two years they had to constantly send out all of these newsletters out to parents to write letters to your congressmen and get those bills passed again. So it was a huge undertaking, it was like a grassroots process … every two years to get the legislation to build to the top of the heap to get it signed so more babies could come through.* [45]

This adoptee notes that the legislation allowed her entry into the United States as an "eligible alien orphan," in 1957, but that groups of prospective adoptive parents had to continue lobbying efforts on a biennial basis in order to extend this visa status for Korean adoptees. The 1957 legislation replaced provisions in the Refugee Relief Act of 1953,

[45] *Ibid.*

which had allowed orphan children visas as refugees, but was not permanent. After three successful renewals of the 1957 law (and three grassroots efforts on the part of American adoptive parents and adoption agencies), the Orphan Eligibility Clause of the Immigration and Nationality Act was made permanent in 1961, effectively guaranteeing visas for transnational adoptees to enter the United States in anticipation of their adoption by American adoptive parents. It is notable that this legislation was passed four years before the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which liberalized American immigration law and effectively lifted the policy of exclusion that had barred most Asians from legally entering the United States. Asian exclusion had been in effect since 1882 for Chinese, 1907-08 for Japanese, and for most other Asians since 1924.

I found it notable that none of the adoptees with whom I spoke indicated that these legal and immigration difficulties had given their adoptive parents pause in the existence of such policies could have indicated just how isolated their children might be in a country where Asians had been deemed inadmissible for so long. Instead, they often talked about the help their parents had requested and received from their U.S. legislators, to whom they appealed in entirely sentimental terms in order to obtain custody of children they had never met. Barry, age 44, talked about legal difficulties in his adoption in 1961 that must have concerned his immigrant status. He remarks:

> *… I should also mention my…mother…told me that it had become so difficult that they needed…our, their congressman to help them facilitate the adoption. And even though my mother was a Republican … she always worked for the re-election of our congressman who helped the adoption…*[46]

[46] Oral History 12.

For others, issues of immigration were more easily understandable than issues of naturalization. While Korean adoptees after 1961 have had fairly easy access to visas, until 2000, all foreign-born adoptees admitted prior to the year 2000 had to be naturalized in order to become U.S. citizens. The naturalization process, if completed before age 18, was fairly simple—but not all were naturalized, or even knew that this was required. Candace, age 41, explains:

> *They* [her adoptive parents] *thought that, um, I would become American citizen because of my dad, being American. …My mom* [was] *Korean, yeah. But my dad was a U.S. serviceman. My* [adoptive] *parents thought because my dad was an American, that I would be considered an American. But I wasn't. And so when I was ten, they found this out.*[47]

This confusion is especially understandable because the adoptee herself is of mixed race, and her family had been told that her biological father was a member of the American military. Because under many circumstances American citizenship can be conferred through either parent, it makes sense that this adoptee's adoptive parents would think that their half-White (and therefore half-American) daughter should not have to apply for naturalization. However, the total legal break with biological family and the secrecy or uncertainty surrounding the identity of biological parents may have delegitimized this adoptive family's claim to automatic citizenship for their Korean daughter, and she had to be naturalized.

[47] Oral History 41.

Eligible Alien Orphan

I have only heard the term "eligible alien orphan," as a complete term used by Korean adoptees in reference to how American government entities referred to them. Though the three word term is not currently in use, the three individual words clearly come from language used by U.S. immigration agencies as they officially name Korean American adoptees in the immigration process. Today, prospective adoptive parents can apply for immigration visas for foreign-born adoptees as aliens, through USCIS Form I-600, "Petition to Classify Orphan as an Immediate Relative" or through Form I-130, "Petition for an Alien Relative." This term also resonates with many adoptees in their common feeling of alienation from both American and Korean societies.[48] The word "eligible" appears throughout USCIS immigration forms where it functions as a gatekeeper, describing who may be admitted to the United States, and, by process of elimination, who may not. So while the term "eligible alien orphan," perhaps deemed too clinical or insensitive to American adoptive parents to remain in common use by the USCIS, I use it to describe the way early Korean adoptees understand how they are/were viewed by the American government. This term describes child immigrants selected to come to the United States for permanent residence as part of American adoptive families. In immigration terms, the adjective "eligible" modifies (linguistically and legally) the noun "alien," a foreign person who might not otherwise be appropriate for inclusion in the nation, followed by the noun "orphan," which marks the reason this particular alien is eligible for entrance into the United States. The "orphan" status applied to adoptees

[48] See also a discussion of the term "alien" used in self-reference among Korean adoptees in Eleana Kim's "Remembering Loss: The Cultural Politics of Overseas Adoption from South Korea."

before their immigration makes them eligible for both adoption and American citizenship.

The popular understanding of the orphan as a child with no living parents has prevailed, even though most Korean adoptees who have entered the United States as "eligible alien orphans" have at least one living biological parent. The word "orphan" also connotes an object of pity, and a subject for charity and salvation, and so meshes well with popular and political understandings of Korean adoptees as international Cold War charity projects.

Within Korean adoptee communities, there is considerable discussion of the term "orphan" as adoptees reflect about their own legal, social, or psychological status as orphans: children whose one-time orphan status has been the reason for the largest life change that most adoptees can expect to experience. Caleb, aged 48, has done extensive networking with other Korean adoptees and discusses the significance of the term "orphan." For him, the popular understanding of an orphan as a person with no living parents is accurate for some adoptees, especially older adoptees who were adopted because they lost parents as a result of the devastation of the Korean war and the hardships that followed:

> *The orphan phrase was there because the adoptees from the Korea War were for the most part orphans. And orphans typically means without parents. Nowadays, that's not true and even from back then a lot of the adoptees were thought to have been orphans because they were displaced from their families and if they couldn't find a family member relatively quickly, then the child was considered to be an orphan without parents…I think really calling us "orphans" any more isn't really accurate. Because so many have* [living Korean] *parents..whether they've met them or not doesn't necessarily matter…* [As far as being called "war orphan,"] *[t]hat's what everyone said at the beginning and that's what I've felt because they've never been able to find a birth relative. They say that most*

> *likely that's what happened. She* [his Korean mother] *hadn't died when she gave me up, but she may have been dying or died shortly afterwards. But since I've got a birth certificate and her name, I've never considered myself an orphan because I was placed by a parent. My sister was abandoned, somebody had to have abandoned her, but she may have been abandoned by someone else. Maybe the chance of her being an orphan is greater than me being an orphan. But some adoptees I've met who were 10, 12, 14 years old, who knew their parents, and were placed because of economic reasons and they know that they're not orphans because they have since found their birth families.* [In the Korean language], *I've heard that translated it means non-person or something? Way back when, Molly or Bertha Holt had mentioned something, Koreans didn't have a very good word for orphan but if you had no parents you were considered a non-person; that's how they explained it to me.*[49]

Caleb identifies several different definitions of an "orphan": a person with no living parents; a person who was separated from parents and was unable to find them again; a person who was adopted and never found any Korean family; and, a person who is considered a non-person in Korean society. He also specifies who he considers *not* to be an orphan, including those who do have living Korean family, or those who, like himself, were placed for adoption by known Korean parents. While the definition of the Korean adoptee orphan is more clear-cut in a legal sense (a person legally relinquished by parents or other legal guardian and therefore available for adoption), for adoptees, the predominant popular understanding of the orphan as a child with no living parents has much more tragic and sympathetic connotations. So the use of the term "orphan" sometimes elicits more complicated responses from adoptees like Caleb. For this adoptee, historical location within or outside the context of the Korean War and its aftermath, as well as connections maintained or lost to Korean birth family, both contribute to the meaning of the term "orphan" when applied to Korean adoptees. In

[49] Oral History 27.

addition, Caleb notes the social location of the orphan in Korean society. His understanding is that the Korean word for "orphan" is synonymous with "non-person," underlining the importance of family lineage in Korea. Caleb's statements reflect an explanation commonly offered to adoptees as evidence that it is better for Korean orphans to be adopted abroad than domestically in Korea. This adoptee recalls that his understanding of the Korean term for orphan was received from Molly or Bertha Holt—biological daughter and wife, respectively, of Harry Holt, who initiated the institutionalization of Korean adoption after the Korean War and founded Holt International, the adoption agency which has placed more Korean adoptees in the United States than any other.

Celebrity Adoptees: Salvation and Isolation in the 1950s

The arrival of the first Korean adoptees in the United States was a newsworthy event. This is partly because the practice of Korean adoption was so new, and the families formed from Korean adoption did not look like typical American biological families. Many adoptees who were born and adopted in the 1950s and 1960s were written about in local newspapers and some were even featured in national publications; much of the news coverage had an unmistakably promotional quality. These were usually congratulatory human interest stories marveling over this new and unusual method of family formation.

Between 1951 and 1956, *Life Magazine* published coverage of Kang Koo Ri, a Korean War orphan dubbed "The Little Boy who Wouldn't Smile," who lived in a U.S.-sponsored orphanage before being adopted in the United States in 1956. Rebecca Burditt

traces *Life*'s treatment of Kang through follow up articles over five years as "…completely transformed from the solemn, weak and unhappy child he once was," [50] into "…the 'new' Kang…a lively and healthy subject,"[51] This transformation was attributed by *Life* to the fortunate trajectory of American humanitarian intervention followed by American family involvement, the ultimate form of humanitarian aid to less fortunate children.

Eleana Kim also notes the proliferation of stories about Korean adoption in newspapers, magazines, books and film during the 1950s. She cites the story of Lieutenant Colonel Dean Hess who orchestrated the evacuation of 1,000 children from Seoul in 1950, Hess's story was popularized through his 1956 memoir which was adapted into the feature film *Battle Hymn* (1956).[52] Kim also notes the many stories of American GIs serving in South Korea "adopting" Korean waifs as platoon "mascots," who were beloved and protected by the soldiers.[53] She also describes the adoptive family drama depicted in the pages of *McCall's* women's magazine, in which a reader attempted to adopt a child she saw in a 1953 *McCall's* article featuring Korean orphans by circling the child she wanted and making her request directly to South Korean president Syngman Rhee in a letter with the magazine clipping enclosed.[54]

Many of those adopted in the first generation talked about news coverage of Korean adoption as a factor in their parents' decision to adopt from Korea. Frances, age

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[50] Burditt, Rebecca. "Seeing is Believing: 1950s Popular Media Representations of Korean Adoption in the United States."
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] Kim, Eleana. "Remembering Loss: The Cultural Politics of Overseas Adoption from South Korea," 65.
[53] *Ibid,* 66.
[54] *Ibid.*

47, had kept clippings of the newspaper articles about her and the other adoptees who flew to the United States on the same plane in 1957. During her oral history, she read to me from these clippings:

> *…we were written up in the Bellingham Herald and the Linden Tribune which were local papers now um this is the Seattle Times, …this is the Seattle one and this is in October 31st… and what happened was…there were 80 children on the plane from Korea and they stopped first in Portland and they dropped people off here and then they went to Seattle and dropped of the rest. So even though it says October 31st it's still the first shipment of 80 in 1957 but it dropped off in both places…So there's that's from the Seattle Times. So the- the beginning of being able to have the babies transported was a big story so this is a picture of us. That's my dad…and my mom Fran..and that's me and my sister…*[55]

Olga experienced the news coverage as evidence of her own celebrity and popularity in her small Pacific Northwest hometown:

> *… I was a celebrity in my own home town… it was a little town. You know a thousand people and I was a Holt adoptee! And I was a celebrity! I was in the, my dad was a plywood worker and I was in the plywood newsletter, I was in the hometown paper, I was everywhere! You know? and I won a contest down at the little Sheridan drugstore and I won an E-Z Bake Oven! Because they gave points and every time you bought something…for every point you bought, you could put somebody's name down, to have those points go to. And because I was* [a local citizen's] *Korean adopted daughter, they all knew me, and I got to get the points! So I won! And everybody knew me. So when I was little before I started school, I was everybody's favorite pet, because I was different and I was popular and I was just the best thing that ever happened since sliced bread, because I was an adopted Holt kid.*[56]

For Olga and Frances, both first generation Korean adoptees, news coverage of their arrival and embrace by American families plays dual subject and object roles; as an "adoptee celebrity" celebratory and congratulatory news stories served as instruction to

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[55] Oral History 10.
[56] Oral History 24.

general readers on how to respond to this triumph of American humanitarian-achievement-through-adoption over Cold War adversaries, but the news coverage clearly also instructed adoptive families and adoptees themselves on how to understand their adoption stories. However, the "celebrity" of being a Korean child who had come to be adopted in the United States was also sometimes interspersed with more troubling signifiers relating to the perceived spiritual and earthly salvation of Korean "orphans" from post-war Korea. Rachel recalled her mother's classification of her adoption as a "missionary project:"

> *I had always grown up with my mom saying, "Y'know you were our little missionary project." And I, y'know, I'd always known I was adopted. That was never a big deal and, um when you're brought up, raised with your pare… your mother always saying, "You're a missionary project; that's what we did for the Lord." And that kind of stuff… it never occurred to me that there was anything different about that. But when I told that to my second husband he said, "I can't believe that she would say something like that." Well, it seems to me that, and I don't get what the big deal is, either, because I've always heard it.*[57]

THE PRICE OF ASSIMILATIVE SALVATION

Among adoptees who came in the 1950s, much more than among younger generations of Korean American adoptees, the understanding that they were "saved" is almost ubiquitous. This salvation was multiply configured as having been saved from the horrors of post-war Korea, from the disadvantage of having been born poor, biracial, or disabled, or from just having been born Korean, in a country imagined to be far less advanced than the United States. However, salvation from all these dangers and ills has a price, and in 1950s and 1960s America, that price included leaving behind Korea and

[57] Oral History 26.

things Korean in order to assimilate into American society and culture. Olga put her understanding of her salvation from Korea into the context of her American life and upbringing by downplaying the possible but unknown circumstances of her adoption. Instead, she talked about her efforts to refocus those White and Korean American acquaintances who badger her with questions and assumptions about her adoption on the essential sameness of all human beings:

> *Why was I one of the ones that was saved? But you also wonder too, you know people say "Well are you full-blooded Korean, or what?" And I said "I don't know" you know, I, I have friends who are, who came over and they were older, or I've had, umm, war brides and they look at me and she says "You look really full Korean" and, umm, I said "Hmm, well whatever, that's kind of nice." Or I'll tell people, "You know I'm probably the daughter of a hooker."* [Laughter] *They go "Oh really?" and I thought you know or I'm the daughter of a rape or I'm the daughter of two very poor Korean people."* [People ask] *"Doesn't it bother you?" and I said "Why? You know we're all sinners, what difference does it make, you know? And I'm just here, they* [her Korean family] *couldn't take care of me…"*[58]

Implicit in Olga's explanation of her common identity with others, as she wonders aloud what difference all the speculations about her personal history makes, is an acknowledgment of her lack of knowledge about her past, her parentage, even her racial heritage. For Olga, as for many adoptees, even if these details about her past do not matter to her. Though she herself admits that she does not know the circumstances that led to her adoption, her speculations that her mother was a prostitute, a rape victim, or very poor closely parallel common American explanations of the circumstances of Korean adoption. While a casual listener might respond with shock, Olga has already developed a response: "We're all sinners. What difference does it make…?" If these

[58] Oral History 24.

doubts about her parentage have been internalized, she has also learned how to deflect the shocked responses of how having such assumptions made about you must feel.

Through these kinds denials of the importance of the past, some of the adoptees in the project isolated themselves, even from other adoptees. David, age 52, tells of his response to having met a fellow Korean adoptee in high school:

> *And I had no idea. Probably the last contact I had with her was when I was a junior in high school and I still had no idea she was a Korean adoptee. No, I thought she was just some kind of Asian. (Laughs) It was like you know oh you didn't tell people about it. so it was my secret and it was back in those days you don't tell anybody about it. And I kind of lost contact with her.* [59]

Even though on some level David might have suspected that the woman he met as a junior in high school was also a Korean adoptee (enough that he was able to figure it out later in life) at the time, he was so secretive about his identity as an adoptee, that he denied the possibility that other Asian Americans he encountered could also be Korean adoptees.

Mabel, 53, talks about a different kind of not fitting in, where she recalls being ostracized by schoolmates, and notes that, by contrast, she feels accepted by Korean adoptees:

> *… in our immediate social settings, in school and in our neighborhoods and things, kids were just like mean…it was so confusing, I didn't fit in, I wasn't picked or chosen for groups or sports or anything, I was really athletic, but I was picked last and everything. I was so cute and lovable! It was very confusing…The one thing though, without a doubt: when I am around other Korean adoptees, whether they are all Korean, or mixed [race], I don't have to tell my story, I feel like I so fit in.* [60]

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[59] Oral History 28.
[60] Oral history 21.

This harsh treatment by (presumably White) peers seemed to be connected to the kind and understanding treatment she experienced with fellow Korean adoptees. Sally, age 45, describes a transition from wanting very badly to fit into mainstram (presumably White) America as a younger person growing up in the 1960s and 1970s to becoming more interested in her Korean and Asian heritage when she gave birth to a son as an adult:

> *… I think of times segueing to more kind of my identity in being Korean-American, being an adoptee and I think about my childhood at the time growing up in a very small town and being Korean, being Asian, being different. But at the time, all the time I wanted to do was fit in. I just wanted to be like everyone else and, you know, even to this day, when people ask, well, what are you and I say well I'm American, and then I say well, I'm Korean-American. But I never just say, I'm Korean. Or I don't say I'm a Korean adoptee. I just generally say I'm an American or Korean-American. But growing up, never really…thinking of myself as Korean or Asian or as an adoptee, but thinking of myself as being American…. And it wasn't until I had my first son when I was 29 that I started to think about my, um heritage…*[61]

Like Sally, several of the Korean adoptees who participated in this project used changes in self-description, contrasts in how they once described themselves to others and how they describe themselves now, to talk about their changing identities as Korean adoptees. Linda, age 44 remarked:

> *I've always considered myself—believe it or not—Korean. When people ask me on the street, you know, "Oh, what are you?" Because I've gotten that a lot. You know, I say, "I'm Korean." Um, I never say, "Well I'm Korean American." I never say, "I'm American," … I just, I just always say, "I'm Korean."…I still, I still say that because that's as much as I know. When I came, I was born in Korea… I believe that my mother was Korean, and that my father was, you know, uh, Caucasian. I'm, I'm not*

[61] Oral History 25.

> *sure, maybe he was any American Caucasian. But because I don't have any other, um, you know identifying information I just say "I'm Korean." And, you know it's kind of, it's kind of, um, it's kind of like, it's, it's too much to explain the whole story to people. …So um, I think people who know what their ethnicity is, are extremely fortunate, you know? It's not a question for them, and as difficult as it is to not know who your parents are, at least you know…who your ancestors were.*[62]

While younger adoptees often expressed how offensive they found it to be asked by strangers, "What are you?" Linda always just answers the questions, and always the same way. She uses her self-description as "Korean" as a way to claim the place of her birth, even though she believes she is biracial and thinks her birth father was White and probably American. Saying she is Korean is the only bit of factual information she feels she can claim about her identity, since so much information about her past has been lost to her, and she remarks that an identifying characteristic that most people can take for granted—ethnicity—is something she has had to guess at. It is as if the act of self-identifying as Korean is a way for her to mark the one thing that she does know about her past: that she was born in Korea. When she says that she considers people who know their ethnicity to be fortunate, she is also touching on another important fact of life for adoptees: even the most basic and important information about adoptees' identities is often lost in the adoption transaction.

Sally, age 45, talks about the significance of a change in her self-description:

> *I view myself as being an American, Korean American, whereas when I was younger, looking at myself as White. Now dubbing myself as Asian and having a real sense of pride now about being Asian, whereas I didn't when I was younger. And, and just visually, like my office, is all this kind of Asian theme and Asian, um part, kind of flavor to it. My home… is decorated, or accessorized or whatever, furnished with a lot of an Asian*

[62] Oral History 55.

> *theme or flavor… I wear a lot of…I have a lot of Asian apparel that would be viewed as probably traditional Asian wear.*[63]

For Sally, a change from self-description as White to Asian or Korean American signifies her pride in a Korean heritage that has become important to her as she has gotten older. Visual cues of her personal identity, like her choice of clothing and home decoration, have become another way for her to embrace her Asian identity. But this process took time, as she had to unlearn the assimilative norms of her youth, when she was expected to consider herself White. Barry, age 44, talked about feeling "culturally American":

> *Certainly the United States has been where I've lived all my life; I am culturally American. The country has many faults but it also is a wonderful place… from the standpoint of multiculturalism…growing up as we have, as adoptees in this country, they have to somehow find their identity here, I think, and be at peace with it, and I'm very much at peace with it. So yes, I'm very much an American. For many years I was comfortable saying I was Asian-American but not Korean-American. I've talked to other adoptees who have said this too, but growing up we used to call ourselves "fake Koreans"…and I felt, somehow, I was inauthentic. So now I realize, and especially, getting to know many Korean-Americans, who are not adoptees but grew up second generation or even third generation now and didn't have a very deep experience with Korean culture or interaction with it, they feel…not completely authentic either.*[64]

Though Barry does not discuss his changing identity in terms of assimilation, he does indicate that his understanding of what a Korean American identity had deepened after he became an adult. He discusses his understanding of his identity as an American, and how he does not feel that he fits into the category "Korean American," because as an adoptee growing up in a White American family he did not feel he could claim a Korean identity. It was through his contact with non-adopted Korean Americans as an adult that he came

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[63] Oral History 25.
[64] Oral History 12.

to understand that the experience he had imagined as "authentic Korean American" with "deep experience with Korean culture or interaction with it" might not exist for many Korean Americans, as he had once believed. So, instead of feeling fraudulent in claiming a Korean identity for himself, he now sees flaws in the taxonomy of "fake" and "real" Koreans. For all of the adoptees above, the understanding of what it means to have a visibly Korean body was important, especially in light of the assimilative pressures they must have faced growing up in the 1950s and 1960s.

Edward, below, told a story of how he discouraged his son from identifying as Korean, even though he has passed his own Korean heritage on to his son.

> *[M]y oldest son…when he was filling out his college app, I was just kinda looking over his shoulder and he was going to be a freshman. And I see that for nationality, he checked Korean. And I said, "What's with that?" He said, "Well I figured I'm more Korean and so that's why I checked." I said "Do you really identify with being Korean?" "Oh absolutely." And I said "Well, I know, I hate to burst your bubble, but you actually have more Irish in you, than you do Korean in you."* [65]

While at first glance it might appear that this adoptee denies the importance of his own Korean heritage and therefore was troubled by his son's interest in having a Korean identity, I suggest instead that this story can be understood as a father's attempt to give the benefit of his own experience to his son. Assimilation into the general American populace was an important survival skill for this generation of Korean adoptees. Some were able assimilate physically because they were biracial, but most were successful in assimilating culturally. Assimilation was expected of them by many of their families and by the communities in which they lived, and it reassured a Cold-War-weary American

65 Oral History 29.

public that humanitarian and Christian American principles could help win the Cold War, and save children to boot.

NAVIGATING RACIST MID-CENTURY AMERICA, ALONE

One of the social interactions almost all of the Korean adoptee participants in the oral history project had to endure was that of racialization (meaning either overt racist experiences or more subtle forms of racism). In addition to having grown up as racially isolated individuals (though some did have siblings who are also Korean adoptees), those who were adopted earliest, in the 1950s and 1960s, were also social curiosities. In these early Korean adoptions, the racial mismatch with other family members in contrast to the adoptees' total Americanization (linguistically and culturally) often led to questioning by people outside the family. In addition, social mores about racial difference allowed for more direct questioning for racial explanations around adoptees' circumstances, as well as for much more overtly racist remarks and teasing. Nadine, age 52, was initially put into Chinese American preschool because her parents thought it would help her socially and emotionally if she was around other Asian children. However, when she went to regular grade school, White children teased her viciously.

> *…when I started school I'd fit in at the Chinese-American nursery school it was in downtown Portland. I fit in there and I was happy there. I used to have a good time with the kids there. But when I got into grade school it was when I was got into second and third grade this one kid used to follow me home with two three kids three boys. They'd call me ching chong chinamo, um, chink, slant eyes, um they'd call me jap… Tokyo Rose, uh that was a compliment. She had a lot to do with the Japanese war….You know, that to me was a compliment because she was Asian.*[66]

[66] Oral History 22.

Despite having been in a mostly Asian American preschool, Nadine was so harassed that she began to construe some of the name calling she endured as positive; even though the name "Tokyo Rose" was certainly intended as a slur (referring to the Asian, English-speaking female host of a Japanese propaganda program during World War II), Nadine considered this name to be a compliment, because at least her attackers were correctly associating her with Asian women, collectively known as "Tokyo Rose" during the war. While this subversion of the cruel intent behind this name calling might have been a good coping tactic, it also underlines the racial isolation Nadine experienced because she did not understand the full meaning behind the name other children called her.

David related similar experiences growing up in a predominantly White school:

> *They'd corner me and say "We're going to send you back to where you came from!" which kind of terrified me…couple of them were saying "Your mother was nothing but a whore," or whatever and I was defending that because I still had really good memories of my mother and it just really, really bothered me, but I learned to keep my mouth shut. You know, going to school, it was the same for so many of us, …'Cause I looked more Korean when I was younger …I can remember being chased home, you know. And called any kind of Asian ethnic name that there is…and I told my parents about it once. And they said,… "Don't worry about it, whatever, they didn't mean it,"…so I never told them again and I just never told anyone about it ever again. And I just…you know just kind of accept hat's the way it's going to be. And I just kind of wanted to fit in I wanted to have friends I wanted people to like me. So it was just growing up I guess it was late fifties and then into the sixties…it's kinda hard to think back on that.*[67]

[67] Oral History 28.

Even though David experienced some racial teasing that became quite violent, when he reported it to his White parents, their responses further reinforced the racism this adoptee told them about because they minimized his experience and went so far as to take the side of his assailants, making the excuse, "They didn't mean it," in their defense. After hearing this response, David quickly learned to never tell his parents or anyone else about racial incidents or attacks. Instead, he learned to accept that he would have to endure this kind of harassment alone. Today, he describes these conditions as a part of growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. This parental denial of racial issues and problems is also shared in the example below, recounted by an Candice, age 44:

> *So it's, my family, too, whenever I would try to bring up racial issues that I was having problems in the family or outside the family,* [it] *was stopped. And if I talked about* [for instance], *in an email that I wrote my sister…she wrote me an email back, saying, "It must be really hard, but we saved you and, you know, you should be, in a way, grateful that we did this," and all this stuff. So, I can't really talk to my family about it. They really don't understand, they think that I should just be able to get over it.*[68]

In this example, the adoptive family also does not support Candice when she tells them of her experiences of racialization. Specifically, while not denying the truth of the adoptee's claims of racial harassment, the sister shuts Candace down instead by claiming that the adoptee does not have the right to complain about these experiences because to do so would signify the adoptee's ingratitude for having been adopted into the family in the first place. Paradoxically, even though the idea that adoption constitutes salvation for Korean adoptees is specifically configured on racial difference between family and adoptee (insofar as the adoption of a racially and socially subordinate Korean adoptee

[68] Oral History 41.

into the superior world of the White adoptive family is an act of generosity for the family and a lucky boon for the adoptee), any claim of racial mistreatment by the adoptee is carefully dismissed. The racial difference between Korean adoptee and White family can only be used to benefit the family, not as a grievance for the adoptee.

David's athletic prowess enabled him to fit in at school, but it also created other problems for him. In this example, the adoptee internalized the social pressure to avoid acknowledging the racial difference between himself and his parents by eventually making sure no one ever saw him with his parents, which also left him emotionally isolated with the unspoken issues around his race and identity; he had many stories about how emotionally raw he was around racial incidences, such as the ones below:

> [T]*hinking back…my parents never, never watched me wrestle or play football, they might have watched me play baseball. And then it got to be as I got older I didn't want them to come to any games because they would see White parents with me and then they would know that there as something wrong. You know and it was like "Well what are you?"… And I would get so tired of that. What are you. I* [never answered that.]. *Naw. I turned around and cried. You know, I'd run. Even back in high school I can remember this time this cheerleader…I was getting into my locker, and she came up behind me and I thought I thought she was going to be nice and she you know, she mocking me kind of saying some kind of Asian language you know like they do and I was so frozen that I couldn't believe that you know I was seventeen years old and this was still happening to me so I think I set the lock and I just took off and ran away.* [Laughs.] *So I never really dealt with it very well at all.*[69]

When I asked him, "So you never told anybody that you were adopted?" he replied,

> *No…they couldn't figure it out …You know, then of course, I was rebelling … I played so many sports and I was so good at it but it got to be … tough*

[69] Oral History 28.

> *and I found out it was a lot easier to take drugs than play sports because … I was hurt and it was all just trying to kill my pain.* [70]

In the examples above, community and/or parental denials about the difficulty of racial difference was painful for adoptees, to varying degrees. This response to racial difference by White family and community was reported by many Korean adoptees of this first generation, as well as by members of younger generations.

Dating was another experience that brought race and racial identity to the fore for many first generation Korean adoptees. Sally had very different experiences when she was in high school than when she was in college:

> *So when I grew up, and all the way through high school, first I wasn't allowed to date until I was 16, I think it was. And then I was all excited that I was 16, I was gonna have all these, these dates, well it never materialized…I did feel it was race related. Yeah , especially in a town that was predominantly White, and wasn't this... and not that I felt discriminated against, but just again, the…visual, or the interest of other White guys, their interest just of wanting to date, you know, people that look like them I guess, er, that, that type of thing. So what was interesting was that when I went to college …that was also kind of a, whoaaaa, there was…all this kind of attention from men.* [It was] *1977. Fall of 1977. So that was like, whoaaa, gosh, and then, and, and that was new and just managing all of that and trying to figure out what that meant and.... adjust to that was...* [71]

Sally expected to have dating options once her parents allowed her to date, but no one ended up showing any interest, which she eventually understood as reluctance among White boys in her high school to date a Korean girl. However, when she went off to college in 1977, she was surprised to learn once she arrived that there was a total reversal of her high school experiences: many White men were interested in dating her. David

[70] Oral History 28.
[71] Oral History 25.

described similar experiences of being shunned by White girls and harassed by White boys in high school when during his teen years:

> *I just felt like nobody wanted to date me. Because I wasn't normal…I think* [some had interest], *but I was stupid. I couldn't see it. I was just afraid. Just so, just so afraid.* [Once] *there was a group of White boys going down the hall. I think I was looking at some girls and they came up to me and said… "Don't be looking at White girls ever again." So I just kind of put my head down and kind of like, kind of walked away. And you know, yeah, I was really afraid. But the equalizer was to get on the sports field and the football field and whatever and you know then I could kick their ass 'cause I as a lot thicker and stronger and I was in good shape. It was the only way. I was not a violent person at all. I did not start at fight, ever. They'd always want to start fights with me. Which happened quite a bit.* [Laughs.] *Because I was different.*[72]

With all the social pressure to minimize and deny their own experiences of racial difference, it is not surprising that many adoptees in this generation ended up internalizing their responses to the active, but out of bounds, racialized social world around them. Sally spoke about her thoughts on "nature versus nurture," perhaps a coded way to talk about race; she saw some characteristics as inborn and perhaps racially determined, while believing that others are learned from adoptive parents and adoptive culture. However, most of the characteristics she associates with "nature" are social behaviors that are stereotypically Asian.

> *… it's also interesting this whole nature versus nurture, because when I think, I have a lot of characteristics of my adoptive mother: being out going, gregarious, assertive, aggressive, you know, whatever. But then as I've gotten older, especially in my job, where I interact a lot with different Asian cultures, I've realized that there's a lot of me that's also just nature. But, I have found an affinity, with dealing with, in my job, with Asian cultures, because I can totally understand where their feelings with Westerners, you know, Caucasians, er, you know, Europeans. So there's a lot of this whole nature part of me. And it's interesting, even though I was*

[72] Oral history 28.

> *raised…I consider myself American… I am viewed here, particularly at work where I get feedback, as having a lot of, kind of, generalizing, not stereotyping, but generalizing kind of Asian traits. In a group setting, I'm very reserved, and more quiet. I do tend to be more aware of a formal hierarchy and seniority and age and I wasn't raised that way, but I seem to have this kind of orientation towards that. So it's always interesting was that, yeah, the nature or the nature part of me.* [73]

Nadine told me a similar theory about her similarity to the non-adopted Asian and Asian American women she knows:

> *I've worked with a lot of Korean women. I've worked in electronics for almost twenty years—and the way they act and react to certain situations and things is not that much different than the way I act and react. And how defensive I get and how loud I get and how abrasive or vulgar. You know Korean women are the same way. So are Vietnamese women so are Laos and Thai women.* [74]

Though in both examples, these women are interpreting stereotypically Asian social behaviors as being naturally inborn in them as Koreans, I do not want to suggest that either woman has some kind of racial false consciousness; perhaps they have internalized messages about their Asianness that they have picked up from cultural cues received over a lifetime. These messages, sometimes pushing a denial of race-based identity, sometimes heightening race-based identity[75] would have been particularly confusing for this generation of adoptees, who grew up in a cultural period that did not support a complicated rendering of social, cultural and racial identity.

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[73] Oral History 25.
[74] Oral History 22.
[75] For an more in-depth discussion of these racial politics of Korean American adoption, see Chapter 7, "'White' Koreans: Korean Adoptees, Racial Visibility and the Politics of Passing."

CONCLUSION

The first generation of Korean American adoptees, those who were brought to the United States in the 1950s as an extension of America's investment and interests in South Korea following the Korean War, is both similar to and different from younger generations of Korean adoptees. While many of the oldest generation's stories of growing up racially isolated and culturally assimilated are similar to the stories that younger Korean adoptees have told me (and to experiences reported in other research, and in written and filmed accounts of Korean adoptee experiences), this generation also had more specific memories of Korea that complemented their imaginations of their birth country. Most significantly, adoption immigration policy and popular understandings about Korean adoptees that still prevail today are based on the experiences—whether real, reported, or imagined—of this generation. The first generation, more than later generations, were socially pressured to assimilate, and had little or no opportunity to connect with other Asians or Asian Americans. As some of the only Asians allowed to immigrate to the United States at the time, they were almost totally racially isolated within their predominantly White families in racially segregated 1950s and 1960s America. Copious press coverage of Korean adoptee arrivals throughout the 1950s and 1960s emphasized the salvation of Korean children by generous and kind-hearted adoptive parents who offered the shelter of American family placement. While this well-meaning media attention valorizing adoptive parents served to explain the odd-appearing circumstances of family formation for Korean adoptive families, it (probably inadvertently) also restricted the options available to adoptees as they grappled with their identity formations as Asian Americans, as Koreans, or even as adoptees. Since the first

generation of Korean adoptees arrived in the 1950s, public understandings of Korean (and now, transnational adoptees from other countries) adoptees have proven to possess extraordinary staying power, despite the huge cultural changes, including the emergence of new ideologies surrounding civil rights and acceptable family formation, which have taken place in the American society. This was also the generation who would become the litmus test as to whether or adoptions of children so disparately related to Americans could be "successful," a problem that would evolve into a subject of intense social work and behavioral science research of the next several decades.

Chapter 3

Misrepresentation, Appropriation, and Assimilation:

A Critical Literature Review of Social Work and Policy Research on Transracial and Transnational Adoption

> At each phase of the study, we reported the problems, setbacks, and disappointments, as well as the successes, joys and optimism about the future…there are no differences between the birth children and adopted children in the likelihood of problems occurring…they feel that their lives were enriched by the transracial adoption experience.[1]
>
> -Rita J. Simon and Howard Altstein,
> transracial adoption researchers

REVIEWING TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION LITERATURE: SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH

As the practice of transracial adoption from Korea and other sending countries became more common and began to receive oversight from professionals in the fields of child welfare and social work, it attracted greater interest from researchers. The first studies were initiated by behavioral science researchers who addressed seemingly obvious problems within adoptive families (stemming from the lack of blood relation between parents and children) and suggested solutions for these problems; they were followed by child and community advocates within the field of social work, who tried to suggest "best practices" for adoptive families.

Several bodies of literature about transnational and transracial adoption have been produced. There are narratives by adoptive parents explaining their experience of adoption. There are also narratives, including documentary films, by adoptees outlining their own perspectives. There are "how-to" books that tell parents the best way to adopt transnationally or transracially with answers to common questions and advice to help parents resolve problems when they arise. There are anthologies of creative writing by adoptees focusing on the adoptee experience. There is also a sizable amount of scholarly

[1] Simon, Rita J. and Howard Altstein. *Adoption, Race, and Identity: From Infancy to Young Adulthood (Second Edition).*

studies of transracial and transnational adoptees. This includes writings about adoptees' medical conditions, psychological problems and development, the history and future of transnational adoption, sociological and legal perspectives on the practice of these adoptions, studies about adoptee identity, and social work research with social policy implications.

My primary interest within transracial adoption is the experience of adult transracial and transnational adoptees. Out of the published scholarly work on transracial adoption, the social work and social policy research reviewed here have been chosen for several reasons. Social workers (including adoption workers) were the first group of professionals to encounter and work with transracial adoptees and their families. Social policy professionals and researchers made decisions that established adoption rules, guidelines and recommendations. As a group, these researchers were the first to encounter the unique cultural implications of transracial adoption. Their debates first characterized large-scale transracial adoption as a problem or as a solution, and they first engaged in that public debate. Social work research on transracial adoption has a history longer than that of other disciplines—almost as long as the practice of transracial adoption, covering most of lifetimes of early adoptees and the entire lifetimes of later ones. In addition, social work and social policy studies have produced more works than from any other discipline.

This chapter, reviews published research by social workers and social work academics, social policy researchers, and adoption workers published in books and child and social work journals such as *Child Welfare, Social Service Review, International Social Work, Social Casework, Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, Journal of*

Multicultural Social Work, Smith College Studies in Social Work, Social Work, and Child and Youth Services Review. Most research has been conducted from a western perspective in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

Because social work and social research are applied fields, they seek to implement practices based on theory and research. This requires social workers to develop a position about transracial adoption, and the literature within the field makes recommendations accordingly. Some of the most ardent supporters and opponents of transracial adoption come from within the discipline of social work, and their ideas have greatly influenced social policy decisions and public perceptions of transracial adoptees.

Although social workers and social policy analysts were some of the first researchers to study transracial adoption, the scope of their work has been limited. Most of these studies have sought to support of the practice of transracial placement (though criticism for the practice is as old as transracial adoption itself). Large scale transracial placement has a very short history; this may have limited early researchers' methods and their ability to make recommendations. In many cases, researchers have chosen to base their definition of success in transracial adoption on the experiences of adoptive parents rather than the experiences of adoptees, and have used parameters such as "adoptee adjustment within the family" and "self-esteem" to gauge the appropriateness of adoptive placements. While issues of race, class, and gender have been discussed frequently, in-depth analysis or scholarship about the meaning of race in the adoptees' lives (or in society in general) was usually lacking and issues of identity were given superficial treatment until (and in some cases after) adult adoptee subjects became more involved. In addition, in all the research reviewed, the authors have failed to place themselves

within the transracial adoption debate as adoption workers, social workers, or adoptive parents, further obfuscating the meaning of their results. Adoptive parents in the United States in both transracial and transnational adoption are usually White. Many adoption researchers reviewed here are adoptive parents, but either have not disclosed their personal positions within their research, or have failed to acknowledge their place of privilege either within American society, or within the context of their adoption experiences. While the work of these researchers is clearly valuable within the transracial adoption debate and in transracial adoption research, most of their studies do not achieve a meaningful characterization of the transracial adoptee experience as they purport.

The basic questions that researchers have posed in their research concern how "well-adjusted" transracial adoptees are, how adoptees' self-esteem compares to that of other children, how adoptees identify racially, and sometimes, how they reflect on their experiences of adoption. While these are all valid questions, I do not believe that these questions are enough to accurately characterize what is happening in transracial adoption. In addition, how and to whom these questions are asked is of the utmost importance.

The History of Transracial and Transnational Adoption Research

The first social work research on transracial adoption was published in the 1970s, in response to the first substantial wave of transracial adoptions. As social and adoption workers encountered transracial and transnational adoption more frequently, they were forced to assess the issues and problems surrounding the practice. In addition, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) and Native American groups working to pass the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) made statements against the

placement of African-American and Native American children in White families in the 1970s. These statements, made in the absence of substantial empirical research, spurred many researchers to develop case studies to verify or contest the claims of these groups. Most of this research, as reviewed here, concluded that transracially and transnationally adopted children developed normally within their adoptive families by the 1980s. The general uniformity of these results helped to effectively reverse the culture prohibitions on transracial adoption established by the NABSW and ICWA.

During the 1980s, restrictions on transracial adoption were challenged in court by White adoptive parents and the American Civil Liberties Union. Courts were unanimous in ruling that race could not be the chief consideration in adoption, but many states maintained laws to limit transracial adoptions.[2] In the 1990s, federal legislation was passed regulating the role of race in adoption. The Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994, amended by the Interethnic Placement Act of 1996, amended by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 mandated that transracial adoptions be handled the same way as all other adoptions, and forbade the consideration of race as a factor in determining adoption placement. The Inter-Ethnic Adoption Amendment, passed in 1997, prohibited the consideration of race in adoption placement entirely. However, many prospective parents still do not undertake domestic adoptions because the supply of children does not match parents' demands. Most prospective adoptive parents seek to adopt healthy infants, while

[2] Pohl, Constance and Harris, Kathy. *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak*, 33.

two-thirds of American children in foster care are over age five and many have health problems or disabilities.[3]

While transracial adoption was debated at the federal level, the first sizable generation of transracial adoptees, adopted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Before this time, the subjects of most transracial adoption studies had been children. Today, the first studies on adult transracial adoptees are just beginning to be published. It is not yet clear if findings from studies of adult subjects will differ from those using children in social work and behavioral science research.

Whether the practice of transracial adoption is in the best interests of children, or is unethical in light of prevailing social norms, it is a practice that will continue, and may be on the rise. The Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 all but ensured that transracial adoptions would continue, probably with higher frequency than ever before. In 1998, children of color constituted sixty percent of children in out-of-home care.[4]

In the early 1990s, much of the research on transracial and transnational adoption was conducted in the context of debates leading up to the passage of legislation that would ultimately beome the Multiethnic Placement Act. While the Act did not pass until 1994, it is certain that researchers were aware of the legal debates surrounding race and adoption and knew their work could have some place in this landmark legislation. After the Multiethnic Placement Act was passed, researchers often mentioned it as a current

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[3] Kim Clark and Nancy Shute, "The Adoption Maze," *U.S. News and World Report*.
[4] McRoy, Ruth G. and Grape, Helen. "Skin Color in Transracial and Inracial Adoptive Placements: Implications for Special Needs Adoptions." *Child Welfare*.

circumstance of transracial adoption in the United States and argued for or against it in their conclusions. Research of the 1990s employed more sophisticated methodology and analysis than previous research, probably in part because of evolving ideas within critical race studies.

Transnational transracial adoptions have also been increasing in number in recent years: Fewer than 100 children from China were adopted by families in the U.S. in 1990,[5] but by 2003 there were over 5000 per year. For transnational adoption overall, the numbers have also grown. The average number of children adopted per year in the 1970s from overseas was under 5000. By the 1980s, that number had grown to almost 8,000 and in the 1990s it was averaged over 10,000 per year. In 2006, 20,679 children were adopted from overseas, the largest numbers from mainland China (5,453), Guatemala (4,728), Russia (2,310), Ethiopia (1,255) and South Korea (939).[6] For the first time in decades, American transnational adoption numbers fell in 2008, largely in response to new adoption rules that the U.S. started using when it chose to come into compliance with the Hague Convention.

Identifying and Defining Terms of Debate over Transracial Adoption and Positions Within Transracial Adoption Research

In the reviewed research, many researchers can be identified as having either a supportive position (with or without special considerations), or a critical position vis-à-vis transracial adoption. A few avoided stating an opinion on this topic, preferring to

[5] Huh, Nam Soon; Reid, William J. "Intercountry, Transracial Adoption and Ethnic Identity: A Korean Example." *International Social Work*.
[6] "Immigrant Visas Issued to Orphans Coming to the U.S." U.S. Department of State.

state their findings without making explicit policy recommendations. Several authors have approached transracial adoption in terms of a problem to be solved, either the problem of finding parents for children who need them, or children for parents who want them. This is consistent with the problem-solving position of social workers and social policymakers, but is short-sighted in its treatment of a group of people (adoptees) as a "problem" or as a "solution" to a problem.

Those who support transracial adoption have done so almost unanimously because they believe the possible problems associated with transracial adoption are minor compared to the assured problems associated with the lack of a permanent family. Costin and Wattenberg, in introducing their research, argued, "The leading reason cited for opposing transracial adoption is the problem of the child's development of identity….On the other hand…the alternative to a white family is no family at all."[7] Researchers in this camp have focused on the large number of children of color currently in out-of-home placements (foster homes, state facilities) and emphasize the scarcity of adoptive parents of color. In large part, these researchers have also reached the conclusion that transracial adoptees are well-adjusted and have family lives which equal or surpass the quality of family lives within traditional families. In advocating for transracial adoption, these researchers also have appeared to enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that their recommendations helped solve the problem of out-of-home children. The majority of

[7] Costin, Lela B. and Wattenberg, Shirley H. "Identity in Transracial Adoption: A Study of Parental Dilemmas and Family Experiences." In *Race, Education, and Identity*.

researchers share this view including: Simon and Alstein[8] in their twenty-year longitudinal and other studies, Bagley and Young[9] in their British study, Feigelman and Silverman[10] in their questionnaire-based study, Gill and Jackson[11] in their book *Adoption and Race*, Grow and Shapiro[12] in the first major transracial adoption study, Rorbech[13] in his Danish study, and Zastrow[14] in his early book on Black-to-White transracial adoption. All these researchers have also employed methodologies that favor pro-transracial-adoption results, including parent assessment of adopted children (Simon/Alstein, Bagley/Young, Feigelman/Silverman, Grow/Shapiro and Zastrow), the discounting of problems found in sizable minorities of the research subjects (Simon/Alstein, Gill/Jackson) and the view of total assimilation as a positive result (Rorbech). While these researchers have posited transracial adoption as a solution for the adoptee, they have proven it to be a solution for the childless parents, conveniently creating a "win-win" situation.

Even when researchers have approached the problem of facilitating successful adoptions and reported about problematic adoptions, many have attributed these

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[8]The most recent update of this research is *Adoption, Race and Identity*. By Simon, Rita J. and Howard Alstein, but several earlier book-length reports were published over the course of the study period.

[9] Bagley, Christopher and Loretta Young. "The Identity, Adjustment and Achievement of Transracially Adopted Children: A Report and Empirical Report." In *Race, Education, and Identity*.

[10] Feigelman, W.; Silverman, A. R. *Chosen Children: New Patterns of Adoptive Relationships.*

[11] Gill, Owen and Jackson, Barbara. *Adoption and Race: Black, Asian, and Mixed Race Children in White Families.*

[12] Grow, Lucille and Shapiro, D. *Black Children, White Parents: A Study of Transracial Adoption.*

[13] Rorbech, Mette. . "The conditions of 18- to 25-year-old foreign-born adoptees in Denmark." In *Intercountry Adoption: A Multinational Perspective.*

[14] Zastrow, Charles. *Outcome of Black Children-White Parents Transracial Adoptions.*

problems to factors other than the transracial nature of the adoption itself, or minimized the problems within the overall results. Kim *et al*. completed a 1979 study of fifteen White New York couples who adopted twenty-one Korean children through interviews and questionnaires. Nine couples reported behavior problems in 16 children.[15] In the group, twelve were adopted over age three,[16] which was surmised to be part of the cause of the problems. Simon and Alstein[17] (1981) wrote a follow-up on the families they had researched five years earlier based on phone and mail correspondence with parents. They found that one in six of the families now reported difficulties with their children that they attributed to the child's transracial adoption. The problem behavior parents reported most often in children was stealing. Other problems included some children who had been diagnosed with disabilities parents perceived to be genetic in origin. Parents also expressed feelings of guilt that their decision to adopt had caused pain to their children. Overall, Simon and Alstein maintained their position supporting the practice of transracial adoption, stating that the great majority of families had few problems, as assessed by parents. Problem families (also called "unhappy families") were assessed separately, but the researchers stressed that these families were a minority in the group, comprising eighteen of the eighty-eight families interviewed.[18] In Gill and Jackson's

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[15]Kim, Dong Soo. "Issues in Transracial and Transcultural Adoption." *Social Casework.*
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] Simon, Rita J And Alstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoption: A Follow-Up*.
[18] Simon, Rita J. and Alstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoptees and Their Families: A Study of Identity and Commitment*.

study, while six of thirty-six children were identified as having problems, the authors stressed that this is "only 17 percent."[19]

Though few researchers have condemned transracial adoption outright, a few have taken a more critical stance. Their studies have challenged findings in support of transracial adoption by pointing to bias within previous research (Hollingsworth)[20] or questioning the likelihood of a healthy assimilation into a racist society (Kim,[21] Saetersdal/Dalin,[22] and McRoy and Zurcher[23]). While less common, this criticism has been voiced throughout the history of the transracial adoption debate. Most researchers critical of transracial adoption have avoided condemning the practice altogether; to do so would have been to discount the problem of children of color without families. Despite their conclusion that transracial adoption was a racist practice, Jones and Else rejected the NABSW statement in opposition to transracial adoption, and criticized the organization's view as one of Black nationalism.[24] They agreed that Black children needed to develop Black identity and survival skills against racism,[25] but argued these traits could be developed in transracial adoptions if they were conducted properly. In closing, they outlined a set of screening criteria for White parents to fulfill for eligibility for transracial

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[19] Gill, Owen and Jackson, Barbara. *Adoption and Race: Black, Asian, and Mixed Race Children in White Families,* 132.
[20] Hollingsworth, Leslie Doty. "Effect of Transracial/Transethnic Adoption on Children's Racial and Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem: A Meta-Analytic Review." In *Families and Adoption*.
[21] Kim, Dong Soo. "Issues in Transracial and Transcultural Adoption." *Social Casework.*
[22] Saetersdal, Barbro and Dalen, Monica. "Norway: Intercountry adoptions in a homogeneous country." In *Intercountry Adoption: A Multinational Perspective.*
[23] Mcroy, Ruth G. and Zurcher, Louis A. *Transracial and Inracial Adoptees: The Adolescent Years.*
[24] Jones, Charles E.; Else, John F. "Racial and Cultural Issues in Adoption." *Child Welfare United States*.
[25] *Ibid*.

adoption. Huh and Reid, in their study of "Intercountry, transracial adoption and ethnic identity," tentatively supported the practice of transracial adoption, but articulated a greater concern with problems of racial difference and put forth specific recommendations about how parents should handle cultural difference within the adoptions.[26] Researchers with critical views (even if tempered by support for transracial adoption) have, in turn, been criticized by pro-transracial-adoption scholars, and characterized as barriers to placement for children of color without families.

Researchers who did not identify a position in the transracial adoption debate include Costin/Wattenberg, Johnson and Shireman, Johnson et al., Kim (1979) and Kryder. These researchers presented their findings without relating them to the debate over how and whether transracial adoption takes place. In these studies, either results were inconclusive, or findings reported on the condition in which adoptees find themselves, not on whether those conditions were ethically appropriate.

Among those who registered a position in the transracial adoption debate, none of the researchers placed themselves within its context. To my knowledge, none were adopted themselves, but whether they were professionally involved as social workers or other professionals practicing transracial placements or personally involved as transracial adoptive parents or relatives is unknown. This information has not been made publicly available and the researchers uniformly fail to include this information in their work. Based on a close reading of their texts, I suspect some of them may be transracial

[26] Huh, Nam Soon; Reid, William J. "Intercountry, Transracial Adoption and Ethnic Identity: A Korean Example." *International Social Work*.

adoptive parents or other relatives, and my sense is that the writers intentionally withhold this information from the reader to preserve the appearance of objectivity.

I know many of these researchers to be White, and two to be African-American. Three have Asian surnames. I am unsure of the racial background of many. While I do not propose that racial or cultural identity determines quality of work or justifies any particular position on transracial adoption, this is clearly a racialized issue and knowing where each of the researchers was positioned in the context of American race releations would be helpful in analyzing their texts. While taking an objective posture at the outset of one's research is common in most disciplines, the transracial adoption debate has so many ethical and emotional implications that it is important for the reader to understand the personal investment of researchers in their work. The researchers' beliefs inform the work they do, coloring their treatment and interpretation of data.

Rita Simon is arguably the primary author of transracial adoption history and research to date. She, with or without collaborator Howard Alstein, is the most prolific producer of books and articles on transracial adoption. She has also positioned herself to influence national transracial adoption policy. In 1998, she testified in support of transracial adoption before the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the U.S. Congressional House Committee on Ways and Means hearing on interethnic adoptions. Her pro-transracial-adoption books aimed at parents considering adoption and at adoption researchers have been and are commonly available in the popular press *(Transracial Adoption,* 1977*; Black Attitudes Toward Transracial Adoption,* 1978*; Transracial Adoption: A Follow-Up,* 1981*; Transracial Adoption Revisited,* 1981*; Transracial Adoptees & Their Families: A Study Of Identity & Commitment,* 1987*; Transracial*

Adoption Is In A Child's Best Interest, 1988*; Intercountry Adoption: A Multinational Perspective*, 1991*; Adoption, Race, And Identity : From Infancy Through Adolescence*, 1992*; The Case for Transracial Adoption*, 1994*; Adoption Across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and International Adoptions*, 2000*; In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories* (with Rhonda Roorda), 2000). While she has taken a strong position in support of transracial adoption, her interests in transracial adoption, both personal and professional, have never been explicitly revealed in her work. In the preface of *Transracial Adoption* (written with Howard Alstein), the authors openly lamented what they saw as the end of "transracial adoption" (African-American and Native-American-to-White adoption) in the United States because of opposition within communities of color.[27]

Simon and Alstein began their research in 1971, following the NABSW statement concerning transracial adoption. While Simon and Alstein's early work did not take an explicit position, they argued extensively against the NABSW position, explaining that (White adoptive) parents were the strongest proponents for transracial adoption. These parents were portrayed by Simon and Alstein at the time as not strong enough to win the fight to continue transracial adoption. Simon and Alstein summed up the endeavor of transracial adoption as "…humanitarian acts, defined purely and simply by love and compassion for another human being,"[28] and cited "Christian charity" as one of the main reasons individuals and agencies are involved in transracial adoption. In their view, transracial adoptions were seemingly without negative social or political consequence,

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[27] Simon, Rita James; Alstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoption.*
[28] *Ibid*, 49.

and the authors were clear early proponents of the practice. In their first book, they gave a history of African-American and Native American transracial adoption and reported that most children adjusted well.[29]

In keeping with their goal to advocate for the practice of transracial adoption, Simon and Alstein glossed over some of the findings in their longitudinal study while emphasizing others and structured some quantitative assessments with possible bias towards a finding of high adjustment for adoptees. For instance, in *Transracial Adoption,* they stressed that African-American transracially adopted children responded to pictures of African-Americans more than non-adopted African-American children, but failed to note that overall, all children still responded more negatively photos of Blacks than to photos of Whites. In *Transracial Adoptees and Their Families,* when assessing how emotionally close parents and children to one another, the researchers structured questionnaires so multiple choice options for children and parents did not match, with children's options weighted towards more closeness with parents. In the same book, Simon and Alstein emphasized that eighteen out of eighty-eight families (over twenty percent) with problems did not represent an "ordinary" experience, and even relegated them to a separate chapter called "Special Families" (as opposed to "Ordinary Families"). Similarly, Gill and Jackson discounted the seventeen percent of adoptive families with problems, implying that this was not a large enough percentage to cause concern.

The majority of social work and social policy research on transracial adoption has taken place within the United States, but research based in the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway and the Netherlands has also been completed. British studies have been similar

[29] *Ibid.*

in results to American work; Bagley and Young (1979) employed a methodology very similar to that of Simon and Alstein, and made similar findings—that mixed race transracial adoption children in the UK were as well adjusted as other White and mixed-race children.[30] Westhues and Cohen's (1998) Canadian findings described less positive results of adoptee assimilation and self-esteem than many American or British studies. These results could be attributed to research design or analysis, or they may be related to unique situations within the adoption or cultural infrastructure in each country. Saetersdal and Dalen[31] and Rorbech[32] conducted research in Norway and the Denmark, respectively. Both studies were published in 1991. I consider these studies to be an important contribution to the available research on transracial adoption, so they are included in my review. However, both studies were deeply rooted in the national identities of the authors' countries (more so than the British or Canadian studies presented here) and seemed to be researching whether transracial adoption could succeed specifically in Norway and Denmark. Saetersdal and Dalen were more ambivalent in their results than Rorbech, who advocated for Danish transnational adoption. Whether this is because of their attitudes about transracial adoption or their experience of their country as a host nation is unknown.

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[30] Gill, Owen and Jackson, Barbara. *Adoption and Race: Black, Asian, and Mixed Race Children in White Families.*
[31] Saetersdal, Barbro and Dalen, Monica. "Norway: Intercountry Adoptions in a Homogeneous Country." In *Intercountry Adoption: A Multinational Perspective.*
[32] Rorbech, Mette. "The Conditions of 18- to 25-Year-Old Foreign-Born Adoptees in Denmark." In *Intercountry Adoption: A Multinational Perspective.*

Child Subjects, Parent Envoys

A number of early transracial adoption research projects used parents' perceptions of their transracially adopted children to characterize the adoptees and to assess how the children were faring in the adoptive situations. In early research, this was necessary because the adoptee children were often too young to answer questions about their situations. However, methodologies in which parents assess and answer for their children introduce the parents' biases into the research. Even if the researcher's intent is to support the best interests of children within transracial adoptive settings, using data collected from parents about their children inevitably creates answers which often indicate the best interests of parents. Most critically, the early research of Simon and Alstein (1974) and Zastrow (1977)—now viewed as cornerstones of transracial adoption research—used these parent-assessment methods without adequately reporting the limitations of this methodology. This drew fire from later researchers, but no real attempt was made by Simon and Alstein over the course of their twenty-year study to explore the implications of results indicating overwhelmingly positive adoption experiences. In this study, parents, not adoptees, reported these positive results. The parents in this research have an understandably vested interest in reporting positive experiences; a report of failure in the adoption experience would be tantamount to an admission of failure as a parent.

Simon and Alstein's interviews and assessments of 204 adoptive parents in the 1970s revealed the families in their study to be uniformly middle-class[33] and predominantly Christian (sixteen to twenty-one percent non-Christian), with seventy-

[33] Simon, Rita James and Howard Alstein, *Transracial Adoption.*

eight percent living in all-White neighborhoods and ninety percent or more considering themselves liberal.[34] All had adopted transracially. Some had also adopted White children, who were also assessed for the research. The majority in the study had adopted domestically, mostly African-American (sixty-five to seventy percent) or Native American (three to eleven percent) children. In one-child adoptions, fifty-six percent of the parents adopted boys (twenty-eight percent wanted only a boy), forty-four percent girls (twenty-four percent wanted only a girl). In two-child adoptions, sixty percent adopted both boys and girls. Of the total, twenty-four percent wanted to adopt because of infertility, eight percent because they had all the children they could biologically and wanted more, and forty percent because of personal or moral beliefs. Interviews, using specific questions developed by the researchers began in 1971, and were repeated in 1979, 1984, and 1991. Initially, 206 families participated, but by the end of the study only 83 families could be located and were willing to participate. In addition to carrying out interviews, the researchers tested adoptees' self-esteem and family integration using various testing instruments. The researchers assessed both self-esteem and family integration to be generally good and did not find significant differences between adoptees and non-adoptees for either characteristic. Most adoptees grew up in predominantly White settings and most adoptees' closest friends were White. The adoptees also answered questions about relationships to parents and siblings, and their responses were interpreted by Simon and Alstein as similar to non-adopted children. In the end, ninety

[34] *Ibid.*

percent of adoptive parents said they would urge others (White or not) to transracially adopt.[35]

In the article "Adoption of Black children by White parents in the USA," Simon (1984) summed up her own research and made the point that "…almost all the mothers and fathers emphasized that that the transracial adoptions had enriched their lives…"[36] She also acknowledged that because very few transracial adoptees had even reached adolescence, it was still difficult to say how the adoption experience would influence adoptees as adults. In conclusion, she advocated for colorblindness in transracial adoption.[37]

Simon and Alstein revisited transracial adoption and the families of their 1977 and 1981 study again in 1987. Reported in the book *Transracial Adoptees and their Families*, the results were based on interviews with parents and children (who now had a median age of fifteen years). When comparing parent and child responses (even though the parents and children were not asked the same questions), they reported finding "considerable consensus."[38]

In this round of interviews, parents were asked about how their children were doing academically, socially, and within the family. Parents generally reported their children were doing well in school, considered them to socially healthy and said that their relationships with their children and their children's relationships with siblings were

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[35] *Ibid.*
[36] Simon, Rita. J. "Adoption of Black Children by White Parents in the USA." In *Adoption: Essays in Social Policy, Law, and Sociology*, 239.
[37] *Ibid.*
[38] Simon, R.J.; Alstein, H. *Transracial Adoptees and Their Families: A Study of Identity and Commitment*, 85.

healthy. Parents were also asked what they remembered to be their expectations about their children's racial identities when they first adopted. Simon and Alstein reported that twelve percent of parents expected the children to have the adoptive parents' racial identity, twenty-three percent to have the children's racial identity, and that fifty percent had no expectations about racial identity. Most said these expectations had not changed over the lives of the adoptees. When asked, sixty-five percent of parents said children had talked to them about being the subject of racial incidents, but the parents generally did not think the incidents would leave a lasting impression on their children. When asked what they would advise others about transracial adoption, forty percent warned against adopting out of a sense of social or political duty and twenty-five percent mentioned that "handling 'the race issue'" should be a major consideration. Still, most (eighty-six percent) said they would urge others to transracially adopt. [39]

Simon and Alstein completed their twenty-year longitudinal study of transracial adoption and published final results in 1992 as A*doption, Race and Identity: From Infancy to Young Adulthood* (the 2002 reprint is referenced here).[40] The book is largely a reiteration of the previous twenty years' findings, with a summary chapter on the final 1991 phase of the study. While the children in the study were adults by this time, little effort was made to find them if they were not at their parents' addresses. The clear implication is that this twenty-year study was about the original adoptive families, meaning the more permanently placed parents. The decision to not make a more concerted effort to find adoptees at this stage of the research is especially unfortunate,

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[39] *Ibid.*
[40] Simon, Rita James, and Howard Alstein. *Adoption, Race, & Identity : From Infancy to Young Adulthood*.

because as adults, the adoptee subjects may have been able to better speak for themselves and their own experiences. This time, parents were asked to reflect on their adoption experience. The parents responded positively; ninety-two percent said they would transracially adopt again if they had it to do over,[41] sixty-eight percent said the experience "broadened and enriched" their lives, and eighty percent said they would recommend that other families also transracially adopt (compared to ninety percent and eighty-five percent twenty and eight years earlier, respectively). Simon and Alstein gave an overwhelmingly positive characterization of the adoption experience and have been staunch supporters of transracial adoption as a solution for children in out-of-home placements. In the several books covering their twenty-year study, they unwaveringly portrayed transracial adoption as a mostly positive experience for adoptees, even though the majority of the research was focused on the experience of parents and on parents' perceptions of their children.

Zastrow (1977) published a study on African-American transracial adoptive families with preschool children, focusing on the satisfaction of these parents compared to that of in-race White adoptive parents and the overall success of the adoptions, based on parents' perceptions. He found that parents saw few special problems with transracial adoption,[42] but that they foresaw more complicated issues for their children as they entered later stages of adolescence and adulthood and that the great majority of parents (ninety-nine percent) considered their adoption experience to be either extremely satisfying or more satisfying than dissatisfying. Zastrow used these results to support

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[41] Simon, Rita James, and Howard Alstein. *Adoption, Race, & Identity : From Infancy to Young Adulthood*.
[42] Zastrow, Charles. *Outcome of Black Children-White Parents Transracial Adoptions.*

transracial placements as a good solution for African-American children in need of adoptive placements.[43]

Costin and Wattenberg (1979) studied parental and family experiences of families with transracially adopted children. They interviewed parents in families of twenty-one transracially adopted children in 1972 and 1973. In an acknowledgement that their research was about adoptive parents instead of adoptees, Costin and Wattenberg took an approach which considered parental dilemmas about transracial adoption: whether parents wanted to integrate or differentiate transracially adopted children and to instill ignorance or knowledge of the transracial adoptee's cultural background. They concluded that while parents do think about these dilemmas, there probably was not a typical transracial adoption parent profile.[44]

In a meta-analytic review of nine previous studies, Hollingsworth (1997) commented on the problem of collecting information about the adoption experience only from parents,[45] as had been done (wholly or partially) in studies which gauged adjustment including Simon and Alstein, Zastrow, Kim (1979), Costin and Wattenberg, Grow and Shapiro, Feigelman and Silverman, Bagley and Young, and Shireman and Johnson. She also observed that studies by Feigelman and Silverman and by Simon and Alstein compared transracial adoptees only to White children. She posited that it would be more appropriate to compare transracial adoptees to other adoptees of color in a same-race

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[43] *Ibid.*
[44] Costin, Lela B. and Wattenberg, Shirley H. "Identity in Transracial Adoption: A Study of Parental Dilemmas and Family Experiences." In *Race, Education, and Identity*.
[45] Hollingsworth, Leslie Doty. "Effect of Transracial/Transethnic Adoption on Children's Racial and Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem: A Meta-Analytic Review." In *Families and Adoption*.

adoptive situation. She also noted that the summaries by some researchers excluded important outcomes, giving the example of one study that claimed there were no significant identity problems among an African-American transracial adoption group, even though one of the findings of the study was that eleven percent of the adolescents in the study group wished they could be White and twenty-seven percent of the parents thought their children self-identified as White. Her work was the first comprehensive critique of the parent-focused methods of assessing transracial adoption. [46]

Nearing the end of their twenty-year longitudinal study, Simon and Alstein conceded that "Much of what we have portrayed thus far has been gleaned from the perceptions and opinions of the parents."[47] While the age of the children necessitated this method, the researchers' emphasis throughout their study, even when adoptees were reaching adulthood, was on parents. When adoptees moved away from home, little effort was made to re-connect with them for the later phases of the study. Zastrow, for his part, based the majority of his findings on how successful parents perceived their adoptions to be. Several later researchers followed this example. This complicates this research because it aligns these researchers with the perspectives and concerns of parents, whose goal it is to transracially adopt, and who wholeheartedly believe that it is a moral, honorable practice. The research shows that, in every study where the issue was assessed, the adoptive experience has been seen by parents as beneficial for parents.

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[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Simon, Rita J. and Alstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoptees and Their Families: A Study of Identity and Commitment*, 112.

Adjustment and Self-Esteem as Parameters of Adoption Success

Since early in the history of transracial adoption, research has sought to measure the success of transracial placements and to answer questions about whether these adoptees have been harmed by their experience. Most of the evaluation has been empirical, using a number of assessment instruments such as personality tests, racial identity tests, and questionnaires. The issue of "adjustment" has been paramount in many of these studies; many of the research questions have centered around how well the adoptee seems to be adjusting to the adoptive family and experience, or how generally "well-adjusted" the adoptee is. In addition, many studies have attempted to ascertain how the adoptee racially self-identifies. This is probably at least partly in response to the NABSW charge that only African-American parents can instill a sense of self in African-American children.

In 1974, Grow and Shapiro first reported their comprehensive research on transracial adoption. They studied 125 families who had adopted African-American children, all over the age of six, by twice interviewing parents and assessing child adjustment and parental management of race within the adoptions. Their major finding was that seventy-seven percent of the children "had adjusted successfully."[48]

Feigelman and Silverman, in an effort to "investigate the long-term impact of transracial placement"[49] gathered information using questionnaires (presumably answered by parents because the children in the study were mostly too young to fill out

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[48] Grow, Lucille; Shapiro, D. *Black Children, White Parents: A Study of Transracial Adoption*, 233.
[49] Feigelman, William; Silverman, Arnold R. "The Long-Term Effects of Transracial Adoption." *Social Service Review*, 590.

questionnaires) from 372 adoptive families. They found that transracial adoptees adjusted as well or better than in-race adoptees, with Korean and Colombian adoptees scoring as better-adjusted than in-race adoptees.

Using instruments such as the California Test of Personality, written surveys, and other empirical methods, researchers in the 1990s compared the mental health status, self-esteem, racial self-identification, educational achievement, family integration, and adjustment of non-adopted and adopted children, or of transracially and same-race adopted children. No significant difference was found between the groups of children.[50]

The work of Grow and Shapiro and Feigelman and Silverman are examples of research where high child adjustment in the transracial adoption setting is a major finding, though it appears as a parameter in most of the transracial adoption research, including that of Simon and Alstein and of Zastrow. As noted by Hollingsworth, adjustment of children in their adoptive families was often gauged by asking parents how well *they* think their children have adjusted. When this method was used, results indicating high adjustment of adoptees were unequivocal. While this may indeed be the case, it is also possible that parents made this claim because they *wanted* it to be true. Most (if not all) parents are highly motivated to say their children are happy and doing well. To report otherwise could be seen, consciously or subconsciously, as a failure at parenting. Adoptive parents—and, arguably, *especially* transracial adoptive parents, in the face of public criticism that transracial adoption may be harmful to their children—have high investment in the success of their adoptions. Even if all the parents in these

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[50] See Pohl, Constance and Kathy Harris. *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak* and Simon, Rita J. and Howard Alstein. *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions.*

studies were exceptionally reflective and honest, the adopted children are also highly invested in demonstrating high adjustment into their adoptive families. Many researchers have reported that parents have emphasized sameness and downplayed difference to their transracially adopted children. Because parents know their adoptees look different than others in the family, constantly claiming and demonstrating inclusion is a common strategy to prevent children feeling alienated. For children, to claim difference instead of adjustment may seem like a betrayal of family. For these reasons, I see adjustment as a poor indicator of successful adoption.

In an early work that stands in contrast to the positive adjustment reports in other studies, Kim's 1978 article "Issues in transracial and transcultural adoption" included a critique of transracial adoption policy and of previous studies, suggesting that in studies that Korean adoptee children to be well-adjusted as other children, the children were "...still in the adolescent stage with an anticipatory socialization." It was also noted that children were unhappy with their Asian appearance, while "…many adoptive parent [saw] 'no color or race or nationality' in their adopted foreign children…"[51] and that "[f]requent reports of foreign children are that 'they felt "totally American" except when people called them Asian', which happens all the time."[52] Kim questioned the validity of adoptee adjustment studies, stating

> "…the so-called good adjustment of these children is being accomplished at the cost of their unique ethnic cultural heritage and identity, partially reinforced by parents' innocent, yet inapt, expectations. However, the

[51] Kim, Dong Soo. "Issues in Transracial and Transcultural Adoption." *Social Casework*, 482.
[52] *Ibid*, 483.

> American cultural assimilation …is not fully accepted because of prevailing racism of the society…"[53]

The majority of researchers who measured self-esteem did not find a significant difference between adoptees and other children, with the exception of Hollingsworth and of Westhues and Cohen, who found a negative correlation between adoption and self-esteem. While these results are inconclusive (especially because of the nature of Hollingsworth's work, a meta-analysis based on the results of previous research interpreted to show that there was no relationship between transracial adoption and self-esteem), they suggest that self-esteem, like adjustment, may not be appropriate as a measure of success in transracial adoption. While many researchers have assessed self-esteem, most have been ambiguous about their reasons for doing so. The use of self-esteem as a parameter of transracial adoption success implies a hypothesis that the process of navigating racism and racial difference, the lack of instruction and support from White parents in handling racial incidents, or the experience of grief, loss, alienation, or displacement may depress self-esteem in adoptees. Even if high self-esteem was an undisputed finding among researchers, there are far too many variables involved with the formation of self-esteem.

Transracial Adoptee Identity

Because loss of racial identity in adoptees is one of the primary issues raised by the NABSW, several researchers have sought to assess this aspect of adoptees' lives. The interpretation of results is inconclusive across the literature (and also in many individual

[53] *Ibid*, 485.

studies). In early studies, the adoptees were young children and parents were asked to report what they believed their children thought of as their racial identity; problems using this methodology have been noted already. Studies that include self-reflection on the part of adoptees are among the most useful, because they present perceptions that are not filtered through parents. However, the results of these studies are also difficult to interpret, as they offer little in terms of conclusive advice or policy recommendations; instead, they offer a complex picture which complicates views on transracial adoption beyond whether or not it should take place. They do, however, offer the fullest picture of the adoptee experience.

Several researchers have attempted to characterize adoptee racial identity. In early studies with young children, researchers (including Simon and Alstein and Shireman and Johnson) used doll and picture tests, in which children were asked to associate qualities or themselves with the dolls or pictures. Later work involved direct interviews or surveys of adoptees, and sometimes of their parents as well. The coming of age of the first large generation of transracial and transnational adoptees during the 1990s created a great potential for research and assessment of adoptee racial identity. As adults, adoptees are more independent from their parents and have a more mature perspective from which to talk about their identities. Certainly, there has been more focus on identity in more recent studies. In addition, by the 1990s, ideals of pluralism and multiculturalism had gained popularity, which better supported researchers interested in adoptee identity in the context of multicultural living.

Simon's identity assessment of children included 366 children aged between three and eight years, 199 adopted and 167 born into families. Interviews lasted approximately

thirty minutes.[54] Children were asked to respond to a list of questions about White, Black and brown (meant to symbolize Asian or Native American) dolls and to associate qualities with Blacks and Whites in pictures. Results were inconclusive among the children with respect to preferences and attitudes towards the different dolls, where previous studies showed a strong preference for White dolls. Adopted Black children had a slightly more positive attitude towards photographs of African Americans than in previous studies (assessing Black children who had not been adopted), though all children still responded more negatively to photographs of Blacks.[55]

Simon and Alstein attributed the difference in attitude between transracially adopted children and other African-American children to the adoption experience, implying that being transracially adopted improved the children's perceptions of African-Americans. This finding supported the rhetorical position that transracial adoption can help solve problems of racism.[56]

A large minority of Asian and Native American transracial adoptees identified more readily with White rather than medium-or-dark complexioned people and dolls. Simon and Alstein concluded that this was due to the images being too racially ambiguous for the children to interpret,[57] discounting the possibility that the children actually lacked Asian or Native American identity and self-realization. Another interpretation of these results could be that these children were less aware of the possibility of an Asian or Native American racial identity, or were unwilling to claim

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[54] Simon, Rita James; Alstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoption.*
[55] Simon, Rita James; Alstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoption.*
[56] *Ibid.*
[57] *Ibid.*

such an identity. This could be because Asians and Native Americans are much smaller minorities in the U.S. (and this was especially true in the 1970s, when this research was conducted) than African-Americans and have less cultural influence in the dominant White society in which the children were being raised. Because race in the U.S. is so often reduced to a white/non-white binary, children may not have considered the possibility that they could be not Black *and* not White; because White is valued over Black in dominant society, a White identity would clearly be preferred.

The first empirical studies on adult transracial adoptees are just beginning to be published; many report results that support a perception of adoption experience different from those in past research that focused on adoptive parents and their children. These include findings by Kimberly Powell and Tamara Afifi, William Feigelman, and Richard M. Lee, Hyung Chol Yoo and Sara Roberts. Powell and Afifi, in their study of White, American Indian, African American and Asian American adult adoptees coping with the "ambiguous loss" of birthparents, found that adoptees who suffered feelings of birthparent loss and had "closed family communication," (described as a lack of communication about adoption and other problems in the family) experienced the most difficulty managing these feelings. Unfortunately, Powell and Afifi chose to analyze their subjects' racial differences neither from one another nor from their adoptive parents.[58] In his comparative study of transracial and same-race adoptee adjustment, Feigelman persisted in relying on adoptive parent assessments instead of consulting transracial adoptees directly, and found varying degrees of adjustment among

[58] Powell, Kimberly A. and Tamara Afifi. "Uncertainty Management and Adoptees' Ambiguous Loss of Their Birth Parents." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

transracially adopted young adults, but no significant differences between the transracial and same-race adoptee groups.[59] Lee, Yoo, and Roberts conducted the only research that used data gathered directly from adult adoptees and used race, ethnicity and effects of discrimination as primary considerations. Their survey study of adult Korean American adoptees found that ethnic pride correlated positively with life satisfaction and that perceived discrimination correlated negatively to life satisfaction.[60]

Shireman and Johnson sought to compare single-parent, Black-to-White transracial and traditional (in-race) adoptions using three groups of families (with between thirty-one and forty-five families in each group). Parents were asked to report children's behavior to establish adjustment and the researchers used the Clark Doll Racial Preference Selection Test to assess racial identity. As in Simon and Alstein's doll test, children were presented with differently complexioned dolls and asked to state preferences between them. Their findings were that the three groups scored similarly on adjustment, but that the transracial adoptees developed Black racial identities later than in-race adopted children. Transracial adoptees' preference for Black over White dolls stayed the same between ages four and eight, while the traditionally adopted children's preference increased over the same time period.[61] This research was interpreted further in 1987 in

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[59] Feigelman, William. "Adjustments of Transracially and Inracially Adopted Young Adults." *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*.
[60] Lee, Richard M., Hyung Chol Yoo, and Sara Roberts. "The Coming of Age of Korean Adoptees: Ethnic Identity Development and Psychological Adjustment." *Korean Americans: Past Present and Future*.
[61] Shireman, J. F.; Johnson, P. R.;. "A Longitudinal Study of Black Adoptions: Single Parent Transracial, and Traditional." *Social Work*.

the article, "Transracial adoption and the development of black identity at age eight." [62] Shireman interpreted this study as further support for the idea that transracial adoption is an acceptable solution when Black homes are not available for Black orphans.[63] Another author, Watson interpreted the findings differently, suggesting that the adoptees' parents had lessened emphasis on positive Black identity for their children, leading to the difference in the transracial and traditional adoptees responses.[64]

Based on "…symbolic interaction theory, which assumes a person's self-definition develops from interpersonal relations in a social world,"[65] *Transracial and Inracial Adoptees*, by Ruth McRoy and Louis Zurcher, Jr. was based on a study of African-American adolescent transracial adoptees compared to African-American adolescent in-race adoptees. Parents and adoptees were interviewed separately from one another. Adoptees were between ten and twenty-six years of age, with a mean age just under fourteen. Three-quarters were male. McRoy and Zurcher found no difference in self-esteem or self-concept between adoptee groups.[66] They found that the families were similar in many ways, but that Black adoptive parents were more likely to instruct children about Black heritage and pride, while White parents tended to emphasize that "all humans are alike."[67] Many White parents "…exhibited stereotypical role expectations and perceptions of Blacks. Those parents expressed delight in raising their Black adoptee but were apprehensive about the adoptee's association with other Black

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[62] Johnson, P. R.; Shireman, J. F.; Watson, K. W. "Transracial Adoption and the Development of Black Identity at Age Eight." *Child Welfare.*
[63] *Ibid*.
[64] *Ibid*.
[65] McRoy & Zurcher, JR. *Transracial and Inracial Adoptees*, 16.
[66] *Ibid.*
[67] *Ibid*, 37.

children and about…living in a racially mixed neighborhood."[68] In addition, they found that children were more likely to tell Black parents about racist incidents. In the study, transracial adoptees were more likely than inracial adoptees to have White friends and dating partners. They were also more likely to attend predominantly White schools, which McRoy and Zurcher judged affected self-identity negatively for these children.[69]

Transracial adoptee families were also more likely to live in White neighborhoods, and some were subject to harassment as a result.[70] The authors also noted that while "[t]he majority of inracial adoptive parents were raising their black children to live in a black and white society; most of the transracial adoptive parents were raising their black children to live in a white society."[71] They observed that children who had minimal contact with other African-Americans "…tended to develop stereotyped impressions of blacks and were likely to feel that they were "better off" in a white adoptive family."[72] McRoy and Zurcher's work brought forth concerns not previously addressed by other researchers about the prevalence of racist ideologies in dominant White society. Their decision to compare in-race and transracial African-American adoptees, instead of comparing transracial adoptees to White in-race adoptees or to biological children as in past research, was critical in light of their findings. The results of this study implied that African-American parents are far better equipped than White parents to prepare African-American children to live in a racist world, and that White parents, though they love their children, cannot fully escape the racist nature of American society.

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[68] *Ibid,* 139.
[69] *Ibid.*
[70] *Ibid.*
[71] *Ibid,* 116.
[72] *Ibid,* 136.

Huh and Reid found a high incidence of Korean identity among Korean adoptees when the adoptees were exposed to Korean culture as children.[73] They studied forty Korean adopted children between the ages of nine and fourteen to determine the factors influencing ethnic identity. Children were interviewed about their involvement in Korean ethnic activity, the extent of their identification with Korean culture, and the ease of communication between parents and children about adoption. Results correlated children with high participation in Korean cultural activities to a stronger Korea identity.[74] Huh and Reid also found that children with the most well-developed Korean identity had begun to develop that identity around age seven or eight. Parental encouragement seemed to affect the development of identity. The authors suggested that social workers should facilitate parental involvement in their children's cultural education.[75]

Kryder's "Self and Alma Mater: A Study of Adopted College Students"[76] was based on interviews with young adult transracial adoptees in college and was constructed from interview excerpts with extensive analysis by the author. How the sixteen interviewees were located was not made clear. The author used the words of the adoptees as the sole source of data for her research, but gave results in her own words, sometimes using the verbatim response of adoptees to give an example of a reported finding. The major finding in "Self and Alma Mater" was that "…adopted college students reflected

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[73] Huh, Nam Soon; Reid, William J. "Intercountry, Transracial Adoption and Ethnic Identity: A Korean Example." *International Social Work*.
[74] *Ibid.*
[75] *Ibid.*
[76] Kryder, S. L. "Self and Alma Mater: A Study of Adopted College Students." *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*.

the same developmental issues [as] all college students; however, the meaning of the college experience…was deeply influenced by the adoption process."[77] Kryder stressed that that adoptees (like other young adults) found a substitute family in college, including, for many, the first other adopted people they had ever met, and that many became more racially aware during this time in their lives.[78] This work revealed the development of racial identity at a late age—while students were in college. While attending college raises cultural awareness in many students, it can provide transracial adoptees, with their first opportunities to participate in communities of color and to freely identify as people of color.

In 1999, all of the roughly 400 Korean adoptees attending the "Gathering" conference were invited to complete a survey about their adoptee experience, and 167 responded. Freundlich and Lieberthal complied the results of these surveys in "The Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees: Adoptees' Perceptions of International Adoption."[79] Freundlich and Lieberthal's summary revealed an Asian identity in the majority of Korean adoptees, though the authors did not explore the social implications of this identity for these adoptees. The survey respondents were mostly female (eighty-two percent), had a mean age of thirty-one years, and were adopted between 1956 and 1985. About half were under age two when adopted. Over half (fifty-eight percent) said they had a spouse or partner. Half of men's partners were White and half were Asian. Among women, eighty percent of partners were White, while thirteen

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[77] *Ibid*, 367.
[78] *Ibid.*
[79] Freundlich, Madelyn and Lieberthal, Joy Kim. *The Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees: Adoptees' Perceptions of International Adoption*.

percent were Asian and three percent were African-American. Adoptees were also asked how they perceived themselves ethnically while growing up and as adults. Fifty-eight percent reported perceiving themselves as Caucasian or American/European, as children, while seventy-eight percent perceived themselves as Asian/Korean or Korean-American/European as adults. Half had some exposure to Korean culture as children. The majority reported experiencing discrimination growing up; most adoptees said that discrimination against them came as a result of their race rather than because of their adoption status.[80] Over half of the respondents had visited Korea, and a quarter had some knowledge of the Korean language. This project was conceived to take advantage of an unusually large congregation of transracial adoptees in one place. It provided a one-time snapshot of Korean adoptee identity, and should be followed up with more comprehensive identity research.

In a previous review of adoptee narrative accounts, I found that past studies have largely failed to portray adoptees' feelings of loneliness and alienation from both adoptive and birth cultures, and loss of birth culture and security. While most adoptees do seem to cope with these feelings successfully, these details are essential parts of the transracial adoptee experience. Most adoptees interviews in my research reported experiences of feeling alone and feeling misunderstood, as if they were the only ones in their situations. Many transracial adoptees also discussed alienation from others of their birth race as well. In their relationships with others of the same race, adoptees described not fitting in or not meeting expectations placed on them. Many said others of the same race could tell they were different, which led to their rejection. Some said they

[80] *Ibid.*

themselves could pick transracial adoptees out of a room by appearance and mannerisms. Other adoptees described feelings of loss and grief about their birth culture. This evidence suggests that the formation of racial identity in transracial adoptees is more complicated than just choosing a preferred affiliation. Navigating race as a person of color in a predominantly White society is always a challenge, but is unusually demanding for transracial adoptees because an exploration of birth race is sometimes seen as rejection of adoptive race and family. Because of this, adoptees have much to lose in racial exploration, and family support is often lacking in adoptees' efforts to this end.

Race, Class, and Gender Coding in Transracial Adoption

Transnational Adoption as Neo-Colonialism

The ranking of adoptees by race and age represents the creation of a value-based hierarchy on an individual level, based on parental preference. These collective preferences create hierarchies on a transnational scale. Now that the dominant form of transracial adoption is transnational as well, comparisons to colonial economic and cultural patterns have become more evident (though domestic transracial adoption practices have also been criticized as the colonialistic plunder by dominant White society of African-American and Native American children). Fieweger documents a shift from Asian to Latin American countries as sources of children for adoption because of the continued high birthrates and poor economic conditions in Latin America, while in Asia birthrates are stabilizing and living conditions are improving.[81] Because of this, Latin

[81] Fieweger, Mary Ellen. "Stolen Children and International Adoptions." *Child Welfare*.

American countries are now motivated by demand to export their children. Fieweger also links the practice of illegal adoption in Ecuador with colonialism:

> "Since the Spanish Conquest, the relationship between Latin American countries and those of the developed world, has not been one of equality. Traditionally, these third-world republics have been providers of natural resources, purchased at bargain prices by the developed world, first Spain, then England, and today, the United States. Many Latin Americans object to international adoption because, as they see it, Latin American children have become another natural resource in demand in the developed world."[82]

Jackson also makes a similar connection, remarking that Mexico has long been used as a source of cheap labor, and that the use of its children as a commodity is consistent with this view.[83] In a pattern reminiscent of colonial economic practices, U.S. and European prospective parents seek to find and adopt the best (most attractive, intelligent, young and healthy) babies foreign countries have to offer, from orphanages or otherwise, leaving the children with the least assets for survival to languish.[84]

While the primary reason parents want to adopt is to address childlessness, many also voice an interest in the cultural enrichment which they feel will result from the adoption. This is perceived as a "bonus" in adopting transnationally among liberal White parents. When parents describe their attitudes about adopting transnationally, many express their appreciation of the "enrichment" they will have as a result of having a foreign-born member of the family. Even though most of their children will grow up totally assimilated into American culture, without any ability to bring into the family the

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[82] *Ibid*, 290.
[83] Jackson, Judy. "Baby Bu$Iness."
[84] Freundlich, Madelyn. *Adoption and Ethics: The Market Forces in Adoption, Adoption and Ethics Series*.

(foreign) cultural enrichment that these parents say they will so appreciate, parents continue to express this view. As parents make these choices according to their beliefs about how adopted children will "turn out," they effectively shop for their children, using socially constructed criteria to decide race and the additional benefit of perceived cultural enrichment. They are participating in the commodification of culture on a grand scale, far greater than the purchase of "ethnic" clothes, goods, or foods.

Colorblindness and Racelessness: Assimilation in Adoptees

Cultural assimilation in the United States always refers to the assimilation of people of color or difference into the dominant White culture. The act of assimilation is often represented as a move towards greater personal or financial success. The loss of culture during assimilation is often considered worth the rewards. Adoptees are assumed to enter the adoption relationship as a population whose assimilation can be considered a *fait accompli*, thus sidestepping the moral complications of the loss of culture within the White family. The perceived success of transracial adoptees supports (in terms of adjustment and self-esteem) the notion that assimilation is the best path for people of difference.

When adoptees themselves, either as children or as adults, have been tested or asked to assess racial or cultural identity, most studies yielded results indicating some degree (usually high) of assimilation into White culture. This is to be expected as most adoptees are raised in White families. Transracial adoptive parents often de-emphasize the adoptee's race by practicing "colorblindness" in the family and by stressing the child's "American-ness." As parents, they want their children to be like them. There is

tremendous desire within families that become racially mixed through adoption for everyone in the family to be "the same." Imagined homogeneity helps these families cope with their outward differences and be more like a "normal" (racially homogenous) family. While many social work and social policy researchers have found a high degree of assimilation to dominant White culture among transracial adoptees, they are divided in their assessment of this finding. Some view high assimilation as high success within the adoptive setting, while others find assimilation more problematic.

Positive Views of High Assimilation

In Simon and Alstein's study, the majority of parents reported that they wanted their children to racially identify as raceless or as White. This being the case, many parents and children also reported either having no racial identity or a White identity. Simon and Alstein's study paints a picture of adult adoptees living, dating, and socializing in a predominantly White world, and coming to a more racialized self-concept later in life. Gill and Jackson also found high assimilation in the adoptee population they studied in Britain. Rorbech reported high assimilation into Danish society and a high instance of Danish identity as a positive outcome.

Simon and Alstein stated that the purpose of their study was "…to find out how racial attitudes, awareness and identity were or were not likely to be affected by the merging of different races within a nuclear family."[85] At time of questioning, sixty-two percent of parents reported having no problems with adopted children and sixty-three percent reported a change in themselves. Some said they had become more racially and

[85] Simon, Rita James; Alstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoption*, 4.

socially sensitive as a result of adopting, though most said it had made them "colorblind."[86] When asked about the racial identity of their children (who averaged five years old at the time of questioning), thirty-two percent of the parents of Black children thought their children identified as Black and thirty to thirty-eight percent of parents thought children of color were too young to consider their own race. A majority (sixty-five to sixty-nine percent) of parents said they wanted their children to identify as having no race, or as having race of both their birth parents and their adoptive parents. Most of the parents (seventy-five percent) were doing things to involve children with their birth race cultures, but twelve percent were doing nothing differently and continued to live as they would have if they did not adopt a child of a different race. Of their own racial identity, seventy percent of parents said their racial identity did not change from White when they adopted, while thirty percent said they themselves changed to become raceless.[87] The perception of the quality of "racelessness" in adopted children or their parents is culturally indistinguishable from whiteness; because we live in a society where the dominant culture is White and non-Whites are "of color," having no race is effectively the same as being White. While these parents were attempting to de-emphasize the race of their children to protect them from the difficulties of difference, in creating an imagined "racelessness," they were unwittingly Whitewashing their children.

Simon and Alstein also asked the children about their social and family relationships. They reported having mostly White friends, and sixty percent said they exclusively dated Whites. They also reported high integration into families. Surveys of

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[86] *Ibid*, 98.
[87] *Ibid.*

the adoptees as adults continued to show a high level of family integration when compared to White children. When asked about transracial adoption policy, seventy percent of the adoptees questioned specifically disagreed with the position of the National Association of Black Social Workers. By this time, almost all adoptees identified themselves by their birth race.[88]

In "Clinical observations of adult intercountry adoptees and their adoptive parents," twenty-nine adoptees over the age of eighteen were interviewed over the phone about their adoption experience. Most said their best friend was White (eighty-three percent), and that they had mostly dated Whites (sixty-nine percent), and the six who had married all had White spouses. Most (seventy-two percent) said they lived in an all-White or mostly White neighborhood. Only five had returned to a country of birth.[89]

Simon and Alstein's work presents a successful trajectory of transracial adoption by drawing conclusions from a highly assimilated population of adoptees who are well-adjusted and have high integration into their White families and high self-esteem. The story has a happy ending because the adoptees have accepted themselves as people of color by the end of the study, even though the majority report living as culturally White and adulthood (the adoptees are in their twenties or later by the end of the study) is late in life to discover and accept one's racial identity.

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[88] Simon, Rita J. and Alstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoptees and Their Families: A Study of Identity and Commitment*.
[89] Alstein, Howard; Coster, Mary; First-Hartling, Laura; Ford, Christy; Glasoe, Britta; Hairston, Sallie; Kasoff, Jamie; Wellborn Grier, Amy. "Clinical Observations of Adult Intercountry Adoptees and Their Adoptive Parents." *Child Welfare.*

In a British study, Gill and Jackson[90] interviewed parents and children in thirty-six transracial adoption families as a part of the long-running British Adoption Project, in which the same families were periodically assessed over time. The book *Adoption and Race: Black, Asian, and Mixed Race Children In White Families* was based on these interviews (the third interview about their adoptions in these families' lives). Gill and Jackson reported no evidence of child isolation within families, and high ability of children to relate with peers (despite the fact that few peers were of color). The experiences of Black and Asian children were not considered separately; all were considered as non-White children. The children showed average or better than average performance in school. They had also developed "white" ethnic identities: "…the large majority of the parents had made only limited or very limited attempts to give their children a sense of racial pride and awareness of their racial origin. The children saw themselves as 'White' in all but skin color…"[91] Children reported having been targets of racial incidents, though they did not consider these incidents a central part of their experiences. Gill and Jackson found no significant difference between the experiences Black and mixed-race children. The concluded they "…can find little support for the criticisms of transracial adoption which are based on the anticipated difficulties of the child."[92]

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[90] Gill, Owen and Jackson, Barbara. *Adoption and Race: Black, Asian, and Mixed Race Children in White Families.*
[91] *Ibid,* 130.
[92] *Ibid.*

In Denmark, most transnational adoptees also come from Asia (over half from Korea).[93] Rorbech's research was based on 384 interviews with adult (aged eighteen to twenty-five) adoptees. Adoptees were asked about their social and family experience, their academic and professional lives, and their experience of discrimination. Rorbech's results focused on discrimination, which most adoptees reported to have not experienced, though over half said they had been teased in school or in social settings outside family. He also reported "positive discrimination", where adoptees felt they had been treated better than others because of their race, in twenty percent of responses. Like the Norwegians, Danish adoptees did not identify with immigrants and seventy-five percent felt of immigrant entry into Denmark should be more controlled by the government and that immigrants should assimilate to Danish ways. Rorbech concludes that Danish transnational adoptees have a strong sense of Danish identity, and that Danish transnational adoptions have been generally successful.[94]

All these researchers advocate for "colorblindness" as a cure for racism, a position echoed by many parents, with the subsequent blending of difference into a melting pot landscape of dominant White culture. Their treatment of assimilation as a sign of success within transracial adoptions indicates a failure to acknowledge that cultural heritage and racial identity is lost in this process. In the minds of these researchers, the problems of childlessness on the part of parents and parentlessness on the part of children has been solved, so the loss of cultural and racial identity not even mentionable.

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[93] Rorbech, Mette. "The conditions of 18- to 25-year-old foreign-born adoptees in Denmark." In *Intercountry Adoption: A Multinational Perspective*
[94] *Ibid.*

Critical Views of High Assimilation

After finding high degrees of assimilation in transracial adoptee populations, several researchers were more critical of this finding. These authors differ from pro-assimilation researchers in their sensitivity to inequities in racial status and in their more critical stance towards the idea of colorblindness. McRoy, Saetersdal/ Dalen, Westhues/Cohen and McRoy/Grape expressed a negative view when considering the relationship between transracial adoption, high assimilation into White communities and racial self-identity.

In her article "Attachment and racial identity issues: Implications for child placement decision making," McRoy, formulated a critique of previous major adoption studies, identifying a trend of colorblindness and a tendency for transracial adoption families to live in predominantly White neighborhoods, including the studies conducted by Simon and Alstein, Grow and Shapiro, and Shireman and Johnson. Unlike these authors, she concluded that colorblindness had negative effects on transracial adoptees. [95]

In Norway, the formal practice of transnational adoption only began in the 1970s.[96] Saetersdal and Dalen surveyed 182 parents of Vietnamese and Indian adoptees and interviewed 98 adult Vietnamese adoptees (older than seventeen years) in their research. They assessed the adoptee group to be open about having been adopted and noted that adoptees were interested in their countries of origin, but somewhat in denial about their ethnic characteristics. These adoptees also showed ambivalence towards

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[95] McRoy, Ruth G. "Attachment and Racial Identity Issues: Implications for Child Placement Decision Making." *Journal of Multicultural Social Work* 3.
[96] Saetersdal, Barbro and Dalen, Monica. 1991. "Norway: Intercountry adoptions in a homogeneous country." In *Intercountry Adoption: A Multinational Perspective.*

refugees from Vietnam and the authors note the potential for self-hatered under these circumstances. They concluded that the success of these adoptions is directly related to the status of racism in Norway; they predicted that if racism increases, these adoptees will have more difficulty, and if society becomes more multicultural, the adoptees will have less difficulty.[97] The implications of this research are that Saetersdal and Dalen found their Asian adoptees too well assimilated, and were concerned about the outcomes of this situation in the racially homogeneous Norwegian society.

Westhues[98] studied transracial adoption in Canada, where adoption workers interviewed all family members in over one hundred adoptive families to compare transnational adoptees with their Canadian-born siblings. Westhues concluded that while adoptees showed high levels of adjustment, transracial adoptees had lower family integration and lower self-esteem than their siblings, but had higher levels of peer relations. Over half the adoptees considered themselves ethnically Canadian or Québécois and a large majority claimed to be comfortable with their ethnic background. In terms of comfort with their racial identity, five to fifteen percent did not think of themselves racially, ten to eleven percent thought of themselves as White, and nine to sixteen percent said they were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with their race.[99] While these findings were similar to those of researchers who supported transracial adoption, Westehus and Cohen interpreted their results differently, showing concern about the high degrees of assimilation, which they interpreted as a problem of racial identity.

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[97] *Ibid.*
[98] Westhues, A.; Cohen, J. S. "The Adjustment of Intercountry Adoptees in Canada." *Children and Youth Services Review*.
[99] *Ibid.*

McRoy and Grape[100] wrote about the implications of skin color in African-American adoptees. They interviewed ten African-American adoptees, some of whom were transracially adopted and some of whom were adopted in-race. All talked about the impact of skin color as an identifier in their lives. McRoy and Grape concluded that even though race-based criteria for adoption became illegal with the Multiethnic Placement Act in 1994, skin color was still an issue in society and "…it is essential that …families and children be prepared to deal with issues of racial dynamics…"[101] This work suggests that race or skin color *does* matter in the lives of adoptees, no matter what pro-assimilation researchers report.

Though these researchers reported similar findings to those who see assimilation in a positive light, they saw assimilation as a less beneficial process. Arguing that racism is insidious within White-dominated societies, they questioned the wisdom of discounting its role within racially mixed adoptive families. Assimilation, through the practice of colorblindness, can be seen as a solution to race problems because it familiarizes Whites with like people of color and can be seen as proof that everyone is, indeed, equal. In transracial adoption, assimilation is a convenient trope through which to reproduce White privilege. White society designates White parents as highly qualified to raise children of color and then rewards the "Whitening" of these children with acceptance into White families. White parents participating in the assimilation of their children are generally blind to the implications of White privilege and ignore the fact that assimilation of adoptees does not solve the problems of disenfranchisement, lack of access and racial

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[100] McRoy, Ruth G. and Grape, Helen. "Skin Color in Transracial and Inracial Adoptive Placements: Implications for Special Needs Adoptions." *Child Welfare*.
[101] *Ibid*, 687.

elitism that underlie racial inequality. Arguably, many social work and social science researchers are just as much in the dark.

Gender and Cultural Hierarchy

Birth mothers of children made available for adoption are often imagined to be unprepared for motherhood, probably poor and unmarried, possibly victims of (or participant in) a variety of social ills. In international adoption, the imagined unfortunate position of birth mothers is compounded by American perceptions of the developing world (to which most sending countries in transracial adoption are considered to belong) as impoverished, dirty, diseased, and immoral. These things must be true, according to the common ideology, or why would she give up her own child? Indeed, the decision to surrender her child "to have a better life" is often depicted as a birth mother's most noble act.

Adoptive parents, on the other hand, are encouraged to see themselves as heroes, the saviors of the unfortunate, and the sharers of their relatively substantial wealth. Through their superior class and their (usually) married status, they are assumed to have more resources and abilities to raise children than the unfortunate birth mothers. Because parenting is so central to the identity of most parents and the family is seen as such a central unit in society, the arena of parenting is a sacred one. Interference in parenting is often perceived as a most unwelcome and presumptuous disruption of the right to individuality. In this way, parenting of transracial adoptees is protected in a way that few other institutions are. Once children of color are placed, the adoptive parents become

agents of assimilation for their children, providers of the tools that children must use to assimilate.

The role of gender in transracial adoption is still developing. The act of child surrender for adoptive placement is almost always seen as a feminized act; birth fathers are not usually viewed as central in this decisionmaking process. Child demand for either boys or girls in early transracial adoptions appear to be comparable. However, in more recent practices of transnational adoption, girls have been in high demand, especially from Asian countries such as Korea and China. This may be a response to alarmist reports of high female abandonment and female infanticide in Asia because of an Asian cultural preference for boys, or it may reflect a belief by American parents that Asian girls will be easier to raise than other gender/race combinations.

Conclusions

Transracial adoption has a relatively short but controversial history in the United States. Transracial and transnational placements continue today; though there is currently a slowdown in transnational placements, the practice is far from ended. While the literature produced by social work and social policy researchers represents a critical archive for understanding transracial adoption, more critical and comprehensive assessments with respect to culture, race, class, gender and globalization are now called for.

Social work and policy research, while not entirely in agreement about the status of transracial adoptees and the best future for transracial adoption, has been characterized by dominant views supporting the continuation of the practice of transracial adoption.

While it is obvious in most of this research to what extent the author or authors support the practice, most do not personally place themselves within the world of transracial adoption by identifying themselves as social workers, adoption workers, or parents or relatives of transracial adoptees. Many of these researchers have used questionable parameters, such as child adjustment into adoptive families and child self-esteem to quantify the success of transracial adoption. Researchers have had more difficulty evaluating racial identity in adoptees, though it is an important factor when assessing the transracial adoptee experience. This research is probably the most influential body of knowledge when policy decisions about transracial adoption are made. Yet it fails to place transracial adoption within the social and historical context of lived racial and class hierarchies to acknowledge the subjugation of birth mothers of color, or to debate the consequences cultural assimilation. Many studies misrepresent transracial adoptees further by appropriating parents, themselves members of the dominant White establishment, to speak for their children in terms of the success of the adoption.

Understanding the transracial adoptee experience is important not only to answer the question of whether parents of one race can successfully raise children of another, but also to better understand our society and culture by illuminating the intersection between race and culture in individuals. Despite the extensive behavioral science research already completed, many questions about the transracial adoptee experience remain unanswered. In order to address generational, gender, and racial differences between adoptees and to examine the role of adoption in racial coding, race relations, and the formation of racial identity, as well as multicultural and multiracial existence within transracial adoption,

adoptees themselves must be consulted. Their life experiences reveal rich examples of the complexity of their identities as Americans, Asian Americans, and adoptees.

Chapter 4

An Adoptee for Every Lake:

Multiculturalism, Minnesota, and the Korean Transracial Adoptee

Sections of this chapter have been previously published as "Mapping Multiple Histories of Korean American Transnational Adoption." Paper WPS 09-1 of the Working Paper Series for the U.S.-Korea Institute at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University. Available electronically at http://uskoreainstitute.org/pdf/WP-Diaspora/USKI_WPS_0901.pdf . January, 2009.

I didn't realize there were other Korean adoptees out there…much less a bunch of them in Minnesota. I had no clue, like…at all…I had no clue that there were… issues to discuss…you know, a community of people.[1]

-Fern, 34, Korean adoptee who currently lives in Minnesota

I began my research—and incidentally, my own Korean American adoption experience—in Minnesota, which is home to a higher concentration of Korean adoptees than almost any place in the world. The population of Korean American adoptees in the state of Minnesota, estimated to be between 10,000 and 15,000, is often compared to the state motto, "The Land of 10,000 Lakes." In actuality, there are about 15,000 lakes in Minnesota, so it would be accurate to say that there is indeed a Korean adoptee for every lake. In this chapter, I examine Korean adoptees in relation to American transracial adoption and explore how Korean adoption became the predominant type of transracial adoption in and since the 1970s and 1980s through the present day. Through the growing popularity of a particular popular variety of multiculturalism, which celebrated difference without correcting racial injustice, Korean and other forms of transracial adoption became celebrated as a form of liberal, colorblind family building. This is especially true in Minnesota, which during this time had begun to embrace a trend of popular multiculturalism, a cultural shift that had special significance for many Minnesota Korean adoptees who were being raised in multiracial families, though in predominantly White communities. The experiences of Minnesota Korean adoptees reveal that this form of multiculturalism had limited usefulness in their lives because it failed to protect them

[1] Oral history 45.

from racism and isolation, and that they had to connect with their racial and cultural identities primarily outside their supposed multicultural families.

A Brief History of American Transracial Adoption

While the practice of Korean transnational adoption has a fifty-plus-year history specific to the aftermath of the Korean War and subsequent South Korean-U.S. geopolitical relations, a parallel history embedded in the practice of American transracial adoption is equally relevant. This history includes the changing social and cultural dispositions of Americans toward the practice of multi-racial family building through adoption, as well as the policy and practice which has made these adoption more and more commonplace since the 1950s.

Korean transnational adoption began in 1953,[2] just five years after the first American domestic African American to White transracial adoption in 1948.[3] Just five years after Korean transnational adoption began, in 1958[4], the U.S. Indian Adoption Project began as a national program with the goal of placing American Indian children in White American homes. Clearly, American domestic transracial adoption as a formal practice barely predates the start of Korean transnational adoption and their histories are largely overlapping and intertwined. Therefore, the entire period of sustained large-scale transracial adoption, including transnational adoptions which were almost always also transracial placements (until Russia and former Eastern Bloc nations began to open

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[2] Hübinette, Toibas. "Korean Adoption History." In *Guide to Korea for Overseas Adopted Koreans.*
[3] "Transracial Adoptions." The Adoption History Project.
[4] "Indian Adoption Project."The Adoption History Project.

transnational adoption programs in the 1990s)[5] since they began in the 1950s and this pattern continues today, the only difference being an increase in the frequency of adoptions since then. Roughly 15,000 transnational adoptions occurred between 1953 and 1962. Greater numbers of these placements took place in the United States starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with 37,469 transnational adoptions from 1965 to 1976.[6] Korean and other transnational adoptions would become increasingly common in subsequent years. The number of United States transnational adoptions almost doubled between 1989 and 1998, with 15,744 transnational adoptions in 1998.[7] In 2006, there were 20,679 transnational adoptions.[8]

In-country adoption statistics are largely unavailable since 1977, when the U.S. government stopped collecting this information. It is known that 831 Black children were adopted into White families in 1975[9] as compared to 2,995 Korean adoptions that same year.[10] An estimated 1,411 Black children were adopted into White homes in 1987.[11] The year before, Korean adoptions to the United States had peaked at 6,138.[12]

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[5] Selman, Peter. "Intercountry Adoption in the Twenty-First Century: An Examination of the Rise an Fall of Countries of Origin." In *Proceedings of the First Korean Adoption Studies Research Symposium*.
[6] Simon, Rita James and Altstein, Howard. *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions*.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] "Immigrant Visas Issued to Orphans Coming to the U.S." U.S. Department of State.
[9]Simon, Rita James and Altstein, Howard. *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions*.
[10] Weil, Richard H. "International adoption: The quiet migration." *International Migration Review*.
[11] Simon, Rita James and Altstein, Howard. *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions*..
[12] Pilotti, Francisco. "Intercountry adoption: Trends, issues and, policy implications for the 1990's". *Childhood*.

The number of domestic transracial adoptions is believed to be stable, with African-American adoption to White homes estimated to represent 1.2 percent of all adoptions.[13]

A Transition to Transnational Transracial Adoption

The increase in transracial and transnational adoptions during the 1960s and 1970s has been attributed to a number of factors. The set of circumstances most cited is that the available number of adoptable White infants decreased during this time because of new access to family planning,[14] while the swelling baby boom population was just reaching the age of parenthood, creating high demand for adoptable children. The civil rights movement may have also furthered the practice of transracial adoptions as more attempts to desegregate American society were made and Whites became more comfortable sharing their lives with people of other races. The wealth of middle class adoptive parents has always enabled them to bear the costs of adopting children with greater economic ease. Children born to working class parents are more often given up for adoption.[15] During the 1960s and 1970s, class division may have translated to Black and White, since the middle class was composed primarily of Whites and the working class had more African-Americans. At the same time, as the number of adoptable children decreased, adoption agencies became more selective in their placement with adoptive parents, with the result that parents were required to pass certain standards of

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[13] Simon, Rita James and Altstein, Howard. *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions*.
[14] Pohl, Constance and Harris, Kathy. *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak.*
[15] May, Elaine Tyler. *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness.*

income and age and be infertile. These criteria may have restricted access to adoptable African-American children by African-Americans wanting to adopt[16] and indirectly encouraged further transracial adoption of non-Whites by Whites. The North American Council on Adoptable Children determined that relatively few Black adoptive families could be found for in-race adoption because of a lack of cultural support within adoption agencies and the fact that parents were poorly recruited in Black communities.[17] Some researchers have also suggested that African-Americans are less interested in adoption than White Americans: "Evidence seems to suggest that the plight of adoptable black children does not rank high on the list of black adults' social priorities, even when they seem to be aware of the problem's severity."[18]—though this view is hotly contested.

The second half of the twentieth century was characterized by rapid advances in reproductive technologies, both scientific and sociopolitical: medical advances such as *in vitro* fertilization were accompanied by social innovations such as formalized and legally regulated adoption.[19] These medical and social technologies became more popular during the 1970s and 1980s, and were considered commonplace by the 1990s. While medical interventions for infertility have become increasingly common as time has passed, not all forms of adoption have increased in frequency. Domestic transracial

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[16] Pohl, Constance and Harris, Kathy. *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak.*

[17] McRoy, Ruth G. "Attachment and Racial Identity Issues: Implications for Child Placement Decision Making." *Journal of Multicultural Social Work*.

[18] Simon, Rita James; Altstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoption,* 34.

[19]Here both medical and social "advances" that enable parenting for infertile couples or individuals are understood as technologies, including both medical procedures and social changes. Through these technologies, cultural expectations of parenting in Western countries have transformed into rights, in that many adults now understand parenting to be an option even if they are unable or unwilling to conceive without medical or legal procedures.

placements have stalled since the 1970s [20] while (first) Korean and (then) other transnational adoption placements have become much more common. Why is this? Opponents of transnational adoption in American communities of color successfully lobbied against the growing incidence of these placements starting in the 1970s. Opposition to the practice of transracial domestic adoption, which crystallized in the early 1970s within the African American and American Indian communities led to implementation of within-race adoption policies at most adoption agencies by 1975.

At its conference in 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) announced its formal opposition to transracial adoption with a position paper titled "Preserving Families of African Ancestry,"[21] which prediced that transracial adoptees would have poor psychological adjustment and racial identity, and would be unable to cope with episodes of racism and discrimination without the guidance of a parent of the same color; subsequently, the organization led efforts to end out-of-race adoption of African American children under a stated goal of protecting children and preventing "cultural genocide."[22] A year earlier, a meeting of American Indian leaders had issued a statement that also identified transracial adoption as "cultural genocide."[23]

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[20] Quiroz, Pamela Anne. *Adoption in a Color-Blind Society (Perspectives on a Multiracial America)*.
[21] Preserving Families: Preserving Families of African Ancestry. National Association of Black Social Workers Position Paper.
[22] Roberts, Dorothy. *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*, 246.
[23]Jones, Charles E.; Else, John F. "Racial and Cultural Issues in Adoption." *Child Welfare United States*, 374.

This was also to be the peak year of domestic transracial adoption in the United States, with 2,574 total placements.[24]

In 1978, the federal government enacted the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), prohibiting the transracial placement of American Indian children outside the Indian tribe of their birth without the consent of the tribe. This legislation was possible because of the relationship American Indians had with the U.S. federal government; since Indian nations have limited rights of sovereignty with respect to the U.S. government, they can be granted protections and rights as nations that are not available to other groups of American people of color. ICWA also represented an acknowledgment of many decades of governmental abuses of American Indians families, including forced removal of children by placement in White-run boarding schools (1878-1930s) or by adoption into White families (1958-1967).

The NABSW statement and the passage of ICWA sent a clear message decrying the abuses inherent in transracial adoption from the American communities of color that had been supplied children to the project of transracial adoption. As domestic transracial adoptions declined throughout the 1970s in response to these two events and the social forces surrounding them,[25] many social workers began to question the appropriateness of transracial placements. While an increase in the number of adoptions from other communities or countries was probably not among the goals of the NABSW or the proponents of ICWA, this was most certainly a major outcome of both of these important

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[24] Carp, Wayne. "Introduction: A Historical Overview of American Adoption." *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives*.
[25]Jones, Charles E.; Else, John F. "Racial and Cultural Issues in Adoption." *Child Welfare*.

milestones in 1970s American adoption history. The hunger for adoptable children among the American adoptive public would not be easily suppressed, but would find other sources of children from which to draw.

Opposition to transracial adoption in the 1970s focused on past and potential racism in the adoption of African Americans and American Indians, American minority populations who had high visibility in civil rights movements at the time. Asians and Asian Americans, on the other hand, had relatively small populations in the United States during the 1970s,[26] and those who were in America tended to be geographically concentrated in a few areas. Partly because of their small populations and low visibility, this group, in comparison to African Americans and American Indians, was (and is) popularly perceived as largely unaffected by racial discrimination and other forms of racism. While the plight of African Americans and American Indians was well publicized in the 1970s, that of Asian Americans was not. In addition, tacit beliefs in a racial hierarchy, that placed Asian closest to White as the "model minority" contributed to the perception that Asian Americans were not suffering the effects of racism; since the anti-transracial adoption claims of the NABSW and in the ICWA emphasized histories of racial discrimination against African Americans and American Indians, the perceived absence of racial discrimination against Asian Americans made the transracial adoption

[26] Asian American population in the United States was less than 1% in the 1970 census, and less than 0.5% in 1960. "Table 8, Race and Hispanic Origin of the Population by Nativity: 1850 to 1990, Historical Census, Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the Unites States: 1850 to 1990." Bureau of the Census.

of Asians into White homes appear "safe," avoiding the appearance of racial/cultural conflicts debated around domestic transracial adoptions.[27]

Unlike the African American and American Indian communities, no Asian American communities have produced any significant anti-adoption critique or policy. This is probably in part because the sending communities of birth parents are overseas and their populations do not participate directly in U.S. domestic policy debates. Since there is a very low incidence of domestic transracial adoption from Asian American communities, the abuses of the very hierarchical transnational adoption system are generally not visited on U.S. citizens, but on the least privileged communities in countries on the other side of the globe. In addition, Asian American immigrant communities appear to be largely unaware of or unconcerned about the issue of transnational adoption, and they generally do not include Asian adoptees as part of their population.[28] This division is apparent when Asian adoptees encounter Asian American groups and organizations. When I addressed National Association for Korean Schools National Conference in July of 2008 and reported that Korean adoptees constitute 10% of the Korean American population overall and up to 50% in my home state of Minnesota, an audible gasp of shock arose from the audience, most of whom had never realized that such a large number of Korean adoptees were in their midst. In addition, until very recently, Asian adoptees have been virtually ignored within Asian American Studies as a group with a distinct social, cultural or political history, and are not usually counted to be

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[27] Jacobson, Heather. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*.

[28] There are some very limited exceptions: for example one of the Korean/Korean American churches in Minnesota has taken an active role in reaching out to local Korean adoptees.

among Asian diasporas. To date the fact that Asian American communities have not responded negatively to transnational Asian adoptions (though groups of birth mothers in South Korea are starting to organize with Korean adoptees living there to reform Korean adoption, much along similar lines as NABSW recommendations), serves as a tacit support for American adoptive parents in their belief that their Asian adopted children can expect a life free of negative exposure to racism.

The expression of formalized adoption in the United States began to produce growing pains as adoptive families struggled for acceptance as "normal" American families and legal dramas which pitted birth parents and adoptive parents started to become public. American family law has historically privileged parents over other family members in custody disputes, and legal precedents for the rights of birth parents' ownership or guardianship of their children had been established long before legal adoption became commonplace in the mid-nineteenth century.[29] Carp writes, "…the United States has retained a pervasive cultural bias toward blood ties, and many people still view adoption as a second-rate form of kinship."[30] Until the passage of the Multiethnic Placement Act in 1994 (the first federal statute favoring adoptive placement over family reunification) this general belief that adoptive placements created second-class families, supported by the legal precedent in child custody law, had given rise to legal interpretations favoring family unification over adoptive placement.[31] The anxiety around the prospect of birth families with potentially legitimate legal claims to adopted or

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[29] Carp, Wayne. "Introduction: A Historical Overview of American Adoption." *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives*.
[30] *Ibid,* 20.
[31] Carp, E. Wayne. *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption*.

about-to-be adopted children in the United States was and is a barrier for many prospective parents considering domestic adoption.[32] In contrast, birth parents of foreign children in transnational adoption are largely understood to have no rights and no claims to their relinquished children. The scant evidence that we have concerning any transnational adoption disputed by members of the birth family is largely anecdotal, because these cases are rarely covered by the press and have generally not resulted in return of children to birth parents.[33] Instead, adoption agencies working in the sending countries seem to have taken to solving these problems on their own, perhaps taking advantage of the low social and economic class positions of birth parents, especially mothers, in many sending nations. So if the legal practices extended to birth parents within American domestic adoption protects birth parents, this means in the free market of contemporary adoption where adoptive parents often see their own interests in competition with those of birth parents, the less privileged position of foreign birth parents is preferable.

Furthermore, since the 1980s,[34] the American child welfare system has used child removal (state removal of children from the custody and guardianship of their parents) as a supposedly child-centered remedy for a host of reasons, including child neglect or abuse, and legal problems of parents, including substance abuse and incarceration. Unfortunately, these policies have been applied unevenly, with the result that children

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[32] Jacobson, Heather. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*.
[33] David M. Smolin. "Child Laundering: How the Intercountry Adoption System Legitimizes and Incentivizes the Practices of Buying, Trafficking, Kidnapping, and Stealing Children" *Wayne Law Review.*
[34] Roberts, Dorothy. *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*.

from poor, Black and Brown homes enter the child welfare system in disproportionately high numbers. While these policies have undoubtedly made more children in the American child welfare system available for adoption, ironically, they have also made these children less appealing to prospective parents because the children are understood to have been "damaged" by abuse or neglect or by being from bad homes or born of "bad stock," recalling long-held prejudices against adopted children as "bad seeds."[35]

Because large-scale transnational adoption was established in the United States around the same time as domestic transracial adoption, and because it has not faced the same kinds of attacks as domestic adoption, it is not unreasonable that the adopting public might begin to prefer transnational adoption from Korea. By the 1970s, South Korea was the only country with a long and established history of overseas adoption and became an easy alternative to domestic adoption for American adoptive parents. And indeed, in the 1970s and 1980s, Korean adoption numbers began to rise[36] and domestic transracial adoption numbers leveled or dropped off.

The Problem of Multiculturalism

What changes in American society permitted and encouraged the increasing prevalence of race mixing within adoptive families? By the early 1980s, two liberal movements were gaining in American society: increasing social liberalism with respect to race (which developed into new ideals of multiculturalism) and increasing economic

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[35] Briggs, Laura and Ana Teresa Ortiz. "The Culture of Poverty, Crack Babies, and Welfare Cheats the Making of the "Healthy White Baby Crisis"." *Social Text*.
[36] Weil, Richard H."International adoption: The quiet migration." *International Migration Review* and Pilotti, Francisco. "Intercountry adoption: Trends, issues and, policy implications for the 1990's". *Childhood*.

liberalism with respect to the process of adoption as a form of transracial and transnational consumerism began at this time. These two aspects of liberalism worked together to make adoption, particularly adoption from outside the United States appealing to prospective parents for whom multiculturalism became a point of entry to family building.

The liberalization of social mores around race began in the burgeoning civil right movements in the 1950s, that claimed equal rights for all persons, regardless of race, passed through power movements affirming the identities of different groups of people of color, and ended up inadvertently contributing to colorblind understandings of familial relations, commonly rendered in transracial adoption as disregard for racial and genetic difference between White parents and non-White children, focusing instead on the relational bonds made through the parent-child relationship.

Economic liberalism that configured consumer choice as a key right of the individual contributed to the increase in transracial adoption; the logics of growing economic liberalism, especially during and after the 1970s, encouraged the marketing of adoptable children, often from economically and socially impoverished backgrounds, to more socially advantageous familiy positions in White America by emphasizing prospective parents' options and choices in the adoptive process. When prospective parents are matched with an adoptable child, the exchange of adoption fees for the legal parentage of the child closely mirrors more mundane forms of consumer behavior. On a transnational scale, this process, sometimes referred to as "globalization," confers a form of global citizenship through participation in a global consumer marketplace.

The term "multiculturalism" originated in Canada and Australia in the early 1970s[37] and began to be used in American educational policy discourse later in the decade.[38] By the 1980s, multiculturalism had begun to catch on as a popular ideal. However, its meaning quickly became a topic of heated debate, fracturing into so many different (sometimes opposing) ideologies that it can now be used by anyone for almost any purpose.[39] Multiculturalism currently takes many forms, from the demand for recognition of minority groups and individuals,[40] to the "salad bowl" or mosaic concept of many cultures making a whole society,[41] and from the belief in a "post-racial" society with culture, but with no race,[42] to the assimilationist or "weak" multicultural demand for accommodation of difference while maintaining individualist agendas.[43] In this hodgepodge of ideologies, multiculturalism has taken on so many definitions that it has become more a set of arguments than a unified ideology. Because the meaning of multiculturalism has become so scattered and dilute, many invoke its name without first coming to agreement on its definition. Some forms of multiculturalism are radical, some liberal, some even conservative. But despite the potential—or the certainty of—

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[37] Joppke, C. and S. Lukes. "Introduction: Multicultural Questions." In *Multicultural Questions*.
[38] Newfield, Christopher and Avery F. Gordon. "Multiculturalism's Unfinished Business." In *Mapping Multiculturalism*.
[39] *Ibid.*
[40] Taylor, Charles. *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*.
[41] Joppke, C. and S. Lukes. "Introduction: Multicultural Questions." In *Multicultural Questions*.
[42] Roediger, David R.(Author). *How Race Survived US History: From the American Revolution to the Present*.
[43] Shachar, Ayelet. "The Paradox of Multicultural Vulnerability: Individual Rights, Individual Groups, and the State." In *Multicultural Questions*.

misunderstanding, the value of multiculturalism in the public imagination is so high that the term is in constant use and under constant debate.

Newfield and Gordon summarize several popular contemporary understandings of multiculturalism, one of which—assimilationism—seems to well describe the multiculturalism operating present-day transnational adoption. They describe assimilationism as rooted in cultural pluralism but state that it "…sets the fundamental conditions for full economic and social citizenship in the United States." [44] Alhough assimilationism puts on the role of pluralism by promising access to upward mobility for individuals, it ultimately strives for the universal observance of common core values, "…rejects racialized group consciousness…[and] …ignores the way supposedly neutral institutions are pro-White."[45]

During the 1980s, the realization of the "rainbow family" consisting of one or more transracially and/or transnationally adopted children came to be seen as more and more as one ideal way to practice this kind of assimilationism in the guise of multiculturalism. This was a family that operated as a normative unit despite the lack of biological relationships between family members and that could serve as proof that the family—the most basic building block of community, society, and nation—could successfully bridge race, class and social barriers. The "weak" multiculturalism that became so popular in the 1980s attempted to celebrate difference without acknowledging racist American national histories and polices. In this framework, there were still some critical structural issues in positioning these families as 1980s multicultural ideals.

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[44] Newfield, Christopher and Avery F. Gordon. "Multiculturalism's Unfinished Business." In *Mapping Multiculturalism*, 80.
[45] *Ibid,* 80-81.

Historically (and currently), Korean and other transracial adoption has largely been a White act, meaning the overwhelming majority children were adopted into homes where both parents (and therefore, the extended family) are White. Jacobson documents the embrace of weak, celebratory multiculturalism constituted only by the acknowledgement of ethnic difference in the 1990s in communities of trasnationally adoptive families.[46] Similar to the way weak multiculturalism was embraced by many White Americans, these multiracial adoptive families did little to empower communities of color or to correct the effects of past racist practices. Instead, they imported and placed adoptees as people of color in largely assimilative situations, where the experiences of birth culture could only be vaguely imagined by the White family using flawed cues from popular culture. In the case of Korean adoption, most families did not travel to Korea to obtain their children. Because South Korea is one of the only sending nations that allows proxy adoption, most adoptive parents have never been to Korea at all, and many know few or no Korean Americans who might teach adopted children about Korean culture.

For Korean children adopted during the height of Korean adoption to the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, the role of multiculturalism as an ideology and gateway to identity cannot be underestimated. Though the popular multiculturalism of the time was deeply flawed as an ideology of empowerment for people of color, I argue that because adoptees had been placed positioned as embodiments of multicultural ideals, and because they quickly built culturally operational capital in their White communities even as they remained aware of their positions as racially othered, they were able to coalesce as a

[46] Jacobson, Heather. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*.

community and take control of their identities as *both* White *and* Asian American. This dual identity is readily evident in adoptees of this generation in Minnesota, the American state with the highest per-capita numbers of Korean adoptees in the country, where Korean adoptees make up of half the Korean American population and are decidedly visible in everyday society.

The Korean Adoptee Homeland: Why Minnesota?

In the United States, many people familiar with the Korean American adoptee community already know that there is a high concentration of Korean adoptees living in Minnesota. I am frequently asked, "Why are there so many Korean adoptees in Minnesota?" I argue that there are several historical, structural, and sociocultural reasons for the Korean adoptee concentration in Minnesota, and that these conditions have worked in concert to make Minnesota an American homeland of sorts for Korean adoptees. Many thousands more Korean adoptees live in Minnesota than Korea, though their level of engagement as adoptees with other adoptees may well be lower in the Twin Cities than is Seoul, where it seems most Korean adoptees regularly engage with other Korean adoptees. Still, Minnesota is probably the only place in the United States where the practice of Korean adoption has become so normalized and commonplace that a viable and visible Korean adoptee community has developed along many different axes, including support for Korean adoptive families and children, adoptee-led networking and activism, news and publishing that privileges Korean adoption experiences, Korean adoptee artistic expression, participation by Korean adoptees in the Korean-American community, and formal adoption research.

From a historical standpoint, Minnesota has a long history of progressive social politics and policies. The radical left Farmer Labor party was the most successful left wing party in the country in the 1930s and would merge with the state Democratic party as the Democratic Farmer Labor party in 1948.[47] In addition, there is a tradition of populist engagement with state policy through civic organizations like the Citizens League.[48] This is one important factor that has led to, "…activist government and innovative social welfare programs [because]…government…has been viewed as a positive instrument for the betterment of society…"[49] Minnesota has a strong history of liberal policies around issues like welfare reform, health care, education, and social policy. This history of progressivism was made possible (until recently) by the general economic well-being of the state coupled with high political participation among a fairly homogeneous voting population with progressive-to-liberal political values.[50]

Historically, there has been strong popular support for the welfare state among the state's White ethnics, who are predominantly descended from Scandinavian Lutheran and German Lutheran immigrants. It is notable that these cultures in Europe, especially Scandinavians, do not have social conventions against adoption or non-biological kinship; in Europe, the country with the both the largest number of, and as the highest per capita population of Korean adoptees is Sweden. The fact that Minnesota (as well as Sweden, incidentally) has historically been racially homogeneous helped support its

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[47] Brandl, John E. "Policy and Politics in Minnesota." *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.*
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] O'Keefe, Michael. "Social Services: Minnesota as Innovator." *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.*
[50] *Ibid.*

racially progressive policies when it came to family matters; Minnesota was one of nine states to never enact anti-miscegenation legislation, probably in no small part because few people of color resided in Minnesota during the era of anti-miscegenation fervor from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, The general absence of Black-White racial power struggles in the history of the state largely allowed Minnesotans avoid racial anxieties that might lead to racist legislation. The state's high degree of racial homogeneity also meant that racial politics in the state have tended to be assimilative. Though Minnesotans may not have been threatened by small racial or cultural differences, the extreme isolation that people of color, including Korean adoptees, faced in the state encouraged assimilative adaptation; this is entirely consistent with adoption industry rhetoric from the 1950s to the 1970s that encouraged White adoptive parents to prevent their adopted children from having contact with their birth culture. In 1948, Minnesota was site of first transracial adoption of an African American child into a White family, and the state's infrastructure, social norms and reputation as a state friendly to transracial adoption began to develop.

It is therefore not surprising that Minnesota also is home to child welfare organizations *cum* adoption agencies that also have long histories of facilitating adoption. Most notable among them are Lutheran Social Services, which initiated a Korean adoption program in 1967,[51] and Children's Home Society, founded in 1889 to facilitate adoptions of poor children born in East Coast cities who arrived on the orphan trains.[52]

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[51] Haggar, Lynne, Post-Adoption Services Coordinator, Lutheran Social Services.
[52] The orphan train project operated between 1854 and 1929 with ideology that impoverished urban children (many of them Catholic and Jewish) would fare better in Midwestern rural settings; the orphan trains were filled with children traveling West to be

Children's Home Society expanded its adoption program to transracial and transnational adoption in the mid-1950s during the Korean War. It is the only agency in Minnesota that still facilitates overseas Korean adoptions. Since the mid-1970s, when in-race adoptable children for White prospective parents became less available and transracial adoption became less socially acceptable, both of these Minnesota adoption agencies actively promoted Korean adoption over other options because of its relative ease and predictability. By that time, Korean adoptions had been underway for over 20 years, and the agencies could offer prospective parents a reliable timeline and reasonable fee structure should they choose to adopt from Korea.

By the mid-1980s, the peak years of overseas adoption from Korea, there was such a critical mass of Korean adoptions taking place in Minnesota that it had become an obvious option for prospective parents considering adoption. Korean adoption had become normalized in Minnesota (as it still is), and I argue that a snowball effect eventually took over: adoption from Korea was no longer an act that parents felt would necessarily isolate them, but could actually connect them and their families with a growing community of adoptive families with children from Korea. For adoptees, this has translated today into a sizable adoptee community in Minnesota, with estimated numbers between 10-15,000 Korean adoptees. As a result, there are a relatively large number of community resources for adoptive families and adoptees, including Korean culture camps, arts groups that teach traditional Korean drumming and dance performance, Korean adoption-centered publications, and two Korean adoptee groups

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raised on Protestant farms in the Midwest. Some were embraced as members of families, others essentially became child farm laborers.

(Minnesota Adopted Koreans, established in 1991,[53] and AKConnection established in 2000). As the adoptee population grew in Minnesota, so did the interest of researchers (and of adoptees in other states); the large adoptee population made Minnestoa a productive location for adoption research. The University of Minnesota is now one of the leading institutions in the field of transracial and transnational adoption research, with studies underway in medicine, psychology, family social science, and social work, as well as in Asian American and American studies.

Even though the above reasons show how and why Minnesota has ended up a population center for Korean adoptees, I also argue that one more reason exists that encompasses the others: Minnesotans wanted, want and continue to want Korean adoptees. Whether this is an outgrowth of Lutheran humanitarianism, or a product of progressive political engagement around enacting multiculturalism, or because everyone else seemed to be doing it, Minnesotans have exhibited high demand for transracial and transnational adoptees, and have found ways to get them. For Korean adoptees, even though those who grew up in other states, the critical mass of adoptees living in Minnesota, especially in the Twin Cities, has made it a desirable place to live. While the social and cultural climate around transracial and specifically, Korean adoption in Minnesota is complex that adoption communities are highly active historically, socially, culturally, artistically and academically, and Minnesota therefore a vital locale for the study of Korean adoptees in America.

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[53] Kim, Eleana. "Remembering Loss: The Cultural Politics of Overseas Adoption from South Korea."

I chose to begin my oral history collection process in Minnesota for several reasons. I myself am a Korean adoptee who was raised in Minnesota and my largest personal network of adoptee contacts is in Minnesota. Working in Minnesota was therefore a personal convenience. But in addition, there are a large number of Korean adoptees present in Minnesota, which has led to a high degree of Korean adoptee visibility in Minnesota. These factors combined made the Korean adoptee population in Minnesota an ideal site for me to begin the work of meeting and learning more about the adoptees around me in an attempt to deepen my knowledge about the adoptee community in Minnesota and elsewhere.

Between February of 2003 and December of 2006, I collected oral histories from 34 adoptees living in (or who had lived or grown up in) Minnesota, most in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. At the time they gave their oral histories, they ranged in age between 21 and 44; most were in their late twenties to mid-thirties, with an average age of 31. Only eight were men, meaning most of the contacts I made among the Minnesotan adoptees were women, which reflects the fact that a larger proportion of girls were adopted from Korea until the 1980s, and probably also my own position as a woman and my broader appeal to women subject. Of these 34, six gave their oral histories in Korea because they had relocated to their birth county as adults. Of these six persons, I only had known two before they left Minnesota for Korea. The other 28 gave oral histories in Minnesota while they lived there. Seven had grown up n other states and had moved to Minnesota as adults and the other 27 were raised in Minnesota.

A (Minnesota) Korean Adoptee Identity

For many Korean adoptees, configuring an identity that takes into account their experiences as Asians in a largely White family and community, and as people of color who have more experience in White-dominated environments than in non-White ones, is difficult considering the culturally limited set of identity choices available to them. In addition to their experiences as culturally and socially multiplicative in between racial and cultural boundaries, many also seek identity formations that address the racism they experience as Asian Americans and the infantalization they experience as adoptees. For many adult adoptees now in their 30s and 40s, this complicated identity formation process began and continues to operate in an environment of weak liberal multiculturalism, first popularized in the 1980s, and is rendered using the logics of and reactions to this ideology.

I have collected more oral histories from adoptees who live or have lived in Minnesota than any other place; I took my first and my last oral history in Minnesota. The home of many thousand of Korean adoptees, it was and is my home as well, the place where I was raised and live currently.

Many of the Minnesota adoptees who gave me their oral histories spoke about similar topics: experiences with racism and racialization; feelings of racial and social isolation in Minnesota; encounters with other people of color, especially other Asians or Asian Americans; pilgrimages to South Korea; and connecting with other adoptees. While all adoptees who gave oral histories did not discuss all of these topics (for instance, several adoptees had not traveled back to Korea, and therefore had nothing to say about

this experience), all of them covered at least one of these topics, and common themes quickly emerged as I collected more oral histories.

Experiences of Racism

Most of the subjects I have encountered have some experience with racism in their lifetimes, though I suspect that many of these subjects have minimized their racialized experiences both to themselves and to me. Because injuries of a racial nature are so contentious in American society, and because the concept of a harmonious racial co-existence is so strongly emphasized in transracial adoptive families who have embraced the ideology of colorblind multiculturalism all but the most grievous racial injuries are often considered unimportant—or worse, somehow deserved. Most of the research participants spoke only occasionally of racism they had experienced in school or at work. Though racist slurs and remarks are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the racism and discrimination that adoptees face, most adoptees understand that these kinds of experiences are significant, that such statements are likely to be interpreted by White people as racist. John, age 33, remarked:

> *I was little and I remember being on the bus and people calling me names, but I, I guess I wasn't one to get back in people's faces or shout back at them. I just tried to ignore them. I guess that was kind of the way I dealt with it, by, maybe not trying to instigate it; if they said something, just ignoring it. I think most people in society don't react, they usually go on and try to pick on someone else then. Then when I went to high school, then it was sports…it's such a small town that people knew who I was and they weren't gonna make fun of me so the only thing I experienced at the high school was when we played opposing teams, they would make some comment, and you know, that went all the way through college.*[54]

[54] Oral History 38.

John ignored the racism he suffered as a younger child, but dealt with it as an adolescent and young adult by engaging in sports activities, where he could build and identity based on his physical skills rather than on his race, even though insults from opposing teams still took the form of racial slurs.

Amy, age 32, remembers how she dealt with childhood racist name-calling:

> *In neighborhoods where the kids didn't know me, where if I went anywhere, you can really start to pick it up. The kids teasing you. I mean, name-calling, "flat nose," I mean everything. You know. That's when I really started picking it up, so I think at that point, is when I just didn't want to be different anymore. And I think that started, you know, subconsciously first, I just didn't want to be different. And then when you move more into the junior high phase, is when then I knew, right then and there, I just wanted to be all-American… I permed my hair, you know, I had this huge like 80's perm.*[55]

Both of these adoptees chose to internalize experiences of racism and attempt to disappear into the mainstream, through participation in sports and through changing appearance to look more "White."

Much more frequently than name-calling outside the family, adoptee participants reported racist incidents that arose during family arguments or debates. While few adoptees have reported overt racism directed at them from family members, a number did talk about racism directed at others as personally hurtful to them. Diane, age 28, remarked that she knew her father harbored racist feeling towards other people of color, but not towards her. She describes this conflict by relating an argument with her father:

> *"You don't get it. If you're racist towards them, then you have to understand how that affects me. Because somebody else could be*

[55] Oral History 3.

> *racist towards me because of the way I look."' We just go around and around and around.*[56]

Erin, age 26, related an experience with an uncle, which has contributed to her estrangement from her family:

> *I was 19 and we were talking about politics he said in the discussion, "I still don't have a problem calling people gooks and niggers." He said that to me, and I started bawling and actually I left and I still haven't talked to him since.* [57]

Far from the popular neo-conservative understanding that colorblindness is inherently anti-racist, many of these subjects made a strong connection between their family's colorblindness and the racism they suffered in their families, in that parent commitment to the colorblind ideal prevented parents from being able to identify racism beyond superficial name-calling. Diane, age 28, stated:

> *I think that there is a certain element of colorblindness which is unfortunately is one of the biggest downfalls that greatly negatively affects adoption, is that these parents become so colorblind that they forget that your race is part of who you are and they need to embrace that and celebrate that and help prepare you for the great big world that you're going into. I know that my parents because of the area that they grew up in and because of the way they were raised that they do harbor racism.*[58]

When I asked Diane if her parents thought of her as a person of color, she responded,

> *I don't think my parents ever clued into racism. I think that were moments when I was a child and they were called because I would cry because someone had called me a chink or a gook. ...I* [did] *not understand it, but I certainly knew that it was offensive, and they would do whatever they could to band-aid that situation, but I*

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[56] Oral History 7.
[57] Oral History 8.
[58] Oral History 7.

> *don't think they ever really recognized racism… just by being in such a largely Caucasian, Catholic setting.*[59]

Another said, "*Barely. Probably not*." Diane also had experiences in her family that she identified as evidence of a buried racism that resulted not from her family's acknowledgment of her racial difference, but from their denial, which is identifiable as a very personalized form of colorblindness:

> *But I never went to camp, I never went to classes. A few years ago when I was starting to get involved in Korean stuff I must have made a comment to my parents about not having done that stuff, and my mom said, "Well, you never showed an interest." And I thought, "Jesus Christ, I never showed an interest in school either and that didn't prevent you from sending me." …Back then we just didn't have a lot of dialogue about it… From the time you realize who you are, as a child you realize that you're a person, so from the first moment of consciousness, you know that you don't quite fit. Because you're adopted and because you don't look like your family, for all those reasons, you just kind of tuck that away, and sometimes it's more on the surface and sometimes it goes back into the background…I didn't feel racism. Because my parents, like a lot of other parents I've heard talk, said, "Well we just love you for who you are."…[T]here was racism in our family.*[60]

Erin told the story of the colorblindness not just within her family, but extended to Asians generally:

> *I was asking my mom six months ago why she decided to adopt from Korea, especially because my dad has exhibited over the years, more and more bigoted viewpoints, when I said, "Why did you guys choose to adopt?" and she said, "It was out of convenience," and when I asked, "Why did you adopt internationally, not domestically," she said, "Your dad didn't want to adopt a child of color."*

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[59] Oral History 7.
[60] Oral History 7.

In this remark, it is clear in this family that color lines have been drawn, and that Asians are considered on the White side of the line. These stories demonstrate how parents' colorblindness allows them to harbor racist feelings towards persons or groups external to the family seemingly without directly violating immediate family members. However these adoptees still recognized such behaviors as racism within their families, and seem cognizant of the implications of that racism for themselves as people of color in an otherwise White family structure.

Denials of anything Korean are another form of veiled discrimination for adoptees. The disavowal of all things Korean for adoptee subject—who are themselves often unable to deny their own Korean origins—sends a message of shame or disgust about Korea to the adoptee. I asked Barb, age 26, about her experiences of Korean culture within her adoptive family in the following exchange (my questions in bold):

> **Did they (her parents) ever talk to you about Korean culture?**
> *No.*
> **No Korean food, language? Nothing?**
> *No. The only mention of Korean food, I remember something came up about Korean food, and I guess I was interested…Well, my father said it was terrible, just terrible. He had this chap chae or something and it was so gross, and I was like, "Oh, okay, so I guess it's gross." And that was it.*[61]

Even when parents are open to hearing about the racial issues that their adopted Korean children deal with, several adoptees expressed not wanting to tell their parents about these problems. Their concerns were for themselves, in

[61] Oral History 4.

predicting that their parents might bring embarrassing racial incidents more into public view, and also for their parents, who some adoptees felt might "freak out" if they were confronted with the racial realities of their children. Gabe, age 29, recalls:

> *My mom always was surprised 'cause I said, "Well of course there were people who made fun of me because I was Asian, oh you know, just the typical picking on people sort of thing,…I never told them* [meaning his parents]*, or made a big deal because I know that she* [his mother] *would have… called the school district and made a big deal out of it. I just ignored these people…when I tell her that this stuff happened in the past, she's like, "Well why didn't you tell me?" I was like, "Well…you know, I didn't want to make a bigger deal out of it, it happened, and now, you know, it's done."…I guess the thing that I've not let it really get under my skin because I'm not a big fighting guy.*[62]

Gabe connects his pacifism as "not a big fighting guy" with enduring experiences of facing childhood racism alone, without telling his parents about what was going on, though he did tell his mother eventually and found out that she had had no idea that this could have been going on right under her nose. In many ways, her response reinforced Gabe's beliefs that he had made the right decision to not tell her in the first place; by not giving White parents the power to mismanage responses to racism, adoptees can avoid being disappointed in their parents, and avoid further trauma to themselves. Unfortunately, this also keeps White adoptive parents believing that they can live in a world free of racial conflict.

In this example, Kye's mother does find out about a racial incident, and sure enough, the situation is extended instead of ended:

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[62] Oral History 37.

> *I was like in* [pause] *fifth grade and I was riding the school bus at the time and some of the* [high school] *junior and senior kids were just incessant… on and on with their racial slurs and they were pretty nasty about it. And then one day after a couple of weeks my* [White] *brother got up and just said "Hey, just shut up. Knock it off!" And so they hit him on the head with a book…My mom used to always wait for us, as we got off the bus and saw this big 'ole red welt on* [my brother's] *head. And so the very next day, the boys and their mothers and fathers were in our living room… You know, I think the guys were actually nicer to me because they felt bad for what they did rather than just because they had to.*[63]

Kye also never meant for his mother to find out about the racism he was enduring, but because his brother stood up for him, and got injured in the process, their mother found out. Though it is just this kind of response many adoptees said they feared their parents would enact if they found out about racist incidents, the adoptee in the example above ended up appreciating his mother's efforts. However, his appreciation did not stem from the fact that she confronted his assailants, but because of how she did it, educating them instead of shaming them as racists. So in some ways, it was her de-racialization of the situation that he appreciated. Also of note is that even though the two brothers endured the experiences of racial attack together, they never spoke of it afterwards; this shows how unable to discuss race White adoptive families can be, perhaps never having discussed it very intimately before adopting.

Passing into/desiring Whiteness/disidentifying with Korea

In light of the White racial makeup of most adoptive families (apart from the adoptees), the assimilationist ideology that prevails in much of White American society,

[63] Oral History 15.

and the colorblind mindset within which many adoptees grew up, it is not surprising that many Korean adoptees grew up wanting to be White.[64] Gabe simply stated, "*I wasn't happy with myself being Asian… or, for that matter, I wasn't happy with myself…not being Caucasian.*[65] The majority of adoptees who participated in my research had at some point, thought of themselves as White, mostly before they moved out of their parents' homes; part of thinking of themselves as White was self-consciousness about their visible non-Whiteness, their Asianness. As a result, many adoptees, like John, experienced a great desire to White, and a rejection of their Asian racial identity and racial characteristics:

> *I wish I didn't stand out so much … I mean I think, growing up, I didn't wanna be Korean; I wanted to be more Caucasian because, what this society values as beautiful, is more the Caucasian* [ideal]. *Seems like that* [was] *being bombarded when I was growing up. I think maybe that's a little better now, but back then every commercial, every advertisement, definitely pictured blue-eyed people.* [66]

Beatrice, age 37, remarked, similarly:

> *Now looking back, I remember that feeling always being in the back of my head. And growing up I struggled, you know. I used to think I was the ugliest girl in the world. I didn't like my eyes, I didn't understand my, uh, identity, I didn't understand, you know, why I looked different compared to other people around me, I always wished that I was a blonde, with blue eyes or brown hair, or blue eyes like my best friend…All White. I grew up in an all-White world. So, I remember I wanted to be a White girl. I remember that being one of my goals. But of course it was impossible. And I didn't understand it at the time. I denied myself as a Korean individual. There was a lot of things that I did wrong*

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[64] For a more detailed discussion of Whiteness in Korean American adoptee communities, see Chapter 7, "'White' Koreans: Korean Adoptees, Racial Visibility and the Politics of Passing.
[65] Oral History 37.
[66] Oral History 38.

> *because I wanted to, please people around me, like my friends.... And, you know, I'm Korean in an all-White community in an all-White world, as far as I knew.*[67]

While some found it easy to understand themselves as "American" (which in many cases, was a euphemism for "White") others considered this transition, or this desire for a transition more solemnly. Henry, age 32, spoke first of the initial ease he experienced in fitting into an all White family and an all White community:

> *My parents didn't put any expectations on me. They didn't put any pressures on me. But I've always put pressure on myself, to do the best I could, whether in school or in athletics... So that was, I guess, my elementary-high school years. Going to college, I surrounded myself...you know, obviously growing up in a small town there weren't any minorities, so, you know, all my friends were Caucasians, or whatever you want to call them. And that was the normal; you know, that was the norm.*[68]

Later, Henry discussed the inherent conflict he felt later in life because his identity as an "American" didn't leave any room for his Korean or adoptee identity. In the end, he directly connected his inability to accept himself as Korean to the shame of not knowing who or what he was because he didn't know anything about his own birthplace; he eventually returned to Korea and is now married to a Korean national.

> *I'm proud of who I am and it took me awhile to figure out who I am… I didn't consider myself Korean; I considered myself American. But then, my friends considered me, Korean, - it's just kind of a weird - where would I fit in? I didn't accept myself as… I tried to push everything in my history, or, where I was from, just in the back, because… I don't know if I was ashamed of who I was - or what. I felt a little ashamed of just, you know… I guess I didn't know enough information. About where I was from.*[69]

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[67] Oral History 40.
[68] Oral History 36.
[69] Oral History 36.

The understanding that it was necessary for adoptees to disassociate with Korea and Koreaness in order to become "American" and to fit into the White world was common among the participants in my research. Kye, who had the opportunity to visit Korea while on military leave, chose not to go, not because he had bad feelings about Korea, but because he had no feelings at all.

> *I had plenty of opportunity, even to the point where, um, I had some time off and uh at White sergeant asked me if I wanted to go to Korea with him,, you know,*[on] *the military transports, "We can go free"…and I said, "Nah, I'd rather go to Spain." And see, the mindset…and he, he even looked at me surprised, you know and* [now] *I look back at that and I'm thinking, "Yeah, he had the right idea. I didn't."*[70]

The will to "fit in" to White communities partly by disassociation from other Asians is sometimes very strong among adoptees. Diane talked about her own racism directed at other Asians as she grew up:

> *I went to a small Catholic school…, so we had very few students of color, which I think would have been different if I had been at a bigger public school. I know that at that time that my town was getting a larger population of Vietnamese refugee families, and I knew that I had to do whatever I could to distance myself from these, you know…*[Immigrants]…. *I mean, God forbid! They couldn't speak English! And that was just horrifying that I could be categorized that way. I remember, I was a cashier at* [a grocery store] *when I was in high school and I would do these weird things: if I thought somebody thought I was one of those kind of immigrants so I would start talking really loud so they could tell that I didn't have an accent.*[71]

While Diane's reaction to Asian refugees appears to be a form of internalized racism, it operates differently than the self-hatred or self-doubt that the concept of internalized

[70] Oral History 15.
[71] Oral History 7.

racism generally describes. This adoptee is caught in the paradox of being Asian herself, but also having a White gaze and socialization that makes her understand how important it is to create social distance from Asians who bear the cultural signifiers of foreignness. The pressure to assimilate is also apparent in this passage; this adoptee expresses anxiety that the Vietnamese refugees are "blowing her cover" because Whites might consider her to be Vietnamese instead of an assimilated, English-speaking American.

Moments of Realization

Some of the oral history project participants had always identified as Korean or Korean American, but several, specifically those who had identified as White at some point, come to realize their non-Whiteness or their Koreanness as adults. Many adoptees experience a profound moment of realization when they first see themselves in racial and or cultural terms as different from their White families and communities. These initial moments are important for many adoptees, and often feature prominently in their life stories. Diane recalled realizing one day,

> *"Hey I am Korean, I am a minority," and I wanted to understand how to fit this in to who I am, on a daily basis, not just in this daydreamy thoughtful sort of way, but to really understand what that means. Because it was so social justice oriented, I think that's when I really started to develop some feelings and ideas about what is racism, homophobia and all those things mean and how it important to me and how I wanted to affect change in the world.*[72]

Kye had a similar realization while in high school. After peaceably enduring racial slurs and name-calling throughout his childhood, Kye finally understood himself as racialized—even if not directly so by his friend, certainly by association with other

[72] Oral History 7.

Asians, the objects of derision by the friend:

> *I really noticed something that I was actually really different* [when] *a group of us guys went up to Minneapolis…Somebody I knew had a car and we all drove up there and there was this group of Chinese guys walking by. And one of our guys is like, "Hey look at those slant-eyed chinks!" And I kind of look at him for a second and then he's like, "Well not you, you know, cause uh, you know, you're one of us…" and that was actually one of the first times where I started thinking about…who am I hanging out with, first of all, and what do I perceive myself as? That was one of the first times.* [73]

Wendy, age 31, was exposed to Asian Americans and Asian American studies for the first time in college and suddenly realized that she, too, was Asian American:

> *I was exposed to Asian Americans* [at college] *the first time; I still remember getting the solicitation from the Asian studies and the Asian American Student Union to come and join It really slipped me up because up until that point I had never seen myself as Asian American. I just considered myself, I don't know, American or whatever. Without the Asian, I kind of just disregarded that part. And all of a sudden I come to this huge epiphany that, "Oh my god! I'm Asian American!" And then I'm like, "What the hell is that about?"…I just remember being in that in college campus and especially if I would see people in large numbers… I would see a group of 3 or 4 Asian people and, it would freak me out! I realize now that I was like that because I was just that uncomfortable with myself and I was just projecting that onto them because I didn't know how to deal with myself.* [74]

Wendy's attempt to articulate the tension she sometimes felt when she encountered other Asian or Asian American people is similar to reports I have heard from many other adoptees who also expressed this same awkwardness. She describes feeling felt curious about other Asians, but also feeling "weird" about feeling curious. I think the moment

[73] Oral History 15.
[74] Oral History 32.

and the “weirdness” she is describing are connected to her understanding on an intellectual level, but not on a personal level, why she should be curious about other Asian people. Even though she knew she was adopted and was, through adoption, totally cut off from other Asians, she could still visually identify with other Asians when she saw them. But she didn’t know anything about Asians, or what it meant for other Asians to be Asian. Therefore she understood herself to be different from other Asians, particularly because she felt curious. She probably also suspected that other Asians might not understand her, as an Asian who knew no other Asians. In addition to all of this, perhaps there is also the feeling of isolation, of being familiar with a racial group that one is not a part of and being excluded culturally by the racial group one is a part of. All of these thoughts and their attached emotions can make for an awkward moment, even in a wordless chance encounter with another Asian person.

Racial Responses

Adoptees described a number of coping strategies to deal with the racialization they have had to deal with. Most told stories of how they just ignored racist comments or situations, perhaps consistent with their parents’ behavior and instruction, and some acknowledged that this wasn’t really useful in terms of dealing with the issue of racism and discrimination. Other adoptees reacted to the racism they faced in other ways. Wendy, trying to turn the racism she had experienced as an actor into something positive, tells the story of her early career. She explains how her agent worked with her in order to call the local entertainment and advertising industry on their racist casting practices:

> *She* [the adoptee's agent] *would get casting calls that were for you know, women, but it wasn't anything race-specific, and she would send me on the castings. And I think sometimes it would shock the hell out of people because they weren't expecting someone who was Asian American to come and play for the part, so that was really forward thinking for her. Because everyone else would only send you if they specifically asked for Asian and you were cast for very stereotypical roles. That was something that really frustrated me and made me want to go into* [making her own] *film because if I'm not going to get the roles that are created, I'm going to make films for the community that I'd like to see and be seen. I never considered myself an activist or anything, or an envelope pusher but I kept getting these inclinations to you know … bust all the models that existed.*[75]

Wendy becomes incensed by the racist casting she was exposed to as a beginning actor because it prevents her from getting roles. She discovers the phenomenon of "White assumed," meaning if a role is not specifically designated racially, it is meant for a White actor, even for roles where race is in no way part of the characterization. Even though she doesn't think of herself as an activist, she quickly develops an activist agenda to change the face of the film industry in the Twin Cities. Adam, age 28, ends up using the racial stereotype that all Asians know the martial arts to his benefit. Having taken an interest in Tae Kwon Do, used this skill to prevent racist incidents at school. He ponders:

> *I think 'cause I was a smaller person, I never ever worried about getting beat up, whereas it's amazing how many guys, Asian-American guys* [who] *grew up in primarily Caucasian areas that got into fights all the time…I had a speech class and I gave a speech on how to break a brick so I broke a brick in speech class and that probably helped my cause now that I think about it… of course the whole deal in high school is acceptance so if you're the big guy and you usually pick on kids, you don't want to take a chance on a kid that can really make you look dumb.*[76]

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[75] Oral History 32.
[76] Oral History 6.

Adam wonders if perhaps he was just lucky that he was never racially harassed at school, or if it was because he was too physically small to be worth persecuting. But then he remembers that maybe the real reason no one ever picked a fight with him is because he had given a public demonstration of breaking a brick with his hands during a speech class. In this example, his real "luck" might have been that his parents enrolled him in Tae Kwon Do classes at a young age, and that he stuck with it until he was quite accomplished.

Kye remembers his violent response to racism in high school:

> *I was getting to be much more independent, basically meaning I didn't really care what my friends thought.. A couple of my friends, while they thought I wasn't looking, they were joking what our* [referring to Kye and his White girlfriend] *babies would look like. And of course they were doing the this kind of thing* [makes hand motion, stretching out his eyes] *and I just kinda go up to them "What is that?" And I go, "Now if you really want to look at it," and then I was getting mean, and I said "If you really want to look like that, let me help you." So I grabbed the guy's face …and so I literally, physically grabbed this guy and I was stretching out his eyes. I'm like, "Let me help you with this then. If you want to be slant-eyed, I'll help you out." . But that's where I think things really started to become more real for me, that hey, I'm not just one of the White boys. I don't know why it took me that long to really be secure over the whole fact that I'm, you know, actually Korean and not White.*[77]

This is one of the only times in all the oral histories I recorded that an adoptee talked about directly confronting an assailant in a racial incident. While his response might seem outrageous to some, Kye was many of the adoptees who had recounted stories of these kinds of low-level racist incidents that had taken place throughout their childhoods,

[77] Oral History 15.

along with their polite responses. By this time in his story, as he related this story to me, I thought he was quite justified in his actions; inside, I was cheering for him, the hero who was finally able to claim his Korean identity and set things straight with his racist friends. Of course, this and the many hundreds of other racist incidents that were related to me by adoptees in the research project are much more complicated.

However, even among the many stories of racism I heard as I collected oral histories, direct confrontations of racist harassers were rare. Though this probably does stem from the lack of guidance adoptees get from adoptive parents, who have not been the objects of racist discrimination, I could not help wondering if this was also an effect of the "multicultural" environment in which most of these adoptees grew up. In Minnesota, a state known for being "nice" (and in fact the phrase "Minnesota Nice" is used locally as both a description of Minnesotans' tendency towards politeness and as a smear against them, pointing to their accompanying tendency towards insincerity in a conflict-avoidant where the appearance of politeness is paramount), multiculturalism is a way to "make nice" by embracing difference, but not necessarily criticizing racism or racists.

Alone in Minnesota

While Minnesota is home to the highest concentration of Korean adoptees in the United States, the assumption that this means that Korean adoptees have grown up or will grow up with close connections to others like themselves (other Korean adoptees or other people of color) is often a mistaken one. Many adoptees with whom I spoke reported having grown up in extreme racial isolation, even in cases where the adoptee was aware

of the presence of other Korean adoptees in the community. For adoptees and other people of color, growing up and living as visibly racially different in mostly White Minnesota is not just the perception of this population, but numerically accurate according to U.S. census data as well. In Table 1, it is obvious that the state of Minnesota has been historically predominantly White, and remains a very White state today, even though the Asian American population has increased more than fivefold since 1980 and 28 times since 1960. From the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, decades during which most of the Minnesotan Korean adoptees who are currently adults were adopted, Minnesota was a profoundly White state, with hardly any Asian Americans at all.

Census Year	Percent White	Percent Asian American
2000	89.4%	2.8%
1990	89.4%	1.7%
1980	94.4%	0.6%
1970	96.5%	0.02%
1960	98.2%	0.01%

Table 1: White and Asian American Percentages of Total Minnesota Population, 1960-2000[78]

In light of this demographic data, it is not surprising that many adoptees in Minnesota remarked on their experiences of racial isolation. This came in the form of numerous descriptions of being "the only one," or one of very few Asian Americans or adoptee—or often, the only person of color in a social situation, a school, the family, or sometimes an entire town. A typical response on this topic comes from Gabrielle, in her

[78] "Table 8, Race and Hispanic Origin of the Population by Nativity: 1850 to 1990, Historical Census, Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the Unites States: 1850 to 1990." Bureau of the Census.

thirties:

> *I think there was only… maybe, 4 or 5 other people of color in my high school at any given time. There was one guy, which, I'm still trying to think about whether he was an adoptee or not. I'm assuming that he was, because he was Asian, but he didn't have an Asian name. When I was a junior, um, this family moved out, and they were Vietnamese. And I actually became really good friends with the girl who was the only one who was the only one in school at the time at my high school. They were my first contact of really being linked to an Asian culture…So, it was 10th grade and I just wanted to go to a bigger school even though I had gone through the transition of super small town to this sort of suburban thing, I just had this great need for sort of becoming lost, and like I wanted to go to the biggest place possible.*[79]

In this example, this adoptee understood herself very well to have been in quite isolated racial circumstances, and did her best to connect with the few other Asian Americans in her high school, but still the school's lack of racial diversity fuelled her interest in getting to a place with a larger population, and presumably and larger person of color concentration. While Gabrielle did not specifically connect her racial isolation to experiences of racism, Barb did:

> *No I don't think I knew any Korean…I don't think I was even aware of it, Korean people or Asian people or White people. At all. I think so, like some of the neighbor kids they would ride their bikes and say "Jap" I would just say, "They called me Jap. And that means Japanese, and I'm Korean. They are dumb. They are wrong."*[80]

Barb used her racial isolation to make moments of racial tension less hurtful. The ignorance of her adversaries, probably at least partly based on the absence of Asian Americans in her childhood community, made them assume she was a nationality that she is not; her response was to assess her adversaries as "dumb" in order to deflect their slurs.

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[79] Oral History 47.
[80] Oral History 4.

In a similar recollection, Ingrid, age 34, also connected her racial isolation to racist incidents:

> *So growing up was really difficult in those small towns, because until I moved to a town … in the sixth grade there were no other Asian children in the town where I grew up and so I remember coming home and being really upset or crying because some kid made fun of me on the playground or some kid called me a chink or a gook or adopted. And telling my mother about it but her saying that they probably didn't really mean it. And I remember being really upset because I knew that they meant it and I felt very betrayed by my mother for having told me that they didn't mean it because you couldn't evade it.*[81]

Ingrid continued her story to discuss how she internalized this racism and isolated herself from other adoptees, even though she did have access to several adoptees who lived in her town.

> [By high school] *there were actually a lot of Korean adoptees in that town, there were probably seven or eight other adoptees at my school…but I remember feeling very uncomfortable about hanging out with them, and didn't really want to be too close to them. There was one person who I was friends with for a short period while I was in high school, and we were good friends for awhile, but* [in the end]…*I didn't really want to be with her because she was an adoptee, I also didn't want to be with her because she was whiter than me, which was sort of a weird thing, but I think I started to really recognize that I was a person of color while I was in college…I mean I started reading some things when I was in high school and …I started to come into interaction with race and racism, just because I was more able to understand what I had been experiencing all along, in all of my years when I was growing up. But it was really when I moved to college that I had an idea that, okay I'm a person of color.*[82]

Richard, age 31, told a similar story of avoiding other Asian people, even other adoptees, or at least avoiding talking about the commonality he had with them as fellow

[81] Oral History 57.
[82] *Ibid*.

adoptees, almost as if he did not want to acknowledge that being a Korean adoptee was part of his or anyone's identity:

> *Ever since I was a child, there were other adoptees, but I never saw them as other adoptees, I saw them as Asian people, and just…maybe that's weird, but the thing was is that, if anything I wasn't ashamed of being Korean, I certainly wasn't going to associate with other Asians, and it just wasn't natural or normal for me to grow up in…Minnesota suburbia in a primarily White area, for me to be associated with or seen with other Asian people…I never knew that they were Korean, too. That's the weird thing. I even can look back to my early early childhood and my neighbors were a family of four kids, and they would always invite over this girl…*[who] *was a Korean adoptee, but I swear I never knew that, and that isn't the type of conversation kids have anyways, so….it didn't occur to me later, when I met her again when we were practically adults that she was a Korean adoptee. And also, a girl that I kinda dated briefly in high school…she was adopted, and I never knew she was an adoptee. Actually, it took me until…we met at some, like, Minnesota conference and she attended, that I saw her again for the first time since high school, and it was like, "You're Korean?"* [83]

Does racial isolation in and of itself constitute a type of broad, socially rendered racism? For many of the adoptees who participated in this research, I argue that it does. Even when racially isolated adoptees are not singled out in overt acts of racism (though they report that they often are), the experience of being isolated prevents them from being able to connect their experiences with those of others like themselves, and can cause them to assume that they have no identity as adoptees, Asian Americans, or even as persons of color because they have been so cut off from cultural experiences of others who might share these identities. In Gabrielle's example, this isolation led her to leave her home town in search of a more diverse social environment; even with all the acculturation to Whiteness she had received in her White community, she still ultimately

[83] Oral History 54.

felt uncomfortable as the one of the only people of color in her town. In Ingrid's example, it is clear how the social setting of racial isolation added negatively to her experience of more overt racism in the form of childhood racial teasing, because she felt more susceptible to racial attacks as the only Asian person in town, her difficulty was compounded by her mother's decision to not take the attacks seriously. A few years later, in high school, Ingrid found herself self-isolating from other adoptees, having found some comfort by this time in controlling her own racial isolation. She described her break with her only adoptee friend growing up partly because it felt somehow wrong to associate with other adoptees, and partly because her growing consciousness about her own racial identity was different than the "White" identity of her adoptee friend. In her own struggle in losing and then finding a racial identity as a Korean adoptee, she could not maintain a relationship with an adoptee who identified differently. In Richard's example, he denies that being Asian or adopted was important in his identity or the identities of the people around him, many of whom turn out to also be Korean adoptees. He connects this impulse himself, saying "*I wasn't ashamed of being Korean,* [but] *I certainly wasn't going to associate with other Asians,*" saying that this felt unnatural to him. While this attitude isn't necessarily an expression of racial self-hatred, it certainly also is not an expression of the racial pride that many psychologists believe is important for the psychological health of people of color.

Encounters with Asian America and other People of Color

For most Korean adoptees, growing up in relative racial isolation is the norm. This is not surprising, considering that the vast majority of Korean adoptees are adopted

into White homes (meaning both parents are White). This is true of 64 of 66 of the adoptees who participated in the project; the two who were not adopted into all-White homes included one adoptee who was adopted into a Korean American home and one adoptee who was adopted into a family with a White father and a Japanese mother. In addition, the United States continues to be a segregated country, so many of those who were adopted into White homes also grew up in White communities. Eventually, most of these adoptees do encounter Asian America, whether in the form of Asians or Asian Americans (including other Korean adoptees) living in the United States, through intellectual discourses based in Asian American studies, or via cultural production by adoptees or Asian Americans. A few adoptees talked about having these encounters when they were still quite young, such as Gabrielle who generically connected with Asia through a family friend:

> *We had a friend, a family friend, that was living in Japan during the early 80s, and she would send me stuff. Because she would send me stuff, because she traveled from Japan to Korea, and she would like send me things, from there, that were Korean, so I would have things. My aunt, who was a social worker, in southern Minnesota, they escorted a lot of adoptees over, so they would bring stuff back for me. So I had this little tiny shelf in my room that had like five things on it.* [84]

For Gabrielle, these five items from Asia constituted her connection with her Asian heritage—a scant acknowledgement, but an acknowledgement all the same. Fern, age 34, knew other Asian children in high school, with whom she was always being confused in a combination of two stereotypes about Asian Americans: that they all look the same and that they all play classical music:

[84] Oral History 47.

> *In high school there was another family, of Asians; um, they were all Asians. Several of the daughters were in, um, orchestra and so people always thought we were one and the same. So, I would always get complimented on my orchestra playing and orchestra concerts.*[85]

Gabe encountered other Asian Americans mostly through his socialization with fellow gays and lesbians. While his gay identity was primary for him, his gay social networks brought him into contact with other Asians and Asian Americans, who are mostly Asian immigrants, so he considers himself lucky to not have to deal with the legal issues of immigration like his Asian friends.

> *Long Yang Club, which is this gay-Asian-American group, which the majority are not adopted, I probably was, the only one, now that I'm thinking about, that was adopted, but it exposed me to actually Asian people, which before, I had really not had any exposure to at all… I guess I'll say a lot of my Asian friends that are gay, that were not adopted, which would be all of them, are here on education visas and they have to go through a ton of rigmarole to look at getting naturalized or* [get visas]*…oh my God, I don't have to… I'm happy that I haven't had to deal with that.*[86]

In my research, it was for more common that Korean adoptees came into contact with other people of color in college or in graduate school, at least after they moved out of their parents' homes. Many first began to understand their own identities as people of color by connecting not with other adoptees or other Asian Americans, but with international students: foreign students in college in the United States. Ingrid remembers:

> [I went to] *the International House where there were all these people of color and where there was also this* [student group] *and people were*

[85] Oral History 45.
[86] Oral History 37.

> *proud to be people of color and that was the first time I really thought, "Oh, maybe it's okay to not be White … At the time though, it was just being comfortable as being a person of color. It was not being comfortable as being a Korean; it was not being comfortable as an adoptee. It was just being comfortable as a person of color. And, uh, I think that um…I didn't feel comfortable with being an adoptee until after I got out of college.* [87]

Amy remarks:

> *Go*[ing] *to grad school also opened up another chapter, because all of a sudden I was going to grad school with all these Asians—that weren't adopted, but really, I just learned so much about their culture. There were male Asians, so for the first time, I got to hang out with a whole bunch of male Asians that weren't adopted. They were from Malaysia, they were from China. They were international students… when they talked about their... culture and all their traditions, I'm like, "Oh my God, that is so interesting." I remember, and I thought, "Oh my God. I know so much about* [these other] *cultures, and yet, I hardly know anything about Korean culture!" It was embarrassing because they would look at me and say, "You're Korean. Tell me something about that." I'm like, (tone of voice as if about to laugh) "Well, um... okay." I had no clue. I had no clue. So then, it was just like a transition after that where I decided I'm gonna get more involved.*[88]

Gabe recalls that he needed to become more comfortable around foreign students in order to be more comfortable being Korean, and needed to become more comfortable being Korean before he could be comfortable identifying as a Korean adoptee. It is almost as if the large distance between his identity as Korean American, with emphasis on American, and that of international students made it easier to approach these other people of color. With Amy, the ease with which international students expressed their cultural identities normalized her approach to and Asian cultural identity. Even so, she had difficulty

[87] Oral History 57.
[88] Oral History 3.

reciprocating in discussions about culture, because she had no basis for an Asian culture or identity as an adoptee.

The inability of White students around Barb to distinguish her from international students made her feel isolated, but also encouraged her to spend more time with other Korean and Korean American students in her school's Korean student association:

> *So going to* [college] *was really hard. I started to realize that I am a minority and that I'm Asian and all these people are White and they think I'm a foreign exchange student or something very different, and I was really self conscious, more self conscious than ever. I think I was really lonely…So I started looking into something Korean. So there's a Korean association at the college and so I went there and there was Korean students, and that was the first time I met anyone Korean. It was like nine or ten people there…International students, there were no Korean adopted students in that group… And I think they tried to help me out, because I was adopted… They were like, "So you don't speak Korean? Okay, well do you want to play some games?" Of course they were very open, but I was still having a hard time with my identity and making friends, and just being* [at college], *it just…wasn't…good. I was very isolated.* [89]

Wendy talked about encountering Asian and Asian American Studies in college, an experience she described as "life changing:"

> *I took um, a film class, a dance class, and Asian American class…That semester … totally changed my life. That …was the first time that I came into contact with Asian American role models. My Korean Dance professor was from Korea and my other professor was a Chinese American woman who taught my Asian American lit class. And through the literature that I was reading about other Asian Americans and their experiences I was all of a sudden able to literally put my finger on experiences of mine that were similar to theirs and to start unraveling and sort of decompressing and regurgitating all this stuff that I had effectively tucked away in my psychology somewhere and let sit and marinate for awhile in my life.*[90]

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[89] Oral History 4.
[90] Oral History 32.

Wendy is like most Asian Americans of her generation in that her education had included no exposure to Asian American culture or history in school experiences before college. Her introduction to Asian American literature and other forms of cultural expression was a libratory experience that allowed her to further develop her own identity as an Asian American, an identity that became very important to her afterwards. This trajectory, from being totally disassociated from other Korean adoptees in particular and Asian America in general, to totally embracing a Korean and Korean adoptee identity, was common among the participants in my project.

Adam summed it up:

> *I remember my freshman year of college. This guy came up to me and he was like "Yeah you know the AA association, the Asian American association is in our campus you know and we're meeting on Wednesdays, here's our little thing, you can come," and I'm like "Thanks," you know, and then I'm like "I'm not going to some damn Asian American society thing…what the hell?" I mean that was my mentality my freshman year. In my junior year, I was involved in Harambe which was this multi-cultural group on campus…I mean it basically since there's only like seven Black people and like fifteen Asian people like on campus, they actually gotta do something together…So I just slowly kind of built from there and of course it culminated when I went to Korea and that's when you … not that I understand what it means to be Korean but you know, it is definitely a culture you can be proud of, I'm Korean and so it just seems that a that that country's been a success and that's something you can even be proud of…*[91]

CONCLUSION

Even Korean adoptees raised in socially and politically conservatives families were exposed to liberalizing cultural norms during Minnesota in the 1970s and 1980s, including multiculturalism. Not surprisingly, many Minnesota Korean adoptees followed

[91] Oral History 6.

the lead of their parents or of mainstream society using ideologies of multiculturalism to cope with the situation of being Asian American in predominantly White Minnesota. However, some adoptees reached the limits of the usefulness of multiculturalism, or at least of the weak multiculturalism that was beginning to permeate mainstream culture at the time. Indeed, commitment to a multiculturalist worldview prevented some Korean adotpees from recognizing and coping with racist discrimination when they encountered it. For others, the bluntness of the tool that they were offered in weak multiculturalism made them extra-sensitive to the institutional and more blatant racism and discrimination that they faced. Because popular multiculturalism of the 1970s and 1980s had no remedy for racist discrimination, it became a double-bind for these adoptees. These adoptees understood that the families and communities around them had trained themselves not to see racism, or to believe the problem of racism was a minor one, and could be solved with the positive attitude of inclusive multiculturalism. Though almost every adoptee who participated in this project spoke about racist incidents they had faced, for many adoptees, to make a claim of racist discrimination was to break the social etiquette of colorblindness, and risk arousing resentment or anxiety in their White social networks.

Section 2:

Scenes of Korean Adoptee Racial and Cultural Politics

In this section, I shift my attention to racial and other cultural formations within Korean adoptee experiences and communities in order to understand how Korean adoptees see themselves. Using different sites of Korean adoptee cultural experience, I explore how Korean adoptees produce themselves in their personal experiences of racial and cultural identity formation, through cultural production, and in social dilemmas of racial affiliation. Each of these chapters is an exploration of how Korean adoptee communities form and are informed, and of the racial and cultural tensions present in adoptee populations. These tensions are sometimes translated into political debates, as the possible configurations of Korean adoptee identities are debated both within and outside of Korean adoptee communities. Therefore, inherent in these chapters are questions about how Korean adoptees are pressured to embody one identity over another, or differentially rewarded for taking different approaches to their own adoption experience. Because identity formation among Korean adoptees is complicated by experiences that are often seen as competing between non-normative and normative ("real" versus adopted, American versus Korean, White versus Asian, well-adjusted versus angry/bitter), the issue of identity choice and the consequences of those choices can loom large for adoptees as they determine and re-determine their individual and community identities. In order to explore these topics, I offer three chapters.

The first, "I, Transplanted, Make Race, Nation, Soar: Becoming Korean American Transnational Adoptees," focuses on Korean adoptee identity formation based

on life histories of adult Korean adoptees across age and geographic boundaries. While there are some distinct differences in generation, gender, and geographic experiences for Korean adoptees, themes of identity formation around being a Korean adoptee seemed to cut across demographic differences. In this chapter, I explore Korean adoptee "cultural practices," such as self-identification as an adoptee, searching for birth family, returning to Korea, participating in public intellectual artistic discourses, and the consequences of these practices for Korean adoptees as individuals and in organized groups.

Because the experiences of adoption are so personal to those within the adoption triad (adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents), and because there is so much symbolic and political meaning in adoption as a public act, public expression about adoption experience is often controversial. In the next chapter in this section, "'Loss is more than sadness:' Reading Dissent in Transracial Adoption Melodrama in *The Language of Blood* and *First Person Plural*," I analyze two popular and early autobiographical texts from within Korean American adoptee experience. In my analyses of these examples of Korean adoptee cultural production, I theorize on the social and cultural effects of adoptee expression within and outside adoption communities, and the reasons for these effects. Though I argue that both texts contain elements of social critique and dissent around adoption practice, I also note the difference in reception between *First Person Plural*, in which the adoptive family of Korean adoptee narrator Deann Borshay remains a central part of the story, and *The Language of Blood*, in which the adoptive family of narrator Jane Trenka ruptures as part of the story. For both examples, I argue why emotionally charged approaches are effective for adoptee authors who share their adoption stories with the public.

The final chapter in this section, "'White' Koreans: Korean Adoptees, Racial Visibility, and the Politics of Passing," is concerned with the racial etiquette around transracial and transnational adoption and the tacit and explicit racial expectations of adoptees among their many peer and community groups, and in society at large. Here, I examine the ways in which adoptees and other individuals with layered racial and cultural experiences are pressured to choose from among their multiple identities instead of combining them and how transitioning between identities can be difficult and socially costly for Korean adoptees.

Chapter 5

Building a Korean Adoptee Identity:
Korean Americans, Transnational Adoptees/
I, Transplanted, Make One's Race, Nation, Soar

I felt very socially isolated being an adult adoptee. And always felt, a lot of times, my friends couldn't understand it, you know, they would just, pretend I was White [chuckles] or they would just say, "I don't think of you as a minority,"…. the realization that other [Korean adoptees] *were…consciously thinking about this and connecting with one another was a huge revelation.*[1]

-Barry, 44, on finding other Korean adoptees.

IDENTITY, AGENCY AND ACTION

Though the generation of Korean adoptees that came to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s became iconic as objects of salvation, they constitute a very small percentage of the overall population of Korean American adoptees. A younger, larger group of adoptees was to become the generation that would create, speak, write, protest, and organize around their identities as Korean adoptees. The cultural understandings and assumptions made about the elder generation of Korean adoptees were handed down to the next generation, adopted between the late 1960s and the 1980s, and the members of this generation have worked both to live up to and to defy the role as saved orphans that had been assigned to them a generation earlier.

From this second generation, a community of Korean American adoptees who consider their Koreanness in addition to their adoption experience to be the basis for connection with other Korean adoptees began to coalesce in the 1980s and 1990s; this community has developed and grown rapidly, even during the research period of this project (2002-2008). While this group probably constitutes a minority of all Korean American adoptees, it is also arguably the most visible group of Korean adoptees today: adult Korean adoptee organizations maintain websites on which they publish information

[1] Oral history 12.

for and about Korean adoptees,[2] hold social and educational events, they provide support programming for adult adoptees, disseminate information about adoption and adoptees to other adoptees, and hold and attend Korean adoption conferences.[3]

It is difficult to estimate how many Korean American adoptees choose to enact some form of identity as a Korean/Asian American, as an adoptee, or as both. Membership in American Korean adoptee organizations is quite low (perhaps a few thousand) compared to the overall Korean adoptee population in the United States (over 100,000). However, organizational membership alone would be a poor indicator of the number of adoptees who use "Korean adoptee" as a meaningful term of self-identity; many of the adoptees who participated in my research had not joined one of these organizations, and had no interest in doing so, but still identified strongly as Korean adoptees. While choosing a primary identification around being a Korean adoptee may not be the norm among all Korean American adoptees, this group is visible in a way that Korean adoptees who do not claim primary identity as Korean adoptees are not. Among self-identified Korean adoptees are the so-called "public adoptees:" authors of Korean adoptee memoirs, documentary filmmakers, artists, leaders in Korean adoptee networking, social and activist organizations, and scholars, like myself. These individuals are largely responsible for knowledge production for and about the Korean

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[2] See websites for adult Korean adoptee organizations AKConnection at http://www.akconnection.com/ , Also Known As at http://www.alsoknownas.org/ , Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington State at http://aaawashington.org/wpress/ , and International Korean Adoptee Associations (IKAA) at http://ikaa.org/en , among others.

[3] Korean adoption conferences include those held in the United States by Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network (KAAN) and internationally by IKAA, and Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (GOAL).

adoptee experience and have credibility as having lived this experience when compared to those outside the Korean adoptee community.

Shiao and Tuan, in their study of sixty adult Korean adoptees, separated their subjects into four groups, rating them according to their degree of self-identification with either Asian American (Groups 1 and 2) or White American (Groups 3 or 4) identity.[4] The identity formations of most of the participants in my research do indeed fall in one of the four categories of the Shiao-Tuan scale. Specifically most of the adoptees in this chapter would be classified as Shiao-Tuan Group 2: "By and large their comfort zone consists of White people, but they are taking active steps to expand the circle to include Asian."[5] However, this classification scheme is not entirely adequate to describe Korean adoptee-identified individuals. Firstly, identity formation in this group has been fluid throughout the lives of the subjects; at earlier points in their experience, they may have identified more closely with Shiao-Tuan Groups 3 or 4. This finding is also corroborated by Dani Meier, who found that most of the Korean adoptees in his study, "opted out of Korean cultural experiences"[6] as children. In addition, while most of the adoptees that Shiao and Tuan would have considered members of Group 1 in my research are equally comfortable with Asians or Whites, most of the Asians they associate with are fellow Korean adoptees, not Korean Americans or other Asian Americans. So how do adoptees with high Korean adoptee identity quotients move from a lower degree of Korean

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[4]Shiao, Jiannbin and Mia Tuan. "A Sociological Approach to Race, Identity, and Asian Adoption." In *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-year History of Policy and Practice*.
[5] *Ibid*, 164.
[6] "Loss and Reclaimed Lives: Cultural Identity and Place in Korean American Intercountry Adoptees."

adoptee identity to a higher one? For most Korean adoptees in this research who elected to express an identity as a Korean adoptee, the decision to do so grew out of experiences of marginalization that were difficult to reconcile in White or non-adopted circles, or out of meeting other adoptees with whom they felt a meaningful connection. Through these common experiences, an adoptee identity is formulated. Barb, age 31, remarked:

> *I think there's more acceptance [among Korean adoptees]. There's similarities. And I think the conversations connect you right away because it's in the context of being adopted. There's a connection initially, and from there you just move on to other things, you just hang out. But the initial connection is being adopted and searching for what this experience means and listening to other people's experience and finding out that you are similar…or different. But like that conversation you just can't have with just anybody initially. Well you can, but in this context, it's what you talk about….*[7]

Just making these types of connections is significant for some adoptees; some spoke about consciously or subconsciously avoiding other adoptees. John, age 33, said that avoiding other adoptees was part of his own frustration with his problems around being an adoptee himself:

> *… there was a girl a year younger than me that was a Korean adoptee, but I did not hang out with her at all, I mean, growing up in high school, I mean definitely being a Korean adoptee was not something I wanted to be. I mean, I think like a lot of people, I just wanted to fit in, I mean Caucasians you know…, non-Caucasian children, I mean you know, everyone wants to fit in. For me, you know, to be so much more different, I remember people saying you should go out with her because you are both Korean adoptees, and it's like, you know, that was the last thing I wanted to do was to, so there would be two of us together to, you know, stand out.* [8]

[7] Oral History 4.
[8] Oral History 38.

Having a strong desire to "fit in" motivated the adoptee above to avoid other adoptees, since he believed that being seen with another adoptee would visibly confirm his own differences, presumably from the White majority. He says he also avoided other adoptees because peers would expect him to connect with other adoptees, again, highlighting the racialized status as an Asian American for which the adoptee wished not to escape, or at least to conceal from others.

Diane, age 28, said she did make friends with other adoptees as a teenager, but that their status as adoptees was not a comfortable topic of conversation:

> *There were a couple of other Korean adoptees. There was one girl for a short time I was friends with, she was a few years older than me, but it was still one of things where you kind of didn't talk about being adopted…it was too weird. The only thing that we ever really touched on that was really ironic and funny was that we were looking at magazines and there was this magazine that was talking about putting makeup on and about putting eye shadow in your crease, we were laughing, because we didn't have a crease!* [laughs] *It was the first time where I remember where I joked about, in a lighthearted way, my ethnicity and my shared background with somebody who was coming from the same background. That was maybe like 16ish.* [9]

John, above, also talked about connections he made as a child with other adoptees at Korean culture camp,[10] these are weekend or week-long camp experiences designed to help Korean adoptees learn about their birth culture, and to meet other Korean adopted children. However, he minimized its importance in his identity development, claiming it was a passing experience with little lasting impact:

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[9] Oral History 7.

[10] Park Nelson, Kim. "Culture Camps" in *The Praeger Handbook of Adoption (Volume 1).*

> *I mean they brought me up to, um, Korean Camp a couple summers. Um, I mean, I think the cities can offer more opportunities…that's for any family, but definitely there can be opportunities for other adoptees to get to know other adoptees…I did [meet other adoptees] but that was, you know, I mean I was not too brave. Um. The thing I remember now is just being able to eat the food, but I guess I did not make any lasting friends 'cause, you know, I knew that, you know, in a week we'd all be going our separate ways.* [11]

Amy, 32, searched for other adoptees with whom she could make meaningful connections, but at the time I spoke with her, she had failed to do so. While she had met several adoptees, she felt the similarities between herself and the other adoptees she met were superficial at best.

> *Now, the adoptees that I knew, they were friends I wouldn't consider close… once we get over the, "Oh, what's your story?" you know, "Oh, you were found, you know, laying out on the street side too?" "Oh me too," you know? We don't really have a lot in common. So, beyond being adopted, and beyond our friends,* [or] *our parents as being friends, didn't have anything in common… Even though I couldn't really put my finger on it, it just kind of parallels how I feel sometimes now…Going back and forth in terms of how much should I be involved with the adoptee community. In terms of trying to force relationships where— where there's nothing there in common...*[12]

Beatrice, age 37, talked about her mixed feelings about connecting with other Korean adoptees, and because she is hearing impaired, especially with other deaf Korean adoptees:

> *Actually, there are a lot of deaf Korean adoptees out there. There's many of them, in fact. I've met a few: I'm very excited to have those connections but, you know... wow. It's - they really are in worse shape sometimes than I am, I have to say. You know their families, most of them lived in, or live with hearing families. And I - I don't know. I don't know how to explain that…They function more on an emotional level than on a cognitive level.*

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[11] Oral History 38.
[12] Oral History 3.

> *They, you know, they don't stop to think. …I can sit down and talk about issues and analyze my behavior, but they seem to - it seems like they can't. They just have a lot of emotion going on. And they haven't been healing. You know. So. I feel like I give so much and there's not a reciprocity: there's no reciprocal energy exchanged. So, education and language: those are all issues I have to deal with when I talk to other Korean adoptees: our education and our language are very different. And uh, I feel like I'm pretty resilient. I have met other deaf adoptees that are not Korean, but adopted; and that just doesn't seem - I don't identify with them, um, much either because they're White from White families…and, you know, they have their issues, their own issues, you know they want to find their parents, like any adoptee; but I just don't identify with them...* [13]

Although Beatrice is enthusiastic about meeting other adoptees, she finds little in common with them, either because they are hearing, because they are White, or because they are in "worse shape" than she emotionally, with little to offer as peers.

Despite the many disappointments that research participants described when encountering other adoptees, many also prized the connections they were able to make with their fellow adoptees. Some of these connections were the result of deliberate efforts, while others were made entirely by chance, at least initially. Fern, age 34 and an actor, happened upon a local Asian American performing arts organization, where she discovered other local Korean adoptee artists and even a stage production that toughed on Korean adoptee experience. Initially, she describes how she did not even have a particular interest in Asian American theater, but thought she might have a better chance being chosen for roles in this theater:

> *And then I could kind of care less: I just thought that that would mean I'd have a better chance of being cast; but I didn't actually care about…It was like, "Oh I just might have a better chance of getting cast." And honestly, I probably thought like, if I could get cast elsewhere I would prefer it....And then I started working, you know, just from that understudying*

[13] Oral History 40.

> *job, then I auditioned for the next thing and the next thing and the next thing; and then just steadily started working for Theater Mu, basically. The next play was "Mask Dance." And, um, then that's when I met* [another Korean adoptee actor]. *And I was astounded, number one that she was a Korean adoptee, and number two that she was a Korean adoptee who wanted to act. And like I thought I was the only one! In the whole world! Um Yeah! I was like, "What? You're a Korean adoptee too? Oh my God! This is a play about Korean adoptees? Oh my God!!" I didn't know people knew about - I mean like, what's there to write about Korean adoptees? You know? So, I was just stunned.* [14]

Fern's story captures the abrupt transition from feeling as though she is "the only one" to finding a broader community of adoptees through meeting another Korean adoptee with interests similar to her own. Her response was enthusiastic, and she now regularly socializes with a large group of other Korean adoptees.

For Gabrielle, meeting other adoptees was also consciousness-expanding; through them, she eventually developed a critique of adoption practice, and confronted her very surprised parents with what she was learning:

> *… I started taking language classes, Korean language classes. I think that's when I really started to sort of meet a lot of adoptees and make big connections…it was interesting because I had this woman in class that was the first woman I met who was super angry about being adopted. Like really, really, really angry. She had two other siblings that were adopted from Korea, and, her parents weren't very educated, and she would tell them every day how she couldn't believe that they were able to adopt children. So it was really an intense experience. And I presented with her at this conference, and I, I think I adopted a little bit of that anger...*[It was] *the Mid-Nineties…and that's when I started having big conversations with my parents and they were getting really defensive with me…Like I would tell them all the facts….Like, "Did you know that people would go around to families and ask them to give up their kids? Did you know that? Like, did you know that that's what you were sort of perpetuating by adopting me?" And they were all freaked out, because you know, in their minds that was, that was not connected to the reason they were doing it. And I asked them all these questions, and first accused*

[14] Oral History 45.

> *them like, "Why didn't you send me to culture camp?"* [laughs] *and all those things.* [15]

David, age 52, speaks of how connecting with other Korean adoptees changed his life as they helped him heal from many years of racial discrimination, abuse, and depression:

> *I had this pain inside of me and I didn't know what it was. You know. Several years after I played sports I just quit and started taking drugs you know just to kill that pain. And I went kind of crazy…in fact two years ago at* [work] *I was sitting there and putting on this big dinner and there was some maintenance people kind of sitting down there and somebody had said some offhand remark about a gook or something like that which you know of course my ears pick up right away. Kind of like and it's like in a moment's time I was transferred from being a forty-nine year old man or whatever. It felt like I was five years old again. I was sitting at the table, I was kicking my leg, and it felt like I was so little and they were so big. So you know I mean it's amazing how after all those years people can say things and trigger, triggers. And it can take you back in time…And three months later I joined AAAW* [his local adult Korean adoptee organization] *and I met everybody there. And my life really started to change. I started doing activities there and it felt so good because you know we all had something in common. You didn't have to worry about saying anything. "Were you adopted? When did you come?" You know. "Did you find your mother?" …It just felt so good.* [16]

Finding other adoptees represented more than just social enrichment for David. Even though he did not realize it at the time, spending a lifetime in isolation from other Korean adoptees have prevented him from being able to deal with the discrimination he experienced. Connection with a community of Korean adoptees felt like a lifesaver because he felt that, for the first time in his life he was around a group of people who understood him.

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[15] Oral History 47.
[16] Oral History 28.

AWAKENING ADOPTEE IDENTITIES

Many of the adoptees who participated in this research had embraced their identities as Korean adoptees at some point in their lives. Their experiences of an awakening adoptee identity were important for them as they matured. Within the Korea adoptee community, these experiences are referred to as one's "journey." Most of my research subjects defined and described their identity as "Korean adopted" (abbreviated as AK or sometimes KAD) as opposed to another cultural, national or racial moniker, such as Korean American, Asian American, or American. While they know these other identity formations are available to them (in addition to White, which is an identity many say they had before their embrace of Korean adoptee identity) they consciously choose that of Korean adoptee; when I asked Erin how she currently identified, she replied:

> *Asian American, when I zero it down more, adopted Korean. I realize that…and I have friends who are Korean…Korean-Korean* [this is a term many Korean adoptees use for Korean nationals], *Korean-Americans and I have friends who are Asian American, understanding that as an adoptee, you're always going to be in between, you're not Asian enough and you're not White enough. But even though I feel that, it's not enough to deter feeling ashamed to being adopted Korean. I'm proud to say I'm adopted Korean now, and don't have a problem so much talking about being adopted Korean.* [17]

Erin went on to say that her feelings of isolation, both culturally and within her own family, contributed to her movement towards an identity with both Koreanness and her adoptive status at its core:

> *I always knew that I was adopted and different from my mom and my dad and my brother. And I think that has always given me the feeling of being separate. Isolated, even within my own family. Instead of going, "Oh I'm so fortunate for having this family who loves me," I'm*

[17] Oral History 8.

> *like, "Well, I'm here, they love me, but I'm really different, so I might as well pull it in to myself and work through it on my own." … part of* [isolation from family] *is being adopted. They're different. They're not going to understand, and if they're not going to understand I'm not going to try to get them to talk about it. That being adopted…this is really horrible but it sort of goes with knowing that they're not really my parents. They are my parents, but I don't ever have a memory of saying, "I love you," to my parents…I have no memory of that.*[18]

Erin attributes the isolation she feels from her family as part and parcel of being adoption and so she places her isolation within her family as a central part of her adoptive identity, isolation possibly compounded by her status as a racial outsider as well. Though isolation was a common topic among many adoptees who spoke with me, not all adoptees connected feelings of isolation as part of their adoptive identities. Barb, below said:

> *So as far as identity goes, I feel like my identity…I identify myself as an adopted Korean. In a lot of ways that's my world. I created this environment, this organization that's the world around me because I'm adopted. My husband's adopted and I've been back to Korea twice.* [19]

Barb figured her Korean adoptee identity more as an embrace of certain characteristics and behaviors rather than a haven from family isolation. However, she did express a belief in a special relationship between Korean adoptees. She went on to say that her connection with other Korean adoptees that is different from other people:

> *I think there's more acceptance. There's similarities. And I think the conversations connect you right away because it's in the context of being adopted. There's a connection initially, and from there you just move on to other things, you just hang out. But the initial connection is being adopted and searching for what this experience means and listening to other people's experience and finding out that you are similar…or different. But like that conversation you just can't have with just anybody initially.*[20]

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[18] *Ibid.*
[19] Oral History 4.
[20] *Ibid.*

Life experiences of isolation, difference, and difficultly resolved identity were common for the Korean adoptees I met. For these narrators, connecting with and defining an adoptee identity is foundational to their understandings of themselves. This happened in a variety of ways, but it seems that most narrators experienced a specific "awakening" period before which they did not see their identity organized around their Korean adoptee status. For some this happened in school. One adoptee explained:

> *While I was going to the* [university] *and taking more sociology classes, and I didn't know what I wanted to do, but the more sociology classes and the more I read on prejudice and discrimination and racial identity, the more I could see how it related to me and it gave me more strength…it gave me the vocabulary of how I felt…Since I'd never had a chance in the past to discuss it with another person of color, that was my first communication with what it meant to be a person of color in the United States, and it interested me, so I then chose that as my field. While doing that, I actually made a pretty good friend who was also AK, and being friends with her, she had a different situation growing up than I do, she had siblings adopted with her, and had gone to a lot of culture camps and whatnot, but she was my first person I could talk to about that stuff, she was also a person I could…she went with me to my first AK function…It was someone I could go with and introduce myself into the AK population.* [21]

Others, like Diane, explored and embraced their Korean adoptee identities after college in professional settings:

> *I started opening myself up to wanting to face the fact that, "Hey I am Korean, I am a minority," and I wanted to understand how to fit this in to who I am, on a daily basis, not just in this daydreamy thoughtful sort of way, but to really understand what that means… I left college feeling very idealistic. I was really ready to go out and tackle some stuff…When I took my first job out of college, I was working for a non-profit… One of the attorneys I worked with, she has two kids who are adopted and they are like 9 and 12, they're Korean, and one day when we were sitting in the office, I happened to ask her, I said, " Are your kids Korean adoptees?" And she said, "Yeah!" and then she said, "I*

[21] Oral History 8.

> *hate to be one of those people who asks this, but are you?" and I said, "yeah," and we just started talking and first of all, not only is she an incredibly cool person, but we started having all this dialogue about her being an adoptive mom and my being an adoptee, and I found myself having conversations that I hadn't previously had with my own parents… meeting* [this co-worker] *and talking with her about adoption stuff was really pivotal for me.* [22]

Diane, like many others in this chapter, sought a point of entry into the Korean American community; she initially made an important connection with the adopted parent of a young Korean adoptee, but also developed more meaningful relationships with Korean adoptees once she encountered them in Korean American social settings.

Pilgrimages to South Korea

For many adoptees, a trip to Korea was foundational to their personal understanding and formation of a "Korean Adoptee Community," since connections between adoptees take on heightened importance during birth country visits. Of the 65 adoptees who participated in my research, 48 had been back to Korea. This is a huge number, considering this is a trip that the majority of Korean adoptees do not make, and it is indicative of the self-selection that took place among those who volunteered to participate in this research. For many, going to Korea seemed to be a rite of passage that legitimized their Korean adoptee identities, and was considered almost a prerequisite for entry into adoptee leadership circles. I made my first trip to Korea in 2004, but have been involved in the community as an adoptee organizer and activist since 2002; between 2002 and 2004, a number of my co-activists at that time assumed I had been to Korea and expressed surprise when I stated that I had not been to Korea. One person stated, "Wow,

[22] Oral History 7.

I'm really surprised that your adoptee identity is so high when you haven't been to Korea." She then stammered and followed up with, " I mean…your journey hasn't taken you there yet." Not surprisingly, for many adoptees, the "journey" begins in Korea with a trip back in order to find birth family or just to see the adoptee's homeland.

The South Korean government's Overseas Korea Foundation reports that 38,712 Korean adoptees visited South Korea Between 1982 and 2005,[23] though it is unlikely that this number is an accurate count of how many adoptees visited Korea in this period. The sources for the calculation are South Korean four adoption agencies who offer post-adoption services to overseas adoptees, so the number does not count the many adoptees who visit the country without making contact with their adoption agencies. It is also possible that the agencies may count individual adoptees who visit an agency multiple times over the years multiple times instead of just once. Though most adoptees who have travelled to Korea have done so since 1982, some travelled there before that. For instance, one of the participants in this oral history project told me that Holt Children's Services in Korea started motherland tours in 1975 and that he went to Korea for the first time in 1977. However, if we accept this figure, we can estimate that between nineteen and twenty percent of the more than 200,000 Korean adoptees worldwide have returned to Korea, meaning that most adoptees never make the trip back.

For many adoptees who visit Korea as adults, the trip is transformative, in terms of how they see themselves as Asian Americans, as Koreans, and as adoptees. An examination of one's adoption story and identity is almost unavoidable when returning to Korea. The specific meaning of the experience varies greatly among adoptees: it is an

[23] Hong, Jeannie. *International Korean Adoptee Resource Book*.

emotional experience for many who ponder what might have been, grieve for lost family, recover childhood memories, and encounter other adoptees on similar trips. Some experience racial invisibility for the first time while in Korea because they look like "everyone else" for the first time in their memories, though most say they do not feel like "real Koreans" because of language and cultural barriers created by adoptees' acculturation to their adoptive cultures.[24]

Not surprisingly, many adoptees experience a new interest in or reconnection to Korean identity when they first visit Korea as adults. Diane recounted her trip back to Korea, an event which initiated a deepening interest in her own Korean adoptee identity and other Korean adoptees, and which was followed upon her return by a decision to become more active in the Korean adoptee community in the United States:

> *So there was a small contingency of us from* [my home state] *who kind of hooked up, and all in all it was a great experience. I'm glad I went, it was something that I needed to do, and it was good that I didn't have too much time to think about it. I needed to just go and do it. And then I came back and met* [a Korean adoptee activist and leader] *at some function, and I started to get involved. But it was hard. There was still some part of me that was like, "I don't know…this is new to me, being with Korean people is new,"… But you know you get used to it pretty quick, and Korea did that for me. You know*…[everybody's Asian]…[laughs] … *It was new and I felt weird and I felt like a tourist, but I had never been to a place there were so many Asians and that I knew that this is where I was from.*[25]

Like Diane, many adoptees talked about what it felt like to be among so many other Asians for the first time. Some reported feeling deeply self-consciousness while in Korea, because they looked Korean but were unfamiliar with Korean language and

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[24] Dani Meier encountered Korean adotpees with similar responses to Korea as a place in his dissertation, "Loss and Reclaimed Lives: Cultural Identity and Place in Korean American Intercountry Adoptees."
[25] Oral History 7.

cultural norms. These responses, verging on embarrassment about their adoptive status when confronted with Korean people, seem to go beyond typical traveler culture shock and anxieties about being in a strange country where people speak an unknown language. Adam, age 28, explained:

> *I took Korean Air there which was kind of painful but it kind of preps you for what it was really going to be like and it was…I mean it was, you can talk to everyone about the culture shock but it was scary for me and in going alone I think it was an interesting… I mean I got off the plane and they were all speaking Korean to me I went to customs, that was painful, you know I couldn't get a taxi I mean I can't speak Korean. I don't know anything…I mean I think it sounds stupid…I mean the signs were like so, they weren't even, I mean people in Europe…well at least the characters are recognizable…I mean I think I'd be embarrassed to tell you that.* [26]

For Adam even the plane trip over was 'kind of painful" because he took Korean Air, and the plane presumably had lots of Korean nationals on board. So even before he reached the Korean peninsula, he was encountering lots of Korean nationals. However, his pain stemmed from feeling inadequate in his own country of birth, and being unable to hide this in front of other Koreans who would not necessarily know that he had been adopted when they saw him. Adam ended up getting a job teaching English in a Korean school, and told this story about his lack of understanding of Korean cultural norms. Though he told this story with self-deprecating cheer, he also conveyed how badly he felt when he realized that his ignorance negatively affected so many people at his Korean workplace.

> *It's like the fourth day of school and you know I have lunch so I'm getting my tray, I'm getting my food, I go into the faculty lounge to have lunch and the faculty lounge is a relatively large room um, setup to have one long table here when you come in, one long table here when you come in and one long table in the back…well yeah, and they're all like longer tables whatever, so I go sit down and there's no one there, I'm one of the first people for lunch and I'm like okay I'm gonna go sit in the back table*

[26] Oral History 6.

and look out the window cause so it looks nice…I get back there, so that's cool, all the other teachers sit up on this front table here, so I was fine, I didn't feel like talking to them anyways, just kind of focusing on my lesson plans, and then I like, you know, leave lunch, and then I like go teach or whatever do whatever I do, so then the principal was like, "I gotta talk to you,"
"Okay sure, what's going on?"
And he was like "Well there's something you gotta understand; Korea is like an incredible hierarchical society."
"Okay yeah, I've read that, yeah, yeah."
"So everything kind of has its place."
"Okay that's fine yeah,"
"So people can't be above their own place."
"Okay, okay."
"So here's the deal in this school, the highest people, elite, I'm the principal so I'm the highest then there's the other administrators, then there's teachers, then there's probably you a student teacher, then there's the custodial staff, then there's students at the bottom of the picture,"
So I'm like "Okay no problem."
"This table here when you come into the right, that's where the light teachers eat, this table of here, that's like for the, um where the secretaries eat this table back here that's where the custodial staff eats so when you sit and eat at this table, the custodial staff can't eat there and the secretaries staff can't eat a table above that table cause…I'm there, so because you ate at this table, the secretary people went and ate out with the kids and then the like custodial staff didn't eat."[27]

John, 33, talked about how being in Korea made him feel less Korean, contrasting the instances above where he fit in while he was in Korea, and when he did not.

[I]*f you don't speak Korean, I mean you're not really Korean. You're a poor adoptee that's…not Korean. It's a great place to go to, Korea, but…I don't think I felt disappointed, but I know some adoptees who do feel disappointed thinking that they'll go back to Korea and they'll be welcomed with open arms. But it's not exactly that way because, I mean, Korea is very proud of being Korean and if you don't speak Korean, I think it's if you weren't really raised Korean, you know, it's nice to be back… I don't know if I'll ever be Korean…I definitely grew up American and I have a lot of American traits, but I look more Korean, but I don't have the Korean culture in me, so….I mean I think I look Korea and I go back to Korea and people think, I am Korean 'til I open my mouth…No, I*

[27] Oral History 6.

> *definitely don't feel Korean. I felt comfortable in Korea, but I mean, I don't feel Korean.*[28]

John's description of how he gave himself away as non-Korean in Korea as soon as he opened his mouth was commonly reported by other adoptees who had traveled to Korea. Of course, the irony of the situation is that Korea, the place where they were born and where they could visually blend in most easily, was also a place where they absolutely could not blend in, because most do not speak the Korean language or understand everyday Korean social norms very well.

Amy, age 32, had a similar experience to John when she visited Korea with her American parents and her Korean adoptee brother:

> *…I didn't assume that they wouldn't be dressed like—you know. Like American culture. And then the second thing is, and this never even occurred to me before I went over there, never once, is, when, the taxi drivers who didn't speak English, always wanted my brother and I to interpret for my parents when they were trying to tell them where to go; I was so embarrassed. I thought—I didn't know any Korean. We went over there, our entire family went over there, not knowing a single word of Korean. I was sixteen! It wasn't like I was trying to prepare—I just assumed that everything was gonna be fine. Exact--my parents would take care of it, and plus, everybody that we talked to said that Seoul, no problem because everybody speaks English. SO, obviously not everybody (laughs) speaks English. And… you know, even though that was the American ethnocentric way of thinking that every—we were gonna go over there and everybody was just gonna accommodate us, you know—But I was so embarrassed. Oh, I just remember when a taxi cab driver, or… a hotel person, or… you know, we'd go into a restaurant, and I would be so embarrassed. I just remember that. At age sixteen, I just remember how completely embarrassed I was that I did not know a single word of Korean—I didn't look Korean, and that was the first time I thought, "Oh my God… I'm so American!" I was really embarrassed!* 3[29]

[28] Oral History 38.
[29] Oral History 3.

The embarrassment that Amy and others say they experienced in Korea stems from the experience of displacement that all adoptees experience when they are removed from Korean family and society, an experience which is often denied in adoptive families, even by adoptees themselves. In the above example, Amy feels like she will be able to "pass" in Korea as Korean because she mistakenly believes that English is commonly spoken, so her lack of Korean language skills will not give her away. Instead, she finds that she is expected to speak Korean and because she cannot, she internalizes the Korean expectations that she be culturally Korean as shame and embarrassment—even though, as a Korean American adoptee, there is no reason why she should be fluent in Korean language or culture.

The experiences of affirmation and/or displacement upon returning return to Korea are common enough among adoptee returnees that they serve to bond disparate individuals in the community to one another. Sometimes however, meeting other adoptees who have been back to Korea can divide individual adoptees from the larger community. Edward, age 52, visited Korea for the first time when he attended an international Korean adoptee conference in Seoul, so during his first back to Korea, he met many other Korean adoptees. During a group discussion that was part of the conference, he realized that his experience and his attitude about his adoption were very different than those of the adoptees who he listened to there. Instead of feeling more a part of a larger group of Korean adoptees, this experience made him see that there were deep differences between his understanding of his adoption and other adoptees' understandings of their adoptions.

> *…I was silent the whole time in our group. And I found very little in common with many of the people who spoke…I guess because I didn't feel like my experience, was the same and maybe there was more of us like me …but the ones who were more verbal, were the ones that in at least our group, were kinda angry. Yeah and they were upset. They were adopted, they were, were some…a number of them..uh of the…. ladies were, were very resentful. They didn't get to grow up in Korea…they said their experiences weren't happy. And uh, especially the ones from Europe. And I didn't have anything to say. And it was difficult for me to relate to what they were talking about. Because, that wasn't my experience So I was very fortunate… Beyond what I deserved.* [30]

However, many adoptees also experienced a return to Korea as a healing experience that helped them address experiences of racism in the United States where they are seen as racial minorities. The experience of minoritization for Korean American adoptees is often quite uncomfortable, not only because of the discrimination that often accompanies minoritization by majority populations, but also because many adoptees have been raised to think of themselves as part of the White majority, not part of the non-White minority population.

For David, age 52, returning to Korea as a middle-aged adult for the first time since he was adopted at age four helped heal old wounds and fill in missing pieces of his own personal history. David made the decision to return to Korea after falling into a deep depression, which he says was only reversed when he started meeting and spending time with other adoptees, who could understand his pain. Though he did make the the decision to visit Korea was a difficult one for him to make:

> … [G]*oing to Korea…I mean the weekend before … my son and daughter in law came up…I said "I'm afraid to go. I'm afraid to go, I don't want to go." They said, " Dad you've got to go. You have to go dad, you have to do this." I started crying. I said "I left the country in bad terms." I don't*

[30] Oral History 29.

> *know why I said that, you know. 'Cause that was in 1957 but I guess I did leave the country in bad terms. Back in those days they wanted to harm and they wanted to kill the Amerasians. If you were half Black or half White, they wanted to throw you in the river or do whatever they were gonna do you know. Yeah, put you in a room full of rats. Whatever. They wanted to kill you… I guess I had all of that inside of me. All those negative feelings. I thought I was just a terrible, terrible kid and* [my] *counselor kept saying to me…"How bad can a four and a half year old be?"*[31]

While in Korea, David visited the grave of his Korean mother, whose funeral he had attended, but didn't specifically remember:

> …[W]*hen we walked up to the grave there, I started getting kinda sick to my stomach. You know 'cause I knew I had been there. And they* [the townspeople who met him in his Korean hometown] *said, "We remember the little White boy. You were at the funeral. You were there. Then you disappeared and you were there* [at the grave]*". Three or four days later they found me back up there and I was by myself and I was trying to dig her trying to uncover her and so I kinda put all that together.*[32]

David lost the deep personal history and memories of the loss of his Korean mother when he was adopted, and returning to Korea as an adult was necessary for him to recover his history, and his sense of emotional wholeness.

For Ingrid, 34, returning to Korea as an adult was also an act of recovery, and she ended up moving to Korea permanently as an adult. Here, she talks about her first trip to Korea, with her American mother, at age 12:

> *I'd been to Korea once before I moved here. I'd been to Korea when I was 12. My mother decided that we needed to go on a trip. And prior to that when I was growing up I didn't really have any contact with the Korean culture, or didn't really have any idea about Korea itself, Korean people…even when we went on the trip when I was twelve not interested at all, didn't really want to go, didn't really care about going … So a) it was*

[31] Oral History 28.
[32] *Ibid.*

> *really weird because there were all these adoptees and I had to be with them, b) it was weird because…for the first time I was surrounded by Korean people, which was great. I was no longer the minority, I was part of the majority, and I could just sort of walk down the street and no one would really know if I didn't open my mouth. Um…but at the same time it freaked me out, because I didn't really know how to feel with that experience … we just sort of went and it was kinda like we were tourists…of orphanages…we were orphanage tourists. Umm…yeah, it was really bizarre, because I was twelve and I was going to these orphanages and I was seeing these babies that were going to be adopted just like me. And that was really uncomfortable and I don't think at that time I could have told you why, but, obviously it's because we share something, but…um, at the time I couldn't have told anybody what the connection between us might have been…But, you know we saw my* [adoption] *file, and um…but I didn't do it because I had the desire to find my parents, I did it because it was part of the tour.*[33]

Though at age 12, Ingrid had received the opportunities that many adult adoptees desire during a trip to Korea, such as having access to her birth and adoption records, and even the chance to see Korea firsthand, these experiences were not meaningful to her because she had not chosen to partake in them, but was instead, just going through the motions of a pre-planned group trip for people she describes as "orphanage tourists." On that first trip, Ingrid was never asked if she wanted to visit Korean orphanages or to search for her Korean family. Her thoughts and feelings about her experiences in Korea were not discussed, so they were quickly forgotten. However, this pre-pubescent visit to Korea may well have made subsequent adult visits to Korea more feasible, if only by helping her decide what she did *not* want to do while she was there.

For most adoptees who travel to Korea, the experience is an important one in initially developing or furthering their adoptee identities, though the effects for different individuals vary widely. Many experience the double-edged sword of relief and anxiety

[33] Oral History 57.

in this foreign environment, which often feels like displacement since neither the United States nor South Korea is an entirely free of multicultural anxiety[34] —relief because they are not in the racial minority for the first time in their memory, but also self-consciousness and anxiety because they know they are being judged by Korean nationals because of their Korean appearance, and most have very limited Korean cultural competency or language skills. Some also relive the trauma of their relinquishment as they go through though birth family searches or make contact with children currently in Korean orphanages. However, return to Korea is an important marker for most adoptees with a high degree of Korean adoptee identity, and many, like myself, find themselves traveling tp Korea many times after the initial return.

Searching in Korea

Contrary to popular belief, not all adoptees who journey back to Korea conduct a *birth search*, a search for Korean family. However, many do at least attempt to find Korean family. According to the South Korean government's Overseas Korean Foundation, 19,599 birth searches were conducted through the four Korean adoption agencies who have facilitated overseas adoptions between 2000 and 2005.[35] In that same

[34] A sense of "homelessness" among Korean adoptees is also documented by Dani Meier in his dissertation, "Loss and Reclaimed Lives: Cultural Identity and Place in Korean American Intercountry Adoptees." Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Minnesota, 1998.
[35] Hong, Jeannie. *International Korean Adoptee Resource Book*. This information is based on the search statistics of each agency that participated in overseas adoption: Social Welfare Society, Eastern Social Welfare Society, Korean Social Services, and Holt Children's Services. It is unknown how each agency counts a search attempt and it is quite possible that an adoptee who visits or inquires more than once would also be counted more than once. There also seems to be some inconsistency in what each agency counts as a search, since Social Welfare Society had over 13,000 of the total 19,599

time, the agencies only recorded 15,637 birth country visits,[36] so it appears that some who searched were doing so by email, letter or phone. For those who search, the process can be fairly straightforward logistically, or become very complicated and difficult. Most adoptees who search do so through their adoption agencies, through public media notice, or both. Though I have spoken to some adoptees who did not search through their adoption agencies, most chose to use this resource, even though this is often a source of great frustration and pain.

Many adoptees start with one of their two adoption agencies, either their agency in the United States or their agency in Korea. Korean adoptees have reported quite a bit of difficulty getting reliable information from agencies: records often appear incomplete, different agency officials give different or contradicting information, and some charge high fees (US $50-400) to supply file information that adoptees may already possess. There are many stories of adoption agencies in Korea allowing adoptees to see their adoption files but not to make copies, making the pursuit of any important information all but impossible for the vast majority adoptees who do not read Korean fluently. The difficulty and frustration that adoptees experience with their agencies when looking for their birth and adoption histories has been well-documented in Korean adoptee memoirs *The Language of Blood* by American adoptee Jane Jeong Trenka, *A Single Square Picture* by American adoptee Katie Robinson, and in the Dutch film memoir *Made in Korea* directed by InSoo Radstake. For adoptees like these writers and filmmakers, birth search and reunion with Korean family becomes a central part of their adoptee identities.

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searches in this five year period, even though they did not facilitate a proportionally higher number of overseas adoptions compared to the other agencies.

[36] *Ibid*, 24.

Although reliable statistics on the number of adoptees who search over the course of their lives are lacking, it is clear that most adoptees do not undertake a search. For some this is because they are satisfied with their identities without knowing more about their Korean families. For others, the decision to search is not pressing, and the decision to search or not has not been definitively made—though also not entirely ruled out. For still others, the difficult experiences with both adoption agencies and with Korean family (in many cases of reunion) that adoptees have reported through published memoirs and through word of mouth, while realistic, are discouraging. According to the Overseas Korean Foundation, between 2000 and 2005, only 8.3% of Korean adoptees who searched for Korean family found relatives.[37] Though this statistic is probably not well-known among adoptees who search, word-of-mouth is an (if not the most) important resource and the high incidence of adoptees who search and find nothing, even after exhaustive and exhausting search efforts, is well-known among those who search. Among the many reasons adoptees choose not to search, the low rate of success when searching is probably motivates many adoptees to be emotionally cautious, even ambivalent, if they do choose to search.

Ambivalence in searching is reflected in the stories of adoptees like Henry, who returned to Korea for the first time at age 30; he made a cursory search starting at his American agency, but decided not to pursue it once both American and Korean agencies told him there was nothing to find:

> *When I went over for the first time in 2003, I did contact the adoption agency here* [in the United States]*; and they didn't have much, they just*

[37] *Ibid*.

> *gave me their sister agency, over there, and a contact person…. They didn't have much information…I could have stopped over there* [in Korea], *but,…they looked my case number and they didn't have anything…*[the] *story is that the record-keeping back in the 70's were just crappy…I have a life, and that's part of the reason maybe why I kind of distanced myself, maybe, back in my younger years, from - my, from the culture, from my culture…I got a great family, and there was probably a reason why my biological parents, you know, put me up for adoption…So I'm saying, I have a hell of a good life here, I got a roof over my head, I got a job, you know, and - who knows what I'd be over there…I made that…one call, and it's like, "There really isn't much," you know, and* [my Korean host] - *she said, "We can drive there," it's like, fuck, screw it, you know. We stopped…But I don't feel abandoned…you know, I got a great situation here, and… I don't feel unloved. I don't feel like I need to find my parents and ask them why, you know.* [38]

Caleb, 48, had been to Korea several times throughout his adult life, but never attempted a search until the birth of his daughter, many years after his first time returning to Korea. Caleb has worked to help many Korean adoptees with birth family searches, and when I asked him if he ever searched himself, he said:

> *I guess I just haven't been that interested. Once* [my daughter] *was born I was suddenly curious. Gotta be somebody else out there. But all along I've never been interested in birth parents, more interested in siblings … But part of it too I think back then I mentioned it to my adoptive parents and they had known I'd been involved in this stuff all along my dad was pretty supportive and said if I wanted to search and if I found something that would be pretty cool from his standpoint. And my mom was so quiet and said, 'Haven't I been a good enough mom to you?" …So I've been sort of half-heartedly trying to think about it not really doing anything about it. But I know that kind of hurt because the first time we helped somebody find birth family, I just went in the other room and just bawled. Because here someone was so lucky to find something and, you know, I had nothing back there.*[39]

Though Caleb reports a very positive relationship with his American parents, his desires to search were quashed by his mother, who was hurt that he would consider trying

[38] Oral History 36.
[39] Oral history 27.

to find another set of parents. The possibility of this response from American parents seems to factor into many adoptees' decisions not to search. In a society where a person can only have one mother and one father, and the legal apparatus around adoption totally obliterates the legal relationship between biological parents and children, it is understandable that adoptive parents might feel threatened by an adoptee's search for birth family. However, most adoptees who search are not seeking to replace their adoptive families, but to reconnect with their own histories and their own lost pasts.

Only some of those who do decide to search are able to find information about Korean family and reunite. Many more adoptees tell stories of how they searched and found nothing, or at least nothing that led to finding Korean family. Sally, age 45, went to Korea for the first time at age 39 and then again at age 42. She searched through her adoption agency, Holt, but was never able to find identifying information for Korean relatives.

> *May of '98 was the first trip I took to Korea…that, the first trip was very emotional... Yeah, um, you know, a lot of kind of internal kind of just emotion about going back and um... I, I remember particularly landing at the airport and being on the ground and driving from the airport to the hotel … as you're driving the some a little bit rural area and working there were, you know, you know, rice paddies and people working in the fields and I remember thinking, "Gee, I wonder if that would have been my life if I had not been adopted?" ...Then in 2001, I guess, I went on the Motherland tour with the family tour through Holt and took my oldest son for a two week tour…and that was…the catalyst when I really started to just hone in and focus in on the Asian, er, Korean heritage and just an interest in finding my birth parents… I remember, we were at the Holt agency, Holt Agency in Seoul and one of the benefits of going on this family motherland tour was that you got to review your adoption file…with the Holt representative…I remember feeling hopeful on one and hand and knowing that I would not have a lot. And sure enough, going in*

> *for my case review, there just was very little in my file.* [I was] *disappointed.* [40]

Barb, age 31, told of her experience searching for Korean family, none of whom she ever found. She felt her search was exhaustive, and did not search further after this attempt:

> *… I always wanted to search but it was such a big…effort. To get started. But I started it and I don't think I had a lot of expectations, but I thought I'd give it my best shot. [I got my records]… I connected with both organizations. It was another opportunity, and I thought, I just gotta do it. It was a chance…they [the agency staff] are with you every step of the way…They used every resource, newspaper, television, magazine… I did a documentary when I was there, I told my story…And they aired it during that week. Everything was like boom, boom, boom, boom…I did get my hopes up a little bit…after it had aired, a few people had called, but there was no match…I didn't find anything. I was very sad. I think that…it was kind of strange, it was very emotional and I started to accept that I was not going to find anything…The last night was…what I say about that trip after I came back, was I think I left all my sadness and all my fears in Korea. I did my best and I did it and I didn't find anything. I cried, I thought about it and dealt with it, and I left all that in Korea….All said, it was my very last night in Korea and I cried so hard, I never cried that hard in all my life. That was completely an emotional release. It was another dream. Every time you go to Korea it's like a dream. It's completely another world. Afterwards, it's back to reality. That's just what it's like. A dream.* [41]

Barb's goal was to try every method available to her to find her Korean mother before giving up. Most striking about her story is her description of Korea as otherworldly: "like a dream." She searched because she felt that she had to at least try, no matter what she found. Still, finding nothing was heartbreaking for Barb, even though she decided to "leave all her sadness and all her fears in Korea." This was possible for her because she had made every effort to find her Korean family; no stone, in her mind, was left unturned.

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[40] Oral History 25.
[41] Oral History 4.

During the course of our conversation, Barb expressed surprise that all adoptees don't search, as if searching and being adopted were inseparable.

Richard, 31, who went to Korea for the first time at age 29, described reuniting with his Korean mother as a matter-of-course operation.

> *I was just visiting…really just to visit Korea for the first time. And…I um…had the opportunity to meet my mom on that very trip…By the time we made it to Korea, I was pretty confident, even though I really wasn't that excited that I was probably gonna have a chance to meet my mom, or at least learn something about her…coming into it, I was a little bit curious and a little bit excited, but I wasn't overtly enthusiastic about the whole thing…And, it wasn't…a surprisingly, or incredibly emotional time for me, and it wasn't shock either, because I've had plenty of time to think about it, to relive that…since, and my emotions haven't changed…it was really, really unusually anticlimactic when I got there…She just sat there and cried and kept on saying in Korean, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,"…I guess…most adoptees might be under the impression that you can just carry a baby to term and…give him or her up for adoption…but in her case…her conscience got the best of her and…she'd gone through several bouts of depression…trying to commit suicide…From there, we kept in loose contact…nothing really exciting….nothing really amazing had changed, the way that I viewed life. And, I think that it's kind of disappointing, because, for me to take for granted what had happened, versus so many adoptees going looking for their parents and who would really give next to anything to meet them, it's kinda sad that it happened to me.*[42]

Though searching and finding Korean family is extremely important to some adoptees, for some, like Richard, it is of lesser importance. Though he expressed interest in his own past and wanted to explore that topic through learning more about his Korean mother, Richard did not express an emotional response to her at or since their meeting.

Korean adoptees choose to visit Korea—or not—for many reasons, and they have just as many reasons to search for Korean family, or not to search. While most memoirs

[42] Oral History 54.

and fictional stories about adoptees include search and reunion as central components of the emotional action in the story, in fact, most Korean adoptees do not return to Korea and do not search for birth family. The broad understanding of searching for Korean family as a symptom of an adoptee's dissatisfaction with his or her current family or social situation may be one reason why more do not search, though there are many other reasons, both practical and psychological.

Of those who do search, most do not find family with whom they can reunite. Whether this is because of lost or destroyed records, reluctance on the part of adoption agencies to release complete and truthful records to adoptees, or because Korean families are unaware of or unwilling to meet Korean adoptees is hard to say. Unfortunately for adoptees who do seek reunion with Korean families, the transnational adoption system is not structured to help adoptees find birth families, but to create legal ties between adoptees and adoptive parents, often by permanently erasing the very existence of Korean families related to adoptees.

Korean American Adoptee as a Public Identity

Organizations and Affiliations: Building Social and Political Networks, Formalizing Korean Adoptee Identity

Beginning in 1991, Korean adoptee organizations have developed in the United States[43] as local or regional efforts with the goal of uniting and networking adoptees in the same geographic area. There are currently several formally constituted Korean adoptee (or Asian adoptee with Korean adoptee leadership) organizations in the United

[43] Kim, Eleana "Remembering Loss: The Cultural Politics of Overseas Adoption from South Korea."

States. When I asked how these organizations became formalized, one adoptee responded:

> *Well, I knew that* [the former AK organization in the area] *just stopped doing things…I did feel there was something missing. It was very fulfilling to have that group, that circle, that type of environment around you. And I felt it was missing* [here], *and there was nothing else, because* [the other organization] *was done. I guess I felt kind of an emptiness too. I felt I could create something because of my experience with* [the other organization] *and seeing how the organization ran and there's so many things I wanted to do differently. I didn't want all the infighting and power struggles, so in a lot of ways I wanted to start it again with the ideas that I had, and yet not throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Reviving the good things, the connections, and providing that for other people. It was definitely missing in Minnesota and it was definitely needed especially here. That's it I guess, I had the time and energy, I knew the website was a big part of it.* [We] *had the resources for that… We found more people who were really interested in taking this on and that's kind of how it all started.*[44]

A larger national or international organization of Korean adoptees has taken shape through four large gatherings in 1999, 2001, 2004 and 2007. The International Gatherings of Adult Korean Adoptees (referred to less formally within adoptee communities as "The Gathering") have been coordinated by multiple adoptee organizations working together to plan single conferences in a coalition called IKAA (International Korean Adoptee Associations). The most recent Gathering was planned by the leaders of individual adoptee organizations in Washington State, New York, and Denmark.

For most Korean adoptees active in the community, the "community" is limited to other adoptees, and to some degree their partners and their children. Parents are accepted

[44] Oral History 4.

as part of *adoption* communities, but are generally not included in *adoptee* communities. The difference here is significant and manifests itself personally and politically for the leadership of adoptee organizations as they engage in community building (and probably for some parents who don't perceive a difference here). For example, the effort to organize a Gathering of Korean adoptees in Seoul over the summer of 2004 resulted in a request from KAAN (Korean Adoptee Adoptive Family Network), the only American national organization for Korean adoptees or families, to participate in conference organizational efforts. Because of KAAN's status as an adoptive parent-run organization, this request was denied, despite KAAN's stated organizational mission to support Korean adoptees. Organizers of the Gathering were adamant that an experience that supported interests and needs of adoptees could not also cater to adoptive parents; though an adherence to this principle may have damaged organizational and personal relationships between these individuals and their organizations and KAAN, Gathering organizers were unwavering in their decision. In the end, parents were allowed to register for the conference (though few did) but were barred from attending most sessions, which were designated as "adoptee-only." The inclusion or exclusion of adoptive parents in other adoptee-organized events, such as lectures, readings, or discussions, is a topic of explicit discussion and decision making within AK groups. While some adoptee-run groups include parents in community building efforts, they are also careful to program events for adoptees only.[45]

As the adult Korean adoptee population has grown, more and more adoptees have also entered the public discourses on adoption. Their positions as artists, writers,

[45] *Ibid*.

organizers, activists, and/or scholars, in conjunction with their identities as Korean adoptees have created the "public adoptee"—sometimes lauded as an adoption expert, sometimes denigrated for their supposed lack of objectivity and self-centeredness.

I am tentative in identifying this group as activists because many of these adoptee artists, writers and organizers do not attempt to advance an agenda of political change, as is typically associated with activism. However, I do consider this to be a group of activists because of their focus on Korean adoptee identity and experience, which is a minority existence both within White American and Asian American social structures. Most of these adoptee activists see the act of claiming their Korean adoptee identities as liberatory in that it is a defiant reaction to an assimilationist ideal of colorblindness or Whiteness within their White families; many adoptees describe a diminishing relationship to family during and after the expansion of their Korean adoptee identities.

Within Korean adoptee organizational, an explicit political agenda around procedural issues of adoption, or any other controversial issue, is often conspicuously absent. Notable exceptions include activist groups such as ASK (Adoptee Solidarity Korea) and TRACK (Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community in Korea) in Seoul and UAI (United Adoptees International) in the Netherlands, but most of the member groups in the large international Korean adoptee umbrella organization, IKAA, have an avowedly neutral political disposition. While adult Korean adoptee organizations might appear to be ideal vehicles to support a more actively politicized position on issues of race and racism, the opposite is generally true. The apolitical stance taken by many of the leaders of adoptee organizations reflects recognition that adoptees are a diverse group socially and politically. Most of these adoptee leaders, who recognize

their own political beliefs and desires, believe strongly that an apolitical position around adoption—and, to some degree, around race—is important in order to maintain a welcoming atmosphere for all Korean adoptees, who are imagined to represent the full spectrum of political beliefs and social positions. This also means that many of the adult Korean adoptee groups have programming that focuses on socializing among adoptees. This type of program agenda means these organizations often operate as "gateways" to the Korean adoptee community, and tend to attract new members (for instance, those who may have not had much previous contact with other adoptees). Unfortunately, this often means organizational programming fails to retain older members who want more intellectually or politically meaningful programming.

The Emergence of Adoptee Artists and Academics

A cohort of Korean adoptee artists has emerged, and through the public display and consumption of their work, have brought early attention to the experience of Korean American adoptees. While these artists' works cannot be said to represent the experience of all adoptees, their work resonates with many adoptees, and has changed the terms of American public discourse around transnational Asian adoption. While the general public still broadly understands Korean and other Asian adoptees as child foundlings, lucky to have to opportunity to become American, artists such as memoirists Jane Jeong Trenka and Katie Robinson, filmmakers Deann Borshay Liem and Nathan Adolfson, poets Jennifer Kwon Dobbs, Lee Herrick, and Sun Yung Shin, and visual artists kate hers, Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine, and Jane Jin Kaisen have begun to perforate these

tranquil images with much more complicated realities.[46] Most importantly, these artists, like artists the world over, are motivated by their need to express themselves and to represent their experiences. They have been among the first to challenge dominant White narratives of transnational adoption as an emotionally seamless act of child salvation; instead, these artists wrestle with the grittier reality of identity crisis, displacement, birth family loss, and American racism. Several artists participated in this project by contributing oral histories, and while they had a broad range of personal experiences, there was a striking similarity: most talked about their drive to create as a way of airing issues about their adoption experiences. They have done so despite resistance to these stories in many adoption communities, that were created mainly to support White adoptive parents. In this way, they have paved the way in developing a more unified adoptee identity, as early orators of complicated and often painful adoption experiences that have now been retold over and over in adoptee networking groups and to adoption researchers.

Since the 1970s, behavioral science research has been conducted on transracial adoptees, but in the last 10 years, transnational and transracial adoption studies has become a burgeoning field (probably related to the heightened visibility of transnational and transracial adoptees as more and more become adults). As has been the case in many new fields, most adoptees and other academics studying Korean adoption are still junior scholars developing new ideas and research within more traditional fields. In the same time period, there has been a notable emergence of the adoptee academic.

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[46] Anthropologist Eleana Kim has written about the phenomenon of Korean adoptee artists in her dissertation ,"Remembering Loss: The Cultural Politics of Overseas Adoption from South Korea."

At once an observer and participant in this new group of "insider" researchers in the field of adoption studies, I am reminded of the activist battle cry for inclusion "Nothing About Us Without Us!" and of historical shifts in traditional fields of study that were radically changed by the admission scholars from the groups of study and by the creation of fields in Ethnic Studies and Women's/Gender /Sexuality Studies that began as fields by, about and for these same groups. As it turns out, community-based and adoptee-centered foci in Korean Adoption Studies make a significant difference in both research questions and outcomes. In these community-based research efforts, there is more emphasis on social, psychological, political, and cultural consequences of Korean adoption than ever before. There is now much more interest in and available research on the whole-life experiences of individual adoptees, in contrast to past preference for parental experiences or for family experiences that only understand Korean adoption as a family-building strategy. This new emphasis in Korean Adoption Studies makes possible of socio-cultural queries about the effects of raising non-White persons in White families, about the meaning of Whiteness and the role of race in family, society and politics, and about the complex and multilayered identities of transnationally adopted persons. In addition, our community-based research tends to make connections to social justice, anti-imperial, and anti-colonial movements and ideologies by articulating critiques of racism, the geopolitical imbalances, class imbalances, and sexism against women in the global East and South (who are not deemed worthy parents in comparison with White women in the global North and West) inherent in the current configuration of Korean and much other transnational adoption. And finally, the role of Korean Adoption Studies research has now been peeled away from the interests of the adoption industry, because an adoptee

focus is (and sometimes must be) independent of the adoption process and the pursuit of "best practices" for adoption.

For those adoptees who choose to participate in public discourse about adoption, whether they be artists, activist/organizers, or academics, the role of the so-called public adoptee has many benefits and perils. Personal stakes can be high, and for many (myself included) the separation of work and personal life becomes a foregone luxury, or at least a hard-fought accomplishment. The benefits, however, can also be great, as Korean and other transracial and/or transnational adoptees finally articulate their experiences and ideas about the overlapping and intersecting categories of race, class, gender, family, policy, and nation that make transnational adoption such a rich and productive site of inquiry. These pros and cons are especially felt by the most public of Korean adoptee figures: memoirists who reveal their adoption experiences as a subject of their art.

Chapter 6

"Loss is more than sadness:"

Reading Dissent in Transracial Adoption Melodrama in *The Language of Blood* and *First Person Plural*

A version of this chapter was previously published under the same name in *Adoption and Culture: The Journal of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity and Kinship.* Issue 1, Number 1, 2008.

> Somehow, I felt that the American adoptive parents didn't quite see the orphans and the mothers as people but rather as interesting specimens, a menagerie of personified sorrow.[1]
>
> -Jane Trenka in *The Language of Blood*

Korean adoptee author Jane Jeong Trenka writes the words "Loss is more than sadness," in her 2003 memoir *The Language of Blood.*[2] She is describing her life at a crossroads of grief after the death of her birth mother, estrangement from her adoptive parents, and administrative runaround from her adoption agency. Recently produced narrative works by transracial and transnational adoptees focus on sadness, loss, and trauma as central experiences. This idea of sadness as an integral part of the transracial adoption experience stands in contrast to the other, more dominant representation of transracial adoption as an overwhelmingly positive experience marked by familial fulfillment, generosity, and unconditional, colorblind love.[3] However, within recent transracial adoptee-centered and/or authored works, a different characterization of the adoptee as a tragic survivor of adoption-related family and social trauma has taken shape.

These works include the written memoirs (such as *The Unforgotten War: Dust of the Streets* by Korean adoptee Thomas Park Clement[4], *The Book of Sarahs* by African

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[1] Trenka, Jane Jeong. *The Language of Blood: A Memoir,* 103.
[2] *Ibid,* 160
[3] See adoptive parent memoirs such as *The Seed from the East* by Bertha Holt, *Family Nobody Wanted* by Helen Grigsby Doss and international adoption "how to" guides such as *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions* by Jean Nelson Erichsen and Heino R Erichsen, *International Adoption: Sensitive Advice for Prospective Parents by* Jean Knoll and *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make an Overseas Adoption Work for You* by Myra Alperson Murphy.
[4] Clement, Thomas Park. *The Unforgotten War: Dust of the Streets.*

American-White biracial adoptee Catherine McKinley[5], *A Single Square Picture* by Korean adoptee Katy Robinson[6], *Ten Thousand Sorrows* by Korean adoptee Elizabeth Kim[7], and *The Language of Blood* by Korean adoptee Jane Jeong Trenka), and documentary or documentary memoir on film, such as *Daughter from Danang* (on Vietnamese adoptee Heidi Bub) directed by Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco,[8] *Passing Through* by Korean adoptee Nathan Adolfson,[9] and *First Person Plural* directed by Korean adoptee Deann Borshay.[10] Like many other memoirs, each of these stories has primary elements of tragedy and sadness at the core of its narrative, but in these memoirs, tragic elements are directly related to adoption experiences, either as causal or consequential of each subject's adoption status.

Though other transracial adoptee narratives have been produced, the listing I've noted here represents a majority of the currently available creative works by (or about, in the case of *Daughter from Danang*) adoptees. In this light, it appears that the genre of memoir, both filmed and written, has emerged as the predominant form within transracial adoptee cultural production, in a body of work that has been growing since the mid-1990s. Most adoptees who publish work on the adoption experience do so using autobiographical, not fictional, forms, in step with the rise of the memoir as a highly marketable genre within the U.S. publishing industry during the 1990s. While a handful

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[5] McKinley, Catherine E. *The Book of Sarahs: A Family in Parts.*
[6] Robinson, Katy. *A Single Square Picture: A Korean Adoptee's Search for Her Roots.*
[7] Kim, Elizabeth. *Ten Thousand Sorrows: The Extraordinary Journey of a Korean War Orphan*.
[8] Dolgin, Gail and Vicente Franco, directed by Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco.
[9] Adolfson, Nathan. Directed by Nathan Adolfson.
[10] Borsahy, Deann.

of films, television shows and novels have been produced that focus on transracial adoptee characters, the novelists, screenwriters and directors who produce these works are not themselves transracially adopted (most recently, see novels *Somebody's Daughter* by Marie Myung-Ok Lee and *Digging to America* by Anne Tyler). The genre choice of memoir and the overarching themes of trauma and sadness are related in that popular contemporary works of memoir—especially if they are authored by individuals who are not already famous—often have melodramatic narratives that focus on traumatic events and melancholic outcomes. The popularity of nonfiction forms other than memoir, such as "reality" television and television talk shows, further reflects the current popular public interest in the extraordinary (and often tragic) dramas of ordinary individuals. While studies about transracial adoption date to the late 1960s, adoptee narrative accounts of the transracial adoption experience have only recently become available. This is probably partly because the adoptees who carry these experiences have also recently come of age, and partly because interest in transracial adoption in America has grown in the last thirty years as the practice of transracial adoption has continued and expanded. Because a surge in transracial and intercountry adoptions began to take place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the first visible generation of transracial adoptees came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Before this time, the subjects of most transracial adoption studies were still children. Today there is yet a general lack of academic and analytical narrative material on transracial adoption; most narrative accounts were not intended for use as academic or analytical texts, but to create community or awareness around the issues that transracial adoptees face.

MULTIRACIAL FAMILY, COLORBLIND FAMILY, NORMATIVE FAMILY: THE LANDSCAPES OF TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION DOMINANT DISCOURSES

Autobiographical texts are filled with choices that their authors make; when I examined transracial adoptee memoirs, I wondered, why are so many of these stories marked with trauma, sadness and melodrama? One reason may be that adoptee authors feel compelled to stand in opposition to and contestation of the dominant narrative of transracial adoption that focuses on adoptive parents instead of transracial adoptees. I argue that dominant discourses about transracial and transnational adoption in the United State are also controlled by parents and adoption agencies, who are for the most part, White (often using the U.S. publishing industry as an apparatus, a mostly White industry geared to predominantly White audiences). For parents, the experience of adoption often includes frustration with the bureaucratic and legal processes of adoption—of which most adoptees are unaware—but is overwhelmingly focused on the joy and fulfillment of becoming parents through adoption. For their part, adoption agencies and related businesses are the suppliers to this huge demand for adoptees and are responsible for much of the material designed to educate parents about adoption. While adoptees and potential adoptees might be one type of client for adoption agencies, parents and prospective parents are definitely the consumers. As the consumers in the multi-million dollar industry of adoption, parents (or prospective parents) pay for the publications, the travel packages, the culture camp experiences, and the adoption expenses themselves. So in our consumer-based society, it comes as no surprise that adoptive parents are seen and see themselves at the center of the adoption experience.

The parent-dominated discourse supports and is supported by a more broadly neo-liberal ideal of colorblindness, that is, the refusal to see race as socially meaningful. Transracial adoption—the creation of successful multiracial families through legal (rather than biological) means—is seen, in this context, as the ultimate proof that colorblindness works. The oft-repeated, and very sincerely expressed, parental rhetoric, "I love you unconditionally and I see you as my child, not as an adopted person or a person of color," while certainly well-intentioned, does not reflect the experience of the children who are generally unable to escape experiences of racialization outside, and sometimes inside, the home. These parental sentiments tend to be interpreted within the popular "love conquers all" trope without an acknowledgement of the very complex work of managing a White-dominated but polycultural society *and* a White-parented but multiracial home. Partly due to the general stigma around adoption, adoptive parents are broadly understood as saints and saviors willing to take in strangers as their own, and thus valorized in relation to adoptees who are become the charitable project upon which parental good deeds are bestowed. So even beyond the experiences of those immediately involved in adoption (adoptive parents, adoptees, birth parents, and adoption agencies), adoptive parents remain at the center of transracial adoption experience.

In addition, social welfare research generally corroborates popular depictions of transracial adoption as unproblematic. Early empirical studies of the transracial adoption experience in the late 1970s and early 1980s focused on the experience of adoptive parents and their assessment of their children's experience (as opposed to sampling adoptees directly). At the time, a sizable group of adult adoptees was, of course, unavailable for study and consideration. Most researchers concluded that parents were

satisfied with their adoption experience, and were even surprised that parents were having fewer problems than anticipated; parents generally gauged their children to be normally adjusted.[11] Interviews with parents and children in transracially adoptive families were used in the Simon-Altstein Twenty-Year Study to assess the adoption experience. In a related study, Simon and Altstein also used their 1991 Twenty-Year Study interviews with Korean adoptees and their parents. Summarizing their findings, they noted that "Korean transracial adoptees are aware of their backgrounds but are not particularly interested in making them the center of their lives. They feel good about having grown up with the families they did. They are committed to maintaining close ties with their adopted families and are supportive of policies that promote transracial adoptions."[12] This well characterizes most of the results of social welfare transracial or international adoption studies. Finding after finding confirms that transracially adopted children are as or more well-adjusted than in-race adoptees, have acceptable self esteem, and relate to their families well. That most of this social welfare-based work functions to support transracial adoption as a continuing and growing practice is not noted as a foundational research assumption in most studies. [13]

The U. S. federal government has also significantly contributed to the public perception of transracial adoption. The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) of 1994 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 mandate that transracial adoptions be

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[11] See Simon, Rita J. and Howard Altstein. *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions.*
[12] *Ibid*, 106.
[13] For a more detailed discussion of behavioral science and social welfare research and its effects on transracial and transnational adoption policy, see Chapter 3, "Misrepresentation, Appropriation and Assimilation: A Critical Literature Review of Social Work and Policy Research on Transracial and Transnational Adoption."

handled the same way as all other adoptions, and forbids the consideration of race as the sole factor to delay adoption placement. MEPA also defined terms under which transracial adoptions can take place, including language that bars adoption agencies from considering a prospective parent's refusal to attend cultural awareness training as a factor in a transracial adoption, as this would be considered a delay to placement.[14] Rita Simon, a prominent transracial adoption researcher and supporter (cited above), was a key witness at the congressional hearings in support of MEPA.[15] The passage of these acts sends a clear message of popular and political support for the practice of transracial adoption by the 1990s.

In Europe, where transracial and transnational adoption are synonymous, and socialized medicine makes transracial adoptees and their health problems trackable, problems among adoptees have been more identifiable. Studies in Sweden headed by Anders Hjern concluded that transnational adoptees in Sweden, despite being raised by Swedish parents, are at the highest risk for alcohol-related hospitalization[16] and drug-related hospitalization[17] of any immigrant group, and are also at high risk for suicide compared to other Swedes.[18] In the Netherlands, Tieman, van der Ende, and Verhulst found transnational adoptees to be at higher risk of severe mental health problems than

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[14] Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA).
[15] Simon, Rita J. "Stand up and Sound Off: Statement of Rita J. Simon, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the House Committee on Ways and Means Hearing on Interethnic Adoptions."
[16] Hjern, Anders and Peter Alleback. "Alcohol-related Disorders in First- and Second-Generation Immigrants in Sweden: A National Cohort Study." *Addiction.*
[17] Hjern, Anders. "Illicit Drug Abuse in Second-Generation Immigrants: A Register Study in a National Cohort of Swedish Residents." *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*.
[18] Hjern, Anders, Frank Lindblad, and Bo Vinnerljung. "Suicide, Psychiatric Illness, and Social Maladjustment in Intercountry Adoptees in Sweden: A Cohort Study." *The Lancet*.

non-adopted Dutch of the same age.[19] None of these findings have been corroborated in the United States, the country with the most transnational and transracial adoptees in the world—and it may not be possible to recreate these European studies in the U.S. because of a lack of nationalized medical records.

Despite these recent findings in adult transracial adoptee research, dominant public discourses have yet to change much from views developed during the earlier history of transracial and transnational adoption in the 1950s, when transracial and transnational adoption to the United States began, and in the 1970s. The dominant adoptive-parent-focused view of transracial and transnational adoption obscures the losses inherent in the adoption process for adoptees and birth parents (often, the birth parents' very existence is erased). In light of the terms under which transracial and transnational adoption is popularly understood, adult adoptees who do not have the experience of "love conquering all" to provide them with emotional, familial, and community fulfillment face a social dilemma. Adoptees who critique transracial and/or transnational adoption, even based on their own experiences, are seen as bitter, unjustifiably angry, and ungrateful. Even so, I argue that the themes of sadness and isolation so present in transracial adoptee memoirs are attempting to do just that; transracial adoptees who produce memoirs of their adoption experience are attempting to take control of a discourse that intimately involves them, but so far has tended to ignore their voices.

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[19] Tieman, Wendy, Jan van der Ende, and Frank Verhulst. "Psychiatric Disorders in Young Intercountry Adoptees: An Epidemiological Study." *American Journal of Psychiatry*.

Because the dominant view of transracial adoption both emphasizes the fulfillment, happiness, and success of the experience *and* excludes adoptee voices, I argue that transracial adoptees have great motivation to contest dominant narratives by sharing the "true stories" of *their own experiences* of loss, sadness, and tragedy. Transracial adoptee stories of discontent, especially around the racial dissonance they experience as a result of being isolated as people of color in largely White family and (sometimes) community settings, also critique the ideal of an American colorblind society that holds sway in many adoptive families, and in popular discourses of contemporary multiculturalism. Specific to transracial and transnational adoption, the idea that transracial adoption could be a cure for racism by creating colorblind kinship ties is caught in the paradox of the current configuration of these adoptions, where mostly White, middle class parents from western nations adopt from racial and/or national groups in depressed or oppressed socioeconomic positions. Because of this, there is an unmistakable neo-imperial and neo-colonial stamp on these adoptions, both in current and historical practice. Christina Klein points out that the trope of American adoption in Asia was born out of a Cold War anxiety that spurred Americans to acts of symbolic "adoption" through charitable sponsoring of starving Asian children.[20] She writes that "[t]his representation of the Cold War as a sentimental project of family formation served a doubly hegemonic function. These families created an avenue through which Americans excluded from other discourses of nationhood could find ways to identify with the nation as it undertook its world-ordering projects of containing communism and

[20] Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*.

expanding American influence." [21] The practice of today's transracial and transnational adoptions only highlight the extreme power differentials between parents and children, institutions and individuals, Whites and people of color, and rich and poor nations. The stories of pain, trauma, and discontent told by adult transracial adoptees serve as solemn evidence of the human toll of these practices.

TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEE MELODRAMA AS THE VOICE OF DISSENT: THE LANGUAGE OF BLOOD AND FIRST PERSON PLURAL

I want to focus on two works from the aforementioned list of adoptee memoirs here: the written memoir *The Language of Blood* and the documentary film memoir *First Person Plural*. Both are autobiographical works by adult Korean American adoptees. These two works have enjoyed, arguably, the widest distribution and greatest acclaim of any of the Korean adoptee-centered memoirs. *The Language of Blood* has a high public profile as the result of numerous reviews. It was included in the Barnes and Noble Discover New Great Writers Series, won Minnesota Book Awards in the "Autobiography and Memoir" and "New Voice" categories, was voted best new book by a Minnesota writer in 2004 by the Twin Cities weekly *City Pages*, and has been a Minnesota Library Association Selection. *First Person Plural* has been released at limited theatrical screenings but has aired several times on public television as part of the Public Broadcast System's *POV* documentary film series. The film has a companion website with copious additional information, including an education guide for use in the classroom. Both works have been widely recommended in transracial adoption circles, among adoptive parent,

[21] *Ibid*, 159.

adoption agency and adoptee settings. *First Person Plural* is screened regularly at transracial and/or transnational adoption conferences, gatherings and meetings, and *The Language of Blood* is often for sale at book tables at these events. Trenka's follow-up memoir, *Fugitive Visions* (2009) about her experiences repatriating to Korea, and Borshay's follow-up film were both hotly anticipated in transnational adoptee communities.

Trenka's and Borshay's accounts are not the first transracial adoptee voices to enter the discussion that stand in opposition to dominant images of happy adoptions. Early works include several narrative accounts of the transracial adoption experience. These works were presented as narrative or interview accounts focused on or including accounts from adolescents or adults, or from adoptees as children with the accounts of their adoptive parents as well. Five of the publications—*Adoption and Race: Black, Asian and Mixed Race Children in White Families* by Owen Gill and Barbara Jackson,[22] *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak* by Constance Pohl and Kathy Harris,[23] *Adopted from Asia: How it Feels to Grow up in America* by Frances M. Koh,[24] "Self and Alma Mater: A Study of Adopted College Students" by Sandra Kryder,[25] and *In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories* by Rita J. Simon and Rhonda M. Roorda[26]—use or appear to use accounts based on interviews. Two others,

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[22] Gill, Owen and Barbara Jackson. *Adoption and Race: Black, Asian, and Mixed Race Children In White Families*.
[23] Pohl, Constance and Kathy Harris. *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak.*
[24] Koh, Frances M. *Adopted From Asia: How it Feels to Grow Up in America.*
[25] Kryder, Sandra. "Self and alma mater: A study of adopted college students." *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*
[26] Simon, Rita J. and Rhonda Roorda. *In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories.*

Seeds from a Silent Tree edited by Tonya Bishoff and Jo Rankin[27] and *Voices from Another Place* edited by Susan Soon-Keum Cox,[28] contain accounts that have been collected as anthologies of work submitted by adoptees for the publication. Perceptions of self, family and racial identity are typical parts of adoptee accounts. The narratives also contain common elements that are not mentioned in other social welfare research findings, like the feelings of loneliness and the sense of alienation from adoptees' birth race groups. These stand in contrast to the majority of social welfare research studies which have largely failed to document adoptees' feelings of loneliness, alienation from both adoptive and birth cultures, and loss of birth culture.

A core element of my research work on Korean adoptees has been the collection of sixty-seven oral life-course histories from adult Korean adoptees. While the experiences (and demographic backgrounds) of this group vary greatly, I can draw some generalizations from their stories with respect to feelings of isolation. While most adoptees do seem to cope with these feelings successfully, these details are important parts of the transracial adoptee experience. Most adoptees relay experiences of feeling alone and feeling misunderstood, as if they were and are the only ones in their situations. Being different, and in the absence of transracially adopted siblings, being the *only one* different also led to feelings of loneliness not reducible to typical adolescent angst. Many transracial adoptees also discuss alienation from others of their birth race as well. Adoptees in my study describe not fitting in or not meeting expectations placed on them

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[27] Bishoff, Tonya and Jo Rankin, ed. *Seeds From a Silent Tree: An Anthology by Korean Adoptees.*.

[28] Cox, Susan Soon-Keum. *Voices from Another Place: A Collection of Works from a Generation Born in Korea and Adopted to Other Countries*.

by others of the same race. Many say others of the same race could tell they were different, which led to their rejection. Some say they themselves could pick transracial adoptees out of a room by appearance and manner. Other adoptees, mostly Korean, describe feelings of loss and grief about their birth culture. This is more understandable for adoptees who remember their birth parents, but this feeling is present even for adoptees who do not remember their birth country. So these experiences of loneliness and isolation, usually absent in social welfare research, are prominent in both oral histories and published narratives from adult Korean adoptees.

Trenka and Borshay, both Korean adoptees to the United States, reveal the sadness of their experiences with great intimacy and in great detail. The results are melodramatic narratives with heightened emotional impact; both works can be accurately characterized as "tearjerkers." I use the term *melodrama* as described by Harmon and Holman in *A Handbook to Literature*: specifically, melodrama is "A work . . . based on a romantic plot and developed sensationally, with little regard for motivation and with an excessive appeal to the emotions of the audience. The object is to keep the audience thrilled by the arousal anyhow of strong feelings of pity, horror, or joy. . . . Though typically a *melodrama* has a happy ending, tragedies that use much of the same technique are sometimes referred to as melodramatic."[29]

Although there has historically been some disregard for the quality of melodramas as literary works because of their emphasis on emotional sensationalism, that judgment does not apply here. Though I read their works as necessarily melodramatic, my sense of both pieces is that neither Trenka nor Borshay had the intent of producing sad pieces only

[29] Harmon, William and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*, 312.

for emotional effect, but rather that both felt it necessary to truthfully cover sad events that are central to their adoption experiences. In a lecture presenting her film, Borshay emphasized the autobiographical nature of the work and the importance of personal truth in its content for her (Borshay) and personal conversations with Trenka also support this interpretation of authorial intent. Although both Trenka and Borshay have become recognized and celebrated figures within Korean adoptee communities, neither had developed these relationships when they were working on their respective projects. However, Borshay's screenings and Trenka's readings are well attended by other adoptees, and in this context, their personal truths operate within Korean adoptee communities as dissenting voices validating the difficulties of being raised Korean in White families and communities amid the din of dominant representations of adoption as unproblematic and adoptees as the fortunate chosen children.

Transracial adoptee memoir is a sub-genre ripe for Oprah-style melodrama: two mothers, two races and/or nations (in the case of Korea and Vietnam, nations involved in war conflicts with the Untied States), identity crisis, racial confusion, and testaments to the power of a mother's love and/or ultimate betrayal. Even this listing reads like a description of a made-for-TV movie of the week. More specific literary conventions for adoptees place them between worlds, either as lost and confused characters with fractured identities or, conversely, as bridge characters between two cultures, nations, races, and most dramatically, mothers. This is also noted by David Eng, who strategically asks, "How might a transnational adoptee come to have psychic space for two mothers? And

what, in turn, would such an expansion of the psychic mean for the sociopolitical domain of contemporary family and kinship relations and the politics of diaspora?"[30]

Both *First Person Plural* and *The Language of Blood* make use of the conventions of melodrama with emotional cliffhangers and releases. Certainly the use of these conventions makes both *First Person Plural* and *The Language of Blood* more marketable to popular audiences. However, these melodramatic expressions about Korean adoption also operate as conversational responses to the long history of Orientalist sentimentalism between the United States and Asia. Klein's *Cold War Orientalism* details the power of American imperial domination through sentimental cultural production. In examples from film and literature, Klein describes how the United States pursued imperial expansion during the Cold War era through U.S.-Asia integration by engaging with popular American sentimental and emotional senses.[31] The integrationist objective required the embrace of a common humanity over racial difference and sentimental appeals made this possible. In making just two of four points about sentimental narratives of the early nineteenth century that she then applies to Cold War era Orientalism, Klein writes: "the sentimental text explores how [human] bonds are forged across a divide of difference—of race, class sex, nation, religion, and so on; the sentimental is thus a universalizing mode that imagines the possibility of transcending particularity by recognizing a common and shared humanity. . . . emotions serve as the means by achieving and maintaining [these bonds]; the sentimental mode values the intensity of the individual's felt experience, and holds up sympathy—the ability to feel

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[30] Eng, David. "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas." *Social Text*, 3.
[31] Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*.

what another person is feeling, especially his suffering—as the most prized. . . . the violation of these affective bonds, through the loss of a member of the community or the rupture of communal ties, represents the greatest trauma within the sentimental universe."[32]

While Trenka and Borshay work against the dominant narrative characterization of Korean adoption that suggests "bonds forged across a divide of difference," they both use melodrama to make their case. In this way, both authors become active in the war of sentiment over Korean adoption. In Klein's terms, this is a war fought over who owns the greatest trauma: childlessness on the part of adoptive parents and familial, racial and cultural displacement on the part of adoptees.

RACISM AND THE RACIAL MELANCHOLY OF TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION

Transracial adoptee intervention is critical around their experiences of racism. That transracial adoptees, as people of color are subject to racialization and experience racism might seem obvious, but these assertions of experiences with race and racism underline the differences between adoptees and their (usually White) families, and therefore have been suppressed.

Borshay's and Trenka's texts take on an almost confessional tone; familial duty to colorblindness as an antiracist moral imperative creates social and emotional settings where the acknowledgement of race—and by association, racism—represents a moral failure. This failure falls on the part of the adoptee, and often also on the part of White parents, assessed guilty of the charges of the National Association of Black Social

[32] *Ibid*, 14.

Workers, that White parents are incapable of raising a Black (or by extension, any non-White) child because they cannot adequately prepare that child to deal with racism in our racist society. In her film, Borshay states, "For a long time I couldn't talk to my American parents about my Korean family. I felt I was somehow being disloyal to them. That here they had done all these wonderful things for me and provided opportunities for me and loved me a lot." For Trenka, the denial of race, nationality and adoption in the family is more mandated. "The a-word, adoption, was not mentioned in our house. Neither was the K-word, Korea," she writes.[33] For Borshay, the decision to take her parents to meet her Korean family, and for Trenka the decision to embrace her Korean mother, totally disrupts the colorblind ideal of their adoptive parents. By doing so, both demonstrate that they come from a family, a people that are biologically, culturally and racially related to them. In these conflicts, Borshay and Trenka show how the admission of racial, cultural and biological difference has potential to hurt both the transracial adoptee and the adoptive parent. The implications of racial difference for parents are reabsorbed by adoptees who seek to shield parents from race-related allegations in order to meet the colorblindness contract in force within many adoptive families.

In psychology, melancholy is a disorder better known as depression; in Freudian use, melancholy is one possible response to loss in which the mourner is trapped in a cycle of depression. Literary scholar Anne Anlin Cheng outlines the concept of racial melancholy as a response to living in a racist society willing to apologize for racism, but unwilling to change. A melancholic cycle is endlessly re-enacted as race-based traumas

[33] Trenka, Jane Jeong. *The Language of Blood: A Memoir*, 35.

are recognized as grievances and remedied but not prevented. For Cheng, the melancholic subject who becomes dependent on the remedy as the sole redress for recurring racial grievance is effectively unable to break the cycle of melancholia and is doomed to remain in a state of racial grief.[34] Cheng is specific in her assignment of racial melancholy not only to the identities of racialized "others," but also to dominant White identities. She writes: "Dominant white identity in America operates melancholically—as an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social consumption-and-denial. . . . Both racist and white liberal discourses participate in this dynamic, albeit out of different motivations. The racists need to develop elaborate ideologies in order to accommodate their actions with official American ideals, while white liberals need to keep burying the racial others in order to memorialize them. Those who do not see the racial problem or those who call themselves nonideological are the most melancholic of all, because in today's political climate ". . . it requires hard work *not* to see"[35]

I apply Cheng's theory of racial melancholy to the case of transracial and transnational adoption, where White adoptive parents, non-White adoptees, and non-White birth parents are locked in a melancholic state created by the imperialist and racist foundations of transracial and transnational adoption. In this example, adoptees operate as subjects with race-in-hiding as they are called into action to embrace what Cheng has named White liberal discourse by burying their own racial otherness. When transracial adoptees do make claims to racial grievances within family and social structures,

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[34] Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief.*
[35] *Ibid,* 11.

apologies are made, but the foundational structures of racist society and the imperial structures of transnational and transracial adoption do not change.

COMPETING RACIAL REALITIES: "REAL" MEMORY AND FAMILY IN FIRST PERSON PLURAL

First Person Plural documents the personal journey of the film's director, Deann Borshay, to South Korea to meet her birth family, including her mother. Adopted at the age of eight, Borshay gradually forgets her experiences in Korea and assimilates to life as an American living as part of a White family. As she grows older, she makes the choice to research her adoption and finds that, just before coming to the United States, her identity was switched with that of another Korean girl at the orphanage. She then learns that her actual birth family is alive and well and willing to meet her. Her adoptive family, including parents and siblings, are also included in the film. Her adoptive parents travel with Borshay to Korea and meet her birth mother and siblings. The film is critical of adoption processes that changed Borshay's Korean identity to facilitate her adoption and focuses on the difficult navigation of adoptees with two families, two countries, and two identities.

Borshay opens her film by speaking the three names of her triple identity: her adopted American identity, Deann Borshay; her switched-at-adoption Korean identity given to her by orphanage staff (in order to provide a child to the Borshays when the one they had been originally assigned was reclaimed by her birth father), Cha Jung Hee; and her actual Korean birth identity, Kang Ok Jin. The highlighting of Borshay's triple identity introduces the melodrama to come: a story that will attempt to resolve the identity crisis of subject/director Borshay. In her narrative, Borshay remarks, "I forgot

everything. I forgot how to speak Korean. I forgot any memory of ever having had a family. And I forgot my real name. . . . [t]here wasn't room in my mind for two mothers" and "I felt like I was supposed to choose one family over the other."[36] These statements underline the pressure on Borshay to resolve her identity crisis by choosing one of her identities over the other(s). Borshay addresses this crisis by asking her American parents to travel to Korea to meet her Korean family. In *First Person Plural,* the peak action is the emotionally charged meeting of Borshay's two mothers; the film's resolution hinges on Borshay's ability to decide which is her "real" mother.

In the case of Deann Borshay, the sentimental appeal to "save starving children" is literally realized by her adoptive parents who participate in a program through which they sent $15 each month to sponsor Cha Jung Hee for two and half years before making the decision to adopt their imagined ward. In *First Person Plural,* Borshay's sister remembers her arrival, "From the moment you came here, you were my sister and we were your family and that was it. Even though maybe we looked different, and had a different nationality and whatever, we were your family," and her mother reflects, "I realize now that you were terrified. But because we were so happy, you know, we just didn't think about that."[37] The early part of *First Person Plural* is loaded with sentimental stories from family on how they accepted Borshay unconditionally and see her as just like others in the family.

The conflict between adoptive parents' versions of the adoption experience and the adoptees' comes up repeatedly throughout Borshay's work, and highlights the

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[36] Borshay, Deann. *First Person Plural.*
[37] *Ibid.*

question, “what is real?” when recounting these experiences. Borshay reveals that, when she was young, her parents’ version of her experience prevailed. She states, “I think as a child, I made a decision that I would never forget Korea. Every now and then I would stop whatever I was doing, close my eyes, and picture the road from the orphanage to the house.”[38] But eventually, she admits, “The only memories I have of my childhood are the images my father filmed while I was growing up. I relegated my real memories into the category of dreams.”[39] After she becomes an adult, she is able to take back control of the memories of her life in Korea, but the incompatibility of her perception of her identity with that held by her parents creates emotional rupture. “My parents have no idea . . . this entire period . . . that I would say I was depressed,”[40] she says, acknowledging the stress of having two realities: Korean, adoptee and Asian in contrast with her parents’ version, American, familial and White.

Even after Borshay discovers that her identity was switched before she left Korea, her adoptive family tries to dismiss the significance of this finding in an effort to reinforce their acceptance of her as American Deann, part of the Borshay family, without realizing that their remarks are insensitive to Borshay’s identity as also Korean. Her mother responds, “I didn’t care that they had switched children on us. You couldn’t be loved more. . . . just because you weren’t Cha Jung Hee, you were Ok Jin Kang, Kong, whatever, it didn’t matter to me . . . you were Deann and you were mine.”[41] The supposed familial utopia of inclusive colorblindness fractures in this well-intentioned remark; while

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[38] *Ibid.*
[39] *Ibid.*
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.*

Mrs. Borshay surely intends to include her daughter in the family, in doing so, she minimizes the pain felt by Deann as a result of living with switched and missing identities, effectively erasing Borshay's Korean identity. Near the end of her film, Borshay tearfully explains, "There's a way then, which I see my parents as my parents, but sometimes I look at them, and I see two White American people that are so different from me that I can't fathom how we are related to each other and how these two people are my parents. . . . as a child I accepted them as my parents because I depended on them for survival. . . . as an adult, I think that I haven't accepted them as my parents and that is part of the distance I have been feeling from them for a lot of years."[42]

Borshay's focus on this difference in perception between herself and her parents works as dissent by augmenting and correcting the dominant perspectives of transracial adoption (that her parents also share) with the story of her own loss, trauma, and sadness.

When Borshay's own stories counter family narratives with her memories of her Korean family and that her identity had been switched, her mother will not believe her. Only when Borshay is an adult is she able to more fully consider her past: "I moved away from my American family and started living by myself. Dreams started coming to me. . . . over the course of a year or so, I started realizing that these must be memories coming back from Korea. That they weren't just dreams, that there had to be something about them that was real."[43] In this exploration of her personal history, Borshay also makes political connections that question the very processes of adoption. In a section of the film that gives a history of Korean adoption, Borshay narrates: "[T]he more children

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[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.*

orphanages had, the more money was sent from abroad. . . . what Harry Holt started as a humanitarian gesture right after the war became big business in the decades to follow. South Korea became the largest supplier of children to developed countries in the world, causing some to argue that the country's economic miracle was due in part to the export of its most precious natural resource, its children."[44]

Borshay's dissent in reaction to her adoptive family's inability to see her outside the limited confines of their family is transformed into questioning and dissent towards the larger-scale processes of transnational adoption and becomes a key moment in *First Person Plural*. In backgrounding her own story by relating a short history of Korean adoption, Borshay uses the language of economy (i.e. "big business," "supplier," "export," and "natural resource") and chooses to underscore critiques of the practice of transnational adoption as an unethical trade of children for economic prosperity. This is certainly not a depiction of fulfillment of the family that currently dominates transnational adoption discourses.

The experience of racism, especially within adoptive families, often comes not in the form of direct race-based confrontations, but instead in the form of ignorance of subtler and more complex forms of racialization. This is how Borshay approaches these experiences in *First Person Plural.* The Borshays' ignorance of the problematic Orientalization of Asian Americans is revealed when a photographic portrait of Borshay as a child in a sailor outfit with an oriental parasol is prominently featured in the beginning of the film. Though Borshay never discusses the significance of the portrait, I suspect that the Borshays' White children were not photographed in similar settings.

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[44] *Ibid.*

Later in the film, the Borshay's American parents present a copy of the portrait to Borshay's birth mother as a gift, presumably to give Borshay's Korean mother a document of the lost middle childhood of her daughter, but perhaps also to prove their embrace of Borshay's Asianness, albeit in an Orientalized configuration.

The inability of Borshay's adoptive family to detect the switching of the child they adopted from Cha Jung Hee to Kang Ok Jin, despite a two-and-a-half year correspondence that included letters and pictures, underlines the White stereotype that all Asians look alike. Borshay's adopted sister remarks about the family's inability to tell which child was destined for their family when they pick up Borshay at the airport. Her sister remarks, "I think mother went up to the wrong person. I think we didn't know until we checked your nametag or somebody told us who you were. It didn't matter . . . I mean, one of you was ours!"[45] This stands in stark contrast to Borshay's Korean brother, who seemed to know right away, despite her switched identity, that she is his lost sister, Kang Ok Jin.

The emotional trauma Borshay experiences also demonstrates why there might be more general silence among transracial adoptees on the topic of racial and national difference. Borshay states, "I think being adopted into my family brought me a lot of happiness . . . but there was also a lot of sadness, and a lot of that sadness had to do with loss. I was never able to mourn what I had lost with my American parents."[46]

Borshay describes the difficult decision of her Korean mother as she contemplated giving her daughter up for adoption. Ultimately, under pressure from her

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[45] *Ibid.*
[46] *Ibid.*

Christian church and the orphanage where Borshay and two of her sisters had been temporarily placed for financial reasons, Borshay's Korean mother decided to give her up for adoption. This is an example of the Korean birth parents in a state of racial melancholy as they believe that giving their Asian children up for adoption into White American families is better for them than keeping them in the birth family; this belief implies the superiority of White American societies, reinforced by local social welfare and religious structures.

First Person Plural has been thoroughly analyzed as a text of "psychic diaspora" by Asian American literary scholar David Eng. Eng's literary psychoanalysis of Borshay also focuses on the melancholy of transnational adoption, supported by examples of unresolved heartache between Borshay and her adoptive family, who refuse to see her pain, which he describes as "the strict management of the adoptee's affect."[47] He usefully connects the long threads of Asian immigration, and the racial grief held within them, to Borshay's adoptee grief. In addition, his work does well to examine transracial adoption as a White act, indeed an act of "Whitening" for gays and lesbians who seek to create normative families through adoption. Eng identifies the rejection of Borshay's Korean identity by her White adoptive family as problematic; he writes, "What is especially disturbing . . . is not just the fact that the family . . . cannot easily conceive of her adoption as involving loss [or] . . . imagine her arrival in the United States as anything but a gain . . . [e]qually distressing is the fact that Borshay['s] . . . sadness . . . is

[47] Eng, David. "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas." *Social Text*, 16.

read by many involved as ingratitude."[48] (21). Here Eng suggests the injustice of the familial negation of Borshay's adoption-related trauma.

My understanding of *First Person Plural* and *The Language of Blood* expands on Eng's analysis to explain the work of *dissent* done by transnational adoptee narratives in dialogue with an existing melodramatic popular discourse on transnational adoption. By publicly bearing witness to transnational adoptees' own personal pain and trauma, their words correct the erasure of their difference in the family and in society. While Eng explains the "communal nature of racial melancholia"[49] as a rejection by parents of the adoptees' racial awareness and experience, I instead understand birth and adoptive parents as not just a cause of racial melancholy, but also necessarily affected by it through the societal demands for normative family formations linked to capitalist interests between poor nations who send children away for adoption and rich nations with demands for adoptable infants who receive them. In other words, both transracial adoptees and their adoptive parents are intimately involved recipients of the racial melancholy of transracial adoption, though they have different roles of power within this melancholic formation. White parents are called into action through aforementioned sentimental discourses of common humanity and colorblind love and thus enforce the social conditions of racelessness for their adopted children. In this way, without acknowledging the burying of racial difference as a uniquely White privilege, parents also participate in subsuming the identity of transracial adoptees as racial others in order

[48] *Ibid,* 21.
[49] *Ibid,* 20.

to create racial and cultural familial identities consistent with dominant (and normative) images of the family as biologically, culturally, and racially identical.

KOREAN ADOPTEE MEMOIR AS A CORRECTIVE ACTION IN THE LANGUAGE OF BLOOD

The Language of Blood is the life story of author Trenka who was adopted from Korea as an infant into a small town in rural Minnesota. She describes a childhood filled with emotional and cultural neglect at the hands of her adoptive parents before entering college in Minneapolis. There Trenka encounters a violent stalker who threatens her life and brings her to the brink of emotional breakdown. Eventually Trenka travels to South Korea to reunite with her birth mother. Here she learns the story of her relinquishment forced by her birth father, an abusive alcoholic, who denies his paternity to the infant Jane. Trenka's reconnection with her birth mother and sisters effectively ends her relationship with her adoptive parents, which is only more completely severed when her birth mother dies of cancer. In contrast to Borshay, who spends her film reconnecting with her two mothers, the peak action in this story is the loss of both mothers, one to cancer, one through a bitter falling out.

Like Borshay, Trenka introduces herself more than once in her book. "My name is Jeong Kyong-Ah. My family register states the date of my birth, the lunar date January 24, 1972," she writes, "My name is Jane Marie Brauer, created September 26, 1972, when I was carried off an airplane onto American soil."[50] Also like Borshay, Trenka finds that the cohabitation of her two identities within her is all but impossible; she writes: "In Minnesota . . . Jane Brauer is missing. She is gone—only a memory in the

[50] Trenka, Jane Jeong. *The Language of Blood: A Memoir*, 14.

minds of those who imagine her. Meanwhile, in the mountains of Korea, Jeong Kyong-Ah . . . blinks hard in the sunlight, as if awakened from a deep sleep, or perhaps a very long fugue."[51] The absence of Kyong-Ah in the presence of Jane and vice-versa sets the stage in *The Language of Blood* for a melodramatic story of loss, neglect, violence, and abandonment to come. *The Language of Blood* opens with a letter from Trenka's Korean birth mother to her and her biological sister with whom she was adopted. The immediate focus on Trenka's Korean family represents a major shift from dominant adoptive-parent focused discourses of transracial adoption. Throughout the work, Trenka identifies and attempts to understand her Korean mother's life, further reappropriating the story of adoption to focus on birth parents, who are virtually non-existent in popular conceptions of transracial adoption. The publication of her memoir alone had the potential to bring adoptee voices of dissent to the White-dominated discourse of transnational adoption; that Trenka's memoir has strong overtones of loss and recounts memories of childhood discrimination in family and community makes the work of dissent in her book even more plain.

Trenka is much less subtle than Borshay about the experiences of racism she recounts, both in her hometown and within her family. In a satirical single-act play within the memoir, Trenka details a barrage of racist slurs from her youth focused into a single response from generalized community members: "Rice-picker! I don't my kids to play with those girls! Go back where you came from! Can they speak English? Roses are red, violets are bigger, you got the lips of an African nigger! . . . All you people are good at math. Frog-eyed chink! Boat person! How much did they cost? Where did you get them?

[51] *Ibid*, 15.

. . . Where did you learn to speak English so well? I know someone who adopted Korean girls. Do you know them? Gook!"[52] Trenka also describes her father's racist response to her dating Asian men: "He mocked their faces, as if they were not human, but dark, stupid monkeys. He mutilated their long names, which he could not and did not want to pronounce correctly."[53] Trenka internalizes her father's racist response to Asian men as racial shame and secrecy. In relation to this incident, Trenka writes, "It was during those years that I took down the bulletin board in my bedroom and scratched my Korean name (which I had cunningly memorized years before) into the paint on the wall and them replaced the bulletin board so I would not be found out."[54] This is also a prime example of "burying racial otherness" which Anne Anlin Cheng suggests is a key element of racial melancholy. Though it begins as an act of shame, I suggest that it operates as an act of dissent towards her parents' silence, and is then powerfully transformed into dissent towards rosier depictions of transnational adoption as a published "true story" of pain and loss within the practice of Korean American adoption. Later in the book, she reveals, "I had checked 'White' in the box of all my college forms. . . . I didn't want to be Korean. Korea was a place that couldn't be talked about at home; it made other children leer at me in school. Korea was the reason why my face was mutated, why my glasses wouldn't quite stay on my nose, why it was so hard to find clothes that fit. It was the reason why some children weren't allowed to play with me, some felt compelled to call me a chink or a rice-picker, and adults didn't feel compelled to defend me."[55] Here, Trenka's

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[52] *Ibid,* 31.
[53] *Ibid,* 59.
[54] *Ibid.*
[55] *Ibid,* 113.

admission of her own internalized racism serves as its own correction; by the time she wrote the book, she is aware that checking "White" is not the right choice for her, but lists reasons why she would feel compelled to do so as a younger adult. Here, she also connects her internalized racism to external racism she faced as a child when she identifies the discrimination against her, and the tragedy of growing up in a racist society where the adults in her life failed to protect her.

The Language of Blood has also gained some notoriety as an "angry adoptee" publication in adoption circles; letters and emails to Trenka as well as posts on her book weblog attest to the work's controversial handling of the experience of adoption. The book is controversial because of its critical depiction of Trenka's adoptive family and its disparaging depiction of life and society in small-town America. Trenka's eventual break with her family is probably also anxiety-inducing for prospective parents of transracial adoptees who read the book. Because of her more overt opposition to the current practice of transnational adoption (embedded in her story of her adoption, which probably never should have taken place), the perception of the book as "angry" probably is not surprising. While her political beliefs about the wrongs in transnational adoption contained in her book are certainly self-empowering and are potentially empowering to other adoptees who have had problems in their adoption experience, they are controversial in the context of dominant discourses on transnational adoption. This is evidence that the use (or even the perception) of anger as a form of direct dissent (as opposed to the depiction of sadness as less direct dissent) can actually be less effective in the "war of sentiment"; as noted by Eng, this can appear as ingratitude in light of

dominant discourses of transnational adoption, where adoptees are reduced into lucky recipients of "a better life."

Conclusion

That transracial adoptees would be present in discussions about transracial adoption is seemingly self-evident. "After all," they can argue, "this discussion is about us." However, most public discussions about transracial adoption are still not framed this way. In a November, 2004, talk radio broadcast about transracial adoption in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota—the state with the highest per-capita population of Korean adoptees in the world and home to a variety of institutions that pioneered the facilitation of transracial adoption—White transracial adoptive parents/adoption service providers Joe Kroll, executive director of the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), and Gloria Hochman, director of communications and marketing at the National Adoption Center, were the featured guests. Most of the broadcast callers to the show were also White parents. The comments of only one transracial adoptee caller, Amalia, were aired in the hour-long program. Amalia stated that, "[M]y concern with the conversation today is that . . . it is largely bookended by those who have adopted and not by those who have been adopted. The perspective is very different . . . Past the age of fourteen or fifteen, my parents did not have skills that they could share with me in terms of helping me develop my own racial and ethnic identity. Those are areas where I had to go out and develop my own skills and tools . . . if you are person of color in the United

States, you need to develop the skills and tools to deal with White supremacy and racism. You can't get those from White parents."[56]

Amalia also made objections to minimization of racist experiences for adoptees who are not African American and connected the imperial relationships between the U.S. and third world countries to the practice of transnational adoption. Her criticisms of adoption discourse as dismissive of adoptee voices was noted by host and guests before they moved quickly to continue discussion among adoptive parents. In reference to training sessions that NACAC provides to prospective transracial adoptive parents, Joe Kroll, in an effort to acknowledge the Amalia's concerns remarked, "we consciously have transracial adoptive parents and transracial adoptees doing the trainings together . . . to get their voices . . . parents hear almost better from the young people that have experienced it, than they do from their peers, other parents."[57] However, Kroll's remarks ignore the reality that transracial adoptees are not necessarily youth or "young people"; all of the authors/directors referenced in this piece are of parenting age themselves, and could very easily be older than the prospective adoptive parents to whom Kroll refers. Complaints about infantalization among transracial adoptees are common;[58] an adult identity for an adoptee is all but erased by popular and scholarly parent-focused depictions of adoption.

In order to develop and express experiences of adoption apart from dominant parent-focused narratives and to be heard, the most effective choice transracial adoptees

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[56] Miller, Kerri. *Race and Adoption*
[57] *Ibid.*
[58] This finding is present in my current oral history research with adult Korean adoptees; it is also documented by Eleana Kim.

can make is to engage in sentimentalist conversations. In Amalia's case, the articulate and logical presentation of her grievances was virtually ignored in the face of the multitude of parents wishing make their own stories heard. I argue that instead, melodramatic stories that engage in the sentimental terms defined in dominant discourses of transracial and transnational adoption are far more effective in bringing transracial adoptee perspectives into public discussion. While these are not the only stories about the transracial adoption experience, they are the ones that are currently most visible as the stories many adoptees have to tell. This intervention on the part of transracial adoptees is particularly crucial because their stories also do the important work of disrupting popular notions of transracial and transnational adoption as unproblematic, apolitical experiences of love, fulfillment and happiness. These disruptions often appear as ruptures in the happy American rhetoric of colorblind love for Korean adoptees who would choose to assert a racial identity, whether it be part of a Korean Adoptee or Asian American community, or a part of the White American community in which most were raised.

Chapter 7

Adoptees as "White" Koreans:

Identity, Racial Visibility and the Politics of Passing among Korean American Adoptees

A version of this chapter was previously published under the same name in *Proceedings of the First International Korean Adoption Studies Research Symposium*, edited by Kim Park Nelson, Eleana Kim, and Lene Myong Petersen. International Korean Adoptee Associations (IKAA), Seoul, South Korea: 2007.

> [If I dated someone Asian], *I would feel like I'm in an interracial* [relationship] *because I am very American. You know,* [my] *parents are White…he's an Asian, and they're a lot more Asian than I am, definitely… I grew up White. So I'm just like…* [throat noise, like uuuuggh]… *I don't know.*
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> -Zoe, 23, on "interracial" dating.[1]

RACIAL VISIBILITY, INVISIBILITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Most people of color in America must navigate racializations within dominant discourses of society and cope with stereotypes about their racial/social/cultural group. In a society with a low tolerance for hybridized identities, individual and social strategies of passing and colorblindness obscure the richness and complexity of multilayered racial and ethnic (not to mention class, sexual, and gender) identity. In my work involving Korean adoptees, I seek to recognize these complexities, while incorporating the very real tropes of "passing," "colorblindness," and "racial visibility." I note that adoptee subjects navigate their multifaceted identities (in a society that enforces categorized or non-existent racial and ethnic identity) using any and all social and cultural tools at their disposal. Among these tools is the choice to claim one or more racial and ethnic identities in order to cope with socially enforced visibility or invisibility for people of color.

The strict enforcement of race-only identity in a racist and White-dominated social context has contributed to of multiple strategies for survival among non-White persons (or more correctly, persons identified as racially non-White in dominant discourses). For persons with White or almost-White phenotypes, one of these strategies is "passing" or "passing for White." Film scholar Daniel Bernardi understands all Whiteness as a performance, whether it is performed by White or non-White persons, so

[1] Oral History 35.

that the act of passing for White necessarily involves either acting or looking White.[2] So with passing, an individual can use their racially ambiguous or White appearance and/or culturally ambiguous or White behavior to disappear into the White majority, thereby escaping racialization and negative association with their minority racial group. For persons with non-White cultural heritage, the price of passing is imagined to be high, and an accusation of racial passing is certainly pejorative.[3] For instance, in James Weldon Johnson's novel, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,* the biracial African American protagonist who passes for White ultimately despairs in his choice to trade his African American heritage and identity away, despite the fact that this choice may well have saved his life in the violently anti-Black and anti-miscegenation social milieu of the American South.[4]

While the legal structures that encouraged passing have largely disappeared, cultural penalties for race mixing and racial ambiguity remain high. The continuing racial segregation in American society ensures that interlopers who cross the color line can look forward to ostracism and isolation. Individuals with hybrid identities are pressured to "pick a side," usually for the most visibly obvious race (consider the general public rejection for Tiger Woods' claim of a mixed race Caucasian, Black and Asian "Cablasian" racial identity). Whites and non-Whites alike have taken up the politics of passing. In the current cultural moment, the practice or perception of passing or trying to pass is also often equated with a lack of cultural authenticity or pride in one's racial

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[2] Bernardi, Daniel. "Introduction: Race and the Hollywood Style." In *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*.
[3] Song, Miri. *Choosing Ethnic Identity*.
[4] Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.

and/or ethnic identity. [5] Contemporary slurs of "apple," "oreo," or "twinkie" applied to individuals who are perceived to be racially Red, Black or Yellow, but thought to act "too White" underscore one cultural price of supposed assimilation of non-White individuals into dominant American societies.

Currently, "colorblindness," imagined as a more "innocent" side to the phenomenon of passing, now the norm in American legal proceedings, has taken firm hold in contemporary American society and politics.[6] The ideology of colorblindness has its appeal in the seemingly benevolent repositioning of race as a social construct (rather than a biologically determined trait or set of traits), and the recognition of race itself as the act around which racism occurs. Following this line of reasoning, if we do not recognize race (which as a social construct, can be just as easily removed or maintained from society), there will be no racism. Not surprisingly, colorblindness has great appeal among Whites who have not experienced racial discrimination and seek a low-investment approach to solving America's race problems, and who do not want to continue to operate as the villain in White-dominated American race relations.[7] While colorblindness frequently figures in neoliberal discourses under the guise of racial justice (often quoting Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech), the insistence that race as a category that is "not real" ends up concealing current and historical inequalities that are

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[5] Song, Miri. *Choosing Ethnic Identity*.
[6] Gotanda, Neil. "Multiculturalism and Racial Stratification." In *Mapping Multiculturalism*.
[7] Newfield, Christopher and Avery F. Gordon. "Multiculturalism's Unfinished Business." In *Mapping Multiculturalism* and Quiroz, Pamela Anne. *Adoption in a Color-Blind Society (Perspectives on a Multiracial America).*

unresolved in our (still) very racist society.[8] With the refusal to accept or recognize race as a significant and historically grounded difference among people, the burden of passing shifts from a decision of the racialized individual to an expectation enforced by family, community or the general public instead. Where passing involves the self-denial of a racialized identity for an individual, colorblindness denies racialized identity for anyone.

Certain theorists have articulated more nuanced formulations of "colorblindness." Gilroy[9] imagines a reality of "against race thinking" and Darder and Torres[10] conceptualize a Marxist ideology based on class rather than on race, encompassing a deracialized—but not colorblind—future. Both these formulations condemn the use of race as a primary mode of identity. Like their neoliberal counterparts, these theorists argue that the use of race as a category of identity only further reifies reality of race as a "real,"—rather than a socially constructed—state, and tends to ignore other bases for discrimination, such as class. On the one hand, these theorists do account for historical and institutional racisms and differentiate themselves from "weak" or liberal multiculturalists by acknowledging the continuing importance of equality and social justice in light of these historical injustices. On the other hand, these theorists do not include an analysis of how this type of "against race thinking" intersects with Whiteness as a dominant discourse and with the neoliberal concept of colorblindness–which as a popular, dominant ideology of racelessness, is also as an artifact of White privilege.

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[8] Quiroz, Pamela Anne. *Adoption in a Color-Blind Society (Perspectives on a Multiracial America).*
[9] Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line.*
[10] Darder, Antonia and Rodolfo D. Torres. *After Race: Racism after Multiculturalism.*

AMERICAN RACIAL HIERARCHY AND IDENTITY: ETHNIC CHOICES?

Escaping the constraints of racial hierarchies and negative racialization is a lifelong challenge for many people of color. For Whites, arguably at the top of the American racial hierarchy and without significant negative racialization, escape from trappings of racial identity is less imperative. For White ethnics, racial Whiteness allows for ethnic exploration, experimentation and choice. In *Ethnic Options* (1990), Mary Waters establishes that White American ethnics often choose to identify with one part of their ethnic heritage over other parts. She explores how White ethnics see their ethnicities in a similar light as race for non-White Americans, and shows that they see their ethnicities as both defining and unimportant, but most of all, as unrestricting. Waters describes her subjects' views of their ethnicities as pleasant accessories, but not essential parts of their daily lives.[11] Though Waters reports that her subjects both participated in and were subject to ethnic stereotyping, and the subjects agree that this may have created difficulties for earlier generations, they do not feel that their ethnic identities are problematic in the present day.

Because of these beliefs, many of Waters' multiethnic White subjects seem to have many options in choosing from a menu of ethnicities (often equated to ancestral nationality) and from the behaviors that subjects linked to each or several of their chosen ethnic identities without real social consequence. In general, these choices are not challenged; for instance, a person who is half Swedish, a quarter Norwegian, and a quarter Lithuanian might identify most strongly with her Lithuanian heritage even though

[11] Waters, Mary C. *Ethnic Options : Choosing Identities in America*.

she is "more" Swedish than Lithuanian. Or at another time, she may decide she it is more important to be Swedish. Such choices are perceived to bring the vibrancy of one or many cultures into this person's life, but would generally not be viewed as a wrong or inauthentic choice by family or community members. There certainly would not be an accusation that such a person was trying to "pass" as Lithuanian when they "really" are Swedish. In the interchangeability of White racial identity, being of mixed ethnic heritage is not problematic. To the contrary, the more mixed a White person is, the larger the menu of ethnic choice he or she may have.

While White ethnics in America are well recognized by having multiple ethnic heritages which may operate just as easily in concurrent ("I am French, Scottish, and Swedish) or divergent (the same person identifying as Swedish only) identity formations, there is much less social tolerance for hybridity in ethnic (and sometimes therefore racial) identity formation among people of color. Despite the belief among Waters' White subjects that their ethnicity operates similarly to race for people of color,[12] processes of racialization in America ensure that people of color are identified in dominant discourses by their race alone (Black/African American, Yellow/Asian American, Brown/Latino or Hispanic Americans, Red/American Indian) without regard to ethnic heritage or national/cultural identity. Therefore, as Miri Song suggests, "…the actual range of ethnic identities available to individuals and the groups to which they belong may not be wholly under their control…"[13] because "..the ethnic identities asserted by groups need to be

[12] Waters, Mary C. *Ethnic Options : Choosing Identities in America*.
[13] Song, Miri. *Choosing Ethnic Identity,* 1.

recognized and validated by the wider society…"[14] Wider society, in the form of American historical and legal traditions have tended to instead enforce race-only identification for non-White Americans though practices ranging from the one-drop rule legal definition of Blackness to the creation of Census categories such as Asian Pacific Islander or Hispanic, which lumps together groups of people who are of different culture, ethnicity and nationality but who are racialized similarly. These practices have proven problematic throughout the histories of these groups, considering the heterogeneity of national and cultural affiliation within of all of these racial categories and the facts of miscegenation and exogamy that have been present in all racial and ethnic sectors of America society historically.

Asian American Racializations

The racialization of Asian Americans began as an experience of heightened visibility as foreigners and interlopers. In her book *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites* Mia Tuan articulates this positioning of Asian Americans between Black and White explicitly.[15] She also describes the unique racialization of Asian Americans, including the drive to become attentive to one's Asian image because of the high social cost paid as visible ethnics and therefore non-American (or "forever foreigners"). More recently, Asian Americans have also been perceived as legally and socially invisible with the advent of the model minority image and the re-classification of Asian Americans as

[14] *Ibid*, page 22.
[15]Tuan, Mia. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*.

"over-represented minorities" ineligible for affirmative action admissions or scholarship/ fellowship programs geared towards underrepresented populations.[16]

At the same time, in social discourses that have privileged the binary racial construction of Black and White, Asian Americas, American Indians, Latinos, mixed race persons, and members of other minority groups, are often left out completely. In *Whiteness of a Different Color,* [17] Matthew Frye Jacobson spends his chapter, "Naturalization and the Courts" outlining legal challenges to naturalization laws of the early 1900s in the courts that were based on inclusion or exclusion from Whiteness. Because only "free White persons" could become citizens, the designation of citizenship was tied to the definition of Whiteness. Jacobson outlines the change of this definition as one of inclusion to that of exclusion, from one that included "Caucasians" and anyone "not Black," to one that included "Europeans," to one that considered skin color to one that excluded Asians. In his examples, the presence of Asians complicated the Black-White binary by seeking inclusion in the American nation as non-Black and non-White subjects.

James W. Loewen makes similar points in *The Mississippi Chinese,*[18] when he explains Chinese as racialized as neither Black nor White in a milieu heavily defined by a Black and White divide. Chinese grocers in his book use of the category of Whiteness as antithetical to Blackness to ascend the racial hierarchy and leave a categorization of "Blackness" behind, but also never become "White" in the eyes of the White

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[16] Mario Rios Perez and Sharon S. Lee, "Asian American and Latina/o College Students' Life Stories." *Journal of American Ethnic History*.
[17] Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color : European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*.
[18] Loewen, James W. *The Mississippi Chinese; between Black and White*.

community.[19] Both these examples show how Asian Americans have been racialized between the categories of Black and White—securing status on the racial hierarchy above that of Blacks, but never equaling that of Whites.

In *Buddha is Hiding,* Ong gives her treatment of the racialized position of Asian Americans between Black and White. In a departure from her past work where she focuses on the "Whitening" of Chinese cosmopolitan transnationals, here she looks at the "Blackening" of Southeast Asian immigrants. This "Blackening" takes place through the social and cultural positioning of Southeast Asians, in this case Khmer, as victims, welfare recipients, unfit parents, and a population given to superstition over intellect. In a deepening of analysis around the Black/White binary, Ong also positions Khmer in relation to "Whiter" Asian Americans, such as Chinese or Japanese, or even Vietnamese.[20] In their anthology *Model Minority Myth Revisited,* Li and Wang write, "Increasingly, underachieving and/or 'misbehaving' Asian American[s]…who do not fit the 'model minority' image are ideologically Blackened while those who do fit are whitened…"[21]

Ong's discussion of racial polarization to Black or White is limiting in that it could be misunderstood as reifying an inaccurate but much adhered to Black or White racial structural binary. Regardless of Ong's intent concerning a Black/White racial model, her model is still useful in that it describes the racialized environment in contemporary American society. While there exist many very real identities, racial or

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[19] *Ibid.*
[20] Ong, Aihwa. *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and the New America*.
[21] Li, Guofang and Lihshing Wang. "Introduction: The Old Myth in a New Time." In *Model Minority Myth Revisited: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Demystifying Asian American Educational Experiences.*

cultural, outside the bounds of either Black or White racializations, when considering race, Black and White are often primary categories of identification. In a non-White context, other non-White groups look to African American race relations and cultural theories as foundational. Unfortunately, non-White, non-Black groups are also often only compared to African Americans as an essentialized racial group without an accompanying critique of past and current racial inequities that African Americans or other groups have suffered. In any case, Ong's model of racialization is accurate in its depiction of racializations which, though problematic, tend to point to either a Black or White pole.

Using this framework, Korean adoptees exist with a Whitened racialization in the United States, but as less White in the context of their birth nation. As "orphaned"[22] Korean infants or children, adoptees are saddled with the patronizing racialization as a result of what Ong refers to as compassionate love. In her discussion of compassionate love, Ong outlines her ideas about "paternalism toward subordinated populations"[23] which uses well-intentioned but denigrating goals of "uplift" as a guiding principal, perceived to assist Khmer refugee populations without a realization that it also racializes and discriminates against them. The goal of saving Khmer from themselves is similar to the example of transnational adoptees because of parallels to the motivations adoptive parents adoption-related social services (which are operate with substantially more economic and social power compared to most birth parents and their children abroad).

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[22] Many Korean adoptees were not actually orphans because they had living parents at the time of relinquishment, but were designated as orphaned in order to comply with legal requirements of transnational adoption.

[23]Ong, Aihwa. *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and the New America*, 145.

Using the motivation of the salvation of babies from poor countries, destitute mothers, and sexist cultures, adoptive agents use such assumptions, in the absence of any awareness of the imperialist implications, which can operate to give adoptive parents a mission of salvation through adoption.

Tuan's title, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites*, also alludes to the "Whitening" of Asian Americans with the advent of the model minority image in the -1980s[24]. However, concerns about Asians "out-Whiting the Whites" reveal that White dominance in American racial hierarchies is not easily so relinquished. High academic performance and economic attainment in some sectors of Asian American communities feeds long held American apprehensions about Asian cultural domination in a contemporary version of "Asian horde" anxieties.

As a result of the location of Asians Americans so close to Whites at the top of the hierarchy of American racialization, privileged social roles have been created for Asian Americans, based on stereotypical perceptions, and on Asian American internalization of these roles.[25] Stereotypes of Asian Americans as naturally smart, musically gifted, or hard working prevail. These perceptions, though they are often described as "positive" stereotypes, work to hurt Asian Americans: the stereotype of Asian Americans as naturally-high achieving prevents high-achieving Asian Americans from getting credit for their work; instead, the expectations are higher for this population.

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[24] Tuan, Mia. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? : The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*.
[25] Zhou, Min. "Are Asian Americans becoming 'White'?" *Contexts*.

For Asian Americans, these expectations can be devastating. Incidences of depression and suicide, especially for college-aged Asian American women, are high.[26]

The just-about-White perception of Asian Americans has also affected that group's experience when it comes to higher education. For instance, in many institutions of higher learning, Asian Americans, instead of being considered under-represented with all other people of color, are considered over-represented in relation to White students, and are therefore not actively recruited.[27] Despite a high degree of media attention paid to Asian American enrollment in elite institutions, most Asian American students, like other students of color, most attend less-prestigious public two-and-four-year colleges.[28] While Asian American students are becoming more common in American colleges and universities than in the past, they still have life experiences that include racialization and discrimination. With a national population of only 5%,[29] Asian Americans are considered "over-represented" if their numbers are greater than this small percentage, despite the clear minority status of these individuals in American society. Aggregating all peoples of Asian or Pacific descent also creates a false truth: recent immigrant populations of Asian Americans, particularly Southeast Asian Americans, are extremely under-represented in American colleges and universities.[30]

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[26] Ida, Donna Jean Akiye Kato. "Depression, hopelessness, and suicide ideation among Asian-American students."
[27] Maramba, Dina C. "Understanding campus climate through the voices of Filipina/o American college students." *College Student Journal.*
[28] Mario Rios Perez and Sharon S. Lee, "Asian American and Latina/o College Students' Life Stories." *Journal of American Ethnic History*.
[29] "United States Demographic and Housing Estimates: 2007." U.S. Census Bureau.
[30] Um, Khatharya. "A Dream Denied: Educational Experiences of Southeast Asian American Youth Issues and Recommendations.

Among faculty ranks, the demographics are also often difficult to interpret, but largely because of the general lack of differentiation between Asian and Asian American faculty.[31] The National Center for Education Statistics for 2007 counted Asians and Asian American faculty in American colleges and universities to be 5.7% of the total faculty population.[32] However, the Center did not disaggregate foreign born Asian from Asian American faculty in their counting (though the Center does separate out non-resident alien faculty). In 1993 William Wei found that Asian faculty outnumbered Asian American faculty in American colleges and universities ten to one;[33] in 1995, Escueta and O'Brien estimated only 40% of Asian faculty were foreign-born.[34] If Wei's ratio is still accurate, only about one half of one percent of American post-secondary faculty are Asian American; if Escueta and O'Brien's estimate still holds, the percentage is 3.4.[35] These low numbers may be partially explained by the fact that Asian American Ph.D. holders are less likely to enter the academic workforce than their White counterparts, and in the late 1980s, had one of the lowest rates of tenurureship among minority groups.[36] Asian American faculty are underrepresented in the humanities and social sciences and Asian American Studies departments are still remarkably rare. Only

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[31] Perhaps this is another example of the "forever foreigner" stereotype through the misidentification of all Asian Americans as Asian nationals?
[32] Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics. "Employees in Degree-Granting Institutions, by Race/Ethnicity, Sex, Employment Status, Control and Type of Institution, and Primary Occupation: Fall 2007."
[33] Wei, William. *The Asian American Movement*.
[34] Escueta Eugenia and Eileen O'Brien. "Asian Americans in Higher Education: Trends and Issues." In *The Asian American Educational Experience: A Sourcebook for Teachers and Students*.
[35] [35] Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics. "Employees in Degree-Granting Institutions, by Race/Ethnicity, Sex, Employment Status, Control and Type of Institution, and Primary Occupation: Fall 2007."
[36] *Ibid.*

four fully fledged departments exist in the United States and none are located outside California. East of California, particularly in the Southeast and Southwestern United States, Asian American studies curricula are absent at many American colleges.

Racial Roles of Korean Adoptees

The "model minority" phenomenon is well-described in Asian American studies research and is exemplified in Tuan's conclusion when she states that Asian Americans "…remain 'model minorities,' the best of the 'other' bunch but not 'real' Americans."[37] Because the insidious nature of the model minority myth has yet to well-understood within mainstream and adoption circles, it is sometimes embraced as acceptance into dominant society.[38] Some published Asian adoptee research even takes a celebratory view of this position of racialization for Asian adoptees. Chinese adoption scholars Tessler and Gamache write that the Asian American model minority image, "…sets a positive example for socially responsible and achieving behavior…It is possible that children adopted from China will gain from these positive images. On the other hand, they may suffer if negative images predominate."[39]

Currently, Korean American adoptees constitute about 1% of the Asian American population (approximately 10% of Korean Americans, who are themselves approximately

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[37] Tuan, Mia. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? : The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*, 161.
[38] Jacobson, Heather. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*.
[39] Tessler, Richard C., Gail Gamache, and Liming Liu. *West Meets East : Americans Adopt Chinese Children*, 20.

10% of the Asian American population).[40] In addition, most Korean adoptees have been/are being raised in non-Asian homes largely in isolation from Korean American or other Asian American cultural influences. Because of their acculturation separate from other Asian Americans, they might not be considered or might not consider themselves to be a part of Asian American communities. So in many ways, Korean adoptees cannot be considered to be representative of Asian Americans or numerically or culturally, but they do embody a relevant theoretical position within Asian American Studies.

However, despite their minority status (demographically and culturally) within Asian America, I argue that Korean adoptees epitomize what it means to be Asian American in several different ways. These include Korean adoptees' positions as imperial subjects, created by acts of war in the quest of imperial domination; as an unusually privileged group of post-1965 immigrants and naturalized citizens; as Asian Americans created and acculturated to embody the concept of the model minority and the ideals of colorblindness; and as hybrid examples of Asian Americans, who are Asian by birth and American by acculturation. Though the personal histories of Korean adoptees are often different than those of other Asian American subjects, the conditions of their existence as Asian Americans thematically similar; Korean adoptees experience many of the same issues of identity and positionality at an individual scale that other Asian Americans experience at a familial or community scale.

Once in an American context, Korean adoptees are subject to a Whitened racialization. Other second and third generation Asian Americans face this a similar

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[40] "Table 8, Race and Hispanic Origin of the Population by Nativity: 1850 to 1990, Historical Census, Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the Unites States: 1850 to 1990." Bureau of the Census.

experience of "Whitening" through acculturation in the United States, where Whiteness is seen as analogous to Americanness,[41] but for adoptees this process is even more accelerated. For adoptees, technically first generation immigrants, this Whitening is achieved through assimilative processes in (usually) predominantly White families. Korean adoptees are generally accepted as "culturally White" and often assume a role of racial and cultural bridgemakers which are remarkably similar to the social roles that Asian Americans assumed, as described by Henry Yu in *Thinking Orientals.* Yu explains how early sociological research of the Chicago School produced scholarship which explained Asian Americans in roles much as they are still cast today. Themes of the Asian American "caught between two worlds"[42] and the role of the "marginal man"[43] are reproduced among Korean adoptees in my research, even though they are largely isolated from much of the rest of Asian America. Though I recognize these roles as disempowering for Asian Americans, my own research indicates that they can still prevail. The racialized position as Asian American in general and Korean adoptees in particular as in between Black and White or at least in between White and non-White, with responsibilities to bridge the gap with their presence as racial and cultural mediators is certainly problematic, perhaps especially because of how absolutely adoptees have embraced this role.

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[41] Zhou, Min. "Are Asian Americans becoming 'White'?" *Contexts*.
[42] Yu, Henry. *Thinking Orientals*, 101.
[43] *Ibid*, 109.

Authentic Visibility, Real Invisibility

Paradoxically, two of the main problems for racialized groups of people are hyper-visibility and total invisibility. For the hyper-visible, racial stereotypes associated with negative characteristics (such as inassimilability, unintelligence, laziness, deviousness, etc.) prevail. For the invisible, society discriminates through ignorance by not noticing difference at all, and by ignoring needs of communities with culture-specific practices, desires and requirements. I argue that these racisms are linked and operate in tandem. The racism of hyper-visibility operates in the racism of invisibility by insisting that visible characteristics of individuals can be used to determine cultural knowledge and group identity/loyalty, ignoring the actual cultural nuances and lived characteristics of specific groups of people. The persistent and general invisibility Asian Americans peoples in American culture[44] is one such example.

The tendency towards absolute racial categorization (with no real possibility for hybridity) along with adherence to persistent racial stereotypes leaves many people of color with limited choices about how to express racial and ethnic identity. Without an understanding that racial visibility and invisibility are two sides of a single oppressive ideology working jointly it is impossible to see that neither is necessarily a good choice. Racism is not necessarily only the condition of having no choices, but also of having only bad choices. However, this is the paradigm within which many American people of color must operate. This has led to argumentation for and against both racial visibility and invisibility as libratory.

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[44] Zhou, Min and Jennifer Lee. "Introduction: The Making of Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity among Asian American Youth. In *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity and Ethnicity*.

Ostracism among one's "real" racial group notwithstanding (though I certainly do not consider this reality to be trivial), passing carries many social benefits—which often translates to economic advantages. Certainly, one does not have to look hard to realize the many advantages of Whiteness in a society dominated culturally, socially, and economically by Whites. We know all too well the advantages in earnings, lifespan, and social access that are associated with Whiteness. In his seminal research on stereotype threat (the psychological internalization of perceived dominant stereotypes by persons in the stereotyped group), Claude Steele acknowledges that one way to escape stereotype threat is to dissociate oneself from the stereotyped group.[45] Historically, this option is especially feasible for persons with hybridized identities, whether they be racially, ethnically or culturally mixed. In the strictest sense, passing is only possible for those with phenotypes close enough to a norm of Whiteness so as to not cause question. Incidentally, as the American historical understanding of "Whiteness" has become inclusive of darker phenotypes (with the inclusion of Irish, Southern, and Eastern Europeans), this type of passing has become possible for darker-skinned mixed race people. However, passing also requires sufficient proficiency in the cultural practices of the dominant society to camouflage one's own differences from the norm. In exchange for passing, one can expect entry into dominant societal discourses, freedom from minoritization, and presumably, from acts of discrimination and from racism itself.

As American dominant society becomes both racially more hybridized and socially more colorblind to racial difference, passing has become more and more possible

[45] Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. "Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

even for those who do not have "White looks." In a strange twist of history, racial colorblindness has become a legal and moral imperative for many Americans.[46] As passing becomes easier for more people of color, and more accepted in dominant society, both the expectations to pass and benefits for passing have increased. Hudson argues that the trend towards colorblindness in American culture has deemphasized race-based identities in favor of national identity and nationalized American values of "…individualism, consumerism, patriotism, ahistoricism—that sustain foundational myths of 'America' as a 'nation of immigrants,' 'land of opportunity, and 'democracy.'"[47] Thus, passing invisibly into dominant American society has potentially become part of a nationalizing project whereby primary identification is with the American nation, instead of with a specific racial or cultural group.

In addition to giving rise to neoliberal understandings of racial unity and justice-through-colorblindness, civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s also gave rise to racial identity movements. Among other goals, these movements sought to heighten the visibility of people of color beyond negative racial stereotypes.[48] Identity-based activisms had—and continue to have—enormous positive impacts on American society, transforming the social, political and academic landscapes. Despite the rise of colorblind agendas, these struggles continue. These historical and contemporary movements of self-defined racial visibility give communities of people of color platforms from which to speak, in order to demand equality, justice, and recognition of difference.

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[46] Quiroz, Pamela Anne. *Adoption in a Color-Blind Society (Perspectives on a Multiracial America).*
[47] Hudson, Dale. "Vampires of Color and the Performance of Multicultural Whiteness." Bernardi, Danie (Edt). *The Persistence of Whiteness.*
[48] Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States.*

Mechanisms for defining what constitutes a "race" or "ethnicity" are integral to the establishment of racial or ethnic identity—including unambiguous ways for marking identity borders. In many ways, the claiming of racial or ethnic identity is only possible through the dialectic process of defining who or what is outside the boundaries of that identity. Often, these considerations are based on the concept of authenticity. The confounding question is: who has the authority to decide who is in and who is out, who is authentic and who is not? Ironically, by seeking acceptance through visibility, identity-based movements may tend to exclude those perceived to be outsiders. We are cautioned by scholars such as Vincent J. Cheng to have a thorough understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of claims on cultural authenticity because, "…the search for genuine or authentic native voices will serve only to provide us with a feel-good liberal and multicultural glow—while in actuality merely recycling tokenism and nostalgia."[49]

Though the politics of passing, visibility, and racial identity are very real, I focus instead on another just as potent reality: heterogeneity and the authenticity of complicated identities. While the group I discuss, Korean American adoptees is often depicted in absolutely racial terms (as "Asians") or in absolutely raceless terms (as "Americans," or as "humans") I approach them as people who navigate both sets of ideologies, who are engaged in endlessly complicated conversation with dominant discourses that would seek to categorize them neatly when their so-called "real" identities.

[49] Cheng, Vincent J. *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity*, 27.

White Family, White Community

In her article "Brown-Skinned White Girls," about women of African descent who self-identify as White, France Winddance Twine summarizes four necessary conditions for the construction of a White identity among a population visibly coded as non-White. These are: 1) isolation from other non-Whites (though this is debatable in her example, since a number of her subjects were living with their non-White mothers); 2) "racially neutral" environments that have colorblind interpretations of family and community; 3) an ethic that privileges individualism and; 4) high priority placed on the material achievements of a middle class existence. [50]

In many ways, Twine's theories can be applied to Korean adoptees as well; most are in family and social environments that fulfill Twine's conditions. As noted by Eleana Kim, Korean adoptees are part of White families and White communities, and as a result, try to "fit in" or pass into Whiteness.[51] Among my subjects, most were placed into families that are entirely or predominantly identified as White; the adoptive parents of most of my subjects are both White and adopted siblings, if present are the only other people of color in the immediate family. In their White American families, the Korean adoptees I interviewed tended to be "raised White,"[52] possibly because of a lack of

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[50] Twine, Frances Widdance. "Brown-Skinned White Girls." in *Displacing Whiteness : Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*.
[51] Kim, Eleana. 2007. "Our Adoptee, Our Alien: Transnational Adoptees as Specters of Foreignness and Family in South Korea." *Anthropological Quarterly*.
[52] Phrase borrowed from Twine, Frances Widdance. "Brown-Skinned White Girls." in *Displacing Whiteness : Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, 218.

interest in the birth culture of the adoptee, certainly because of the lack of availability of parenting models which privileged cultural modeling of another culture over the parents' own, and because of the role of Whiteness as a race-neutralizing human identity.

As members of families that are generally identified as White, Korean adoptees are often assimilated into the family and subsequently assimilated into racial and cultural identities of Whiteness. Many adoptees remarked that the only people they saw growing up were White. Because of acculturation to Whiteness through rearing, many Korean adoptees find easy access to "White" privileges and life options, both because of a general support for White identities and a lack of support for non-White ones.

The practice of transracial adoption works to both highlight and erase race in adoptees. While most adoptees can never escape the reality that they are one of the few—if not the only person of color—in their adoptive families (and often in their communities), White parents and even entire communities often work to erase racial differences using a number of strategies. This might happen through instilling value for a "weak" multiculturalism (which celebrates difference but does not address a history of racism and imperial injustice), by downplaying racial incidents, or by enacting racially homogenizing ideologies.

For Korean adoptees, the ambiguity of Asian American racializations is compounded by racial ambiguity within adoptive families as adoptive families use the trope of colorblindness[53] to smooth over racial differences within the family and conform to a normative construct of family which includes blood ties and physical resemblance between parents and children. Applied to transracial adoptive families, Perry calls this

[53] Fogg-Davis, Hawley. *The Ethics of Transracial Adoption*.

tendency colorblind individualism, and includes a belief that transracial adoption "…constitutes a positive step towards a more integrated, nonracist society."[54] Paradoxically, while a colorblind ideology seems to have become a norm for adoptive parents in raising their transracial and transnational adopted children, recent research reveals that the child search process for most prospective adoptive parents is highly racialized, and full of race-based selection preferences.[55]

While most families continue to acknowledge the racial difference within their adoptive families, these differences can be wiped away by the claiming of a single culture and national identity (usually White American culture) by adoptees and their families. The tendency to conflate culture and race in mainstream American society[56] supports this privileging of cultural sameness over racial difference in these families. Additionally, the emphasis on sameness in family supports familial and social concepts of racial neutrality and colorblindness.

I would also argue that individualism is a quality that is valued in mainstream American society, and especially, perhaps, in adoptive families, who have approached child acquisition with much decision-making and deliberation. Many adoptive parents tell adopted children, "I chose YOU!" in order to make adopted children feel special despite their lack of biological relations to the family. Though there are surely good

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[54] Perry, Twila L. "The Transracial Adoption Controversy: An Analysis of Discourse and Subordination." *New York University Review on Law & Social Change*.
[55] Quiroz, Pamela Anne. *Adoption in a Color-Blind Society (Perspectives on a Multiracial America)* and Jacobson, Heather. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*.
[56] Song, Miri. *Choosing Ethnic Identity*. Song discusses the politically correct tendency emphasize culture over race in contemporary British society on page 18 and I would argue that the substitution of culture for race operates similarly in American society.

intentions in this particular parenting strategy, unbeknownst to parents, this can be construed by adoptees as a very one-sided choice; most adoptees understand very well that they had absolutely no choice in their family placement, certainly no more than biological children have to be born into a family.

Using Twine's logic, the conditions to create a White identity, regardless of phenotype, are in place for most Korean adoptees. That they would develop White identities while in White families could be seen as predictable, even unavoidable. Vincent Cheng notes, for better or for worse, interracial/cultural "…adoptions make a radical mockery of any notions of an authentic identity. Children adopted as infants…have almost no experience of their birth parents and of the culture of their birth parents."[57] Though the Korean adoptees who spoke with me described many different axes of identity, for most, a White identity was as or more common a part of their personal history as their Asian, Korean, or adoptee identities.[58]

Though there constant pressure to choose one identity over the other, and many adoptees see a conflict between their White and non-White/adoptee identities, they are in a sociocultural setting in which they have many choices from a multiplicity of ethinic and cultural options. For some, acknowledging White cultural background is essential and phenotype alone is insufficient for how these adoptees would like to be characterized.[59]

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[57] Cheng, Vincent. *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity.* 70.
[58] Laura Briggs also describes the inheritance of adoptive parents' cultures by their adopted children in "Making "American" Families: Transracial Adpotion and U.S. Latin America Policy." In *Haunted by Empire*.
[59] Maria Root advocates for this type of complicate and layered multiplicity for mixed race individuals in her work, including in her article "Rethinking Racial Identity Development." In *We are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity.*

For others, building up Asian American or Korean American or Korean identities is more important. Still others understand their identities to be a product of the many complicated cultural and racial processes of being Korean, American, Asian, and adopted.

Adult Korean Adoptee Racial Identities

Since Korean adoptees are indoctrinated into Whiteness as children, it should come as no surprise that they might continue to live with identification as they get older. While issues around White identities were not the most prominent topic among the participants in the project, several adoptees with whom I spoke emphasized Whiteness in their social and family histories; many discussed having identified as White and only considering dating White partners, initially. This was true of some adoptees in all the locations in which I collected oral histories, and among both genders. However, in my conversations with Korean adoptees, these White identities do not always last a lifetime. For most of my informants, White identity decreased after leaving home and becoming independent as adults, though this process is often complicated and difficult.

Many adoptees felt the development of a non-White identity, though culturally rewarding, carried a high price, including coming to terms with one's own lack of Korean cultural knowledge and experiencing rejection or dislocation within the family. A late emerging Asian or Korean identity seems to be a phenomenon common among Korean adoptees; many of the participants began to question or reject their White identity in their late twenties and early thirties.

For many Korean adoptees who identified as White throughout childhood, the social pressure to re-identify as non-White is often realized during dating and college years. This corroborates Twine's findings; her subjects experienced breakdown of White identities as a result of "reality checks" with dating and immersion in a more racially diverse environment in college.[60] Many adoptees who experience this realignment of identity are traumatized by the change, but also see its benefits in terms of their sense of ethnic pride.[61] However, it is important to note that Korean adoptees who self-identify as White do not necessarily ever stop using this identifier; conversely my analysis here is not meant to suggest that all Korean adoptees necessarily develop White identities.

An emerging Asian or Asian American identity can be particularly risky for adoptees who have previously expressed a White or culturally White identity. For many adoptees, changing identities is a painful and confusing process that family may not be able to understand. Gail, 32, stated:

> *The sad thing about it is that once you take the lid off it, you can't go back. It's a can of worms. In some ways I wish I could be so ignorant again, you know that ignorance is bliss. My mom knows that there is something terribly wrong in our relationship on a gut level, but she doesn't know what. She's blinded by her privilege. I try to engage her and understand that Whiteness is about being totally blocked off and not having to look at anything you don't want to and I keep bumping my head against this, and it's impermeable. It's an obstruction I can't get through.*[62]

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[60] Twine, Frances Widdance. "Brown-Skinned White Girls." in *Displacing Whiteness : Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*.
[61] Lee, Richard, Hyung Chol Yoo and Sara Evans. "Coming of age of Korean adoptees: Ethnic identity development and psychological adjustment." In *Korean-Americans : Past, Present, and Future*.
[62] Oral History 11.

In this example, Gail feels isolated from her mother because of her racial exploration as she has gotten older. One of the major contradictions for Korean adoptees is their tendency to be raised White, but then be told they are not White by those inside or outside the family upon reaching adulthood. Gail continues:

> *I did identify as White. I remember asking my mom when I filled out my college form what to put. She said, "Well you're ASIAN." But that totally flies in the face of what I've been told…if I'm raised White then I'm supposed to be White. As a good liberal college student, than race doesn't matter, and I'm going to mark White. But then I found out that other people didn't know that I was White (laughs)…it gets complicated because other people actually look at you. So then I have to think about what I'm marking on those boxes and I started changing it every semester, and that does not sit well with people.*[63]

Here, the Gail pays a social price for making choices about racial identity and then changing her mind. Even though Korean adoptees are well versed in enacting Whiteness, they are sometimes reminded that they are **not** White, at least not biologically or visibly, by those around them. Unlike the White ethnics that they may try to emulate, for Korean adoptees, identity-switching is much less acceptable in a practical sense—because racial changelings are more threatening than ethnic ones as race is a more meaningful identifier in everyday life than ethnicity.

This contradiction has been named the *Transracial Adoptee Paradox* by research counseling psychologist Richard Lee. He describes the paradox as the contradiction felt by non-White persons adopted by White parents as, "…racial/ethnic minorities in society…perceived and treated by others [inside the family]…as if they are members of

[63] *Ibid.*

the majority culture."[64] Lee's research objectives query the psycho-social development of these individuals, paying particular attention to identity building and psychological adjustment to the adoption experience. This paradox may become a problem when adoptees have to transition from racial invisibility within White families and communities that do not recognize a racial element of their identities to the visibility of "the real world" where race is recognized and adoptees must cope with more obvious forms of racialization. Barb, age 31, recounts:

> *Going to college, I was getting really depressed. Just not dealing with my emotions and all the anxieties I had, it was all happening at the same time. I'd called home and said, "I don't know what to do. I feel like I want to kill myself, I'm so depressed right now. I've been crying for all day long and I don't know what to do. I think I need to leave or something." I said, "Mom I feel really suicidal and I'm so depressed." I just remember the conversation was really short. She said, "Oh, you'll figure it out, it will work out, you'll figure it out, it's okay."…We just said bye; I called my brother and said, "I just don't know what to do." He listened. But I decided I just needed to drop out. I came back home. I started trying to explain to my parents that I feel like I'm having issues with being Asian. People look at me like I'm Asian. People look at me like I'm a foreign exchange student. I don't know. There's a lot of issues, that's when I started realizing that I was very very different and people saw me and they didn't see who I really was.*[65]

In the complex racial reality of transracial adoptees, the "real world" is represented broadly by a racist dominant society if and when transracial adoptees encounter racist language or forms of racial discrimination among strangers, peers or in institutional settings such as work or school. However, the racial rules of the "real world" are also enforced by the racializing tendency to consider categories of race and ethnicity bounded and impermeable; Lee's paradox operates with an assumption that transracial adoptees

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[64] Lee, Richard M. "The Transracial Adoption Paradox: History, Research and Counseling Implications of Cultural Socialization." In *The Counseling Psychologist*, 711.
[65] Oral History 4.

contend with the bounded identity categories of either "White" or "non-White." Miri Song suggests this impermeability is compounded by dominant society enforcement the act of "opting out" of one ethnic or cultural group only by successfully opting into another group, with leaves little flexibility for individuals to be in a space in between groups. She goes as far as to cite research that suggests mixed-race people have suffer with identity crisis and low self-esteem.[66] The dissonance of claiming an identity not supported by others (the social consequences of being "wrong" about your identity, such as in the example above, if a person checks "White" when he or she *really* is Asian) is of primary concern to many adoption researchers.[67] The fear is that an acculturation to Whiteness may not prepare Korean adoptees or other transracial adoptees to live in a racist society, and that these survival skills are best learned from parents of the same race as the child. In addition, other people of color may exert social pressure on transracial adoptees to suggest that taking on a White identity is symptomatic of poor identity development or denial of one's "true" self. While well-intentioned, these renderings of the "real" racial identity of transracial adoptees are often just as ignorant of transracial adoptee life experience as the supposedly racially ignorant and isolated White family.

However, for some Korean adoptees, just as the incentive to accept a White identity in a White family is great, the consequences of rejecting such an identity could be grave; I have found that adoptees sometimes see challenging this White identity as threatening to continued inclusion in their White family. This is consistent with the aforementioned racial ambiguities enforced within many adoptive families in order to

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[66] Song, Miri. *Choosing Ethnic Identity.*
[67] Bagley 1993, Feigelman 2000, Freundlich and Lieberthal 2000, Hollingsworth 1997, Verslius-den Bieman and Vehulst 1995, and others.

achieve normative familial sameness by de-emphasizing racial differences. If adoptees understanding that race doesn't matter in order to maintain family harmony, the insistence that racial difference does matter can upset this balance, sometimes in extreme ways.

At the same time, pressure to "be more Asian" within Asian American communities, the Korean adoptee community included, can be high for Korean adopted adults. So many Korean adoptees have the experience of being "raised White" that one mark of maturity among adoptees is to revert or discover one's "roots." This journey of discovery often includes travel back to Korea, searching for birthparents, self-education about Korea, Asia and/or Asian America, and sometimes, the rejection of White family and friends. Korean adoptees may be responding to these pressures if they seek to move away from culturally White identities as they mature. Diane, age 28, recalls her response to an invitation to a social event that excluded Whites, including her White fiancée:

> *There is something that happened not too long ago, with someone* [a person of color]*…somewhat out of our group was throwing a party and had made the comment, "I'm having this party with such-and-such and let's try to keep it to folks of color, because I don't think my nerves can handle anyone else." And I was really offended by that. Because I have spent most of my life trying to feel comfortable with people who are Asian and there is absolutely no way in hell that I am going to start feeling uncomfortable because there are White people in my life. And I really resent that sentiment. I get it on a sociological level, I get it, but I don't agree with it. It's hurtful. I'm sure the same way it's hurtful for you sometimes. I feel like as a person and as a couple, we're above that. The person inviting me was not the person who wrote that, so I told that person. I said, "Anyplace my partner's not welcome to, I'm not welcome to. That's offensive to me and that's just the same as me sending around an email saying don't bring any people of color."*[68]

[68] Oral History 7.

When speaking about racism she's experienced as a Korean American adoptee, Abagail, age 32, had more complaints about other Koreans in her life than her White friends and family:

> *I'd have to say that I think I experienced more racism from other Koreans than I did from Caucasians, for example. Most Caucasian people that I knew and were friends with, they were pretty accepting of my family situation. But, I think the - the recurring theme for me was running into a lot of Korean Americans and Korean families who had a strong bias against adoptees…I ran into that numerous times growing up…For example, all through grade school, middle school and high school, there was a group of Korean Americans who kind of teased me and called me "twinkie" and, you know, "banana" and things like that. I think I always tried to laugh it off and, you know, just pretend like it didn't bother me. But I think, inside, I did internalize a lot of that. I did really think about what - what it is to be a "real" Korean and what it is to be a "fake" Korean, which is the other term that was used quite often*.[69]

Madeline, age 36, compares the racialization she experienced in Korea, for being "White inside" to that in the United States.

> [When] *I came to Korea when people were like, "Oh, you're a White person inside," and… when I was, in the U.S, they'd be like, "Oh, you're…" umm what is the, "You're a banana." and I never really understood, completely, that concept. I mean, I understood, yeah, you're a White person on the inside, Asian person on the outside, and I really did understand that, but..they'd just be like,* [pause] *"Well, you know, you, you're a wannabe White person." And I'm like, "No,* [pause] *I don't think I'm a wannabe White person. I, I think I am what I am, because I didn't have a choice. So, does that make me a banana?" An Asian person who comes…I think a banana is an example of an Asian person who goes to America, and starts* [pause] *just a completely disses his culture, his or her culture, and then starts acting like a White person…That would be an example of a banana. However, because I'm placed in that society does not, I don't think, really* [pause] *say that I'm a banana, because* [pause] *I don't think I follow that example. So, do I think more White? Do I think more Asian? I don't know if I, if I think more White, because…I think*

[69] Oral History 39.

> *more Western. I definitely don't think Korean…so, if you differentiate…maybe I think more Asian if I go to America, and when I go to America…go to Korea then I think more White. So,* [pause] *I don't know. It's such a hard question.*[70]

Diane, Abagail, and Madeline all feel caught between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand, they are connecting with other Asians and Asian Americans, either because they want to while in the United States or because, in Madeline's case, because she has to at her workplace in Seoul. Though none see themselves as racial-cultural curiosities, they are treated as such, or at least asked to choose a singular racial-cultural identity by the Asians and Asian Americans with whom they come into contact. For Diane, the choice is clear, and she is not willing to abandon her White friends and partner in order to be in with an Asian American friend who seems to not want White people in his life (or at least in his presence). In Abagail's case, the discrimination she experiences around Koreans and Korean Americans steels her against those communities, but it also makes her question if she is really Korean, or only a "fake" Korean (meaning Korean in body only, but not culturally). Madeline rejects the suggestion that she is a "banana" because it is pejorative, but also because she does not feel she should be held responsible for a cultural identity that she did not choose. In her view, though the description of "yellow on the outside, White on the inside" may well be accurate, she does not see herself as having rejected Korean culture of her own volition; instead she claims"…*I am what I am, because I didn't have a choice."*

In contrast to the race-neutral positions cast for Korean adoptees by parents or the race-positive positions cast by some adoption researchers and members of communities

[70] Oral History 59.

of color, many of the Korean adoptees I spoke with expressed a profound sense of racial "in-betweenness." Considering the competing social pressures to identify as White (usually within the family and close friends) and as Asian (in larger social contexts among groups that do not identify the adoptee as Asian and adopted) it is not surprising that Korean adoptees feel divided.

FLEXIBLE RACIAL BOUNDARIES, MOBILE RACIAL HIERARCHIES

In-Between Races

> *He handed out this thing where you were supposed to put your name, your age, your race-slash-identity. As a knee-jerk reaction, I put "Korean." Then "sort-of." I am 32 years old and I still don't know.*
>
> – Gail, 32, talking about her identity.

In her work on mixed-race identities, Root finds that many mixed race individuals change their self-identity over their lifetimes.[71] Though most of the Korean adoptee informants with whom I spoke were not racially mixed, they are in many ways culturally mixed in their cultural identities of White, Asian, American, Korean and/or adopted, and many identified as White earlier in life, while living with parents, and had an epiphany of sorts sometime during adulthood where their racial designation changed from White. Some experienced this as adolescents, some as young adults, some not until they were in their thirties. Not surprisingly, I found ambiguity in adoptees as they were transitioning and questioning their racial and cultural identities. For many, the price of changing racial and cultural identities (from White to Korean or Asian) was high. Most eventually chose

[71] Root, Maria P.P. "Rethinking Racial Identity Development." In *We are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity.*

identities as Asian or Asian American. However, many remarked that even this identity did not entirely fit their life experiences. One subject said: "*…as an adoptee, you're always going to be in between, you're not Asian enough and you're not White enough.*"[72] In a more complicated rendering of this idea, Gail remarked on the stark contrasts between her White and Korean identities:

> *Minnesota is profoundly White; it doesn't get any Whiter than this, except North Dakota, and I'm from a town near the North Dakota border. The population and the ignorance and the White privilege that comes with that. But then I think what is the alternative…I can move to California or Hawaii….but then I think, I can't even make it to the grocery store…I can't even make it to King's* [a local Korean restaurant], *because then I have to be profoundly Korean.* [73]

Later she continued with these thoughts about her condition of in-betweenness:

> *I really struggle with feeling fraudulent…that's a thing…I have a really hard time hanging out with people who were raised Korean, because I have such tremendous feelings of insecurity about that. I get in these situations of racial starkness…if everyone is starkly Korean, then I feel really White. If I'm with my family, I feel really not White. It goes in degrees, depending on the cultural consequence, because if I'm not White, then I must be Korean and that doesn't take me very far either. Right now I feel very not White and very White at the same time…that has to do with cultural competence and it's the chameleon thing, like who am I standing next to…These days, the only people I feel completely comfortable being around are my Korean adoptee friends because I don't feel fraudulent.*[74]

Researchers White Stephan and Stephan made similar findings in their research of mixed-race Japanese Americans: identity is often based on the particular social context in which each person was in, and that the social pressure for mixed race persons to only

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[72] Oral History 8.
[73] Oral History 11.
[74] *Ibid.*

have a single ethnic identity is psychologically harmful to these individuals.[75] While most Korean adoptess are not mixed race, they are similar to mixed race people in their mixed ethnic bearings. Korean adoptees often expressed context-based identity shifting as an experience of in-betweenness,[76] and like Gail, often mentioned the "chameleon effect" where they felt they could or had to adapt to whatever identity was dominant or expected of them in any given social situation. Similar to White Stephan and Stephans' findings in mixed-race communities, dominant ideologies outside adoptee communities seek to regulate Korean adoptee identity more rigidly. Resistance to any Korean adoptee self-concept that complicates simple identity categories takes many forms, all of which attempt to pigeonhole adoptee identity into either "White" or "Asian/Korean" categories. This response echoes the experience of mixed-race individuals and second-generation ethnic Americans who also want the freedom to exert choice in their identities.[77] Korean adoptees have much in common with both groups, as highly assimilated immigrants because of their immersion in White American society at a young age and as individuals who are often mixed in their cultural and national identification.

Because of their age and their awareness about Whiteness as a problematic identity in their lives, many adoptees expressed some rejection of the Whiteness that they had embraced as younger people. These rejections were filled with painful realizations of

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[75] White Stephan, Cookie and Walter G. Stephan. "What are the Functions of Ethnic Identity?" In *We are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity*.

[76] This strategy is also identified as "practical identification" by Miri Song in *Choosing Ethnic Identity*, though she claims this as a position between dominant culture and one's own community, suggesting this is a position of ambiguity between a "real" and "convenient" identity.

[77] Song, Miri. *Choosing Ethnic Identity*.

what was lost to gain their Whiteness, and what is lost in rejecting Whiteness. Many equate Whiteness with a deeply held ignorance in relation to non-White people and about difference in general. Some reported experiencing a profound sense of internal conflict because, although they understood well how such ignorance was produced and maintained, it was painful for them to confront.

When specifically asked what Whiteness means to them today, as adults, Korean adoptees had a number of responses, including explanations of a contradictory access to White privilege, equating Whiteness with ignorance, and a rejection of Whiteness altogether. Though the adoptees with whom I explicitly discussed Whiteness acknowledged that they had some access to the privileges of Whiteness, their explanations of their relationship with White privilege were complicated by encounters with racism within Whiteness and other expressions of partial instead of full access to the privileges of being considered White.

In navigating Asian American roles, the role of the model minority may have special appeal to Korean adoptees. Some adoptees see the position of "best of the worst" as an alluring one, holding the prospect of adoptees as people of color allowed to co-exist in their largely White world. The racially neutral position of many White families and social circles would not allow adoptees to acknowledge that a model minority position enacts an inferior racialization, only that it is far better than a negative Asian racialization, or the racialization of other groups of people of color.

The ambivalence expressed by some Korean adoptees about their racial identities in their conversations with me appeared to be related to the pressure many adoptees felt to "pick a side." Limiting adoptees to the choice of White identity versus Asian identity

leads many to a "third space" where the complex realities of adoptee racial and cultural identity can be more easily rendered. This space of racial ambiguity expresses itself in two major sites: Korean adoptee communities and race-neutral communities, often of or around adoptive families.

In Lee's concept of the transracial adoptee paradox, he describes a familial space where race is not recognized, and a space outside the family where the rules of racial engagement are much harsher[78]. Adoptive families develop race-neutral values in order to minimize the obvious biological differences within their families, but I argue that in contemporary American society, many transracial adoptees can increasingly choose to stay within a race-neutral space. Expanding on his concept of the race-neutral family, which Lee applies to the individual adoptee subject, I suggest that the practice of transracial adoption has contributed significantly to the development of race-neutrality as a moral imperative extending beyond families to their communities, becoming significant even at a national scale.[79] Many adoptees who contributed oral histories discussed their extended families, churches, schools, and towns as having similar race-neutral values.

Neutralizing Racial Etiquettes for Korean Adoption

Omi and Winant's concept of *racial etiquette,* where "[e]verybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification…[r]ace becomes

[78] Lee, Richard M. "The Transracial Adoption Paradox: History, Research and Counseling Implications of Cultural Socialization." In *The Counseling Psychologist*.
[79] Pertman, Adam. *Adoption Nation : How the Adoption Revolution Is Transforming America*.

'common sense'—a way of comprehending, explaining, an acting in the world,"[80] is one way to usefully examine the racial attitudes and identities Korean adoptees have about themselves. Legal scholar Janice MacDonald also describes a contemporary racial etiquette of "polite Whites" who prefer not to engage in dialogue about race that is too challenging to themselves or others and who tend to respond to racial queries with polite silence.[81] I suggest that there is a specific racial etiquette to transracial adoption, wherein the White communities tend to politely overlook the racial difference between the White majority and the adoptees themselves. Some community members may follow this racial etiquette of denial of racial difference because of obligation to adoptive families who are enforcing a race neutral ethic. Some may have of overarching beliefs in the importance of colorblindness as a solution to America's race relations problems. Either way, I argue that transracial adoptees can remain racially invisible even outside their adoptive families.

Because of high acculturation into White society and comprehensive understanding of White social and racial rules, adoptees often make it easy for those around them to look past their race, which in turn enforces the correctness of colorblind racial etiquette among non-adoptees in their communities. Certainly, many adoptees see any acknowledgement of their race as racist or at least uncouth. These cultural demands of adoptees and adoptive families to maintain colorblind perspectives feeds back into their communities and helps to maintain the racial invisibility preferred by some adoptees. In one example, Amy, age 32, told how she learned that her White fiancée,

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[80] Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*, 60.
[81] McDonald, Janis L. "Looking in the Honest Mirror of Privilege: 'Polite White' Reflections." *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law.*

early in their dating lives, was unable or unwilling to see the racial difference between them:

> *That summer, late on a Sunday when they had that National Night Out, where they have block parties—we started dating in April, so this is August and I came over—he invited me over to do the block party.* [laughing] *And the neighbors right down the street* [pauses to suppress laughter] *this woman, this wife, of this couple comes up to* [her fiancé] *and says, "Oh my God! I'm so glad you moved in…. Another interracial couple on the block, I'm so happy." 'Cause she sees us standing there. And he says—and I wasn't there when she said that—he was, you know, helping her husband grill. And I wasn't there, and he's telling me this, and he's like, "I couldn't for the life of me understand what she was talking about." He goes, "I had no clue what she was talking about." He goes, "My mouth just opened," and I'm like—he said he just sat there, "Interracial couple? Well I'm Irish and she's Norwegian." He said, "I couldn't figure it out!"*[82]

However, some Korean adoptees have found communities consisting of other Korean adoptees can offer a more comfortable environment. Fellow adoptees are able to readily recognize adoptee differences from both the White racial majority and from Asian and Korean American communities. It is in these adoptee-centered communities that many adoptees are able to express cultural and racial hybridity without feeling pressured to pick a single racial identity. Gail remarked:

> *The other day when I was feeling really in despair about the whole Whiteness thing, I think it has to do with identifying myself in terms of negations…you're not White, you're not Korean and that's how it always is. That's why it's so affirming to be around other adoptees, because for one time you can refer to yourself in the positive, you know, linguistically. Because I'm always negating myself otherwise.*[83]

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[82] Oral History 3.
[83] Oral History 11.

Other adoptees echoed this Gail's experience of being at home around other adoptees. The development of a Korean adoptee identity, which is neither culturally Korean nor culturally White, functions for these adoptees as a remedy to feelings of in-between. Unfortunately, Korean adoptee communities almost always exist outside mainstream communities and other adoptive communities. Adoptees seem to recognize that the identification with the "third space" of Korean adoptee communities is sometimes still too "Korean" for colorblind communities. Referencing the precarious position adoptees find themselves in when trying to break free of White identities, another adoptee stated, "*We know not to congregate* [with other Korean adoptees]. *It's too conspicuous*," as if the mere act of being seen with other adoptee or other Asians would be threatening to White family and friends, or to the adoptee's own sense of identity.

Consistent with assimilationist understandings of Korean adoptee adjustment, designations of "well adjusted" or "happy" are sometimes conflated with "White" while opposite designations of "bitter" or "angry" are associated with "Asian." Though racial unrest is not always articulated as the primary reason for feelings of dissatisfaction with being adopted, it is often inferred. In these cases, high consciousness around being a person of color, an Asian American or a Korean adoptee, can raise accusations of ingratitude, poor adjustment, or mental instability.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, the binary understanding of Korean adoptee identity politics has been used to mobilize adoptees against one another. A recent and striking example of the

polarizing tendency in Korean adoptee communities took place in 2006, when an American adoption agency, which has a long history of facilitating Korean adoptions, responded to a legislative proposal in South Korea which advocated for the end transnational adoption from Korea. The agency initiated a letter-writing campaign directed at South Korean legislators, soliciting Korean adoptees to express support for continuing transnational adoption from South Korea. A letter addressed to Korean American adoptees stated:

> "Some of you may have already heard about this proposed legislation… One of the driving forces behind this legislation is the fact that Korean officials are only hearing from adopted Korean adults *living in Korea* currently who had *negative* adoption experiences and who support ending international adoption in Korea. We felt that there was a need for Korean officials to hear from voices of *other* adopted adults when the timing was right…. many [Korean] officials see adopted Koreans still as "poor orphans," as one put it, and continue to apologize for the fact that they were adopted, when in fact they are leading *productive and satisfied lives*."[84] (emphasis mine).

The letter, which was written by an agency director who is not a Korean adoptee was sent and signed by agency workers who are Korean adoptees, presumably in order to use their personal appeal to other adoptees to further the cause of the agency. That the agency, which has both a financial and a moral stake in the continuation and success of Korean adoption to the United States, opposes the end of transnational adoption from Korea is not surprising (though very much in violation of Hague Convention rules about political interference from adoptive receiving countries in the adoption law and politics of sending countries). However, the tactics it chose to use writes the race-aware (those adoptees living in Korea) and race-neutral ("concerned friends" of the agency who are

[84] Johnson, Jenny. "Adoption in Korea."

living in the United States) script onto adoptees as happy versus angry and uses divisive techniques to pit so-called happy ("productive and satisfied," presumably grateful) adoptees against so-called angry (those with "negative adoption experiences") adoptees.

Gratitude is a quality that has always been a prerequisite for admission into White American society for people of color; those non-Whites accepted and loved by Whites are expected by the White majority to be grateful for this privilege. Embedded in the demand for grateful American people of color is the strong maintenance of White as hierarchically superior to all other races. Using this logic, any non-White person allowed to be elevated to a position of Whiteness should be grateful[85]. The accusation of ingratitude is both common and disturbing when launched at Korean adoptees. This charge almost always refers to adoptees' ingratitude for their own adoptions, which historically is almost always into White families. Inferred here is the ethnocentric assumption that any person adopted from Korea (or any poor country that sends its children to rich countries for adoption) should be grateful for their adoption since the quality of life as an American is obviously higher than that of a Korean. Those who accuse adoptees of ingratitude are attempting to enforce the colorblind racial etiquette of transracial adoption by accusing the adoptees themselves of breaking the rules of etiquette. Any adoptee who is ungrateful, especially if racial difference is the basis for personal problems experienced by individual adoptees, is disrupting the more harmonious

[85] Twila Perry has articulated a similar critique, focusing on the transfer from a devalued mother to a valued mother, and how children who experience this transfer are considered by society at large to be lucky in "Transracial and International Adoption: Mothers, Hierarchy, and Feminist Legal Theory." *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*.

norm of colorblindness—a norm that denies racialization as a potentially divisive and threatening characteristic for people of color in America.

Ingratitude among Korean adoptees potentially threatens adoptive family systems and relationships, the multi-million dollar transnational adoption industry, and paternalistic relations between the United States and peripheral adoption-sending nations. So, for grateful Korean adoptees, becoming and remaining White (equated with becoming and remaining American) fulfills an important nationbuilding function of transnational adoption. As the stakes are high in maintaining Korean adoptees as culturally White and grateful, there is little tolerance for adoptees who express interest in Asian, Korean, or in-between identities.

Despite efforts to regulate Korean adoptee identity as either angry Asian or grateful White, many Korean adoptees respond to being placed in the either/or position by staking a claim to the in-between space. While adoptees do express frustration at being neither here nor there, neither American nor Korean, neither White or Asian, Korean adoptee identity occupies any and all of these identities as well as any number of hybridized identities between and outside them.

As I both research and congregate with Korean adoptee populations, I note much difficulty in the community because of mistaken-identity pigeonholing tied to stereotyping and racialization. While the strategies among Korean adoptees are quite divergent, the will to self-define and the dissent against dominant definitions of identity based on common racializations is clearly evident. Though each group or groups have a different history of racialization in America, Korean adoptees are resisting racial assumptions, socializations, and categorization thrust on them through dominant

discourses of law, policy, media representation, and family. While this resistance is contentious and the social price for it may be high, its evidence in my work using Korean adoptee oral history is apparent. This group, pressured into incomplete identity binaries (Asian or White, Korean or American) that often collapse into identities of no choice (as in, "You *think* you are Asian or White, but clearly, you are not!") undermine this process of forced racialization constantly using strategies that subvert racial categorization to reinvent their images as infinitely more complex.

Section 3:

Global, Racial and Economic Exchanges of Korean American Adoption

All of Korean adoption can be thought of as a set of exchanges: the exchange of needy children of one country to desirous parents in another; the exchange of adoption diplomacy for political and economic relations between nations; the exchange of child migrants to adoptive countries for adult return migrants back to birth countries; and the exchange of money for access to adoptable populations. In this final section in my dissertation, I examine the transnational exchanges between nations that send children away for adoption and those that receive them, between adoptive parents and birth parents, and among adoptees. In the complicated world of transnational adoption, political, social, cultural, and economic capital are negotiated and traded throughout the adoptive process and, in many cases, throughout the lives of adopted people, but are rarely discussed in adoption discourses.

I argue that these sets of exchanges have been under analyzed in past research, largely due to social trends in adoption discourses that tend to celebrate adoption rather than critique it. So far, the adoption industry has been most successful when it focuses on the needs and desires of its paying clients, adoptive parents and prospective adoptive parents. Adoptive parents are motivated to see their position as normative when compared to biological parents, in opposition to social and cultural understandings of adoptive families as not "real" (in that adoptive parents are often tacitly or explicitly understood as not the "real" parents of their adopted children). Though it is well understood that adoptive parents are "real" parents in a legal sense, discussions that

would undermine their cultural or social authenticity are discouraged by adoptive parent and adoption industry interests which are highly invested in maintaining and widening channels through which adoptable children can flow. This emphasis on pro-adoption rhetorics that position transnational adoption as wholly necessary and humanitarian have largely drowned out critiques of the practice, including those arising from the experiences of adoptees themselves. In order to better explore a few of the many kinds of currencies and exchanges in transnational adoption universe, I present two chapters.

The first, "Shopping for Children in the International Marketplace: The Economics of Transnational Adoption," explores issues around exchanges in the transnational adoption economy, and how the adoption industry uses linkages to global systems of capitalism in order to procure adoptable children. While I do not dispute the child-focused and child-protection ethics espoused many adoptive parents, most would not be in contact with issues of child protection were it not for their initial desire to adopt. Whether they want to or not, most transnational adoptive parents and prospective adoptive parents must enter the transnational adoption consumer marketplace in order to secure an adoptable child. Though not always acknowledged as such, adoption agencies are in the economic debt of adoptive parents. These agencies are therefore highly motivated to fulfill the desires of the adoptive parent population. When aggregated, these desires are hierarchical, nationalized ,and racialized, and in the adoption industry, these desires translate into financial values.

I contrast the first chapter in this section with the second, "*Uri Nara*, Our Country: Korean American Adoptees in the Global Age," which focuses on the cultural and migration exchanges of Korean adoptees who have travelled to the United States to

be adopted, and then back to Korea to live as adults. In this chapter, I use ethnographic material to render the transnational realities for Korean adoptee repatriates to Korea. The members of this group of adoptee "global citizens" have the economic and cultural capital as Americans to live abroad and the ethnic and national connections to choose South Korea. In this chapter, I explore the transnational strategies used by this group of adoptees to maximize their positions as both Americans and Koreans. On one hand, these Korean adoptees are an unusually privileged group of post-1965 immigrants and naturalized citizens of the United States, who have easier access to immigration and citizenship as children of Americans than any other group of immigrants who enter the United States; in addition, Korean adoptees also have special status in Korea, where they are eligible to live and work freely, should they decide to return as adults. On the other hand, in both the United States and South Korea, Korean adoptees face exclusion through identification as foreigners in both nations: because of race-based discrimination in the United States and because of a lack of linguistic and cultural fluency in South Korea.

Chapter 8

Shopping for Children in the International Marketplace:

The Economics of Transnational Adoption

A version of this chapter was previously published under the same title in *Outsiders Within*, edited by Jane Jeong Trenka, Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin. South End Press, Cambridge, MA: 2006.

> *Adoption has…become big business. Go to any adoption conference for the first time, and you'll be surprised by the numbers of "advertisers"—agencies, facilitators, magazine publishers, insurance companies, greeting card vendors, and toy manufacturers—seeking to sell you their services.*[1]
>
> -Myra Alperson, White adoptive mother of non-White children, author of an international adoption how-to book for parents.

THE INDUSTRY OF TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION

The growing practice of transnational adoption can be understood through a supply and demand equation. This equation operates on a global scale, where individuals, usually White, from rich nations adopt individuals, usually not White, from poorer nations. This is a complicated exchange, where children, the governments of the two nations, both sets of parents (birth and adoptive), (usually) two adoption agencies, adoption workers, social workers, childcare providers, attorneys, and a host of other intermediaries may be involved. Typically, everyone but the adoptive parents and the adopted child is compensated, either monetarily, materially, or socially, creating a complex economic relationship. Adoptive parents pay for the services associated with the adoption they are completing, and are willing to do so because it gives them the opportunity to build a family and because of the tremendous demand for children in rich nations. This demand is created by the enormous cultural pressure to complete one's life with family (which includes children), the relative shortage of "healthy" White infants in rich nations, social anxiety about domestic transracial adoption, and I argue, White parents' desire to enrich their lives by parenting a child from a foreign culture. The

[1] *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make an Overseas Adoption Work for You*, 5.

demand is met with supply from poorer nations around the world, where the potential to procure healthy infants is great and the possibilities for realizing a healthy profit are just as possible. Regrettably, the demand is so great that illegal baby markets have developed as child trafficking, and even in many legal transnational adoptions, child procurement and adoption payments border on (or cross the border to) the unethical. In her work on Chinese transnational adoption, Dorow summarizes this complicated exchange, "Transnationally adopted children are not bought and sold, but neither are they given and received freely and altruistically."[2]

In understanding transnational adoption as subject to market forces of supply and demand, I analyze factors which create demand or desire for the transnationally adopted child as a cultural and economic commodity. These factors include the monetary benefit to the transnational adoption industry within both sending and receiving countries, as well as the cultural appeal to adoptive parents that imagines them as humanitarian, multicultural child saviors who are participating in a family building strategy of growing popularity among "trendsetters." This chapter also uses transnational adoption guides as a primary source in order to understand how parents are directed to navigate the maze of the adoption marketplace. The adoption guides represent material publicly available to parents who seek practical advice on a complicated and expensive undertaking. Because these guides are such a valuable resource to prospective adoptive parents, I see them as playing a key instructional role. While these guides do present a wealth of practical logistical advice, they largely fail to address race as a significant factor in the adoption

[2] Dorow, Sara K.. *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship (Nation of Newcomers)*, 17.

experience for parents or children. Instead of presenting ideas and parental advice on how to manage the experiences of racialization that adult adoptees report widely, these guides fundamentally ignore or minimize this reality. Instead, they reify and reinforce current mainstream, White, and middle-class values and beliefs about the low importance of race as a category of grievance or of identity. My intent is to analyze the messages that are sent to parents through these guides, and to critique these messages and their limitations, especially in light of the authors' failures to consult adult transnational adoptees, who remain an untapped resource.

Created Demand in International Adoption

The Obligatory Family Includes Children

For the majority of Americans, childlessness is not an option, and being a parent has become an essential part of personal identity. Young adults, if childless, are constantly queried about when (not if) children are planned. While they still experience some discrimination, "non-traditional parents," such as single parents and gay and lesbian couples, who in previous times would not have been expected (or allowed) to parent, receive more support (culturally and technologically) than ever before to become parents. Many of these parents cite having children as a way to become "normal." In her book *Barren in the Promised Land*, Elaine Tyler May outlines the history of childlessness in America, and identifies the post-World War II baby boom of the 1950s and 1960s and the "new pronatalism" of the 1980s and 1990s[3] as two times when the pressure to become a parent has been particularly potent. These two time periods are demographically related

[3] Elaine Tyler May, *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness*.

in that the "second baby boom" of the 1980s and 1990s is a response to the childbearing activity of the unusually large generation of the first baby boom of the postwar era. May also documents the cultural creation of anxiety during the 1980s and 1990s about having (and not being able to have) children, where "advertisements suddenly began to link children to consumerism and the good life…parenthood began to permeate the nation's popular culture. Plots of movies and television shows and even popular songs revolved around the baby quest."[4] The solutions for the unfortunate infertile person (including single parents and gay and lesbian parents, for whom finding a reproductive partner is a barrier) are surrogacy, artificial insemination, fertility treatments, or adoption. At the time of the new pronatalism (the '80s and '90s), when there was more cultural pressure than ever to have children, prospective parents were also realizing the trials and hazards of domestic in-race and transracial adoption.

There is also a sizable population of fertile parents who choose adoption because they believe that adoption, rather than reproduction, helps to solve population problems or helps to give children without families or means of support loving homes. Often, these children are infants of color or foreign infants, as the demand today for White infants may create waiting periods of several years.

Why Transnational Adoption?

Transnational adoption has been a reasonably viable option for American parents in the United States (as well as in Canada and in Western European nations) since the mid 1950s. Though transracial adoption has been contentious for much of its history, the

[4] *Ibid.*, 214.

reasons for its controversy have varied. Much of the debate has been concerned with racial aspects of the adoption, and the practice has been characterized as inherently racist in nature because of the racial and national power differential between the adopters and the relinquishers and/or adoptees. However, it has also been argued that transracial adoption is the remedy for racism in a racially divided society, the prime example of the ideal of colorblindness within the family, the foundational building block of contemporary society. Likewise, those who oppose transracial adoption have been regarded as racist for rejecting the concept that familial love can transcend racial barriers, and as inherently anti-racist, for seeking to advocate for the populations of color from which these adoptions typically draw. In many ways, the tangled social history of transracial adoption mirrors that of American race relations in its constantly shifting values, norms, and practices.[5]

By end of the 1990s, a decade of heavy that saw several significant pieces of adoption legislation signed into law, the American public was expressing its fatigue about American race and civil rights struggles through anti-political correctness attitudes and a shift towards conservatism. During this period, the adopting public became well aware of the possible pitfalls and complications of domestic transracial adoption. U.S. laws are generally written to protect the birth parents of infants, not adoptive parents, because they generally privilege blood relations over other types of kinship in recognizing rights to custody and parenthood. This tendency leaves domestic adoption fraught with potential legal problems. In addition, public discussions leading up to the Multiethnic Placement

[5] For a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between transnational and transracial adoption in the United States, see Chapter 4: "An Adoptee for Every Lake: Multiculturalism, Minnesota, and the Korean Transracial Adoptee."

Act (1994), added to the NABSW position (renewed in 1991) and a few highly publicized court cases where children of color were returned to birth mothers after adoption, contributed to the perception of domestic transracial adoptions as controversial, potentially reversible, and possibly unethical and/or emotionally wrenching. In many ways, the trials of domestic adoption in an industry that has begun to recognize the importance of maintaining birth-family ties for adoptees operates to steer parents who prefer closed adoptions to transnational markets.[6]

Thus, ever since legal barriers have been removed, prospective adoptive parents seem reluctant to complete domestic transracial adoptions. In contrast, very little public criticism has been voiced about international transracial adoption. Instead, according to advocates Rita Simon and Howard Alstein, parents see the practice as "achiev[ing] instant sainthood."[7] because "[i]n adopting foreign children, the parents feel that they are cooperating in their children's efforts to burn their bridges. The children have no option but to adapt to the new world. There is no going back."[8]

Foreign Babies as a Cultural Commodity

Jon Cruz take a page from Marx when he notes that in capitalist systems "…social identities of individuals were increasingly mediated by commodity production and regulated, too, as if they were things, reified along with commodities. Marx called

[6] Quiroz, Pamela Anne. *Adoption in a Color-Blind Society (Perspectives on a Multiracial America).*
[7] Rita J. Simon and Howard Altstein, *Transracial Adoption: A Follow-Up*, 106.
[8] *Ibid.*, 105.

this fundamental misrecognition commodity fetishization."[9] Though Cruz writes about the tendency to commodify human identities in association with capitalism, the transnational adoption industry has gone one step further by putting forth children and/or the services of procuring a child as the commodity itself, deepening even further the tendency to commodify individuals and their identities. Any guilt that adoptive parents may face as consumers (which might persuade them to not participate in the exchange) is assuaged by the "equalizing" force of the capitalist system within which they operate. Appelbaum writes, "Capitalism may often appear to be color-blind," thus erasing racist and racialized histories with a single economic act, or with a product endorsement, but he then reminds us, "…yet capitalism continues to reinforce racial and ethnic divisions…on a global scale."[10]

In addition to the relative ease with which prospective adoptive parents can adopt transnationally using the adoption industry, parents are also subject to other motives for adopting foreign children. While the primary reason parents want to adopt is to address childlessness, many also voice an interest in the cultural enrichment they feel will result from the adoption. This is perceived as a "bonus" in adopting transnationally among liberal White parents.

Theorist bell hooks, in her essay "Eating the Other," explains why White people were drawn to commodify the cultures of the "other" (non-Whites) in the early 1990s

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[9] Cruz, Jon. "From Farce to Tragedy: Reflections on the Reification of Race at Century's End." In *Mapping Multiculturalism*, 23.
[10] Appelbaum, Richard. "Multiculturalism and Flexibility: Some New Directions in Global Capitalism. In *Mapping Multiculturalism*, 313.

arguing that Whites believe that they are enriched through their consumption of the "exotic":

> [t]he commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling…ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish of mainstream white culture.[11]

hooks also points out that the commodification is made possible by White privilege, and that while racial boundaries are transgressed (by Whites), neither are they left behind. She specifies that "[w]hen race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups…can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races…affirm their power...with the Other."[12] She goes on to give a number of examples from film and television where Whites benefit from the consumption of the culture of non-Whites. In her book *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation and the Commodification of Difference*, Deborah Root describes the Western historical depiction of Eastern and indigenous cultures as at once violent, primitive, savage, sublime and erotic, but above all, as authentic. This authenticity is what is desirable, and becomes marketable. Root points to the link between luxury and colonialism in the contemporary Western psyche,[13] suggesting that the colonial mindset provides power and freedom, affording imperial Western Whites the luxury to do or have anything they desire. Reminders of the colonial past appear frequently in advertisements, and through exotic or tropical themed products, prompted by its association with luxury in the marketplace.

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[11] Bell hooks, "Eating the Other," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 21.
[12] *Ibid.*, 23.
[13] Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference.*

This creation of desire for authentic objects of culture is extended to foreign children in transnational adoption, where the object of culture is an Asian, Latin American, or African baby. According to hooks and Root, parents as consumers are already conditioned to want the authentically exotic, and what better way to meet this desire than to adopt an authentically exotic child? Cues from popular culture and mainstream adoption literature that parents receive tell them that transracial adoption is the same or better than domestic adoption in terms of having satisfying parenting experiences, and these parents or prospective parents are barraged with a flood of country-specific marketing materials that sell the child's ethnicity as well as the child herself. Jacobson writes, "Engagement with a foreign culture is promoted by the adoption industry as one of the attractive features of international adoption [and]…market the ethnic (yet ethnically malleable) child…with an interesting splash of foreign ethnic color."[14] One recent adoption agency brochure had the title "Our String of Chinese Pearls" with a photo of a line of Chinese babies on the cover, evoking one of the other exotic and precious commodities of the Orient, the luxurious pearl. However, these commodifying appeals are also carefully concealed as potentially offensive to adoptive parents who might recoil from the idea they are purchasing their adopted child; Dorow writes, "…parents who in the vulnerable moments of exchange need (pay?) to be protected from signs of a commodified child."[15]

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[14] Jacobson, Heather. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*, 53-54.

[15] Dorow, Sara K.. *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship (Nation of Newcomers)*, 124. This need to conceal the monetary exchange in adoption industries also noted by Domingos Abreu in "Baby-Bearing Storks: Brazilian

Parents' ideals of the authentic exotic are met by trips to foreign nations to pick up their foreign children, with ample opportunities to shop for authentic, exotic merchandise while there. Some of these products are adoption specific, such as the "Going Home Barbie," available in China, while others are souvenirs of the adoptees' Asian countries of origin.[16] Many adoptees who participated in this research recalled these cultural keepsakes that their parents or others had purchased in their birth countries. For some it was one or two items: a doll or some other toy or trinket. For others, their parents had decorated whole rooms in the supposed style of their birth country, like an imagined museum of the adoptee's original home.

When parents describe their attitudes about adopting transnationally, many express their appreciation of the "enrichment" they will receive as a result of having someone foreign-born in the family. Transnational adoption guide authors Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen write of foreign orphans:

> They evoke social change. Infants and children bridge American social divisions of color, culture, and nationality…. Our family has extended far beyond the confines of a white middle-class community. We benefited from the companionship of children and adults of other ethnicities and nationalities we otherwise might not have met.[17]

While it is true that many transnationally adopted persons are the only people of color or of foreign birth in their adopted families, I can't help thinking that these expectations by parents are somewhat misguided for this very reason: they are the only ones. Most of

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Intermediaries in the Adoption Process." In *International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children*.

[16] Dorow, Sara K.. *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship.*

[17] Nelson-Erichsen, Jean and Erichsen, Heino R. *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions*, 10.

their children will grow up totally assimilated in American culture, without the ability to bring the cultural enrichment from their birth countries that these parents say they will so appreciate. Nonetheless, this is a belief shared by all the adoptive parent authors of the adoption guides I consulted for this article.

The heavily marketed nature of contemporary adoption experience is also influenced by the large amount of media coverage given to celebrity adoptions. In the highly superficial, celebrity-focused culture that has emerged in contemporary America, the public often looks to celebrities to determine what is popular, and therefore, what to buy. In the last decade, the understanding of adoptive parents as saintly and as trendy has only been heightened by a number of high-profile celebrity transracial transnational adoptions. And since popular culture of the last decade has been more tabloid-ish and voyeuristic than ever before, these prolific adoptions have been copiously covered in the news media, peaking in 2006. Celebrity transnational adoptive parents such as Angelina Jolie, Meg Ryan, Nicole Kidman, Ewan McGregor and Mary-Louise Parker have been fairly uniformly praised and glorified in the media as child saviors; only the always-controversial Madonna weathered criticism when she adopted from Malawi in 2006 and again in 2009. The buzz about celebrity transnational adoption in recent years has been so fevered that some critics have cynically suggested that celebrities are trying to cash in on the adoption fad in order to increase publicity.[18]

Because of the high-profile nature of celebrities in the U.S., there is certainly heightened public awareness of the availability of adoptions from nations such as

[18] See, for instance, Mongeon, Marc-André, "International adoption...the latest 'in' thing." From the blog, *Fortress of Knowledge*.

Cambodia, Malawi, and Ethiopia which have not previously been prominent sending countries for transnational adoption. In the American transnational adoption industry, there is speculation that new public interest in adopting from these nations has been influenced by the "success" of celebrity adoptions,[19] and thus, it seems that the behavior of celebrity adoptive parents should now be counted as a factor that influences Western demand for foreign adoptable children.

Though this tabloid-style celebrity coverage often seeks to point out celebrity flaws, most coverage about the transnational adoptions have been reinforced the concept of the adoptive parent as saintly, sometimes even disparaging critics of celebrity adopters.[20] Even media queen Oprah Winfrey weighed in a *USA Weekend* article, stating "…women are going to save Africa," and one of the ways Oprah sees (American) women enacting that salvation is through transnational adoption.[21] Today, as in the 1950s and 1960s, sentimentality is used to "sell" transnational adoption to the American public. Jacobson argues that "'Child-saving'…is no longer totally accepted in the larger adoption community as an appropriate motivation for bringing a child into one's home;"[22] though it may be less of a given as a specific reason, I argue that this motivation is still deeply held, though perhaps less frequently spoken. Since the United States broadly understands itself to have "won" the Cold War, this time around, instead of religious and anti-

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[19] Jacobson, Celean. "Madonna's African Adoption Reflects Growing Trend." Associated Press.
[20] There are a multitude of articles with this general disposition. Two include: Siverman, Stephen M. "Angelina Jolie: We Should Support Madonna." In *People Online,* and "*BREAKING NEWS:* UPDATE: Angelina Adoption Official!" in *US Magazine.com.*
[21] Edmonds, Patricia. "This time, I won't fail." In *USAWeekend.com.*
[22] Jacobson, Heather. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*, 30.

communist appeals, the sentimental draw is shaped as the salvation of whole nations or regions of the world. This public understanding was evidenced in 2004 when the Asian nations of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand were hit by a devastating tsunami caused by a massive undersea earthquake. In the tsunami's aftermath, there was an almost immediate public call to set up adoption programs to "rescue" orphans of the disaster. The American government,[23] as well as the governments of the affected countries,[24] following international adoption policy established by the Hague Convention and of international child aid organization UNICEF, quickly (and wisely) quashed this effort by banning any transnational adoptions for several months following the disaster, correctly understanding that child removal would be a further trauma on child tsunami survivors and that family reunification programs would be a more sensible and child-centered solution. However, the issue remains: why do large sectors of the public imagine that other countries' problems could be solved by taking away their children? The answer, of course, is embedded in transnational adoption history and practice, within the ideal that transnational adoption is always a so-called humanitarian solution, apparently now applied to almost any problematic situation facing a country in the global south.

Supply-Side Market Forces

In 1988, there were 3.3 families seeking to adopt for every successful placement. By 1995, this number had increased to six families.[25] In the year 2000, 500,000

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[23] Longley, Robert. "State Dept. Blocks Adoption of Tsunami Victims: May take months to identify children truly orphaned" About.com: U.S. Government Info.
[24] de Vries, Lloyd. "Tsunami Children Lost, Vulnerable Urgent Need To Spot Unaccompanied Children, Aid Workers Say." CBS News World.
[25] Clark, Kim and Shute, Nancy. "The Adoption Maze." *U.S. News and World Report.*

Americans were on the market to adopt a child, up 150% from five years earlier. Transnational adoptions in the United States now occur at the rate of over 20,000 per year,[26] fueling the change in adoption services "from the tightly self-regulated realm of social-service agencies and unwed mothers' homes to the free market."[27] The heightened demand for adoptable babies has sent adoption fees (which should, theoretically, be untouched by laws of supply and demand) soaring, and desire for the children is so high that prospective parents are willing to pay the price. The huge demand for adoptable babies in the United States, Canada, and the rich nations of Europe has prompted nations with adoptable populations to react, and intermediaries in both the birth and host countries to step into the profitable middleman role. In 2000, the adoption industry generated $1.5 billion in adoption spending, with costs for transnational adoptions ranging from $15,000 to $50,000, up from around $1000 in the early '70s (my own adoption cost my parents $1097.50, the equivalent of $6000 today). One U.S. adoption agency reported revenues of $4.1 million with a profit of $937,515 in 1998.[28] As in any profitable industry, demand is also boosted by advertising. In her study on American adoption online, Pamela Anne Quiroz documents the many marketing messages used to promote adoption on web pages of adoption agencies and services. These sales messages are so pervasive that she writes, "Clearly they [adoption agencies]..do what they can to move their inventory of children."[29]

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[26] "Immigrant Visas Issued to Orphans Coming to the U.S." U.S. Department of State.
[27] Clark, Kim and Shute, Nancy. "The Adoption Maze." *U.S. News and World Report*, 63.
[28] *Ibid*.
[29] Quiroz, Pamela Anne. *Adoption in a Color-Blind Society (Perspectives on a Multiracial America)*, 49.

THE INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION MARKET OF GLOBALIZED CAPITALISM

As other markets have expanded globally, so too has the adoption market. When it became clear that South Korea would sustain its transnational adoption program past the immediate post-war period, it became the model for the dozens of nations that would eventually follow suit. Differences in placement policy and child availability are now incorporated into the marketing strategies of adoption agencies in an effort to find a sending nation whose requirements best fit prospective adoptive parents in order to secure a child for adoption.[30] The high returns the adoption industry currently enjoys as a result of high demand from the adopting public have led to heightened competition in the international adoption marketplace. In her 2000 book *Adoption and Ethics: The Market Forces in Adoption*, Madelyn Freundlich details this phenomenon, where dozens of agencies are in place in each adoptive birth country, each promising to deliver the best quality child from that country most expeditiously for progressively higher fees.[31]

In diversifying offerings sending countries all over the world, adoption agencies take a page from globalizing corporations in their use of "diversity management." Diversity management is one way to compete in global markets[32] and operates by taking advantage of diverse global resources, including personnel. Through diversity management, global corporations benefit from labor and cultural differentials by exploiting different resources in different locations so as to best serve the corporation.

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[30] *Ibid.*
[31] Madelyn Freundlich, *Adoption and Ethics: The Market Forces in Adoption*, *Adoption and Ethics Series*.
[32] Gordon, Avery and Christopher Newfield. "Introduction." In *Mapping Multiculturalism*.

Diversity management, in the corporate world and in the transnational adoption industry has been criticized as a way outsource racial and gendered exploitation to poorer, browner countries because of the "…globalizing pressure of capitalism to abandon the will to social investment within the national-domestic sphere,"[33]meaning that when social justice agendas in one location, such as the United States, become too "successful" or expensive to the corporation, exploitation efforts can be focused on a less belligerent population overseas instead. As one adoption market closes, there is always another ready to open.

Unfortunately, another result of heightened demand in Western nations has been the kidnapping and selling of children from Latin American nations. In her 1995 documentary film *Baby Bu$iness*, Judy Jackson remarks, "Even in the Third World, demand outstrips supply."[34] The U.S. State Department reports that the largest number of kidnapped children adopted in the U.S. are from Mexico.[35] Madelyn Freundlich lists a number of incidents worldwide where children were bought from parents for $5-70 per child and sold abroad at great profit.[36] Mary Ellen Fieweger, in her article "Stolen Children and International Adoptions" reports on women in Ecuador whose children were kidnapped, or who were coerced or threatened to give up their children for adoption.[37]

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[33] Cruz, Jon. "From Farce to Tragedy: Reflections on the Reification of Race at Century's End." In *Mapping Multiculturalism*, 29.
[34] Jackson, Judy, *Baby Bu$Iness*.
[35] Miko, Francis T. "Trafficking in Women and Children: The U.S. And International Response."
[36] Freundlich, Madelyn. *Adoption and Ethics: The Market Forces in Adoption.*
[37] Fieweger, Mary Ellen. "Stolen Children and International Adoptions." *Child Welfare.*

Fieweger reports her surprise when she found that lawyers are the key organizers of and profiteers from these illegal adoptions.[38] Jackson also reported this finding, documenting single lawyers who arrange dozens to hundreds of transnational adoptions yearly.[39] The system of illegal adoption from Ecuador to the United States or European nations is stimulated by demand from adopting nations and made possible because those who facilitate these illegal adoptions are "beyond the reach of the law of either the sending or receiving country."[40]

Illegal adoptions are profitable because of the great demand for children. In Guatemala, the agency cost of producing a child for adoption is about $1000, including $25 for a falsified birth certificate, Guatemalan court filing fees, and time in a "fattening house," an illegal nursery where traders keep kidnapped children before their adoptions abroad and "fatten them up" so adoptive parents will receive a healthy looking baby. The total fee paid for such a baby in the United States is $15,000—a difference of $14,000 per child that goes to lawyers and other intermediaries.[41] Other reports state that some birth mothers are given $100 for healthy babies or $50 to become pregnant with children to be used in adoptions abroad, in a transnational surrogate motherhood that is much less expensive than a surrogacy in the United States or Europe. These reports reveal that fees for the adoptions of these babies are between $3000 and $30,000.[42] This money may also go toward bribes, "donations" to orphanages, or unknown recipients. Often, prospective

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[38] *Ibid.*
[39] Jackson, Judy, *Baby Bu$Iness*.
[40] Fieweger, Mary Ellen. "Stolen Children and International Adoptions." *Child Welfare.*
[41] Jackson, Judy, *Baby Bu$Iness*.
[42] Freundlich, Madelyn. *Adoption and Ethics: The Market Forces in Adoption.*

parents are instructed not to ask where the money is going.[43] Freundlich differentiates between black (illegal) and gray (legal but unethically profitable) market adoptions, specifying that while gray market adoptions are legal, the chain of custody of monies paid for services related to adoption is often purposely obscured, implying that great profits may be realized by individuals in the trade.

Commenting on the vulnerability of children in war-torn nations to illegal adoptions, Jackson offers the examples of El Salvador, where thousands of children were taken from parents by the Salvadoran army, declared "displaced," then adopted out to the United States and other rich nations, and of Sarajevo, where 50,000 children went missing during the recent war that fragmented Yugoslavia.[44]

Transnational adoptions have become so common that they have resulted in measurable income streams to some birth countries, to the annual tune of $15–20 million in South Korea (estimated 2001 GDP of $865 billion), $5 million in Guatemala (estimated 2001 GDP of $48.3 billion), and $2 million in Honduras (estimated 2001 GDP of $17 billion).[45] Though this income is desperately needed in many poor birth nations, there is much evidence that the money does not support the economies of these nations, but has instead "promoted corruption and fraudulent practices."[46] This view is echoed by

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[43] *Ibid.*
[44] Jackson, Judy, *Baby Bu$Iness*.
[45] Freundlich, Madelyn. *Adoption and Ethics: The Market Forces in Adoption*., 63; GDP information from CIA World Fact Book
[46] *Ibid.*

Oreskovic and Maskew, who detail widespread adoption abuses in Cambodia in the late 1990s and in Guatemala and Vietnam more recently.[47]

Fieweger notes that a shift occurred, in the late 1980s, from Asian to Latin American countries as main sources of children for adoption because high birthrates and poor economic conditions continued in Latin America, while in Asia birthrates seemed to stabilize and living conditions improved.[48] Although this shift has not remained a permanent change in adoption sending nations,[49] Latin American countries had begun and continue to be motivated to participate in exporting their children. Fieweger links the practice of illegal adoption in Ecuador with colonialism:

> Since the Spanish Conquest, the relationship between Latin American countries and those of the developed world has not been one of equality. Traditionally, these third-world republics have been providers of natural resources, purchased at bargain prices by the developed world, first Spain, then England, and today, the United States. Many Latin Americans object to international adoption because, as they see it, Latin American children have become another natural resource in demand in the developed world.[50]

Jackson also makes this connection, remarking that Mexico has long been used as a source of cheap labor and that the use of its children as a commodity is consistent with this exploitation.[51] In a pattern reminiscent of colonial economic practices, prospective parents in the U.S. and in European seek to find and adopt the best (most attractive,

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[47] Oreskovic, Johanna and Trish Maskew. "Red Thread or Slender Reed: Deconstructing Professor Bartholet's Mythology of International Adoption." *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review*.
[48] Fieweger, Mary Ellen. "Stolen Children and International Adoptions." *Child Welfare*.
[49] "Immigrant Visas Issued to Orphans Coming to the U.S." U.S. Department of State.
[50] Fieweger, Mary Ellen. "Stolen Children and International Adoptions." *Child Welfar,*. 290.
[51] Jackson, Judy, *Baby Bu$Iness*.

healthy, and intelligent) babies foreign countries have to offer, from orphanages or otherwise, leaving the children with the least assets for survival to languish.[52]

Though the act of transnational adoption is not solely an economic act, too often the economics—and the potential economic abuses—of the exchange are ignored or obfuscated in order to justify the industry to its consumers: adoptive parents. Even in an entirely legal transnational adoption, funds are exchanged for children, thus assigning monetary value to them. If we see the part of transnational adoption as inclusive of acts of commodification and exchange, we must also consider the source of this commodified resource. Because poverty and other social pressures on women are primary reasons for child relinquishment in all countries that supply the transnational adoption industry with adoptable children, it is important to acknowledge that these oppressive conditions boost child supplies in a market of high demand. Are women who relinquish their children for transnational adoption to Europe and North America that different than the women exploited in sweatshop economies of East Asia, Southeast Asia and South America? Indeed, some of these women may well be one and the same.

International Adoption Guides: How To Acquire the Right Child for You

Whatever the country of origin, the process of adopting a child transnationally is an enormous logistical undertaking. Once prospective parents have made the decision to adopt from abroad, they must decide whether they want to complete a private or agency-assisted adoption, find an agency or intermediary, complete a home state approval (which

[52] Freundlich, *Adoption and Ethics* and Quiroz, Pamela Anne. *Adoption in a Color-Blind Society*.

will assess the prospective parents as appropriate for parenting), and seek approval from the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS), seek approval from the birth nation and its adoption agency, wait for and be referred to a child, petition for the adoption, pick up the child (often in the child's birth country), complete the adoption and obtain traveling papers for the child, and finalize by completing the adoption paperwork at home.

Because this is a complex process, there are many possible obstacles along the way. Each potential obstacle can translate into lost time and money for prospective parents. With the great potential cost of transnational adoption, and the large number of prospective parents, there is a demonstrated market for informational materials about how (or how not) to complete these transactions. A *US News and World Report* article "The Adoption Maze"[53] has a consumer protection "buyer beware" slant about the hazards of transracial adoption, like consumer exposé articles on products or services. Many "how to" materials for transnational adoption are available in print and online and constitute a set of instructions that tell parents how to safely navigate, and sometimes, how to act and think about their adoptions.

With this in mind, I have chosen to examine three transnational adoption "how to" guides. They are *International Adoption: Sensitive Advice for Prospective Parents* (1994) by Jean Knoll and Mary-Kate Murphy,[54] *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions* (2000) by Jean Nelson-Erichsen and Heino

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[53] Clark, Kim and Shute, Nancy. "The Adoption Maze." *U.S. News and World Report.*
[54] Knoll, Jean, and Mary-Kate Murphy. *International Adoption: Sensitive Advice for Prospective Parents*.

R. Erichsen,[55] and *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make Foreign Adoption Work for You* (1997) by Myra Alperson.[56] Knoll and Murphy are both adoptive mothers: one married (Murphy), and one single (Knoll). The two met in a hotel where both were staying when they adopted their children. The book is a combination of journal-style descriptions of the adoption experience from Knoll's point of view, commentary from Murphy, and brief stories from several other unnamed parents. Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen are a married couple who are adoptive parents and the founders and operators of an adoption agency that specializes in international adoptions. They offer a "nuts and bolts" approach to transnational adoption, including step-by-step adoption advice and information given with a high level of detail, with some additional personal advice. The style of Alperson's book is a combination of the other two, containing how-to information interspersed with personal anecdotes.

At the time of writing, all three books were widely available for sale and were the only such guidebooks specifically geared towards prospective parents of foreign children in print. Prospective parents who wanted a printed resource or "how to" manual today would have probably purchase one or more of these three books. All of these books were written by transnational adoptive parents, presumably because they themselves had wished for such a guide as they went through their adoption processes.

Most materials about international adoption for prospective parents emphasize the positive aspects of building a family through the adoption experience. With respect to the

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[55] Nelson-Erichsen, Jean and Erichsen, Heino R. *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions*.
[56] Alperson, Myra. *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make Foreign Adoption Work for You*.

almost sacred institution of family and parenting, these materials only briefly question parents' motives in adopting internationally or ask parents to do so themselves. Instead, these books empathize with parents who must endure the humiliation of judgment about whether they would be good parents and the other hardships of the adoption journey. All three books focus on the adoption process, not parenting, though all give some "starter" advice on parenting the newly adopted child. All offer a chronological treatment of the adoption process from the idea of adoption to beginning parenting.

The Adoption Process

The three books describe, in greater or lesser detail, the stages of the transnational adoption process. The first stage is the decision to adopt a foreign child. Alperson explains common reasons for wanting to adopt internationally. She goes on to say that many people can internationally adopt, even if age, marital status or some other barrier would bar a domestic adoption.[57] She is especially encouraging of single women in their forties. Her message is that anyone can have a family through international adoption, insinuating that there are more barriers to adopting domestically.

Obviously, for prospective parents wanting to start a family, this is a good thing, because transnational adoption solves the problem of the supposed domestic baby shortage. This highlights the existence of a hierarchy of parents and children on the international and domestic adoption market; just as White infants are most in demand on the domestic market, middle-class heterosexual married couples in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties are most favored in the domestic adoption process. Dorow points out this

[57] *Ibid.*, 11-12.

kind of double hierarchy "matching" policy also places marginal children with marginal parents.[58] Because in-race adoptions are most desired and White prospective parents are most numerous, individuals or couples lacking these most-favored characteristics are forced to look for children to adopt out-of-race and/or out-of-country. On the other hand, many parents choose to adopt transnationally because they feel unprepared to raise African American children, but think they can be successful raising Latinos or Asians.[59] This draws attention to a racial hierarchy of babies available for adoption, with European Americans on top, followed by foreign Asians and Latinos, and African Americans on the bottom. These examples emphasize both the high value of White babies and White "middle American" parents within adoption circles (and within society), and the consequently lower value of foreign children or children of color and single, older, poor, or gay/lesbian parents.

Alperson encourages parents to gather information about transnational adoption by reading magazines, newsletters, and papers; to find out more from other parents by joining parents' groups, talking to successful parents, and going to adoption conferences; and to access online resources, contact adoption agencies and get in touch with state agencies. [60] This process of educating oneself about the transnational adoption process is very similar to that of gathering information to make a large purchase—a new car, for instance (which may cost about the same amount as a transnational adoption).

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[58] Dorow, Sara K.. *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship (Nation of Newcomers).*
[59] Knoll, Jean and Murphy, Mary-Kate. *International Adoption: Sensitive Advice for Prospective Parents*.
[60] Alperson, Myra. *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make an Overseas Adoption Work for You.*

Parents must also decide from which country to adopt. Alperson suggests parents assess their own attitudes to help answer this question when she writes, "If you feel any reservations about ethnic or racial difference, don't be afraid to express them. It could interfere with your ability to bond with your child."[61] The implication is that if parents are not comfortable with children of color, they should seek to adopt from eastern Europe or Russia instead of Latin America or Asia. Knoll and Murphy add that the country can often be determined according to parents' criteria, such as length of wait to adopt, length of visit for child pickup, cost, and other factors.[62] Deciding from which country to adopt includes an assessment by the parents of their own community, especially what parents have in terms of "support for children of color." Alperson uses veiled language such as, "Do you feel the community that you live in would be a comfortable place for a child of a *different* background?"[63] (emphasis mine) instead of directly encouraging parents to think about race. Indeed, in her short section on "Becoming a Multicultural Family" she never refers directly to racial difference within or outside the new transnational adoptive family, implying that race was not a factor in her adoption experience and should not be for other transnational adoptive parents either.

All three books address the choice to use an adoption agency, use a facilitator, or go independent (where the parent finds a baby by directly contacting the birth parents) and present pros and cons for each alternative. All three also have lengthy sections on the voluminous paperwork involved, no matter what method is used. Parents must open a

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[61] *Ibid*., 17-19.
[62] Knoll, Jean and Murphy, Mary-Kate. *International Adoption: Sensitive Advice for Prospective Parents*.
[63] Alperson, Myra. *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make an Overseas Adoption Work for You*, 18.

BCIS file, schedule a home study, file for child abuse clearance, and collect documentation needed in the birth country. Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen specify dozens of forms to file or obtain, questions to ask, and decisions to make. All the guides discuss how to cope with waiting; this seems to be a common experience among the parents who wait for paperwork to be cleared, for decisions to be made and for a child to be found.

Alperson remarks that adoptive parents do not have to wait in line at the BCIS to get forms (with the immigrants) but can call to get forms mailed.[64] This implies that Alperson does not think of her own or other transnationally adopted children as immigrants and highlights the elevated status potential parents have (and perceive they have) over immigrants themselves as facilitators of immigration. This is one of many examples that show how adoptive parents place themselves at the top of a national hierarchy, with their children below them and immigrants or nationals of the "Third World" on the bottom. U.S. legislation that has been enacted since the publication of Alperson's guide sidesteps the immigration queue altogether; the Child Citizenship Act, passed in 2000 and enacted in 2001, states that foreign-born adopted children with at least one adoptive parent who is a citizen of the United States, become citizens as soon as they immigrate.[65] This makes transnationally adopted children some of the most privileged immigrants in the U.S. with regard to access to citizenship.

The attitudes of transnational adoptive parents represented in these guides shows a differential understanding of *adoptees* who are by definition, immigrants, and their disregard or disdain for *immigrants* themselves. Adoptive parents, who are usually White

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[64] Alperson, Myra. *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make an Overseas Adoption Work for You*.
[65] "The Child Citizenship Act of 2000." U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

and from the global North, adopt children, who are usually not White and from the global South, have some stake in erasing the significance of race and other difference in their children as part of the project inclusion of their adoptive children within (usually) all White families. The imagined position of transnational adoptees as non-immigrants reinforces the view of their children as unracialized by contrasting them to immigrants who are racialized and aids in masking difference among members of transnational adoptive families.

Parents are quite explicit in their attitude about their dealings with the USCIS and their class separation from the primary clientele of the USCIS, immigrants. Predictably, the international adoption community in the United States has a very progressive position towards immigration and naturalization policy for adoptees but does not tend to remark on immigration and naturalization policy for other immigrants. Many adoption agencies and parent advocacy groups highlight information about citizenship for adoptees and explain how the new legislation works. Even after the passage of the Child Citizenship Act, transnational adoption groups have continued to advocate for further streamlining of naturalization processing for transnational adoptees[66] including faster turnaround for citizenship documentation after adoption. In addition, other adoption groups are campaigning to include adoptees not included in the Child Citizenship Act legislation, mostly to reverse deportation orders for adoptees felons.[67]

The next step in adopting is completing a home study, a daunting process that includes a parenting evaluation, child abuse clearance, references, and background

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[66] King, J. "Streamline the Process for Citizenship for International Adoptees."
[67] Campbell, Boyd F. "International adoption bill confers U.S. citizenship on foreign adoptees." Immigration Law Center website.

checks. The home study is designed to ferret out any information indicating fitness (or lack of fitness) for parenting. Prospective parents must disclose personal information including attitudes and beliefs about parenting and adoption, past mental/physical health, finances, a personal history and environmental conditions of their home. Of course, parents must also submit several more government forms at this time, (including a set of fingerprints) and comply with an FBI criminal record check. There is currently an extreme emphasis on ruling out the possibility of criminal activity and very little emphasis on cross-cultural and U.S. race literacy, which is consistent with the popular understanding of adoption as only a legal process and not a cultural one.

Once all the paperwork is completed and parents are approved, they wait for a "referral" or a child whom they can choose to accept for adoption. After this has occurred, many parents go abroad to pick up the adoptees. Both Alperson and Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen provide traveling tips and packing lists for parents traveling to pick up their adoptees. Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen also offer health advice for traveling including that travelers should be wary of all dining establishments except "first-class" restaurants or the homes of upper-class nationals[68] in order to avoid unsanitary food and food poisoning. This is another example of parents' class placement of themselves above most "Third World" nationals.

Alperson and Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen also give health advice for adopted children once they are in the adoptive parents' custody. Alperson suggests health checks

[68] Nelson-Erichsen, Jean and Erichsen, Heino R. *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions*.

for children new to the United States and gives a list of tests and vaccinations.[69] Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen write a lengthy chapter on health problems of foreign orphans, with a large emphasis on First World versus Third World health standards, where the Third World is portrayed as dirty, poor, and abusive and its children are portrayed as malnourished, sickly, and infested. Of birth mothers, they warn of (presumably poor) "…maternal lifestyles, fetal alcohol syndrome, fetal alcohol effect, prematurity, and low birth weight. Other issues prospective adoptive parents need to educate themselves about are the effects of parental abuse and neglect, institutionalization, and developmental disabilities, especially speech."[70] This advice is particularly interesting, since Jacobson reports that one of the main reasons prospective adoptive parents decide to adopt transnationally is specifically to avoid these kinds of health problems.[71] Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen's advice for how to care for new babies includes a warning against treating adoptees like "first world kids" at first, with an explanation that these children will be overwhelmed and possibly unappreciative of too many choices and toys. They also give advice on feeding, explaining that the children have generally had small portions of low quality food in the past, so overeating or food hoarding is common,[72] but that these tendencies usually go away the longer the child has been in the United States. While this advice might have some practical use, it also reinforces the image of Third World

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[69] Alperson, Myra. *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make an Overseas Adoption Work for You*.
[70] Nelson-Erichsen, Jean and Erichsen, Heino R. *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions*, 151.
[71] Jacobson, Heather. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*. Nashville:
[72] Nelson-Erichsen, Jean and Erichsen, Heino R. *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions*.

populations as slightly less than human in comparison to the super-human First World parents, and clearly demarcates the line between the dirty, diseased, wretched child *before* adoption from the clean, happy, and fortunate child *after* adoption. Erichsen and Erichsen proclaim, "We have seen children in excellent health, but more often, they have a degree of malnutrition, some intestinal parasites, and acute illnesses…These are quickly remedied with a loving home and medical attention,"[73] as if a lack of love, not resources, is the primary reason for child illness. Of sick, malnourished, and even disabled children, they write, "As adopted children, they have made some spectacular recoveries,"[74] Here, parent or prospective parent readers are both praised for saving the foreign orphan as a parent and warned against damaged goods as a consumer.

Costs

The complicated transnational adoption process encourages the marketplace behavior of parents and the treatment of children as merchandise. Parents must shop for children to choose their national origin, their race, and their gender. Because the decisions to be made are so large and difficult, the adoption industry is full of companies or individuals offering services to help parents through the process. Knoll and Murphy offer commentary from a frustrated parent, who said, "I would have done anything. We had waited long enough,"[75] implying that parents are willing to pay a large price to have to adoption process end with a successful placement.

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[73] *Ibid*, 151.
[74] *Ibid*, 152.
[75] Knoll, Jean and Murphy, Mary-Kate. *International Adoption: Sensitive Advice for Prospective Parents*, 70.

Like any other good consumer guide, Alperson and Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen's books both include itemized price lists for all the services adopting parents require, along with tax credits and other financial assistance available. Alperson includes information on resources like credit cards, bank loans, and mortgage refinances to pay for adoptions. Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen's book estimates the cost for transnational adoption in 1999 to be $12,000–25,000,[76] not including foster care, travel, and medical care. Current costs can reach $30,000 and beyond. Knoll points out hidden costs as well, giving the example that she had trouble getting maternity leave because her employer usually takes it out of women's disability funds, and as she would have no physical disability (from giving birth), her leave was compromised.[77]

Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen warn *against* offering gifts or support to birth mothers or families, arguing that adoptive parents' responsibilities are to the child and not to his or her parents and relatives, with an additional caution that if adoptive parents give the birth mother anything, she will be back to solicit them again.[78] This is another good example of the privileged White adoptive parent further separating themselves from and stigmatizing lower class birth mothers of color by representing them as greedy or grasping and thus morally inferior to the adopter. It is clear that the parents in this transaction want the woman's child, but nothing else. Somewhat ironically, Nelson-

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[76] Nelson-Erichsen, Jean and Erichsen, Heino R. *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions*.
[77] Knoll, Jean and Murphy, Mary-Kate. *International Adoption: Sensitive Advice for Prospective Parents*.
[78] Nelson-Erichsen, Jean and Erichsen, Heino R. *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions*.

Erichsen and Erichsen also warn that gifts or support of any kind to birth mothers could be seen as baby buying and strongly advise against it.

Alperson more honestly acknowledges parent consumerism in transnational adoption, saying "It's true that as adoptive parents, we are indeed consumers looking for the right adoption service to…meet our goal…[but] [i]n choosing an international adoption…[i]t is important to respect the culture and the traditions of the people in whose country we are guests."[79] Alperson discourages parents from commodifying other cultures and advises parents not to be "ugly Americans" abroad. While acknowledging the reality that services leading to adoption are paid for, she also emphasizes that the ultimate goal is to build a family.

Dealing With Race and Racial Hierarchies

The most obvious way in which transracial adoption depicts a hierarchical positioning of race in the United States is that Whites are almost always the adopters of children of color and people of color rarely adopt White children. This is often portrayed as a necessity using the rhetoric that people of color don't even adopt in great enough numbers to provide homes for children of their own race, let alone other races. There is also the perception that children of color are probably advancing in class as they are adopted by Whites, to their benefit. While none of the guides reviewed in this chapter explicitly mention a racial hierarchy of adoption, it does exist among both child adoptees and adoptive parents. Most White parents would prefer to adopt healthy White infants.

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[79] Alperson, Myra. *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make an Overseas Adoption Work for You*, 86.

In the absence of healthy White infants, they make choices in the infant of color adoption market, from either African-American children or non-Black children of color adopted from abroad. The hierarchy of adoptable children is created by the desires of adoptive parents.

The public debate over domestic transracial adoption changed public perception about the ethics of Black-to-White adoption, (the most common domestic transracial adoption pattern). Simon and Altstein illustrate this with a quote from some adoptive parents, who say, "At the time, we weren't ready to adopt a black child. Taking an [American] Indian child was less of a step."[80] When domestic transracial adoption of Native Americans became almost legally impossible in the 1970s, parents opted for transnationally adopted children, mostly Asians at first, then Latinos as well. In *Transracial Adoption: A Follow-Up*, Simon and Altstein interviewed twenty-two families who adopted from Vietnam, India, or Korea. Reasons behind the decision to adopt internationally were similar to reasons parents said they wanted to adopt transracially—that they wanted children—with a major exception:

> "Others thought they would be more comfortable with a Korean child than an American black and suggested they would have an easier time raising the foreign-born child, (quoting from a subject parent) 'Adopting a foreign child is different from adopting a black child. A black child is from American society. Interestingly, they suffer from prejudice, which is not usually the case with a foreign child.'"[81]

This perception of the experience of transnational adoptees was only imagined by the parent, since at the time, there was no "usual foreign child" adopted into a White

[80] Simon, Rita James; Altstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoption*, pg. 81.
[81] Simon, Rita J And Altstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoption: A Follow-Up*, 103-104.

American family. Simon and Altstein also reported a high desire among parents to Americanize children and reported almost all of these Asian adoptees saw themselves as "Americans, white, or as 'hyphenated Americans.'"[82] They also found that, unlike parents who had adopted African-American children of United States citizenry, the international adoptee families experienced virtually no hostility from their extended families, and instead were seen as saintly saviors of these foreign children.[83] Almost thirty years later, adoptive parents in Jacobson's transnational adoption study made almost identical comments, claiming family would not accept a Black adopted child and that adopting Black children would be more difficult because African Americans have to deal with racial prejudice.[84] These examples support the stereotype of Asian Americans as the so-called model minority where Asian Americans are seen as the "best" of American minority groups, closest in racial hierarchy to White, least susceptible to racial discrimination, and therefore in least need of group protection.[85]

The transition from domestic to transnational transracial adoption was also not without its critics. At first, Simon and Alstein did not even consider international adoption of children of color to be transracial adoption.[86] In telling the history of Vietnamese transracial adoption, Simon and Altstein made the case for domestic transracial adoption, asking "Why were 2,000 Vietnamese children more worthy of front-

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[82] *Ibid*.
[83] *Ibid.*
[84] Jacobson, Heather. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*.
[85] For a more detailed discussion of the model minority myth as it relates to Korean adoption in the United States, see Chapter 7, "Adoptees as 'White' Koreans" in this dissertation.
[86] Simon, Rita James; Altstein, Howard. *Transracial Adoption.*

page coverage when the plight of thousands of non-White children was only occasionally mentioned and then only on remote pages?"[87] Perhaps in wishful thinking, they went on to predict that international adoption will not "succeed as a viable alternative for childless couples seeking to adopt."[88] Simon and Altstein changed their views as time passed and changed from proponents of domestic transracial adoption to advocates for all transracial adoption.

Presently, adoptive parents, unlike biological parents, may choose the race, gender and nationality of their children. Not surprisingly, child demand in transracial adoption mirrors perceived racial hierarchy in the United States. African-Americans are the least desirable, with Latino children (from outside the U.S.) more desirable, and Asian children (from outside the U.S.) most desirable. Documentation of child desirability in adoption markets is available from adoption agencies, who set fees for adoption services. Though these fees are not seen as prices within adoption circles, the immense range in adoption fees evokes a cynical response; obviously they are not only what is necessary to cover costs of adoption services. The difference in fees for different categories of children is a reflection of value for these categories and sets a hierarchy among adoptees. Lloyd and Pellissier, married journalists who were considering adoption as a solution supporting zero population growth wrote extensively about their research into adoption and reflected on their findings about cost:

> "…the cost variation is largely based on color. A paraplegic Bulgarian tot with a cleft palate costs $30,000, whereas a mobile and dentally normal Chinese or Guatemalan urchin runs only $15,000. And black children? Absolutely nothing. Drop in and take a dozen. The Caribbean islands of

[87] *Ibid,* 65.
[88] *Ibid,* 67.

> Martinique, Grenada and Barbados offer free black children to anyone who wants to fly there and pick them up…The price of the few Caucasians available is preposterously steep (up to $50,000), and the bidding is intensely competitive (only one-third of would-be adoptive parents ever receive their white Baby X). Meanwhile, dark-skinned babies and children languish in hospitals and foster homes, often virtually free, but unwanted… We assumed [special needs] meant children had mental or physical handicaps…but soon we discovered that all black, Hispanic and Asian children fell into this category, as do all boys and any child over 3 years old. Blackness, maleness and toddlerness get the same assignation as blindness, fatal diseases and pyromania, because they are all 'difficult to place.' Already adoption works off the human equivalent of the gold standard: the healthy white infant."[89]

As demand drops for children of races in less demand, ease of adoption for less ideal parents increases.

Likewise, there is a hierarchy of prospective parents. Holt International, one of the first American adoption agencies to facilitate transnational adoption for a large number of U.S. parents, currently facilitates transnational adoptions to the U.S. from eleven countries and summarizes their requirements for prospective parents. The countries set restrictions for prospective adoptive parents, including parents' ages, their current and past marital status, income, and number of children already in the prospective parents' families. Ideal adoptive parents are White, middle class, married, heterosexual, between 25 and 40 years of age, and religious (usually Christian or Jewish). Parents who do not meet one or more of these criteria are considered less desirable as parents, and are more restricted in what type of children they can expect to adopt. Older couples can expect to get older children. When single women are allowed to apply for children, are also restricted to older children in many nations. The irony of this situation is that children adopted past infancy are documented to have more behavioral problems than

[89] Lloyd, Carol and Pellissier, Hank. *Interracial Adoption: One Couple's Story*.

children adopted in infancy and single parents have less resources to deal with these problems. Only three of ten nations even consider single men. Gay or lesbian couples are not mentioned in Holt's list; the assumption is that they adopt as single men or women. Gay men, because of restrictions on adoptions by single males, would seem to have few options and little chance of adopting when compared to other prospective adoptive parents.

The existence of racial hierarchies in transracial adoption has not been well addressed within the social work and social policy research literature. One work does develop a position outlining transracial adoption as a racist practice and hierarchies in transracial adoption practices are implicated as part of the problem. In Jones and Else's 1979 article, "Racial and cultural issues in adoption" transracial adoption is equated with racism[90] for four reasons. The first is because of racist attitudes against Blacks, including the practice of shifting transracial adoption practices to Asian and Native American children because of the perception that these racial groups would be "less objectionable" than Blacks. The second is that children of mixed parentage are transracially adopted before African-American children of unmixed parentage. The third is that "[t]he designation of racial minorities as "hard to place" is an example of 'blaming the victim.'"[91] The fourth reason Jones and Else saw transracial adoption as racist was that adoption agencies did not make adequate efforts to find Black homes for Black children

[90]Jones, Charles E. and Else, John F. "Racial and Cultural Issues in Adoption." *Child Welfare.*
[91] *Ibid,* 376.

and that requirements for placement were skewed towards the selection of White parents.[92]

Since they are written for adoptive parents, who are mostly White and middle class, it is not surprising that the adoption guides reviewed for this chapter did not engage in a racial critique of transnational adoption practice. More surprisingly, they also did not engage in much useful advice about how to deal with the racial "othering" transracially adopted children are almost certain to experience. The primary way the authors handle race and the racial differences between themselves and their children is by highlighting only the positive aspects of having a child from another race and country in the family. Alperson states:

> Intrigued by the challenge of bringing a child from another culture into their lives… [s]ome people adopt internationally because they *want* their family experience to be a multicultural one… Once I began to considering international adoption, and then when I actually started the process, I realized it was a gift—to me.[93]

Knoll and Murphy make similar comments about personally benefiting by incorporating another culture into the family.[94]

Such remarks are illustrative of parents' denial of the complexity and difficulties faced by people of color in the United States because the authors only see how diversity benefits themselves, explicitly ignoring how it might disadvantage others. Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen take this one step further by assigning the responsibility of social

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[92] *Ibid.*
[93] Alperson, Myra. *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make an Overseas Adoption Work for You.*, 10.
[94] Knoll, Jean and Murphy, Mary-Kate. *International Adoption: Sensitive Advice for Prospective Parents*.

change to these children, ignoring the fact that adoptee assimilation does not solve the problems of disenfranchisement, lack of access, and racial elitism that underlie racial inequality.

The parents referred to in these books use the strategies of racializing themselves or de-racializing their children to minimize differences between their children and themselves. In her book, Alperson describes a process by which parents become racialized when they attempt to take on the racial and ethnic identities of their adopted children. She quotes one mother who says, "My daughter was born in China and is an adopted American. I was born in America and I'm an adopted Chinese."[95] Alperson describes this as an ideal attitude. Other parents de-racialize their children and de-emphasize the child's race by practicing "colorblindness" in the family and stressing the child's "American-ness."[96] This is a confusing phenomenon, until it is understood that there is tremendous desire within families that become racially mixed through adoption for everyone in the family to be "the same." Imagined homogeneity helps these families cope with their outward differences and be more like a "normal" family.

The authors of all three books minimize incidents of racial discrimination and teasing against children and offer superficial advice on how to cope with it. Alperson contributes one page on racial incidents, suggests ignoring them or deflecting them with humor, and stresses that a mother's love can put things right.[97] Nelson-Erichsen and Erichsen advise that parents find friends from the child's minority group and to think

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[95] Alperson, Myra. *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make an Overseas Adoption Work for You*, 106.
[96] *Ibid.*
[97] *Ibid.*

about possible consequences of racial prejudice, which are not discussed in much detail.[98] They lament continued racial prejudice but state, "Nevertheless, our lives were enriched by transracial adoption,"[99] without realizing that parents' enrichment will not compensate for the discrimination and racism faced by their children. These books do nothing to explain the complexities and difficulties of not being White in the United States and to the contrary, suggest that racism toward their children is a superficial problem easily remedied. None of the parents who write these books seems to realize that racism in the context of transracial adoption is not about them, but about their transracially adopted children.

CONCLUSION

Transnational adoption has become widespread in the United States. There is tremendous social pressure for Americans to become parents. Since there are more prospective parents seeking to adopt than healthy White infants waiting to be domestically adopted, the market has become transnational. The exchange of children for adoption fees across national borders can be described in terms of market supply and demand. Nations with orphan populations have responded to this demand and are now the sending countries of transnational adoptees.

The transnational adoption marketplace is difficult, complicated and expensive enough to warrant "how-to" literature for prospective parents. These materials inform prospective parents on how to reach their goal of becoming parents. Because these guides

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[98] Nelson-Erichsen, Jean and Erichsen, Heino R. *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions*.
[99] *Ibid*, 185.

are often written by successful adoptive parents, they are also an account of parents' experiences and attitudes.

This chapter highlights the power differences between White people and people of color, the rich and the poor, the more and less empowered in the adoption circle. Parents are willing to support the growing and expensive transnational adoption industry to acquire children with whom to build family. Children are adopted from abroad instead of domestically because of hierarchical differences between domestic-White, international-of-color and domestic-of-color babies. American parents view themselves as superior to parents in poor countries, further easing their decision to adopt transnationally. They simultaneously see their foreign-adopted children as enriching, authentically exotic, and yet part of the family, therefore, no different from the parents themselves. These views enable these parents to reproduce their own White privilege through the act of transnational adoption. Transnational adoption "how-to" guides for parents show that many prospective parents are aware of how to take advantage of the adoption market, and more pointedly, see themselves as more deserving of the parenting experience than parents in poor countries. Racial and cultural literacy is not viewed as a prerequisite for parenting children of color, to the detriment of the children who are exchanged as commodities in the international adoption marketplace. This form of one-way globalized exchange of American money for children from around the world operates in sharp contrast of globalization of adoption in another form, that of adoptee migration and return migration between the United States and birth nations, such as South Korea.

Chapter 9

Uri Nara, Our Country:

Korean American Adoptees in the Global Age

I think I look Korean and I go back to Korea and people think, you know, I am Korean 'til I open my mouth. But no, I definitely don't feel Korean. I felt comfortable in Korea, but I mean, I don't feel Korean.[1]

-John, 33, on being a Korean adoptee in Korea.

It's always good to have friends where you travel, and I am lucky enough to have a few good friends who live in Korea full-time. So in the summer of 2006 when I was collecting oral histories from Korean adoptees who had returned to live and work in Seoul, I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with my friends, who are all also Korean adoptees. There is an active open air market life in Seoul, where one can bargain for all manner of goods and services. Korean people, as well a visitors and tourists like myself, make good use of Seoul's many markets, and for me, a market visit is mandatory on a trip to Seoul. On a trip to one of these markets, I was with a Korean resident friend, also an adoptee. As we made our way through narrow streets crammed with sheets, quilts and *yo* (sleeping mats that look like thick quilts), merchants called out to us to get our attention and potentially, our business. A central part of my experience in Korea as a Korean American adoptee is that Koreans seem to be able to tell I am not one of them (a perception I know to be shared by many other Korean adoptees who visit Korea). This is certainly because of my lack of Korean language skills, but even without making a sound, I know I stick out. Perhaps it is because of the way I dress, or my body language. In any case, I am used to being read as not-Korean in Korea. I guess this is true for my friend too, because the one of market merchants yelled out to us, "Where are you from?" in order to get our attention. I don't speak enough Korean to feel comfortable engaging

[1] Oral History 38.

with most Koreans, certainly not in marketplace banter, but my friend is much more accomplished than I. She looked the merchant squarely in the eye and replied, "*Uri nara*." I'm from our country.

One of the idiosyncrasies of the Korean language is the tendency to use the plural possessive pronoun *uri*, our. In Korean, one refers to our family, our government, our school, rather than my family, my government, or my school. Thus, Koreans refer to the Korea as our country, *uri nara*. However, referring to Korea this way is generally reserved for use among Koreans; a Korean speaking to a foreigner does not use *uri nara*, but the country's proper name, Korea. So the use of *uri nara* signifies shared nationality with other Koreans, and the shared possession of the nation of Korea among Korean people.

For Korean adoptees, the use of *uri nara* has additional meaning. Because of the use of *uri nara* between Koreans, it can also be used to signify foreigners. Korean people can be fiercely nationalistic, and the divide for Koreans between *us* and *them* seems ever-present. Therefore, I wondered if it was a bit gauche for foreigners to use *uri nara*; how can a foreigner refer to Korea as "our country"? When I asked native speakers of Korean what the use of *uri nara* by a non-Korean would signify, they answered that a Korean assume that the foreigner was speaking about their own country, not about Korea. The use of *uri nara* by Korean adoptees in a Korean context might be confusing for Koreans in Korea, further underlining the national confusion about transnational adoption in Korea and the spectacle of Korean adoptees returning to Korean soil. Nonetheless, in this speech act of referring to Korea as *uri nara* signifies a claim on the part of the speaker to

shred possession of the nation of Korea and its history—a claim of Korean-ness in the heart of the Korean motherland.

After this incident, my friend explained to me, "They think we are Japanese. I tell them I am from *uri nara* so they know we are Korean too. Adoptees are Koreans too." When I got to the home of another adoptee friend with whom I was staying while in Seoul, I told her about this incident. She laughed and remarked, "That's right. *Uri nara,* motherfucker." It was then that I knew many of the adoptees living in Korea were trying to assert themselves, trying to determine if Korea is indeed "our country."

While Korean adoptees are similar to other diasporic returnees to "home" nations in terms of their experience of Americanization, they also have key differences. Identification with birth country culture may be obscured by adoptees' experiences of growing up not just in dominant American society and culture, but also in (usually) White families and social contexts, cut off from family and community experiences of immigration. Instead, Korean adoptee identity is often shaped by connections to fellow adoptees and by feelings of cultural and racial "in-betweeness," which forms the basis for much of Korean adoptee networking and activism today. While I see Korean adoptees as transnational subjects, in many ways, the Korean adoptee experience defies current explanations of the "transnational" in Asian American Studies because adoption complicates our current understandings of diaspora and transnationalism.

THE TRANSNATIONALITY OF TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION

Transnationalism was initially defined in 1994 as "the process by which immigrants forge and maintain social relations that link together their societies of origin

and settlement...[and] whose social fields...cross geographic, cultural and political borders.[2]" Since then, "transnationalism" has proliferated as a theoretical explanation of immigrants' identity, their cultural and legal citizenship(s), and their national subjecthood. Some scholars use the concept of transnationalism to emphasize the growth of post-nationalism in a world where the importance of national borders is declining. In my work on Korean American transnational adoptees, these understandings of transnationalism are insufficient to address the cultural, political, and racial belonging (and/or lack of belonging) experienced by adult adoptees as they cross physical and social borders in the United States, Korea, and within adoptee-centered spaces all over the world. The work of Aihwa Ong describes how the interests of both the state and the individual are served by making links between state and individual more flexible;[3] applied to the case of Korean American transnational adoptees, transnationalism (in theory) would give adoptees access to forms of Korean nationalism without requiring them to renounce American national identity or citizenship; conversely, it would allow South Korea as a birth nation to reclaim adoptees after their transmigration. A critical theoretical goal of this project is to examine the "transnational turn" in Asian American Studies by applying and critiquing the current concepts of transnationalism and by offering more complicated understandings of transnational Korean adoptee subjects.

The very existence of over 100,000 Korean American adoptees is based in the American Cold War policy decision to support a Korean transnational adoption program after the Korean War. As American political interests in Asia have been sustained in the

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[2] Basch, Linda G., Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States.*
[3] Ong, Aihwa, *Flexible Citizenship : The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*.

post-Cold War period, South Korea has developed the longest running and most successful transnational adoption program in the world. In the U.S., racial preferences for Asian children among the American adopting public (who are overwhelmingly White) have created a strong demand for adoptable children of Asian origin. In response, transnational adoptees are granted preferential status within American immigration policy as the privileges of American adoptive parents are extended to their soon-to-be American children born to overseas parents. Since 2000, special immigration provisions for transnational adoptees make them the least restricted group of immigrants in the United States. South Korea has also recently enacted special visa legislation that makes most of the privileges of Korean citizenship available to adoptees. The Korean position of welcoming adoptees' return is particularly important for Korean adoptees who choose to return to South Korea to live and work. The culture and politics of both South Korea and the United States have influenced the lives of Korean American transnational adoptees throughout the history of transnational adoption.

Even during the period of Asian exclusion, Korean American adoptees, as children or future children of American citizens, were always been privileged as immigrants and in naturalizing as American citizens, paving the way for them to transfer their national and familial allegiances from South Korea to the United States. However, Korean adoptees become truly transnational when they return to claim Korean family and belonging in Korean society, recognizing the perseverance of blood ties to Korean family and ethnic ties to Korean nation. Though the legal processes of transnational adoption are designed to completely sever ties between adoptees and their birth families and countries, for some, the draw of returning to Korea is ever present, and the importance of

exercising a Korean identity includes living in Korean society. While this group of repatriates is small,[4] the fact that return immigration is taking place within the largest group of adult transnational adoptees may be a sign of things to come for the growing population of transnational adoptees which has become truly global: an estimated 800-850,000 adoptees born in at least 22 countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe and adopted in at least 15 countries in North America, Europe, and Australia, and growing at an estimated rate of 40,000 a year.[5]

THE NATIONALIZATION OF TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION

Making Korean Adoptees American

Many Korean adoptees do not see themselves as immigrants, but they do have many characteristics in common with immigrants, not the least of which is the phenomenon of return migration to the land of their birth. Politically, they are born in countries that are under the imperial influence of richer, more politically powerful nations. As children born to Korean citizens, they are born with national membership in Asia (though their social membership there may be less certain).[6] They move to nations that have diplomatic (and, historically, imperial, in the case of the United States) relations

[4] The South Korean adoptee support organization Global Overseas Adoptees' Link estimates the resident population of Korean adoptee returnees to number between 200 and 300.

[5] Selman, Peter. "Intercountry Adoption in the Twenty-First Century: An Examination of the Rise and Fall of Countries of Origin." In *Proceedings of the First International Korean Adoption Research Symposium.*

[6] South Korean nationality law accorded South Korean citizenship only to children born to South Korean fathers until 1997. After 1997, children with a South Korean father or mother were considered South Korean. From the formation of the South Korean state in 1948 until 1997, children of South Korean mothers and foreign fathers would not have been considered South Korean nationals.

with South Korea. They are perceived to have better economic and social opportunities as a result of their migration. The primary difference between Korean adoptees and other immigrants is the relative political ease with which adoptees can make their migratory transition—their immigration aided, sponsored, and advocated for by (usually) White adoptive parents, citizens of some of the richest and most powerful nations in the world.

So why are Korean American adoptees disinclined to identify as immigrants? Writing about transnational adoptees in Spain (which has currently has the second highest rate of both international immigration and international adoption after the United States, Diana Marre notes that Spanish adoptive families draw a clear distinction between adopted children and immigrant children. These distinctions are largely based on class and other social advantages Spanish families can confer on their foreign adopted children in order to protect them from the racism they might otherwise suffer as immigrants.[7] Among Korean adoptee families in America, a similar dynamic has been put in place. Adoptive parents, usually White, often middle class, always U.S. citizens, are not traditionally a politically or socially marginalized group within the U.S. Parents' treatment as agents of adoptee immigration by the federal government through the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS),[8] and by state governments appears to differ from the treatment of non-adoptee immigrants, who are often neither White nor middle class, and are obviously not citizens. While adoptive parents have to go through lengthy legal and immigration procedures as part of the adoption process, the procedures

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[7] Marre, Diana. " 'We Do Not Have Immigrant Children at This School, We Just Have Children Adopted from Abroad: Flexible Understandings of Children's 'Origins.'" In *International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children*.
[8] Formerly the INS.

are different from those of other immigrants. This also means that these families can avoid contact with immigrants (and, therefore, any association of their children with immigrants) if they wish, in their dealings with the USCIS. In short, Korean adoptees, from the moment of their adoption, are considered by their adoptive parents *and by the U.S. government* as the children of American nationals, not as an immigrant population.

This policy stands in stark contrast to both historical and contemporary immigration policies for most other Asians. Of particular note is Chinese exclusion, whereby Chinese peoples were the first and only group to be excluded purely on the basis of nationality from immigration to the United States. In *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943,* Erika Lee explains how the codification of Chinese exclusion marked the federal sanction of anti-Asian discrimination, support for which was created and maintained by popular anti-Asian sentiment prior and during the period of exclusion. Lee establishes anti-Chinese immigration legislation as a starting point for all anti-immigration and immigrant-restrictive legislation and sentiment since then. The criminalization of immigration to the United States began with Chinese exclusion, and the current state of anti-immigration legislation and immigrant suspicion is deeply rooted in this history. Not surprisingly, many of the strategies used by Chinese migrants to undercut immigration law are still in use today by new groups of scrutinized immigrants. The United States continues its assault on immigration, currently focusing on Latinos and those of Middle Eastern descent, using tactics which continue to undermine the civil liberties and human rights of

targeted groups.[9] While the general public might prefer to historicize the period of Chinese exclusion as a relic of our racist past, Lee's research reveals that the context in which these acts of racist exclusion occurred have disturbing echoes in to the present anti-immigrant and anti-foreign sentiments.

Historically, immigration status has greatly influenced the differing American racializations of immigrants in the United States. This has taken the form of Chinese exclusion as discussed by Lee. Asian immigrants have been subject to racialization and placement within class hierarchy through unequal access to legal and cultural citizenship. As evidenced by Lee's work, it is the government that has taken on the role of gatekeeper and enforcer of who is prevented from migrating into the United States, who is allowed in, and on what basis. More recently, immigration has been liberalized (through formal deracialization) since 1965 to a system which restricts access to most immigrants, but makes exception for "special" admission of foreign professionals such as in the Exchange Visitor Program or the H-1 visa program, grants liberal admissions of elite immigrants on student or professional visas, and privileges family re-unification. Family re-unification is the way through which adoptees are able to so easily enter the United States as children of American citizens. If Asian exclusion and other anti-immigrant policies are on one end of the immigration spectrum of restriction, transnational adoption is on the other, with an ease of access for America's most desired immigrants, child adoptees.

Since the passage of the Child Citizenship Act in 2000,[10] transnationally adopted children of U.S. citizens even have access to automatic citizenship, without the legal

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[9] Lee, Erika. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era.*
[10] "The Child Citizenship Act of 2000." U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

necessity of a naturalization process. Though the Act was passed before the events of September 11, 2001, this extreme liberalization in immigration and citizenship policy has never been questioned, though it privileges "nationals" of countries who are people of color, who have otherwise been regarded with great suspicion by immigration authorities since 9/11. However, the Asian, African or Latino child migrant, adopted by American citizens and entrusted to the nationalizing influence of an American family, is so far from arousing the suspicions of American immigration authorities, that even my suggestion of it here probably seems outlandish. My point is not to encourage additional discriminatory policing of adoptee migrants, but to underline the almost total disregard for the adoptee migrant as an immigrant at all. As transnational adoption has become more common as a family building strategy in the United States, understanding adoptees as deracialized members of American families—and **not** as racialized threats in the form of alien immigrants— has come to be seen as a matter of supporting American families, and is never criticized as evidence of leniency in immigration and naturalization law, even in these xenophobic times.

Before February 27, 2001, parents had to submit several forms for naturalization of their transracial adoptee children, following a process specific to transnational adoptees, with no exam or residence requirement for minor children, and with the explicit requirement that at least one parents had to be a citizen of the United States. Even though this process was considerably easier for adoptive parents than for non-adoptee immigrants, legislation concerning the naturalization of transnational adoptees has changed since then to make the naturalization process even simpler. Now, under the Child Citizenship Act of 2000, transnational adoptees of finalized adoption under the age

of 18 whose adoption had been finalized and who live in the legal and physical custody of a citizen parent automatically receive citizenship.[11] The Child Citizenship Act, lobbied for by (presumably White) U.S. adoptive parents,[12] does not even appear to share to the same goals as other immigration or naturalization reform legislation, rather, it was positioned as an act of corrective justice for upstanding White American citizens and their children. Through such legislation, parents have been successful in positioning these adoptee immigrants higher on the immigration hierarchy than other immigrants. Of course, these parents' beliefs are also reinforced by permissive naturalization policies of the USCIS concerning transnational adoptees compared to other immigrants.

Since September 11, 2001, American immigration policy has become more restrictive, with fewer visas and more deportation ordered than previously.[13] In sharp contrast, transnational adoptees and their families enjoy extremely liberal immigration and naturalization policies, as well as a special new office, the Office of Children's Issues at the U.S. Department of State established in 2008, with as staff who "… are dedicated to assisting parents as they seek to provide a home to orphans abroad."[14] Parents, perceived as the primary agents of transnational adoption, are privileged through their high cultural capital and as citizens in the naturalization process; their adoptees children have the advantage as secondary beneficiaries.

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[11] "Fact Sheet: Child Citizenship Act of 2000." U.S. Department of State.
[12] Jacobson, Heather. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*.
[13] Nguyen, Tram. *We Are All Suspects Now: Untold Stories from Immigrant America After 9/11*.
[14] "Our Role." Intercountry Adoption Office Of Children's Issues, U.S. Department Of State .

One of the reasons cited for enacting this legislation was that apparently many parents were unaware that their transnationally adopted children *were not already* automatically receiving citizenship[15] and that transnational adoptees who slip through the cracks, like other non-citizens, are in danger of deportation if convicted of a felony. The act of deportation in these circumstances is especially outlandish because most transnational adoptees have no cultural ties to the country of their birth. This legislation is not without gaps; parents who have not physically seen their adopted children before adoption (this is true in many cases where parents do not travel to the birth country to pick up their adopted children) are not considered to have a finalized adoption and must readopt their children in their home states before citizenship will be granted.[16] In the American assimilationist immigration and naturalization system, the inclusion of transnational adoptees is now a mere formality. Unlike most other groups of immigrants who seek permanent entry into the United States, for transnational adoptees, the gates are wide open.

The ruling paradigm within federal structures of naturalization is assimilationist, where an advanced degree of assimilation must be demonstrated through English language proficiency, knowledge of American history and culture, and long-term residence before citizenship is considered. Many researchers theorize that citizenship allows some access to political agency desirable to immigrants who are minorities in both their naturalization and racial status. Using current structures to advance the agendas of ethnic (including largely immigrant) groups, theorists including Bill Hing, Noah Pickus,

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[15] Maguire, Ken. "Law makes foreign adoptees citizens." Associated Press.
[16] Urban, Patricia M. "International adoption: U.S. proof of citizenship." What You Need to Know About Adoption.

and Portes and Rumbaut acknowledge that participation in this system is a solution which avoids total disenfranchisement. Hing argues for a broadening and strengthening of Americanism through a reconception of American "core values."[17] Pickus argues that this same ideal should be reflected in the process of naturalization[18] where naturalization processes would be even more constructive of a nationalized citizen than they are currently.[19] Portes and Rumbaut argue that naturalization is the first stop for "…any foreign minority that wishes to make itself heard…"[20] as disenfranchised groups within the political processes of the United States.

Transnational adoptees are assumed to be easily assimilated because they arrive to the United States as children and are raised by United States citizens who usually are part of the dominant culture and ethnicity in the United States: White, English-speaking Americans of European ancestry with Judeo-Christian cultural attributes. Because of this, these adoptees are easily placed on the top of the immigration hierarchy. They can be expected to have a native's command of English and to be as well-versed in American culture and society as any other person raised in the United States. They do not carry the family memories of immigration, as most adoptees are adopted too young to remember even their own immigration journey, and no other family immigrants accompany them to retell their immigration stories. The only attribute of dominant culture transnational

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[17] Hing, Bill Ong. "Beyond the rhetoric of assimilation and cultural pluralism: Addressing the tension of separatism and conflict in an immigration-driven multiracial society." *California Law Review*.
[18] Pickus, Noah. "To make natural: Creating citizens for the Twenty-First Century." In *Immigration and Citizenship in the Twenty-First Century*.
[19] *Ibid*, 133.
[20] Portes, Alejandro and Rubén G. Rumbaut. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, 117.

adoptees generally lack are the phenotypical attributes of Whiteness. While a non-White appearance certainly raises problematic issues for many adoptees, it is not necessarily synonymous with non-Americanness in a cultural setting where racial minorities are broadly accepted as Americans. The high acculturation, or pre-assimilation[21] of adoptees through rearing in American homes warrants the easiest naturalization process of any group of immigrants in the U.S. Indeed, the formation of transnationally adopted children into U.S. citizens seems to be justified through their American parentage and cultural upbringing as "native" Americans.

Immigrants are generally acknowledged as having families the nation of emigration, from which they may be separated by citizenship. So, for other immigrants, familial ties to a "homeland" or ancestral land are recognized. This condition is more complicated in the case of transnational adoption, because adoptees are physically and legally separated from family in their countries of birth. In many cases, they are also encouraged to sever emotional ties to birth nation and family or are prevented from having these ties in the first place. In exchange, they are granted entry instead into American families (and to imagined American genealogies). Through the easy access to citizenship that transnational adoptees enjoy, the adoptive family and national relationship trumps previous categories of national membership. In this example, family and nation is solidified as family units are used as foundational building blocks of nation.

[21] I use the term *pre-assimilation* to denote the general lack of choice in engaging in assimilative processes for most transnational and transracial adoptees; while assimilation is certainly a survival mechanism for adoptees of color in the America, I argue that it is not generally chosen, but (perhaps inadvertently, but still powerfully and predominantly) assigned by the White families and communities of many adoptees. See Chapter 7 for a more thorough investigation of this phenomenon and the Whiteness of Korean adoptees.

The government of the United States privileges adoptees in the immigration and naturalization process more than any other migrant group. For most transnational adoptees today, American citizenship can be taken for granted. The privileged immigration status which adoptees and their families enjoy eases adoptees' political transition into citizenship by virtually guaranteeing their instant naturalization.

Among participants in this research, most of those who chose to address the issue of immigration do not see themselves as immigrants, and in fact sought to deny any similarities between themselves and other immigrants. In my observations, the use of the pejorative "FOB" ("fresh off the boat;" i.e. a recent immigrant) is common among Korean adoptees, who want to be differentiated from immigrant Asians. Some adoptees in my research remarked on the appearance of other Asian immigrants, Vietnamese or Hmong, in their communities as they were growing up, and recalled fearing that they might be mistaken for members of immigrant groups that were seen as far more differentiated and racialized than the adoptees wanted to see themselves. If adoptees hope to develop positively racialized identities, contempt for similarly racialized individuals is clearly problematic. It is apparent that many adoptees do have a sense of racial justice, no doubt as a result of growing up a person of color in predominantly White communities. While these adoptees statements about Asian immigrants betray some internalized racism, they also are sensitive to anti-immigrant sentiment within their families. Some adoptees I interviewed talked about their difficulties with the racism and xenophobia of their parents against Mexicans or Middle Eastern immigrants and their parents' failure to acknowledge that their own children were immigrants and people of color.

All of the adoptees in this research were adopted before the Child Citizenship Act became law, so all had to go through the naturalization process to become U.S. citizens. However, for the most part, the adoptees with whom I spoke did not consider stories about their naturalization to be an important part of their narratives, and most did not even mention it, though I know all were naturalized before the age of 18. When I asked one adoptee about her naturalization, she told me that the most remarkable thing she remembered was that it was her first elevator ride (she was raised in a rural area and the naturalization took place in a federal courthouse in "the big city"). The absence of importance attached to the naturalization process is particularly striking in how closely it resembles the attitude towards citizenship of Americans born into their citizenship. It is as if the citizenship process is only important to immigrants, from whom transnational adoptees understand themselves to be different. Not surprisingly, the attitudes of Korean adoptees are consistent with their placement in families and society by their parents, their government and their societies. Designated as pre-assimilated by those around them, these adoptees have occupied the positions and created identities as non-immigrant citizens—though I would argue—not without conflict.

The immigration of transnational adoptees blurs the distinction between immigrant and citizen in the eyes of the USCIS, the community of transnationally adoptive families, and transnational adoptees themselves. Many transnational adoptees do not see themselves as immigrants, even though they technically are. I would argue that even though transnational adoptees have a different migrant story than non-adoptee immigrants, they still are immigrants and though their experiences may differ from those of other immigrants, they have many of the issues that other immigrants face. For

adoptees who have been removed from contact with birth country and family, the experience of immigration to the United States could become an important foundation of a new American identity. However, the erasure of adoptees' immigrant pasts, like the erasure of many of their other pre-adoptive experiences, separates them (and their adoptive families) socially and culturally from important potential bases of identity in the United States by preventing them from identifying with other American people of color and/or other immigrant populations who they might benefit from knowing and understanding. Instead, adoptees and their adoptive families, through special policies for transnational adoptees and through social norms of segregation, are insulated from contact with other immigrant communities. It comes as no surprise, then, that Korean adoptees, as they become adults often choose to further distance themselves from other Asians by avoiding contact with Asian immigrants, a population with whom the want to avoid being confused.

Making Adoptees Korean Again: Korean American Adoptees in Seoul

If American orphan visas and the Child Citizenship Act of 2000 can make Korean adoptees American, the South Korean F-4 visa can make them Korean again, at least for as long as they choose to stay in South Korea. South Korean F-4 visas are specifically for "overseas Koreans," meaning those with traceable and verifiable South Korean past citizenship or nationality.[22] The special visa for overseas Koreans was established in 1999 by the Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans, partially in

[22] Yoon, In-Jin. "A Comparison of South and North Korean Policy for Overseas Koreans."

response to appeals by Korean adoptees living in Korea for permanent legal status as Koreans.[23] The F-4 visa is the least restrictive of any residence visa in Korea, conferring on the holder all the rights of native Koreans except voting, including unlimited entry and exit privileges, the right to own property and businesses, and the right to reside in Korea without a work-related sponsor. Though the F-4 has a two year term, unlimited renewals are possible. The acquisition of and F$ visa is as close to citizenship as a non-Korean citizen can be. It carries such comprehensive and flexible rights that when I asked Patrick, an adoptee businessman living in Seoul, if he would want dual citizenship if it were an option (South Korean law does not currently allow dual citizenship), he responded:

> *No…I pretty much do now right now, with the F4 visa. Like I got my business license for free. Most foreigners that want to get a business license here, they have to prove they have at least $50,000 in an off-shore account. I can work here wherever I want to. I actually pay less taxes…I get pretty much all my money here, and I don't get stuck with jobs, like they're in control maybe because they have control of my visa. So I'm like you know what, if you screw me over, and I don't like you, I'm leaving! And go and do the next thing.*[24]

There has been some controversy in Korea over the F-4 visa since its establishment. Because it only applies to overseas Koreans who were once South Korean nationals (along with their descendants), it is restricted to those who left Korea after South Korea became a nation in 1948, meaning that it mostly applies to diasporic migrants who reside in western countries and excludes 5.65 million ethnic Koreans, descended from people who left before 1948, almost half of whom live in China, Russia

[23] Sheppard, Nicole, Vice Secretary General, Global Overseas Adoptees' Link.
[24] Oral History 51.

and Japan.[25] For this reason, the Act has been attacked as discriminatory against the ethnic Koreans in these locations, especially the Korean-Chinese. Criticism has also been directed at the promotion of unity among ethnic Koreans over other persons of other ethnicities who live and work in Korea.[26]

Since Korean adoption did not formally begin until 1953, all Korean adoptees are eligible for the F-4 visa, though the application process can be onerous. Since the F-4 visa is for those with foreign citizenship only, to obtain one, an adoptee wishing to live in Korea must provide documentation of onetime Korean citizenship, as well as documentation of the loss of Korean citizenship. Proving current American citizenship is not difficult, but to obtain proof of Korean ancestry, adoptees must obtain their family registry, or Korean *hojeok*. The *hojeok* lists the entire known patrilineal family; since these records are generally accurate and complete genealogies, they are the basis on which claims of citizenship can be made. Adoptees who have no information on birth family must obtain an orphan *hojeok* (which lists only themselves, with no other family members) from their Korean adoption agency in order to fulfill the requirement for proof of onetime Korean citizenship for the adoptee.

Even for adoptees who have found members of their Korean birth family, an orphan *hojeok* is probably still logistically preferable. Many adoptees were never entered into their birth family *hojeok*, or were removed when they left the family. Even if the adoptee is on their birth family *hojeok*, since important personal details like birthdates, parental identities, and family circumstances were often changed by adoption agencies in

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[25] Lee, Jeanyoung. "Korea's policy for ethnic Koreans overseas." *Korea Focus*
[26] Jeon, Jaeho, "Changes in the Korean Identity in the Globalization Era." *New Asia Research Institute, Quarterly New Asia*.

the adoption process, the orphan *hojeok* can be made to be a better match to the adoptee's American identity papers, removing the possibility of conflicts of information within the visa application materials. Additionally, since adoptees' legal identities are completely changed through the adoption process, the adoptee with access to birth family records may have no way to legally prove that he or she is the same person as listed on their birth family *hojeok*.[27]

For adoptees who seek the F-4 visa, there is considerable irony in claiming legal orphan status in order to re-connect with Korea, Korean people, and possibly Korean birth family. Unlike other overseas Koreans, who must document their own Korean citizenship by show a direct familial connection to other Koreans to obtain an F-4 visa, adoptees usually must obtain it through formalized documentation that the adoptee has no relationship with anyone of Korean citizenship—or in the Korean context, with anyone at all. It is exclusively through the acknowledgement of the practice of removing the identities of Koreans who become overseas adoptees that these adoptees can gain legal status as Koreans once again.

Nonetheless, does the legal opportunity afforded by the F-4 visa make Korean adoptee ethnic return migrants to South Korea "feel" Korean to the extent that they more fully identify with other Koreans? Certainly the F-4 visa gives a readily accessible legal toehold for adoptees to live and work in South Korea among Korean people, and they can move to South Korea much more easily than to other countries. However, I have not found that adoptees really 'become Korean' just because the South Korean government

[27] Trenka, Jane Jeong. "Adoption is a Feminist Issue: Towards an Imaginative Feminism."

has removed most of the barriers for their return. Instead, many of the adoptees who live in Korea are deeply folded into adoptee communities, where they can connect with others who have similar experiences as themselves, but find little acceptance in Korean society at large. Most Korean adoptee ethnic return migrants plan to stay in Korea for periods ranging from one to five years and do not consider a permanent move to Korea to be a viable option.

The Adoptee Bubble in Seoul

I traveled to Seoul in the summer of 2006 to collect oral histories from among the few hundred Korean American adoptees who have chosen to return to Korea to live and work. Estimates of the size of the Korean adoptee population in South Korea range up to several hundred repatriates from adoptive countries in North America, Europe, and Australia. I collected oral histories from 16 Korean American adoptees in Seoul that summer, using them to augment the five oral histories I had previously collected in the United States from American adoptees who had lived in Korea as adults, but had returned the United States. In this subset of 21 subjects, all had lived in Korea or one year or longer and most had lived primarily or entirely in Seoul. In the group, nine were men, 12 were women, and all were under age 40.

No reliable or official statistics exist that would reveal demographic information about adoptees who reside in Korea; those that do rely on adoptee voluntary contact with adoptee help organizations, such at the Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (GOAL). However, it is commonly believed in the community that there is general gender parity between returnees, and that most are young (under 40) and single. It is very possible that

adoptees outside this general demographic have returned to Korea and are unknown within larger adoptee social circles because they never associate with other adoptees socially or with organizations like GOAL. For instance, I made several attempts to connect with adoptees who were living in Korea because they were stationed there either with the American military or with the U.S. State Department, but none of them ever returned my calls or emails. I suspected that these individuals might have very different experiences—and in terms of their reasons and preparations they had for coming to Korea, and of their daily lives in Korea—than others with whom I connected, but was left not knowing about this group because they were too busy or unwilling to connect with me. This made me wonder if the adoptees I did see were more invested in developing social connections with other adoptees simply because they were professionally isolated because those who had stronger professional ties (for instance, with the U.S. government) seemed less interested in spending time with other adoptees or participating in a project like mine, about adoptee identity. My methodology for collecting oral histories depends on volunteerism among the subjects; while I did not hear of many adoptees who were not single adults between 20 and 40, this does not mean that these demographic traits are absolute.

Like the overall group of Korean adoptees at large, this group of adoptees living in Korea is difficult to characterize in any kind of absolute terms; if Korean adoptees can be best likened to one another only by having been adopted from Korea to the west, then the repatriate group in Korea can best be likened as all having made the decision, for one reason or another, to leave their adoptive countries to live back in Korea, some for a brief

overseas stay of a year or two, some more indefinitely. In other words, while their circumstances might tie these adoptees together, not much else necessarily does.

I also want to note that a large proportion (perhaps half) of Korean adoptees living in Korea are not American, but European, having been adopted to one of several countries there that participated as receiving countries in Korean adoption. This is consistent with the proportion of Korean adoptees worldwide, half of whom came to the United States, half of whom were sent elsewhere, but mostly to European nations. While there did appear to be considerable cross-socialization among American and European adoptees, I also noticed some separation based on nationality, mostly because of differing language and/or cultural preferences between these groups. There is professional separation between English-speaking and non-English speaking adoptees in that the default profession for the English speakers, teaching English, is not open to the non-English speakers. While the entire community of Korean adoptee returnees to Korea is interesting to me, because of time constraints and my interest in American-Korean relations through adoption, I limited myself to collecting oral histories from American adoptees, but want to acknowledge that the population of adoptees in Korea is diverse in terms of adoptive nationality. American adoptees in Korea interacted regularly with European adoptees, and unlike adoptee communities in the United States, everyone there seemed to understand that the community of adoptees in Seoul is quite international, consisting of Americans, Scandinavians, Francophones, and a few Australians and Italians.

Being Korean I: Moving to Korea

When I arrived in Seoul to collect oral history interviews from within this population, I had made a couple of assumptions, both of which turned out to be proved wrong. The first was that adoptees living in Korea would all articulate some sort of deep and meaningful connection to Korea, or at least with Korean culture or Korean people. As the motherland for Korean adoptees, I thought Korea would have a special draw for adoptees that they would discuss as the reason they decided to move back. In accordance with my first assumption, I also assumed that it would follow that adoptees would say that they were in Korea mostly to connect (or re-connect) with Korean culture and language, and that it would then follow that most of them living there would be fluent or quickly becoming fluent in the Korean language. All these assumptions, though not entirely disproved by the oral history material I collected, were also not particularly supported by it.

Instead, the adoptees I spoke to articulated much more mundane and pragmatic reasons behind their decisions to move from the United States to Korea. While some said they wanted to be in Korea to maintain relationships with birth family or other individuals who also lived in Korea, many more said the main reason they came or decided to stay was because nothing much was happening at home. Many mentioned that they had left behind uninspiring or nonexistent careers in the United States or that they had experienced recent personal breaks with family or long term partners. Nate, 31, explained how a difficult year in the United States led him to decide to move to Korea:

> *What started it off with me was… losing my job…as a computer programmer. And, …losing my house…losing my car…'cause I got in a*

> *car accident. My parents were going through a divorce…I know my brother was starting to get into some legal troubles… But it was just like a series of things…being involved with a… girl that… screwed me over financially. But I remember going through a period of … close to a… year where it was just like one thing after another happened to me…[it] just kind of all multiplied and, like, you know…losing myself throughout the whole thing; my personal identity.* [28]

While this adoptee's story why he chose to move to Korea were unusually dramatic, many, like him, did not mention the pull of Korea as much as the lack of a pull to stay in United States. Larry, 26, told how after he dropped out of college, he made the seemingly random decision to move to Korea:

> *I didn't know anyone Korean, I didn't talk* [speak Korean], *I never had Korean food, nothing. But I was just like, why not? You know I got nothing else going on, I got nothing else to really lose at this point, so I'll just do it. So I just booked a plane ticket, and when I got here I arranged for like a homestay thing. I just stayed with a homestay family, or a host family whatever… and when I was here I got to know a lot of people and I really liked it so I didn't really have anything to go back to in America at that point. I couldn't go get a job because the economy was sort of bad at the point, and I wasn't going to go back asking for my old job back, so I was just like, well, I'll stay here and see what happens.*[29]

So, more than the inescapable pull of Korea that I thought adoptees would cite as the reason for returning, those I spoke to were unanchored or unencumbered in the United States, and Korea came up as a viable possibility as they reviewed their options. To be sure, becoming familiar with Korean culture and learning the Korean language were still important for adoptees living in Korea, but as necessities for surviving in Korea, rather than their primary reasons for being there. Ingrid, 34, described a search for identity that

[28] Oral History 49.
[29] Oral history 48.

brought her to live in Korea, including an acknowledgment that her search for identity could not be fulfilled just in the United States:

> *I think that what made me know that I had to come back was I think you know part of what has really influenced me has been my interest in racism and my interest in Asian American experience. From there I started to become interested in adoptee experience just because I had this growing awareness of myself as an adoptee and knowing there were some thing I hadn't really dealt with when I was younger and I knew that I still had a lot of anger for never having talked to me about it. So I think it was reading adoptee stories and reading about adoption that helped me to understand that I really needed to make peace with my identity as an adoptee, not just as a person of color living in America, but as an adoptee. And that there was some piece of me in Korea that I needed to get that I would not get just living in the United States so I don't really feel like I had a choice.*[30]

Being Korean II: Learning Korean, Teaching English

To my great surprise, most adoptees living in Korea, even those who had lived there for an extended period of time, were not fluent in Korean—even though (not surprisingly) most cited this lack of language proficiency as a major barrier to their ability to live comfortably in Korea. Lack of Korean language skills was also the biggest reason why adoptees said they would never be able to "be truly Korean" or "pass" as Koreans in Korea, a major frustration for adoptees returnees. The acquisition of a second language in an immersion environment such as a study abroad experience has generally been found in linguistic research to be faster and more effective than classroom studies in a native language location.[31] Given this finding, in addition to the high degree of

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[30] Oral History 57.

[31] Collentine, Joseph and Barbara F. Freed "Learning Context and its Effects on Second Language Acquisition, an Introduction." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition.*

motivation Korean adoptees living in Korea reported, I was surprised that so few were functionally fluent; even those who had been living in Korea for several years had only the most rudimentary language skills, such as the ability to navigate home, make simple purchases, or order food in a restaurant.

Though most of the repatriate adoptees who gave me oral histories had studied the Korean language in the United States, in Korea, or both, most had stopped Korean language studies in Korea because it was so difficult for them. Of the 21 adoptees who told me their oral histories, only one claimed to be fluent enough to read and understand a Korean newspaper or to participate fully in street conversation. Many talked about being tormented by the Korean language, and said this torment was compounded by the everyday social pressure of Korean people who did not understand why the adoptee did not speak and understand Korean and shamed them for their lack of language skills. Adoptees reported that this was in contrast to how they see other (White) westerners treated by native Koreans, where even the slightest Korean language ability is effusively praised. In addition, adoptees reported feelings of guilt, anger and shame at their lack of Korean language abilities. Some adoptees refused to work on Korean language skills for these reasons. Ingrid remarked,

> *I had this attitude that "oh I can learn language fairly easily and learning other languages hasn't been a problem for me, learning Korean should be fine." I took my first class in Korean maybe a month after I got here, and it was really hard!! At that time I started to talk to other adoptees about their experiences learning Korean and started to hear things like you know it's more, it's more difficult for adoptees to learn Korean and we have other emotional issues attached to learning language…the longer I was in that Korean class the more I started to feeling myself having*

> *emotional issues from Korean…because here was this language I was supposed to know and now…I have to learn it as if it's this new language I have no connection to, and that was, it was really frustrating and it made me at times not want to learn Korean and it made me want to just only speak in English.*[32]

Ingrid's story points to a hardship associated with a perceived loss of "Korean-ness" that adoptees, especially those living in Korea, seem to feel. This same sense of inadequacy and fraudulence has also been described in Chinese American non-adopted returnees to China after a generation or more of acculturation in the United States,[33] but the situation is somewhat different for adoptees. Being in Korea can cause adoptees to reflect on many aspects of their adoption experience, and this is one of them: being immersed in Korean society reminds adoptees that they might well have grown up there, and the struggle to learn the Korean language would be non-existent. The irony for adoptees in their struggle to learn Korean (and this is true even for adoptees who were adopted in early to middle childhood, not as infants, and who know they came to the United States speaking Korean) is palpable and their frustration with learning the Korean language is almost universal.

However, adoptees are highly motivated to learn and/or improve their Korean language skills; many of the adoptees who gave oral histories mentioned their lack of Korean language skills as the primary reason they felt they were not fully Korean, because this is the clue to Korean nationals that they are foreigners. Though many adoptees came to Korea wanting to "pass" in Korean society based on their physical appearances, their poor language skills give them away as foreigners. Adoptees struggle

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[32] Oral History 57.
[33] Louie, Andrea C*hineseness across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States*.

with this contradiction and equate their language skills with their level of "Korean-ness." Rebecca, 31, who had been living in Korea for several years said,

> *I don't think I could ever live in Korea forever… 'Cause Korea also drives me crazy. It annoys me.* [Laughs] *Sometimes I think language is a big thing. I don't think I'll ever be able to speak Korean fluently…I studied like, for a few months, just like, part time. I never did like a full time program. I think if I studied a lot, and actually spoke it a lot, then I could be at a decent level but I would never sound like a Korean person. I will always have some sort of accent…I think the longer I've been here the more I've gotten used to being here, but I actually hated it when I first arrived.* [34]

When I asked Richard, age 31, if he feels more Korean living in Korea than he did living in the United States, he replied,

> *I don't think that I feel any more Korean than I did and especially, even though I met my birth family, I don't feel any more Korean, because I'm reminded that I'm a foreigner every day, and the biggest part is the language barrier. If I could communicate with my peers in their native tongue, then, it would be no problem, but otherwise, I'll just continue to be a foreigner, and it will just always be that apparent…*[35]

Adding further to the irony of adoptee existence in Korea, most adoptees living in Korea must teach English to Koreans in order to make a living. Most teach at *hagwons*, cram schools where Korean students take extra study. Because of their lack of Korean language proficiency, the only marketable skill most Korean American adoptees have to offer are their English language skills as "native-speakers." Since English language ability is a highly sought after skill in Korea, as Koreans seek to enter the English language-dominated global marketplace, English teaching positions are well-paid and fairly easy to obtain for adoptees.

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[34] Oral History 64.
[35] Oral History 54.

Unfortunately, teaching English in the *hagwons* does not contribute to a recognizable career path in Korea or back in the United States; adoptees teach in the *hagwons* because this is the only employment available to most while in Korea. Many adoptees also complained about the discriminatory hiring practices in many *hagwons;* many were surprised that there is a marked preference for White teachers even in Korea. Nate recalled,

> "*Most of these people that they do hire that are White, they can't speak better English… but worse English than I do. With the accents. And people in here from, like…Russian countries that can barely speak a lick of English, but they're hired as English teachers. Because they're White.*[36]

This racism and discrimination parallels that which adoptees face in the United States, because they are discriminated against for being Korean in appearance. The assumption that "native speakers" of English must be White creates a barrier for adoptees who seek to benefit from their native speaker status as a way to earn a living and stay in Korea. Some adoptees complained that they had seen situations in *hagwons* where non-native speakers who spoke English, but were White (such as Europeans who speak English as a second language) received preferential hiring or payment, presumably just for being White. While most adoptees would not argue that Korea is somehow more racist in labor and hiring practices than the United States, these complaints about discriminatory treatment towards adoptees in Korea illuminate several racial realities for adoptees. Nate made a connection between not speaking Korean and how he is

[36] Oral History 49.

minoritized in Korea, though he also differentiated between minoritization in America and in Korea:

> *In Korea, sometimes I* [feel like a minority], a*nd I don't speak Korean. That's strange to say that, 'cause I look Korean and I fit the profile of a Korean…but, yeah, sometimes I do. I've been in situations where I'm the only English speaker there, you know, and like, running around…trying to figure out how to say what, or try to draw on a piece of paper (laughs). [*But it's] *different* [from being a minority in the United States] *because* [there] *you kinda know you're a minority… I mean, physically…your guard is always up. Here it throws you off guard. And the reason why I say that is 'cause when you start to feel the most comfortable is when you start to lose yourself in the fact that* [you are still different]. *Then, I start to realize, "wait…yep…I'm still a minority here at this point," you know. You know.*[37]

Many adoptees remarked that teaching English makes it more difficult to learn Korean, and fully recognized the irony of being in the position of representing America because they are teaching English in Korea, even though they themselves were born in Korea. Adoptees also recognize the class differences that their English language education of Korean nationals supports, especially because so many Koreans see acquisition of English as a way out of Korea. Victor, age 28, remarked,

> [T]*eaching these rich kids, like all these rich family's kids, English. It's just such a weird, ironic little…fucked up thing, you know. Especially like during this summer camp where it's very like all specialized around American learning, right? And so… I'm teaching American history and stuff, like Social Studies, American social studies right now in the classes…considering all the circumstances leading up to this moment. [I]t's like oh man, these kids, they just come from these rich privileged… I mean in Korea if you have money you're…like gods here, right? I mean like you get everything. So it's like in some ways I prefer teaching the blue*

[37] *Ibid.*

collar, because I where I was working before was more like blue collar kids. In some ways I prefer that…[38]

In contexts where phenotypic Whiteness is valued, broad contexts such as dominant American society or more specific contexts like the English language *hagwon* scene in Seoul, non-White persons often experience racial discrimination. However, adoptees are understandably angry with discriminatory treatment. In the United States, such treatment is illegal and more and more, is generally socially unacceptable. Polite public behavior includes ignoring race as a visible or important characteristic, which has probably lessened the incidence of individual-to-individual racist interaction (though I would argue that social and institutional racism continues to be common in America). In addition, many adoptees imagine that racial discrimination could not exist in Korea, certainly not against themselves as ethnic Koreans. As a result, many adoptees who witness or are victims of racist hiring practices in Korea are taken off guard.

The few adoptees who find work outside the *hagwons* and English-tutoring scene have vastly different experiences at work. One adoptee talked about the advantages of having a corporate job in Korea, where his Americaness, not just his English language skills, are valued and rewarded, despite his Korean appearance. However, the emphasis on and valorization of Westernness is the same as in *hagwons;* for Richard, because he has the privileges of being a corporate employee, and probably because he has the privileges of being male in Korean society, he can contrast himself with those who must teach English in *hagwons.*

[38] Oral History 62.

> *In Korea, there are a lot of professions that are time honored here, and one of them happens to be mine. And, if I tell them the company that I work for, anyone here will just know, and lot of people are really impressed, and it carries a lot of weight. And it's not just in social circles, it makes a difference when I go to the bank, when I do any types of transactions, if I present them my business card and they see the company that I work for and the position that I do, then it makes all the difference in the world. And it's bad because, then, other friends that don't do what I do will try to get, maybe, similar things that I get, maybe, like, just going out to buy a cell-phone or getting a credit card or something, they'll get completely different responses than I'll get. So, I know that it makes a difference, and Korea is just that shallow, they're focused on payment and status, education and other things… Pretty much, the profession I'm in is ruled by America. Pretty much all the precedents, all the rules, regulations, all the laws, everything eventually streams down from America…And, so, even though I'm reminded that I'm American almost every day, at least in the environment that I spend the majority of my time in, and I'm in contact with Koreans, it's totally a benefit. Because, my advantage is to be American. And, they listen to me, and the things that I talk about, the models we use at the American firm, the resources available, and they're nothing but envious, and they should be, because we're not at the global standard in this* [Korean] *office.* [39]

Whether the discrimination that adoptees (and other overseas Koreans who wish to teach English in Korea) face on the job market reflects 1) internalized racism against Korean foreigners within Korea as a country colonized by the United States, 2) the fierce nationalism present in Korean culture and subsequent ostracism towards non-Korean Koreans, or 3) reflects Korea as a country swept away by globalization fever, where fluency in the English language is a key to success and Whiteness is "naturally" associated with English-speaking, is difficult to discern. Certainly, there is great irony in the situation in which adoptees find themselves when they experience or witness this discrimination. Korean adoptees are in Korea trying to learn the Korean language, and they often must make a living by teaching Koreans English, some of whom want to learn

[39] Oral History 54.

English in order to try to leave Korea. While some may see this as an even exchange (much like many see the entire process of transnational adoption as an even exchange between birth countries who seek a solution for often-defunct child welfare systems and economically disadvantaged birth parents and receiving countries who seek a solution for low infant availability in child welfare systems and economically advantaged adoptive parents), the effect for the adoptees is not reported as even, but tilted towards Korean social needs and expectations.

Being Korean III: Consuming Korea
Eating Korean

There is a primacy about eating that is especially telling about how people identify, though this same primacy makes many take the act of eating as a cultural statement for granted. As the most basic form of consumption, we can eat culturally significant foods in order to assert a shared identity with others who engage in the same culinary customs,[40] or we can eat these same foods in order to engage in "culinary tourism" where history, culture and politics disappear as we eat to have a literal taste of a place or culture as well as to satisfy our physical hunger. Historian Hasia Diner writes, "Preparing and consuming food together solidifies social bonds…[t]he notion of the common table connecting people exists in many cultures as an embodiment of communal trust." [41] For Korean adoptees not raised on Korean food (and some are never exposed to Korean food until adulthood), eating Korean food at a (culturally) Korean table is a way of connecting to other Korean adoptees and/or connecting back to Korean culture.

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[40] Gabaccia, Donna R.. *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*.
[41] Diner, Hasia R.. *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, 4.

Several adoptees with whom I spoke mentioned Korean food and the frequency with which they eat or do not eat it in the United States as evidence of how Korean they felt they were; the consumption of Korean food seemed to be evidence of "Koreanness" for adoptees, as understood by themselves, and sometimes by Koreans or Korean Americans around them. Two of the adoptees I talked with in Seoul had worked at Korean restaurants in the United States and considered these experiences to be points of entry into Korean culture. Victor remembered,

> *"I was working at this Korean deli restaurant, called Grandma Chung's. In a sense, I think I was just doing it to prepare me to come to Korea. I just wanted to be around Korean people and eat Korean food. Just me and this grandma cutting vegetables and cooking food and stuff."*[42]

For Paula, age 31,another adoptee who had worked in a Korean American restaurant, what she ate, bread or kimchi, was the primary signifier to her Korean American employer of whether she was Korean or American:

> *I worked in a Korean restaurant, so that was a nice introduction to Korean food, and the lady, the owner…*[when I first started working there]*…she was trying to place my identity; I think she figured I was American. But, she would ask me,… "do you eat bread, or do you eat kimchi?" And, I was like, "well…I do eat bread, and I really-I just started eating kimchi," so I was like, "both."*[43]

While she was successful in claiming both Korean and American identity by saying she ate both bread and kimchi, later she remembered how her lack of familiarity with Korean dining customs "outed" her as more American than Korean:

> *I made a lot of mistakes. I remember one time, the owner's friends came in, they were in their 50's, an older couple. And, then only thing that was*

[42] Oral History 62.
[43] Oral History 63.

> *missing was the kimchi. And they were like, "How could she forget the kimchi?" I learned that was a big mistake (laughs). Like, "She's not Korean!"* [44]

Alternately, not consuming Korean food signified an absence of Korean identity. One adoptee remarked, "*At that time I was like, 'I don't even have anything in the Korean community. I don't do anything in the Korean community. I don't even eat Korean food.'*" [SS]

It came as no surprise that many of these adoptees also talked about what they ate in Korea as a significant part of their past and present identities. Eating in restaurants is very common in Korea, and can be done very inexpensively by Western standards. Even among the adoptees who spoke very little Korean, many remarked that they had favorite Korean dishes and knew enough Korean to at least order them in restaurants. Eating Korean food evoked powerful taste memories for other adoptees like Patrick who had been adopted as children (instead of as infants), even if they had no other memories of Korea.

> *When I ate first… when I was back in Korea I was like, "Holy shit I tasted this when I was little!" It was like one of those flavors that I remembered; it was like all this rush of memories and whatever, [it] was a very distinct flavor, and it's like OK I know I had this before, and I was like I know where I had it. I had it in Korea.* [45]

Victor had a similar recollection:

> *I was I was four years old when I was adopted and actually I have…I have no memories of being in Korea or living in Korea, but I do remember certain things since I've been back. I've like realized that there are some things that I remember. Not like visually, but more like taste things and*

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[44] *Ibid.*
[45] Oral History 51.

> *these smells. Like a…I remember … when I first came to Korea on vacation in 2003, I had some of the grapes ,the black grapes with the seeds and you don't eat the skin, some of those. I was just eating them, because they always had fruit on the table… I put one in my mouth and you know we're just talking and I was like whoa, I like had this moment of this is kind of strange, because this is so familiar and I think I don't remember for sure, but I think I said something right then and there. This tastes familiar.* [The Korean there said,], *"Yeah this is a very famous fruit, parents will give this to their children at birthdays, or a special holiday." So they say if you've lived here in Korea, there's a good chance that you've probably ate it. So that, and also… the seaweed, kelp soup…That tasted familiar and…some smells you know like some random Korean smells you smell on the street. …some of those smelled familiar. … I wanted to get it on tape.* [46]

In both of these examples, the memories evoked by taste served to connect the adoptee in a physical way to Korea, even though other memories of themselves in Korea had been lost. Both relished their moments of realization that they could remember eating food in Korea from their childhoods, perhaps because this is a piece of evidence about their pasts that they could recall themselves instead of having to rely on others to fill in the blank spaces of their memories.

Food-based nostalgias can work in multiple directions; Nate relied on the Americanization of chain restaurants in Seoul to keep from getting too homesick for the United States. He remarked,

> *I think I came at the right time… Americana here is not so much an exotic thing anymore, and it's almost part of the norm. And you got a McDonald's on every corner, you got a Baskin Robbins…every third store there's a lot of American restaurants…So, I eat pretty much the same food* [as in America]…. *I do enjoy Korean food, but I do have the occasional McDonald's and Burger King and…you know, if I want to order pizza, I can order a pizza, or get fried chicken. I mean, what I'm getting at is, the*

[46] Oral History 62.

comfort food is there, a lot of the same kinda things are there, you know?[47]

The visible globalization in the emerging fast food market in Korea, besides being a comfort for transnational adoptees raised in the West, also serves as a powerful symbol of the investment by global economies in Korea, and by extension, Korean national interest in overseas Koreans, including adoptees, who have Western educations and cultural currency to contribute to Korean society and the growing and increasingly globalized Korean economy. Perhaps it is not a coincidence, then, that the adoptee above perceives himself as having gotten to Korea "at the right time," since the F-4 visa that makes his move to Korea possible also happens to have been created during the time period that saw a huge increase in the availability of American-style fast food.

Loving Korean: Racialization, Gender and Dating

Diner writes, "Food, like sex, intensifies group identity."[48] In many ways, the personal, political, and cultural significance of eating and sex are similar. Both are intimate bodily acts, and depending on what we do and with whom we do it, we use both to assert our identities. And both are acts which most people understand to be personal (based on taste or preference), rather than cultural behavior. In their research on Korean adoptees in the American Pacific Northwest, Shiao and Tuan found that the majority of adult adoptees in their study dated and married White partners, and that most adoptees considered Whites to be their "natural" partners. Shiao and Tuan interpreted this finding

[47] Oral History 49.
[48] Diner, Hasia R.. *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, 4.

to be consistent with the culturally White upbringing of most of their adoptee subjects.[49] Of note is the sharp contrast to this finding among the adoptees I spoke with in Seoul: all those who were actively dating exclusively dated either fellow Korean adoptees, Korean nationals, or nationals of other Asian countries.

Most of the adoptees I encountered living in Korea were single and all identified as heterosexual at the time. Differences of gender between heterosexual women and men seem heavily focused on dating experiences. In the U.S., gendered racialization of Asian Americans creates dating "opportunities" for adoptee women as objects of orientalized desire. Men, on the other hand, more often talked about their invisibility as dating partners in the States, consistent with Asian American racializations of men as emasculated and nerdy. In Korea, roles are reversed: men seemed more likely to use the party atmosphere in the adoptee community to date many different people, while women reported more problems with the party scene and the promiscuous dating patterns that seemed more common among the men. These problems were marked enough that women cited the lack of suitable partners as a major reason for leaving Korea; many of the adoptee women I interviewed were dating no one. Paula remarked,

> *"I feel like it's kind of hard to date in Korea;* [most of] *the older guys are… married.* [D]*ating Korean guys, … there are so many… differences…language, cultural…*[F]*or Korean adoptees and Korean American guys, maybe if they're in the States, they would date Korean Americans or Korean adoptees, but in Korea, I feel like they're more interested in dating native Korean girls….That's part of my…reason for going back to the States; I find it hard to date in Korea-or, not date, but to have a relationship."* [50]

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[49] Shiao, Jiannbin Lee and Mia Tuan. "Korean Adoptees and the Salience of Race in Romance."
[50] Oral History 63.

In this example, Paula gives a good reason why it might be so difficult to find men to date in Korea for adoptee women. The men are more interested in Korean nationals and dating partners, and many adoptee women are not interested in dating Korean men, citing they are too traditionally Korean to date, and might not be able to accept the more equal position that a Western-raised woman would expect in a dating relationship.

Women rarely discussed dating in their oral histories, except to remark that they were not dating. Men, on the other hand, extensively discussed the party life in Seoul for adoptees, the dating opportunities that resulted, the women they had been with since arriving in Korea, and what type of women interested them. Nate discussed how accessible the adoptee party scene was for him (and in his estimation for other adoptees) because of the relatively high pay adoptees were earning by teaching English in Korea.

> *I mean, the cost of living here is relatively decent, where I can get by…and then be able to pay my living expenses, and then pay off extras…I've told the other adoptees that…and they'll complain and bitch and moan about their jobs, and like…there's nothing you should be complaining about. 'Cause you kinda live like rockstars out here, you know? These are people that can go around, party all night…sleep until three o'clock, start their private tutoring until ten o'clock, and then, go back to a night of all drinking, and then be able, yet, to pay off their bills back home, and…keep the cost of living the same here.*[51]

Victor attempted to count his many Korean lovers since his arrival not two years previous:

> *Okay, yeah…sex…let's say seven or eight, and a little bit less than sex, seven or eight to ten. And then like making out with it you include just like heavy kissing, probably fifteen. That's a lot I guess…maybe twelve or thirteen because I think, every almost every girl that I've made out with and kissed, I've done more with…, but I definitely had my heyday, oh I*

[51] Oral history 49.

would say from last… it would have been from like December, 2004 December to about…um…March or April 2005. So just like four or five months I was really, like I felt like if I liked a girl and I tried hard, I could get her. [52]

Unlike Victor, Sam, 27, hadn't dated as extensively, but did still have a pointed interest in the datable population of women in Korea. For him, Korea was a place where he could find his ideal wife, and he described what she would be like and how he might meet her:

I want to meet a lot of people and if I can meet up with somebody who's Korean American, that would be great. You know and I feel like the best place to do that would be… probably here. It's probably the best place to do that. … I mean a Korean who spoke English and who had been exposed to American culture. That would also be someone who I would be compatible with, you know. And I feel like I have to be really realistic about this. Is that if I marry somebody who wasn't Korean or Korean American, I'd be missing out on a big part of my life, you know. I mean obviously you could share some of that with that person [53]

Men were more likely than women to date widely, after which, some settled down with a Korean (national) woman, who could help them become more permanent as Korean residents by navigating and translating Korean society for their adoptee partners. Unlike the concern adoptee women had with dating Korean nationals, men felt they could exert their influence as men in relationships with Korean women to make them more "Americanized" in order to adapt their Korean partners to their own American cultural preferences. Nate, who had a serious Korean girlfriend said,

I think with my girlfriend and I…she's becoming more Americanized than I am…Koreanized…'cause she's following…my mannerisms, versus me

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[52] Oral History 62.
[53] Oral History 58.

> *following her mannerisms. 'Cause, you know, we speak English,, we watch American TV, stuff like that.* [54]

Adoptees of both genders were interested in dating other Koreans while living in Korea, but while women saw mostly barriers, men perceived a tantalizing menu of options and opportunities. Because adoptees understood Korean national women more than men to be open and adaptable to Americanization, adoptee men were interested in dating Korean women more than adoptee women were interested in dating Korean men. Since adoptee women were just one of several options for adoptee men, some find it difficult to compete with non-adopted women and tended not to date as prolifically as the men.

Being Korean IV: Political Engagement
Adoptee Activism in Korea and the Gulf between Lucky and Pitiful

One of the most unsettling cultural differences I noted the first time I traveled to Korea was the great difference I perceived in how Americans viewed me as an adoptee and how Koreans seemed to view adoptees. In the United States, the perception is generally how lucky adoptees are to have been adopted in the first place, and to have been taken into loving American homes. Implicit here is the assumption that the economic and social circumstances of being adopted to America are far superior than staying in Korea, a place most Americans have never visited, and do not understand in any real way. In Korea, I realized shortly after the first time I returned as an adult that Koreans often pity adoptees. They claim to have a connection to adoptees because we are Korean, like them. But they feel sorry for the fact that adoptees were not raised in Korea as Koreans. And sometimes they seem to feel ashamed that they couldn't raise

[54] Oral History 49.

adoptees themselves. Being an object of pity as an adoptee was a new experience for me because this is so different from what I am used to when Americans learn that I am adopted. Korean adoptees who live in Korea live with this cultural mismatch every day; some talk about it, some exploit it, some just sidestep it.

In Korea, several organizations exist with the sole purpose of supporting adult adoptees. These are not adoption agencies, but service agencies, some run by adoptees, some by South Koreans, which seek to identify adoptee needs and meet them. While there are American networking organizations run by adoptees which have non-profit status, this type of charitable organization does not exist in the United States, not because it would not be useful to adoptee communities there, but because the concept of a charitable organization for transnational adoptees (not orphans, or lost children, or even children at all) would be quite unthinkable given that in the United States, adoptees are already the lucky beneficiaries of the good deed of our adoption. In Korea, adoptees are still the pitiful and abandoned victims of war, poverty, neglect, and shame. The adoptee position in Korea as pitiable makes adoptees powerful potential symbols for critique and reform within the Korean context; doing right by adoptees could be a way to heal the broken and divided nation, or at least make a gesture in the right direction. Because of the shame of having given Korean children away for other countries to raise, adoptees symbolize sacrifices made during Korea's wartime history that can be used to motivate other Koreans into change towards a more progressive political agenda for the thriving nationalist Korea of today.

Adoptees living in Korea as privileged westerners often find it difficult to imagine themselves as objects of pity because adoptive societies have always impressed on them

that it is the Korean nation that should be pitied, and that adoptees are the lucky ones, not the pitiful ones. The use of adoptees as pitiful symbols of South Korea's past mistakes in this mobilization of political will among Korean nationals can feel strange and unexpected for adoptees. An additional irony is that adoptees are also understood in Korea as being born of the lowest and most shameful circumstances, shrouded in poverty, and stained with an uncertainty of lineage. I argue that the Korean understanding of adoptees as simultaneously Korean and Western makes it possible for adoptees to participate in Korean social and political interaction without the requisite scorn that adoptees would have received had they not been adopted. While Koreans still commonly express pity towards adoptees, the Western quality of adoptee upbringings trumps the imagined lowly circumstance of their births; it is as if the act of adoption raises adoptees from near-untouchables to socially acceptable by transforming them from Koreans to Westerners. For some Koreans, adoptees may even come to symbolize an escape from Korean poverty or social stigma to Western success and prosperity, in a Korean version of the American Dream.

Most adoptees living in Korea sidestep this reality and are instead engaged in the work of everyday survival. Though Korean allies are not always at one with adoptees in their motivations, many adoptees who are interested in political engagement around the issue of the future of adoption from Korea work with Korean nationals who are sympathetic to the causes of ending transnational adoption from Korea by improving conditions for single Korean mothers and by promoting Korean domestic adoption. While Korean nationals have an investment in the future of social welfare services in Korea and in the international reputation of Korea on the world stage, adoptees may or

may not share these concerns with their Korean national co-activists. While most adoptees with whom I spoke in both the United States and Korea were interested in and informed on the issue of transnational adoption, specifically transnational adoption from Korea, the adoptees with whom I spoke in Korea were most likely of all the adoptee participants to be politicized on this issue. This is in contrast to adoptees who live in the U.S., some of whom were interested in political engagement around the issue of Korean adoption, but many of whom were not. The experience of living in Korea and engaging on a daily basis with Korean culture and the issues around Korean adoption seems to to have made repatriates more vocal on these issues. Even those returenees who did not see themselves as highly politically engaged around the issue of future adoption from Korea had much to say about it. Patrick told me:

> *I am kind of mixed on this issue. I think the Koreans should try to do more to take care of say their own children, maybe get more education out there to the younger teenagers that are going to get into sex and whatever…and then like try to promote actually Koreans adopting from within…You know like I do feel the Korean government at the time, back then when they were exporting all these kids, I think they were making some money off it… I know a lot of adoptees had had bad experiences, but then a lot of adoptees had good experiences, so if you completely cut it off, what if there is a family with parents, or a family with other kids that really are good parents and want to provide love and housing for children who need it. I don't see why you're going to cut that off completely. I wish they can just restrict it more, which I know they have been doing recently, I don't think they should completely cut it off.*[55]

Many adoptees living in Korea, like Ingrid, are more actively engaged in the political decisions in Korea that would effect domestic and international adoption in Korea's future:

[55] Oral History 51.

> *So in 2004 I and four or five other people started to talk about adoptee issues and I think that those discussions eventually grew into the organization that we have now which is ASK* [Adoptee Solidarity Korea, which is an adoptee activist group in Seoul] *but in the beginning we didn't really have a language to talk about some of the things that we were interested in, which were the politics of adoption. For most of us, living in Korea gave us a very unique perspective on Korean life. For me especially coming here and seeing the society and seeing the affluence of the society when I had had an idea of this being a very poor country, was really kind of shocking and it was really upsetting to see. Because meanwhile there were all of these people who were very poor and in addition there was adoption which had continued and which I hadn't really realized was still continuing to the degree that it was at that time. So we started talking about, not only the social kind of issues that were happening in Korea at the time, but we were all interested in having a political space for adoptees because at the time there weren't really any organizations for adoptees which gave adoptees a political voice.*[56]

A Transnational Korean American Adoptee Identity

Korean adoptees living in Korea commonly express a profound sense of in-between-ness in their identities, straddling divides in symbolic representations in popular discourses that divide the West and the East: rich nations and supposedly poor nations, and White and Asian racial identities. While many adoptees refer to and borrow some elements of these polarized and opposite identities, most do not dichotomize their own identities within these frameworks, and choose instead to articulate national, cultural, and racial duality or multiplicity. Korean adoptees have access to a type of dual citizenship because of the F-4 visa in Korea and their easy immigration as adoptees to the United States. They have privileges as American citizens and as native English speakers, but they also have access to Korean citizenship through their Korean heritage and because of

[56] Oral History 57.

Korea's economic and cultural interest in Western countries. However, because of language and cultural barriers, most say they never feel "truly Korean."

Korean adoptees living in Korea are reminded daily that they are Korean and not Korean all at once. Wendy, age 31, remarked of her neither-and-both identity as a Korean adoptee:

> [Being in Korea] *made me feel more American, at first, definitely. Which is the opposite of what you'd think it would. There were those typical first experiences from when you first jump off the plane and you're in a pool of Koreans it's kind of overwhelming and kind of like elation, my god, there's so many of us, and you're trying to pick out your face and see who looks like you and trying to listen to all of this chatter, and it's almost overwhelming…And there are these moments were you're like, this is super super cool and you can't even describe being able to just being able to blend, and be a part of this whole country of people, or be connected to this whole country of people and you didn't have any real sense that they were there, kind of, so all of a sudden there's all these things manifesting that you didn't know about kind of. But then there's this big slap in the head, and your head goes the other way because you can't communicate and you don't understand the culture and the culture class and you're unable to assimilate immediately to the community so it's like you're ethnically Korean but you're not that obviously.* [57]

Other adoptees, like Paula and Rebecca, below, made similar remarks, and noted that a sense of being Korean has been part of their identities for longer than they have lived in Korea. They also said that living in Korea opened their sense of being Korean further than when they were in the United States. Paula said:

> *From when I was little, I've had this strong feeling like, deep down I was Korean, but I couldn't explain it…and, after, I learned that I was Korean. …Now I…identify myself as being, Korean American. I could never be a native Korean. I don't think I can be totally American…My parents or my relatives, they-they told me, "You're American. Don't forget you're American." But, I do feel American, but I feel I do want to recognize my*

[57] Oral History 32.

> *ethnic identity too… I still I feel like sometimes it's hard to balance the two, because sometimes you're marginalized, sometimes you're in different situations and who you're with, sometimes you feel more American, or feel the pressure to be Americanized, or , American, or Korean. It can be stressful, it really can be stressful, but I try not to let that pressure get to me too much…Ever since I was little, I've felt like, in a way I did belong in the States, but not really. And, then, in Korean, I also feel like I kinda made it my own-my own…place…[E]ven if I found my birth family, or married a Korean, I still feel like it wouldn't be totally-unless, unless I grew up here. Even after eight years, I felt like I'd be fluent in Korean, I'd understand myself more, I'd know—have a clear idea of my identity.* [58]

Rebecca remarked:

> *I've never felt fully American. Um, I was a bit more radical when I was younger, especially in college, and I was totally anti-American and I hated America and I thought, you know, America was responsible for so many awful things, um… And now, since I've been in Korea, my feelings have kind of mellowed out a bit, because, or not mellowed out—evened out a bit, because I think Korea, Korean society is really messed up in a lot of ways as well and definitely needs to change. There's the adoption issue, but there's so many other problems as well among Korean society, the way they treat people… For a while here I felt more American than I ever did back in the States. But when I was in the States I never felt like I was American, so it's hard to say. It's a mixture of both so, partly Korean, partly American. And I know inside, I am that way as well ... I really can't say whether I'm American or Korean but – both.* [59]

These adoptees express their in-betweenesss, but also the trauma caused by this state of belonging neither to Korea nor to the United States. Sometimes this stress is underlined by the experience in America as Asian Americans who are "culturally White" and racially Asian, and by American family and friends who insist on American-ness over other identities for the adoptee. Ironically, these adoptees are also discriminated against transnationally as well, for being Asian in appearance in the U.S. and for not being Korean enough culturally in Korea. Since most adoptee returnees do not articulate

[58] Oral History 63.
[59] Oral History 64.

a preference for how and where they are discriminated against, these social pressures do not entice them to pick a less complicated identity.

It seems that the duality and the sense of being in between two races and/or nations is more pronounced for adoptees in Korea than in the United States; this may be because the adoptee living in Korea has more access to everyday examples of what constitutes Korean-ness though observations of so-called "real" Koreans, Korean nationals living in Korea. Many of these repatriate adoptees say it is difficult for them when they return to the U.S. because of the racism they encounter as return culture shock, though most do not cite this as a reason to stay in Korea.

This tension of the in-between self, sometimes construed as a divided self is further exacerbated by the very nature of the Korean and American mechanisms that make adoptee transnationalism possible, since the United States wants adoptees as minor children and Korea wants adoptees as Westernized adults. Both nations are specific in their privileging adoptee immigrants as either children or as adults, revealing national interests in child adoptees in America, and adult adoptees in Korea.

Conclusion

Unlike other groups of transnationals, Korean adoptees might not have the cultural fluidity of being bilingual and bicultural, but they do have considerable legal fluidity when crossing borders. As immigrants, Korean adoptees are unusually privileged both in the United States as adopted children, and in Korea as adults. In both countries,

they are among the most privileged in the immigration and naturalization[60] queue; in the United States as the children of mostly White citizens, in Korea, as part of the "global family" of the Korean diaspora. Those adoptees who live in Korea especially feel this "transnationalism on paper" where access to legal residence in Korea is a matter of filling out the correct paperwork as adoptees are generally not denied the Korean F-4 visa. Of course the opportunity to return to the United States never disappears, since naturalization of Korean adoptees (if this process takes place before the adoptee turns 18) is also just a matter of paperwork, and citizenship by naturalization is all but assured. So in a world that would have them identify as American or Korean, White or Asian, these adoptees are choosing a variety of in-between positions, even though it is not always a comfortable position to occupy. These positions can be shared with other adoptees, as Ingrid articulates:

> *You know adoptees always talk about feeling about feeling like they're in between two cultures—well, it's true. …*[Y]*ou're not comfortable in America or your adoptive country because you don't feel like you are Korean, and yet people look at you, and to them you are Korean. …And then you come to Korea and you look like you're Korean, but you're really not. And so I think I will always be in between those two worlds and it's almost like there's this other alternative space for adoptees to be in, and it's almost like adoptee land.* [I]*t's like we have a very specific space and it's not in Korea and it's not in America. It's in a place that I think we're going to have to create for ourselves. It's in a place I think we've already begun to create to a certain extent, but I don't think anybody else really understands why we need to do that or where that space is for us.*[61]

[60] I here refer to the cultural naturalization process in both countries, the legal process of citizenship in the United States, and the legal process of permanent residency, though not legal citizenship, in Korea.
[61] Oral History 57.

Although immigration rules for Korean adoptees in South Korea and the United State are very different than for other groups of immigrants, Korean adoptees leave and enter America with immigrants from all over the world, and return to South Korea with thousands of other overseas Korean ethnic return migrants. Korean American adoptees living in Korea share many characteristics of other groups of Asian American diasporic immigrants, marked by (as described by Anderson and Lee) "…establishing and maintaining kinship, economic, cultural, and political networks across national boundaries, and the creation of multiple sites of 'home.'"[62] The obvious difference between the Korean adoptee returnees to Korea and the Asian American immigrants Anderson and Lee describe is location. For Anderson and Lee, the Asian American population is in exile in America, still reaching back to Asia; in this study, the diasporic Asian American population is back in the country of their birth, struggling to maintain all the same networks mentioned by Anderson and Lee while in exile in Asia, still reaching back to America.

The adoptee population who have returned to Korea also share many characteristics with other "First World" Korean ethnic return migrants in that they are returning because of ethnic affinity to Korea, not mainly for economic opportunities, and are taking advantage of liberal South Korean immigration policies with respect to overseas Koreans. That the adoptee returnees maintain social relations largely segregated from Koreans is also consistent experiences of ethnic return migrants from around the world, who find cold comfort as "foreigners" in their supposed "homeland." For

[62] 2005. Anderson, Wanni W. and Robert G. Lee. "Asian American Displacements" in *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas*, 9.

adoptees in Korea, the cultural distance from Koreans that might be created in several generations of removal from Korean society for other overseas Koreans is achieved in two or three decades of adoptive placement in American families, often in total or near-total isolation from Korean or Korean American culture and society. Adoptee returnees also share with other overseas Koreans the burdens of high expectations of Korean cultural competency in Korean society because Korean nationals perceive them to be Koreans, who are expected to retain the Korean language and a comprehensive understanding of Korean culture, despite their foreignness. Like other Korean ethnic return migrants, Korean adoptee returnees find themselves in a difficult paradox in Korean society: in between Korean and foreign, subject to high expectations as ethnic Koreans but also to rejection as foreigners.

However, Korean adoptee ethnic return migrants also have key differences from other groups of returnees. Most important among them is the lack of cultural and social contexts that easily apply to Korean adoptees. Unlike other groups of emigrants, most adoptees experience racial and cultural isolation (with respect to birth culture and society) as a direct result of having been adopted not just transnationally, but also transracially into homes that are both Western and White. This leads to the high identification among Korean American adoptee ethnic return migrants not with Korean or American nationals living in Korea, or even with other ethnic return migrants, such as other Korean American returnees, but primarily with other adoptees living in Korea. This creates a cohesive, but sometimes claustrophobic, social reality for the small but significant group of Korean adoptee returnees. That Korean adoptees have symbolic significance as the

pitiful lost children of South Korea's modernization project only adds to their complicated reception as Koreans born into, but removed from Korean society.

Conclusion

In November and December of 2007, the *New York Times* created a blog called *Relative Choices: Adoption and the American Family*,[1] for and commissioned several adoption-related bloggers to contribute. Some were adoptive parents, some were adoption professionals, some were adoptees, and one was a birth mother. In all, eleven blog authors composed nineteen posts about their experiences with adoption over the two months that *Relative Choices* was actively updated. The creation of this two-month long blog series was significant for several reasons. Never before had such high-profile media coverage explored the issue of adoption in America so deeply and from so many different points of view. Because of the nature of blogging, this was also one of the most public discussions of adoption in American history; the bloggers' posts were public, but so were readers' responses (though editors' selection of which readers' responses to make public or not did become controversial over the life of the blog). And, of the eleven authors, eight wrote about their experiences in relation to transnational adoption. The level of coverage adoption received in this series is also an indicator of how common adoption had become, and the choice to feature a majority of bloggers who were transnational adoptees or adopter tells us something about how adoption is being understood and consumed in America today. Most states still have more domestic adoptions than transnational ones, but this is starting to change; during the time I have been working on this project, Massachusetts and Minnesota each recorded more transnational adoptions than domestic adoptions in an annual cycle for the first time. While transnational

[1] "Relative Choices: Adoption and the American Family," New York Times at nytimes.com.

adoptions are becoming increasingly common (doubling in frequency in the past ten years), they have higher visibility than domestic adoptions, no matter what the numbers are, largely because of heightened media coverage transnational adoptions (certainly at least partly as a result of the number of high-profile celebrity adoptions in the past few years), So the Relative Choices blog is consistent with that trend, though I consider it a more significant news event than a single printed story, which would run for one day on one page only.

The blog appeared as I was deep in the writing stages of this dissertation, and of course it caught my attention. However, this was not so much because I thought it contained new and interesting insights about adoption in America, but because having a transnational adoption series in such a prominent news outlet told me that more and more Americans have become involved and interested in adoption from overseas than ever before. I was also interested in the series because it was presented as a blog, and I knew I would find the public response to the posts would reveal as much, if not more, about how Americans were thinking about adoption as the posts themselves.

Sure enough, in the second week of the series, a blog post[2] by Tama Janowitz, novelist, New Yorker, and adoptive mother to a Chinese daughter, created a storm of comments by readers, some of whom really appreciated her 'well, whatever" attitude in describing her trials and tribulations about raising her daughter, and some of whom were offended, finding her instead flippant and sarcastic, as well as a bit racist (who refers to her daughter's phenotype as "Mongolian" and makes a sweatshop joke at her daughter's expense), in her public discussion of her Chinese daughter. This kind of debate is quite

[2] Janowitz. Tama. "The Real Thing."

common in any public forum about adoption, and unfortunately, is often split along the lines of adoptive parents and adult adoptees. Generally, and in this instance, the argument is about whether or not adoptees should get to complain about having been, or how they've been, adopted. Adoptive parents often feel this is a critique of them or of their parenting, and they also seem offended at the suggestion that adoption might have actually harmed their children (though we know from surveys described in Chapter 3 of this dissertation that most adoptive parents feel the adoption benefitted themselves). Overall American public opinion seems to support the idea that adoptees, especially those from foreign countries, are lucky to have been adopted, and since Americans like to think of the United States as being the best country to be in the world, there is an unmistakable nationalistic stamp on this rhetoric. Of course, this is complicated by the racial dynamic present in most of transnational adoptions; the fact that adoptive parents are usually White and that transnational adoptees are usually not White injects a lot of long-held tension and anxiety into these discussions. In the case of Janowitz's post, the conflict between these debating sides was deepened by the decision of *New York Times* blog editor Peter Catapano (who also happens to be an adoptive parent), not to publish many of the comments made by readers who took issue with Janowitz's perspective or tone. Unfortunately, many of these commenters were adult adoptees,[3] and the majority of the published comments were by adoptive parents.

The events related to Janowitz's post even motivated a response in the liberal magazine website, *Mother Jones,* by journalist Elizabeth Larsen, who criticized the

[3] For an excellent description of these events, see Jae Ran Kim's blog posts in response on her blog, Harlow's Monkey: "Relative Choices?" "New York Times aka 'the Adoption Police?'" and "We will not be silenced."

decision not to publish critical comments by adoptees, writing, "I think when it comes to adoption, American adoptive parents (myself included) steer the discourse. We direct adoption agencies and think tanks. We write the home studies of prospective adoptive parents. We are policy experts and doctors and academics and journalists."[4] Though I must admit, I also believe that adoptive parents and representatives of the adoption industry control the public conversation about adoption far too often, I also have ambivalent feelings about focusing too much on this debate if it is only understood to be between adoptive parents and adoptees.

Firstly, though adoptees and adoptive parents are often cast as being on opposite sides of this debate, often, they are not. Many adoptees have no complaints about having been adopted, and many adoptive parents (including Elizabeth Larsen, above), are quite critical of the current system of domestic and transnational adoption.

More importantly, the social dynamics of this imagined conflict between adoptive parents and adoptees tend to tie into larger imagined conflicts that adoptive relationships also represent (white versus nonwhite, "native" versus immigrant, rich versus poor, American versus "foreign," and savior versus saved, to name a few) which are just as complicated, misunderstood, and potentially damaging. The drama of pitting parents against their children in light of these additional social contexts makes for exciting reading in newspapers and magazines, though more often than not, this conflict is only hinted at under a veneer of "everything is going great in adoption"—a point of view that is particularly beneficial for adoptive parents and those in the adoption industry. In any

[4] Larsen, Elizabeth. "International Adoption, It's a One-Way Dialogue." Mother Jones website.

case, the positioning of adoptees in opposition to adoptive parents, and vice versa, does little to improve the practice of adoption, or to increase understanding what adoption means to us as local, national, and global societies and communities.

In this dissertation, I have suggested fresh ways to look at Korean and other transnational adoption that I think better serve these goals. I have tried to re-imagine Korean adoption as a research issue, an Asian American issue, an immigrant issue, a feminist issue, a political issue, and most importantly, as a socio-cultural issue.

While a discussion of the racial implications of transracial and (to a lesser degree) transnational adoption has been ongoing virtually since the these types of adoption were first institutionalized, I place Korean American adoptions in racial-economic discourses, where adoptee race has a price, as well as within the complicated reality of racial identity for adoptees, who are pressured by social forces such as multiculturalism and cultural assimilation. The position of Korean adoptees epitomizes the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans, expected to be culturally assimilated to whiteness and prove the prevalence and superiority of color-blindness as a racial ideology in mainstream American society. I also frame Korean adoption as politically meaningful, as both the United States and South Korea have significant stakes in their economic-political relationship—and, by extension, in their co-parented children, Korean American adoptees—as symbols of the successes (and potential failures) of each nation. Since women are deeply invested in adoption as birth and adoptive mothers (as it is women who usually make the decision to both relinquish and to adopt children) and because the adoption industry is highly gendered in child selection processes, I also describe transnational adoption as a feminist concern, although mainstream and intellectual

feminist discourses have largely failed to recognize transnational adoption as a location of feminist inquiry. I have also placed Korean American adoptees as immigrants and transmigrants, whose extraordinary privilege as immigrants reveals the cultural preferences in both the United States and South Korea for assimilated and Americanized subjects who have high potential to benefit non-immigrant populations. Finally, and most significantly, I place Korean adoption within a socio-cultural reality of adoption communities, where lived experiences of Korean adoptees tell complex stories about race, politics, gender, and culture. In my understanding of Korean adoption, positions within adoption social and cultural structures must be taken into account as a key influence on beliefs about how and if transnational adoption is working, and whom it benefits. In this work, through their stories, Korean adoptees emerge as subjects through whom American national, political and racial beliefs and practices are most intimately played out.

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