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Embodying The Hyphen: An Ethnography On Korean Adoptees

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EMBODYING THE HYPHEN:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY ON KOREAN ADOPTEES

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate Faculty
Central Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Cultural & Environmental Resource Management

by
Barbara Anne Hammersberg

May 2018

CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

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by

Barbara Anne Hammersberg

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An estimated 150,000 Korean children have grown up in culturally and racially different homes in the United States and other countries since the increase of transnational adoption in 1953. Due to the large number of Korean adoptees living in the U.S. the potential for ethnographic research is profound. Past studies have favored adoptive parents' perspectives over that of Korean adoptees. This study aims to address that limitation in hopes of contributing to the growing trend of Korean- adoption ethnographic research led by Korean adoptees. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with six Korean-American adoptees living in the Seattle metropolitan area in Washington State, this thesis focuses on economic consumption, material culture, and the performative ways that Korean adoptees in Seattle, Washington, present themselves to others and how they see themselves. This thesis interrogates the path from biological birth to the severing of the national, cultural, and biological ties, and the reconstruction and rebirth of the Korean adoptee in a white, American family. These participants' stories and experiences of belonging, fitting-in, experiencing racism within and outside the family, embracing their chosen identity, and reflections on their

adoption origin stories show how Korean adoptees differ from Korean-Americans within the diaspora. The limitations of previous adoption research and the lack of focus on the experiences of Korean adoptees allows this study to help show that Korean adoptees struggle with their ethnic and racial identity and have unique experiences that fall outside the Korean diaspora.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Tucked away in my dad's coat closet hung the *hanboks*, the traditional Korean dress for females, which my sisters and I were given when we were younger. Until last year, they sat unattended, gathering dust on the plastic protectors that cover the dresses. We were gifted them by our parents and by a Korean woman who was a family friend. The only reason why we have them is because we attended Korean culture camp and that was one part of getting in touch with our lost culture as Korean adoptees. Over the years and through several moves, we had kept them, thinking that one day our children might want to wear them or perhaps because they meant something to us emotionally. They were then transferred to my older sister's house for storage because she has children that will be soon be tall enough to wear them. They sat in storage for a year until I asked if I could borrow them to put in *The Things We Carry*, an exhibit at the Central Washington University, Museum of Culture & Environment in the fall of 2016. So once again the *hanboks* came out of storage to be put on display. This time it would be in a different context: Rather than being worn by children to be shown off to visiting company, they would be hung on a wall accompanied by my writing. As the *hanboks* were hung and visitors came to see the exhibit, a Korean woman came by and told a museum staff member that the *hanboks* were tied incorrectly and that she would be happy to tie them for her. I felt gratitude that the Korean woman fixed the display, but I also felt embarrassed because I could not remember how to tie them, since I had learned only a handful of times at Korean culture camp as a young kid. I also wondered what the woman thought about Korean adoption and Korean adoptees, did she pity me because I had not known how to tie a *hanbok*? My Korean passport, which was also displayed in the exhibit, shows me as a baby, barely any hair, chubby cheeks, and a funny expression. Was

this the first picture taken of me before I left my birth nation and was separated from my birth family? I do not know. All I know is that the passport is what catapulted me from Korea to the U.S. so I could be adopted into a different family.

Korean adoptees that have made the same journey across national boundaries have predominately ended up in homes where they are the minority. Their parents are white, their siblings may also be white, and their extended families are as well. They do not easily fit into the strongly categorized ideas of race, ethnicity, and stereotypes in the U.S. As such, this ethnographic study focuses on the experiences of Korean adoptees living in the Seattle metropolitan area and looks at the different ways they deal with the racial and ethnic constructs of U.S. society and how it impacts their identity. This study interrogates the path from the biological birth to the severing of national, cultural, and biological ties, and the reconstruction and rebirth of the Korean adoptee in a white, American family. The Korean adoptees that participated in this study were an example of how their experiences and stories can differ from Korean-Americans within the diaspora. Stories of belonging, embracing their chosen identity, their reflections on their adoption origin stories, and their experiences of racism inside and outside their families, all show how unique their perspectives are and the importance of acknowledging them as a unique part of the diaspora. The situation of Korean children growing up in homes with white parents helps to reveal everyday experiences of race and racism in the U.S. that the study area illuminates through the predominance of Caucasians within the demographics in cities of the Seattle metropolitan area.

Problem

Current estimates for Korean adoptees living in the United States are at the most 150,000 (Le 2017). Past research on Korean adoption has focused on the success rate of acculturation and

assimilation of the adoptee, as well as focusing on the satisfaction of parents and their new family. Little effort has been made to delve into the experiences of Korean adoptees from their perspective. In response to that, over the last decade, Korean adoptee-led research has popped up in the fields of anthropology and sociology as a way to bring Korean adoptees to the forefront. Research on the Korean diaspora barely touches on Korean adoptees as a significant population and focuses on the voluntary movements of Koreans and the major periods of migration. More recent research has uncovered the relationship between the United States and Korea and used the period of 1945-1950 as a starting point when the figure of the Korean adoptee emerges. The use of the Korean female body throughout times of war that include comfort stations during the Japanese colonization and the Korean War, show how important Korean women are to the history of Korean adoption. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the connection between the use of the Korean female body to that of the female Korean adoptee by looking at the colonial and post-colonial history of Korea and the role of trauma inflicted by war, militarization, and society.

There is also a need for more Korean adoptee-led research that looks at the system of Korean adoption more critically, as well as bringing in the experiences of Korean adoptees and highlighting their positions in the U.S. as unique from the rest of the Korean diaspora. Recent research has emerged that gives voice to Korean-American adoptees, acknowledging that their identity is in conflict with their placement within Caucasian families and society (Myung Ja, Moon Ja and Kim 2015, Park Nelson 2016, Hubinette n.d.). My research aims to bridge the gaps between older research on Korean adoption that excludes the perspectives of adoptees to that of the critical research and analyses of transnational adoption from the Korean-adoptee perspective. Adding further to this goal of focusing on the voices of Korean-adoptees, is the myth of Asians

as one cohesive race. This idea is one that is harmful to Asian identities because it does not fit in with the black and white dichotomy that is prevalent in the U.S. There is also the model minority myth and the stereotype that Koreans are the most successful at assimilation. Given this complex, racialized landscape, how do Korean adoptees construct their identity since they often grow up in white middle class homes? How do they identify as an adoptee and is it markedly different than other Koreans in the diaspora?

Purpose

As a Korean adoptee, my interest in the topics and purpose of this study is to further the understanding of identity construction in people of a different race and ethnicity than their adoptive parents, with focus on Korean adoptees in the U.S. The growing trend of Korean adoptee-led research and their findings will help ground this study to further examine how adoptees maintain flexible or fixed positions with racialized U.S. society (Palmer 2011) (Park Nelson 2016) (Myung Ja, Moon Ja and Kim 2015). This study is centered upon questions about material culture, ritual, everyday practices, family, and experiences of racism as different ways to reveal the subtle and obvious ways that Korean adoptees perform and extend their identities in the U.S. The research questions included: Do the objects that Korean adoptees buy and keep contain a deeper meaning about how they see themselves and how they want to portray themselves to the public? Are identity portrayals flexible? Do Korean adoptees operate in multiple spheres with different identities as they navigate society? What are the experiences and moments in Korean adoptee's lives that make them confront their identity as being in conflict or unstable within their adoptive family? How do Korean adoptees deal with balancing their birth country's culture to that of their adoptive parents' or do they shun one over the other? Are Korean adoptees more likely to struggle with identity because they grow up in racially and

ethnically different homes than any adoptees that grow up in homogeneous homes? Using these research questions as a starting point as well as building upon previous works, this study focused on the questions of the construction of self-identity that occurs inside predominately Caucasian homes and in the larger society in the U.S.

To be able to answer these questions I focused on Washington State as an area of settlement for Korean Adoptees. My own experience as a Korean-American adoptee raised in Washington State is a factor in choosing the Seattle metropolitan area, but more importantly from 1999 to 2015, 261,728 intercountry adoptions were conducted with the United States as the receiving country (Bureau of Consular Affairs U.S. Department of State 2015). Within that same time frame, Washington State had 8,178 intercountry adoptions (Bureau of Consular Affairs U.S. Department of State 2015). The number of adoptions is not all from Korea, but knowing that there is a large community group of Korean adoptees, Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington AAAW in Washington State, has further led me to believe that this is an acceptable location to conduct my research. The objectives of my study were:

1. To understand kinship, family, relatedness, and where adoption fits it. How is adoption seen in the U.S. and how does it affect the identity of Korean adoptees and ideas of where they fit in within their family, culture, and the larger society?
2. To interpret the ways in which material culture connects with identity and race for Korean adoptees. By using ideas and concepts found in readings on material culture, further understanding can be gained into how Korean adoptees perform or live their identities through their bodies and choices of material culture.
3. To rely of past and relevant literature. Interview Korean adoptees and use Korean adoptee-led research as reference, native anthropology literature, and interview

techniques learned in an ethnographic field methods course, in order to conduct research.

4. To gain insight on Korean adoptee identities. Interview Korean adoptees using proven methods to get to the heart of what identity means to adoptees and find out if it really is contested, under stress, disrupted, or if it is flexible, situational, static, and not contested.
5. To add to existing literature. Use data from interviews to add to the growing amount of Korean adoptee-led research in order to have it accessible to adoptees, parents, and the public.

Significance

Korean-American adoptees are thought to be a *sui generis* population, and thus have unique experiences, which have been sidelined in favor of focusing on the more positive aspects of transnational adoption, like the adoptive parent's experience of adoption. This study posits that Korean adoptees are indeed a unique population within the Korean diaspora and as such, will have different experiences than other Korean-Americans in the diaspora. This study is important because it will provide an accessible resource for adoptees that looks at the decisions and performances of culture and identity as well as experiences of racism, conflicts within the family, etc.

As a Korean-American adoptee, I can use my unique position as an insider, similar to Kira Narayan's position in her work on her own culture in "How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist?" 1993, that can also provide further insight and research that will add to the growing body of literature of Korean adoptee-led research, and Korean-American adoptee narratives. Korean-American adoptee-led research is by no means unique, but each time an

adoptive parents who would like to learn more about the processes of negotiating race and ethnicity in a multi-racial home.

This thesis also comes at a time when hopes have been raised that the seemingly un-ending war...may finally come to a close. From the genesis of this work to the interviews with participants, the relationship between both parts of the Korean peninsula, have been featured heavily in the news, including the inclusion of North Korea in the Winter Olympics. In the context of political peace-making, Kim Jung-un's emphasis on blood and Korean homogeneity during his Panmunjeom announcement. He asserted that all Koreans are the same-blooded people. His statement has a similar ring to it, to that of South Korean political figures that want to assert that Korean adoptees are still Korean and are long-lost children. These comments are problematic, but are interesting because it begs us to re-consider what national, cultural, and family allegiance really means. These events have perhaps had effect on the lives of the study participants that might range from experiences of racism, feelings of fear, excitement, or feelings of hope. Throughout this thesis, the Korean War will be referred to as un-ending since it is still unclear how the re-unification of a fractured nation will occur. Although it can be said with certainty, that the Korean War is still un-ending.

The next three chapters include the literature review, study area, and methodology. The literature review goes over previous influential works as well as key theories and concepts that have helped shape research questions as well as providing a better basis for analysis. Following

that is a chapter about the study area, covering the reasons why the Seattle Metropolitan area was chosen, as well as discussion how these reasons relate to the study participants connection to the socio-cultural aspects of the region. The methodology chapter explores how previous ethnographic research has influenced the method and techniques that I used for this study. It also goes over the objectives as guidelines for the goals of the research. Moving on from methodology, the thesis goes over important relevant literature that was considered for this study. The next chapter is an exploration into native anthropology and my position as an insider in the Korean adoptee community. Kinship and economics are discussed in terms of adoption and the biological creation of families as well as the processes that go into creating a new family for Korean children. The next chapter goes into the issues of race and racism as Korean adoptees are often placed in families where they are the only person of color. Their experiences are explored more in-depth as it relates to their identity and their style. Their deliberate or unconscious choices of style and fashion often emulate and promote the identity they most feel at home with or what they want others to focus on. The last chapter brings all of the main themes that were elucidated from the voices of the informants. Their experiences are what shows how Korean adoptees see themselves and how they want others to see them.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Since my position as an insider in the community of Korean-American adoptees allows me to critically reflect on my own experiences, as well as analyze those of other adoptees, I begin my literature review with works on native anthropology. I explore how conducting ethnographic work on one's own culture requires the person to be reflective of their experiences. I also delve into the work that has been currently growing on Korean adoption that is being led by Korean adoptees. Their reflexive work and ethnographies are important to the overall understanding of Korean adoptees as a unique group within the diaspora. I then turn to U.S. ideas of kinship and the structure of family, which can often times dictate behaviors and expectations. In the next section I review works on the construction of self and identity in relation to how Korean adoptees might experience identity crises or situational identities. Moving on from identity, I explore important works on material culture and ritual to address questions and hidden meanings about important objects or clothes that can sometimes be passed on from a birth mother or objects that are given to adoptees from their adoptive family. Critical studies on Korean adoption and the Korean diaspora help ground my study in the complicated and traumatic history of the ending of Japanese colonization, the Korean War, and the legacy of the so-called Forgotten War. An understanding of critical race theory and concepts round out the literature review, because in order to understand the position of the Korean adoptee within predominately white homes, one must be aware of how the structures of race affect them when

they are effectively not a part of Korean-American identities, nor white American identities. Their Korean-ness and whiteness-by-association is what sets them apart.

Native Anthropology and Korean Adoptee-led Research

The most recent trend of Korean adoption research has been led by Korean adoptees who are scholars, professors, and individuals who are trying to make sense of their experiences and add to the general knowledge of the system of transnational adoption. Kirin Narayan used her own experiences growing up in Bombay to conduct ethnographic work in India, but what she stressed was that the old definition of native anthropologists is limiting in who is being studied and the position of the so-called native (Narayan 1993, 671). People can embody many different identities that are useful in different settings (Narayan 1993, 671). There is also a growing interest in the field of anthropology that stresses the importance of insider or native anthropology, but Narayan is quick to criticize the legitimacy that is placed on it so quickly without considering the colonial history of anthropology and the classification of who was and is native (Narayan 1993, 672). Some of the broader themes of overcoming the colonial past that anthropology was created in as well as the issue authority are ones that are also echoed in the work of Lanita Jacobs-Huey (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 792). She as well as Narayan writes on expanding the claim of a native position as a way to further de-colonize the discipline (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 792). She also argued for the critical reflexivity of the researcher in consideration of their informants' positioning and voice as well as their own dualities with their own native position (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 793). Anthropologist, E.L. Cerroni-Long stated "knowledge does not flow automatically from claiming native membership, but the access to knowledge does" (Cerroni-Long 1995, 8). Cerroni-Long also explains why a reflexive form of native anthropology is important to reflecting on ones' own biases as well as the position of power researchers may

be within their respective communities (Cerroni-Long 1995, 11). Korean adoptees have begun to critically question, reflect upon, and study Korean adoption.

In 1999, for the first time, a group of Korean adoptees met at the Gathering conference in Washington D.C. in which over four hundred adoptees attended from across the U.S. as well as adoptees in Europe (Associated Press 1999). The event was organized by a first-generation Korean adoptee who wanted to create a gathering for adoptees who were some of the first ones (Associated Press 1999). Susan Soon-Keum Cox was not so much of an adoption researcher, like others mentioned here, but she was one of the first adoptees to organize an event for Korean adoptees that gave them a sense of belonging as well as an outlet to speak about their experiences with others (Associated Press 1999). More Korean adoptees have been stepping forward to talk about their own experiences, but also actively seeking out others that often times leads to research. John D. Palmer has written a book called *Dance of Identities* 2011, in which he explores the struggles that he and many other adoptees go through when they are dealing with an identity crisis. Sara Docan-Morgan is currently studying how Korean adoptees deal with the birth reunions, an experience that she went through as a adoptee in 2009 (Docan-Morgan 2013). Tobias Hubinette, a Korean adoptee that was adopted into Sweden, has done extensive research on issues of adoption, identity, critical race theory, and cultural studies (Hubinette n.d.). Kim Park Nelson has been a huge contributor to the study of Korean adoption. Her recent book *Invisible Asians* outlines her method, theory, and experience conducting oral history interviews with over sixty five adoptees (Park Nelson 2016). The title *Invisible Asians* is similar to the title of my thesis in that they both explore the conflicts of identity that Korean adoptees experience as well as acknowledging that for the most part; adoptees are a minority within the diaspora. Their racial identity is also invisible to many family members. One of the most important aspects of

her book that helped inform and guide my research was her placement as an insider to the Korean-American adoptee community. Unlike her, I am not active in any community group as she was, nor have I served on the board for various adoption organizations, but my experience as a Korean adoptee gives me an insider position (Park Nelson 2016). My study follows along similar lines in terms of method, but on a smaller scale and one that was more fitting with my study area and time constraints. I used the method of semi-structured interviews with six participants as well as participant observation, but did not include asking for the entire life histories of adoptees (Park Nelson 2016). Based off of previous work by Korean adoptees, the method of ethnographic interviews was the most suitable form of inquiry. Using my research objectives and readings of previous literature, interview questions were developed that would get to the bottom of how adoptees construct their racial and ethnic identity.

Kinship & Adoption

In a book that summarizes decades of previous work on kinship theory, *Kinship and Marriage* 1967 by Robin Fox, it looked at “primate heritage” and used that as a jumping point to examine kinship within human society. According to Fox, the most basic tie was the one between the mother and the child and it is the most fundamental of social ties (Fox 1967). Being that adoptees do not have that biological tie with their adoptive mother, this most basic form of kinship may help explain if this lack of biological connection is meaningful to adoptees or if it has no bearing on how adoptees identify. Despite Fox’s book being written in 1967, it is useful for the terms and types of kinship that focus on descent and affiliations. David Schneider posits in *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* 1968, that “sexual intercourse is the symbol that provides features in terms of which both members of the family as relatives and the family as a cultural unit are defined and differentiated”. Schneider focuses less on connecting relationships

with terms and rather focuses on how American kinship can be seen as its' own cultural system full of symbols (Schneider 1968, 45). Sexual intercourse is the central symbol within American kinship, but Schneider is very conscious of exceptions to the norm, such as seeing kinship as something other than sharing biogenetic substances (Schneider 1968, 39, 107). His version of kinship moves beyond the law of nature to the order of culture, which better represents kinship in the U.S (Schneider 1968, 107). Furthermore, the adopted child will not have any features that will be defined as similar to the family; therefore they are only differentiated from the family unit. Schneider wrote that in "American culture, family is a 'natural unit' and one that is 'based on the facts of nature' as well as being its' own cultural unit" (Schneider 1968, 33). His insights on family in the U.S. are a little dated, but his assessment of families performing natural roles that correspond with their "natural abilities and natural endowments" help show how adoption goes against the so-called natural abilities of the adoptive mother (Schneider 1968, 34). She is not able to, or chooses to not, use her natural ability to give birth and bypasses it with the adoption of another woman's child. American kinship is "essentially made-up of the unity of flesh and blood, in the fact that the child looks like the parents or takes after a grandparent, it is the affirmation that blood is thicker than water" (Schneider 1968, 49). Transnational adoption is the denial of that symbol of kinship, it takes the idea that blood is thicker than water and turns it into blood and water are both liquids so let us not have qualms about it. But kinship in the U.S. is more than just tracing descent, it is also tied to the rituals of family that reinforce and reimagine the relationships within the unit. Mark Auslander's *How Families Work: Love, Labor and Mediated Oppositions in American Domestic Ritual* 2012, tell us that "rituals are part of cultural 'tradition' through which people create meaning through the use of symbols". Similar to Schneider, the act of sexual intercourse builds kinship, but the ritual of it also asserts that the two

people love each other and that by giving birth, the love is then shown through the actual labor of the woman. (Schneider 1968, 50). Just as certain acts affirm love, so do rituals with the family, like providing sustenance and paying the rent (Schneider 1968, 51). The ritual of birth as Auslander wrote, “Is a multileveled ritual process through which the newborn child is produced as a social person” (Auslander 2012, 55). Birth for the adoptee occurs twice, since they are born, commodified, and then re-born in a new ritual, wholly situated in the context of the U.S. family.

Since some societies practice regular and frequent adoptions, for example in Hawaii or Oceania, it cannot be assumed that ideas about adoption are the same across the world (Terrell and Modell 1994, 156). The risk of adoption is greater, though, when the parents and child are not phenotypically the same (Terrell and Modell 1994, 155). The risk is that children will struggle with their identity, because they do not match their parents’ race or ethnicity. This is a common thought for many researchers who are now studying the ethnic identity of transnational adoptees; and it is given more weight with the emergence of adoptees as researchers.

The Cramblett case, of mistaken sperm donation that highlighted contradictory conceptions of race and family, also touches upon how much we connect race with class and family (Lenhardt 2017, 2071). Fox argued that we all long to claim ancestry or a connection to descent, because, psychologically, we all crave a link to our past so that we can make sense of who we are (Fox 1967). This is important in acknowledging that Korean adoptees have the potential to experience crises of identity. Through the many different forms of kinship, there emerges clear winners and losers of each arrangement, like in patrilineal descent systems that give more power to the male line. Ultimately, one person gains something like a mother, family, nation, and in opposition to that, a mother loses a child, a family loses a child, as does the nation.

The study of kinship first began as an important part of understanding how, through the social structures, property, money, or titles were transferred, effectively lost or won (Fox 1967). In terms of adoption, the winners and losers are less clear because everyone loses something and gains something at the same time. (Terrell and Modell 1994, 156). The classic work of Robin Fox where he engages kinship and property is highly relevant to adoptees because they are to some extent, valued property. They hold the hopes of re-creating the “second-best way of creating a natural family” (Terrell and Modell 1994, 155). The people that lose the most are the adoptees and their sense of loss and displacement are repeated themes in ethnographic and psychological literature on adoption and identity (Terrell and Modell 1994, 156; Myung Ja, Moon Ja and Kim 2015, 1-3). Kinship and adoption readings give hints at why transnational adoption can be seen as a symbol of biological kinship in that creates its own category of meaning. “Adoption is thus a phenomenological category betwixt categories, a category that straddles a fence a category in our society that dooms those who fall within it to be both non-kin and kin—real and fictive” (Terrell and Modell 1994, 158).

The Construction of Self-Identity

Ruth Benedict’s writing on the individual and culture, tells us that individuals are shaped by the culture in which they are immersed in (Benedict 1934, 77). In the manner a culture develops, so too do the individuals within it (Benedict 1934, 77). People who are acculturated within the culture do not operate on the idea that they are being influenced by it nor do they acknowledge that it affects their behavior or responses. In an example that Benedict used to describe a homosexual individual whose response to cultural and societal aversions to their actions was unwelcome; the ability to “achieve a satisfactory life unsupported by the standards of society” was essentially impossible (Benedict 1934, 83). Therefore, the behaviors that the person

exhibits in response to the general aversion, leads to the rest of the society thinking those behaviors are relational to being a homosexual. This example shows how deeply rooted cultural understandings of different types of people are expected. With Korean adoptees, it is very much expected that they will be easy to acculturate into American society and by effect, the American family. My mother has told me that one of the reasons why my parents decided to adopt from Korea, was because they had heard that children were well cared for before coming to the U.S. and would be easier to essentially blend in. It cannot be said with certainty that my mother was well informed of the underlying geo-political or racial issues when she adopted me, but there definitely is a sense that she was blissfully naïve. It was a convenient statement to put her faith in. Being brought into my family has affected the way I see my race. There is no doubt. As will be further explored in my study area, the unique history of Seattle and race has affected my informants' experiences as well as mine. Individuals such as adoptees are greatly influenced by the culture in which they grow up in especially the culture of their family unit. What your culture values and promotes will heavily affect your sense of what is accepted and what is not in terms of who you are (Benedict 1934, 78).

The idea of self is a modern term and one that is not universally understood in the way that Western society places importance on self (Giddens 1991, Mauss 1985). Giddens argued that self-identity is a modern problem which has “produced a narrative” that an individual feels the need to maintain (Giddens 1991, 74). It is the reflective quality that individuals maintain throughout the choices they make which also “extends to the body” in terms of food, diet, and exercise (Giddens 1991, 77). Adoptees consciously or unconsciously make decisions in terms of their life path and bodies that are extremely reflective of how they view themselves. What this background in identity construction helps clarify is if adoptees really struggle with identity more

than anyone else. It can help determine if adoptees are placed in a distinct position of identity conflict or crisis.

Material Culture and Ritual

Daniel Miller asserted that in the 1980s, that the social world was affected by materiality as much as the other way around (Miller 1998). He also argues a point that my study elucidates, that “the study of material culture may often provide insights into the cultural processes that a more literal ‘anthropology’ has tended to neglect” (Miller 1998, 3). The adoptees that are interviewed in the study are all very much American and a product of their adoptive families and up bringing. Even though material objects were not a main focus of the study, clothes, personal style, and insights from the participants, all give clues to how they connect with their understanding of their identity. Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* 1985, explored the relationships created via material culture, in the form of gifts and the implications of gift giving and receiving. According to Mauss, a gift was not only a material possession, it could be money, services, women, and children that in terms of his theory on gift-giving, gifts are physical, dynamic barometers of a relationship between the giver and the receiver (Mauss 1985, 3). Mauss’s theory on gift giving can be applied to the relationship between the United States and Korea as well as the understanding of how materials can represent more than just the object itself (Mauss 1985, 1). The United States, being a large military power after WWII and a powerful ally, came to the aid of South Korea in response to the invasion from the North as a way to assert their stance on communism as well as within South Korea by creating many military bases that remain active to this day. Mauss’s idea of gift giving can be situated in terms of looking at adoption. It is literally the gift of life that Korean women are bestowing on white women in the U.S. It is also the appropriation of reproductive capacity, in the context of a neo-colonial relationship that is re-

affirmed with every adoption. Their hard labor has produced a child that is seen as a gift to parents that might not be able to reproduce. And perhaps it can be seen as a gift from the nation in gratitude for coming to their aid, but as Mauss asserted, “The obligation attached to a gift itself is not inert, even when abandoned by the giver, it still forms a part of him” (Mauss 1985, 9).

By using ethnographic methods, “careful observations of what people actually do and in particular do with things” can be empathized (Miller 1998, 12). In this modern world, we are surrounded by objects and material possessions, which tend to take away from the importance of objects as valuable or significant (Stallybrass 1999). We lose the value and meaning that objects and materials have that connect back to moments in time or symbolize a relationship or person. This does not take away from the reality that people do indeed place meaning on objects or that objects can be substitutes for a person or place (Stallybrass 1999, Miller 1998, Winnicott 1953, 6). These readings assist in showing that adoptees do place meaning on objects or purposefully act out their identity in the context of their chosen culture. Transitional objects are often used by children and can mediate relations with the primary caregiver and between self and non-self (Winnicott 1953, 6, 9, 10). Adoptees are not the only ones who use material culture to represent an ethnic or cultural identity, adoptive parents use material culture to represent the adoptees’ lost birth culture (Louie 2009, 306). If objects are chosen by the adoptive parents, are they less important in the adoptees sense of identity, is it just an object that has less meaning, because meaning is imbued by the person who selects it? Or do objects that come from the adoptive mother mean more because there are more contexts surrounding it?

Material objects might have special meaning for adoptees, exiles, or migrants because something that was lost to them can be found in an object and therefore replace the place or

person they lost. Using Victor Turner's *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* 1967, I see a clear connection that can be drawn between the adoptee and the neophyte that Turner referred to and how they have either structural or physical invisibility. Both are in the midst of a transitional period, which Turner refers to as the liminal period, and with it comes the stripping of all materials and connections to the outside world (Turner 1967, 98-99). This can also tie in with the position of adoptees as they make the transition from Korea to the United States and what is lost during that period. But how can this relate to adoptees as they are thinking about their adoption critically?

Critical Studies on Korean Adoption and the Korean Diaspora

Critical studies on Korean adoption look at the reasons why the system began and how it has persisted and thrived over the years versus adoption from other nations. There is a clear connection between the United States and Korea that these works look to elucidate, including the reasons why orphanages and U.S. aid coincide with the origin of Korean adoption. Arissa Oh's book, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* traces the history of Korean adoption to the years 1945-1950 instead of the more common interpretation of its beginning at the perceived end of the Korean War (Oh 2015). Her work focuses heavily on the relationship between the United States and Korea after WWII and the effects of the growing dependency between both nations (Oh 2015). Her work discusses race and empire in furthering our understanding the U.S. and Korean relations. It helps explain how some adoptive families were inherently racializing their children as they thought of them as products of people in need of American "civilized" help.

A Korean adoptee who was adopted into a family in Sweden is one of the top critical Korean adoption scholars. Tobias Hubinette's article "The Orphaned Nation: Korea Imagined as

an Overseas Adopted Child in Clon's Abandoned Child and Park Kwang-su's Berlin Report" 2005, looks at the forced movement of adopted Koreans, along with unavoidable economic aspects to the commodification of children. He uses a Korean song about adoption as well as a film involving a Korean adoptee as a way to understand how Koreans view adoptees as a representation of their own fractured history, like the loss of a family member (Hubinette 2005). This analysis is useful in understanding how the nation is still experiencing the lasting effects of its colonial occupation and the Korean War.

Some of the studies in the Korean diaspora acknowledge the movement of war orphans and war brides, but not Korean adoptees or other Koreans who fled their country due to war or other traumas. But what are the other push factors that led other Koreans to leave their nation and how do they continue a relationship with it after they leave? In the book *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, Grace Cho centers her work on the figure of the sex workers, *yanggongju* and how the trauma of war, colonization, and militarization have affected the roles of women such as the comfort woman, Yankee whore, GI bride, and finally a Korean American woman (Cho 2008). She traces kinships of trauma through the diaspora that even extends through assimilation and persists through the so-called honorary whiteness that is often bestowed on Korean Americans (Cho 2008). The article "Moved by War: Migration, Diaspora, and the Korean War" by Ji-Yeon Yuh asserts that most of Korean migration is heavily influenced by the Korean War as well as the division of the peninsula (Yuh 2005). She uses the term *refuge* to refer to the immigrants that left because of the trauma inflicted by colonization, the Korean War, and the fracturing of the nation (Yuh 2005). Not only were it people leaving from South Korea, people were moving from the North to the South (Yuh 2005). The term

refugee is used because the migration movements were forced, meaning they had no choice but to leave because of famine, loss of jobs, violence, trauma, and fear for their lives (Yuh 2005).

Critical Race Theory and Readings on Race

The basic tenets of critical race theory are similar to civil rights and ethnic studies except that critical race theory is a deeper look into the big picture (Delgado and Stefancic 2001 , 3). Critical race theory looks at “history, economics, context, feelings, group and self-interest, and the unconscious” (Delgado and Stefancic 2001 , 3). Its’ roots began in the 1970s after the civil rights era was running out of steam (Delgado and Stefancic 2001 , 4).

Ordinariness, means that racism is difficult to cure or address. Color-blind, or “formal,” conceptions of equality, expressed in rules that insist only on treatment that is the same across the board, can thus remedy only the most blatant forms of discrimination (Delgado and Stefancic 2001 , 7).

This idea of color-blindness is something that many adoptees face within their family as well as in their daily life. People can claim to not see race, but their unconscious feelings of race can be exposed or their denial of race can prove to be just as harmful as acknowledging negatively.

The case of *Cramblett v. Midwest Sperm Banks, LLC*, as mentioned before, was not so much a case of claiming damages; it was more about how an already socially stigmatized, white, Lesbian couple had clear ideas about what family meant (Lenhardt 2017). To them it did not mean having a multi-racial child; they wanted to have a white baby that would exhibit similar traits as them in order to confirm their status of being a family and in order to be accepted by society in the way that families are (Lenhardt 2017). This case shows that no matter how much people proclaim colorblindness, they are still affected by their own perceptions of race. Peggy

McIntosh's, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack*, shows how adoptive parents might be unaware of how little they are prepared to answer questions of race when they most likely are not aware of how they are benefitting from unearned privileges (McIntosh 1989, 1). Adoptive parents will never have experiences of racism that their child will have so not being able to draw from personal experiences could hinder them in helping their child deal with racism. In, *So You Want to Talk About Race* 2018, author Ijeoma Oluo focuses much of the conversation of the black and white dichotomy of race that is so prevalent in the U.S., but does acknowledge that because of this, other minorities are often times left out of the conversation. Because of this, minorities' ability to talk about racism and even say that it occurs, can sometimes be obscured by the idea that it does not mean as much, or that they are overreacting (Oluo 2018). This kind of thought is harmful to the people that experience it and can often times make matters worse if people feel like no one will listen or understand. Asian-Americans are indeed a racial minority and have been persecuted because of it during the Japanese internment period of WWII, Chinese exclusion act and violent acts against them, as well as the subjugation of Korean women during WWII and the Korean War. But as John Hartigan Jr. in "Culture Against Race: Reworking the Basis for Racial Analysis," points out, race has, in the past, been used to highlight differences that have led to colonization and acts of violence against different people (Hartigan Jr. 2005, 545). So we are left to consider more carefully our ideas of race. We cannot ignore that it affects many things, down to getting a call-back for an interview, or being singled-out for a random search at the airport. Minorities experience race every day, so how do Korean adoptees manage their identities when they encounter racism?

Situating this Thesis

Since no known resource exists that looks at the choices of material culture, economic consumption, and cultural performance that Korean-American adoptees negotiate when building their racial and ethnic identity, my study will help bridge that gap. But, in order to better understand what those choices mean, how they are situated in the U.S. in-alignment or agreement with adoptees' identity, and how to best ask questions or create a method; the research is grounded in kinship theory, culture in relation to the individual, the concept of self-identity, and critical race theory, as well as looking at how material culture can be a lens in which race, ethnicity, and class are performed. These core concepts and ideas that are found in the readings help my understanding of how racial and ethnic identity might be reinforced by kinship ties, adoption, and choices of material culture. The acknowledgement of previous work on Korean adoption has allowed for the inclusion of Korean adoptees' experiences in America. Looking at the system of adoption with a critical eye will also help strengthen my approach to ethnographic research. Particularly the research and ethnographic methods that fellow Korean adoptees have utilized in the past when studying a familiar group. These studies have informed my methods and techniques in questioning a group that I fall under, as well as being aware that my own biases and experiences could affect my responses and questions in interviewing. Even though I am adopted and grew up in Washington State, I am not an active participant in local adoptee community groups, therefore my position as researcher is still as an outsider, but I have an advantage through my experiences, as well as knowing other adoptees.

CHAPTER THREE

STUDY AREA

Location

Washington State is a place of settlement and transnational adoption prevalence. From 1999 to 2015, there were 20,058 recorded adoptions from South Korea into the United States and 8,178 intercountry adoptions into Washington State during that period (Bureau of Consular Affairs U.S. Department of State 2015). Washington State is located at 116° 57'W to 124° 48'W longitude and 45° 32'N to 49°N latitude and is bordered by the North American country, Canada. To the East of the state lies Idaho, Oregon State to the South, and the Pacific Ocean to the West (NetState 2016). Figures 1 and 2 show Washington State and position of Seattle, which is a major city within the state.



Figure 1. Washington State (Google 2017)

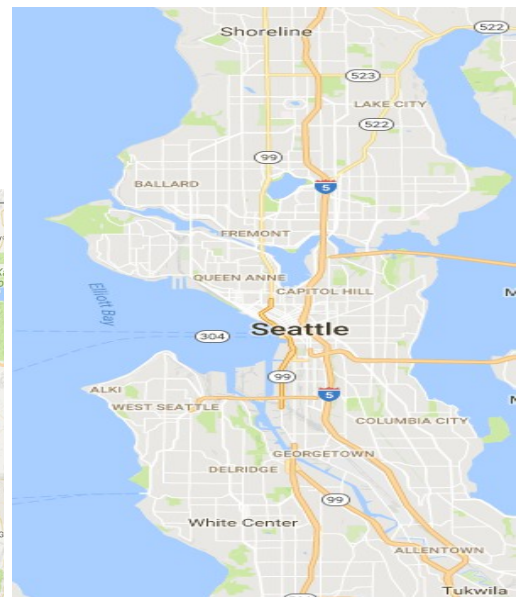


Figure 2. City of Seattle (Google 2017)

My area of focus within Washington State is the city of Seattle, which is situated between the Puget Sound to the West and Lake Washington to the East. To the North of Seattle lies the cities of Shoreline and Lake Forest Park, and to the South lie White Center, Highline, Allentown, and Bryn Mawr-Skyway. Within the city of Seattle, there are thirteen neighborhood districts that

the city organized and mapped out in order to better serve the communities (Nyland 2016). These districts are broken down further into the encompassing neighborhoods such as the Magnolia/Queen Anne district that contains the smaller neighborhoods like Interbay, Magnolia, and Queen Anne. The demographics of the neighborhoods help me understand what kind of environment adoptees lived in and to further understand if their decisions and experiences were affected by the demographics of either the neighborhood they grew up in or the neighborhood in which they chose to live later on.

Figure 3 shows the breakdown of White and Asian percentages in the designated

neighbor-hood districts.

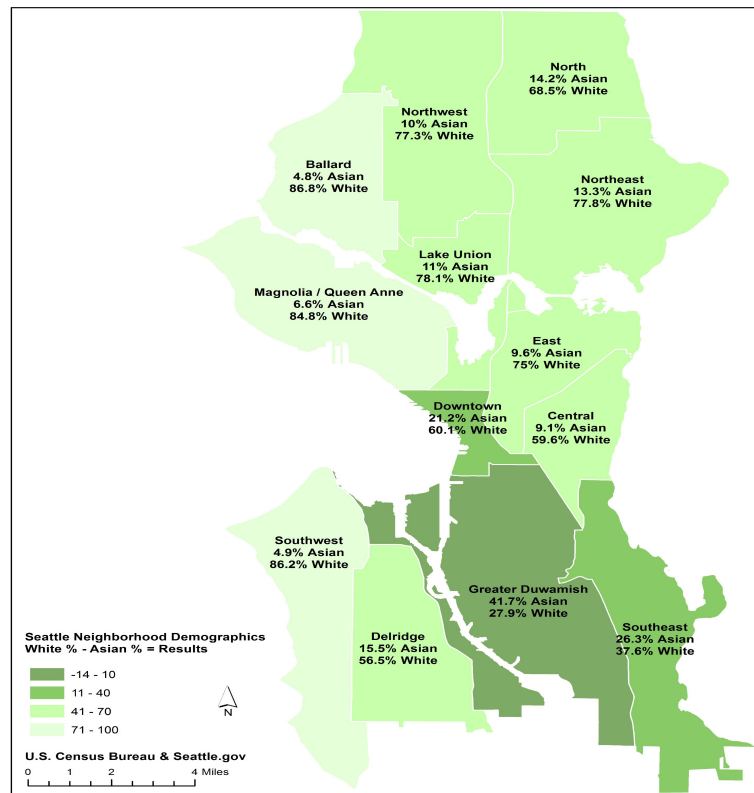
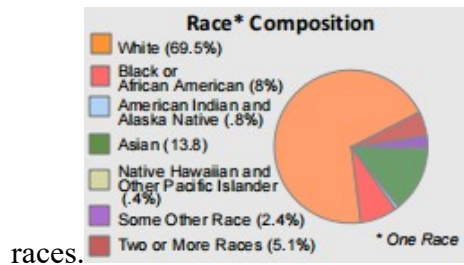


Figure 3. Map of Seattle with demographic information for the neighborhood districts. (Manning 2017)

Socio-cultural

In order to better understand the identity-shaping experiences of Korean-American adoptees in Washington State and Seattle, it is important to know where concentrations of Asian-Americans are within these communities, as well as how diversity is spread out overall. This can be helpful in shaping identity even if communities are not ethnically and racially homogeneous. In the whole of Seattle, demographics place Caucasian as the highest percentage, with Asian as the next highest percentage as shown in figure 4 and figure 5 shows areas of density for different



racess.

Figure 4. Racial demographics from the 2010 census in Seattle. (Planning and Development 2016)

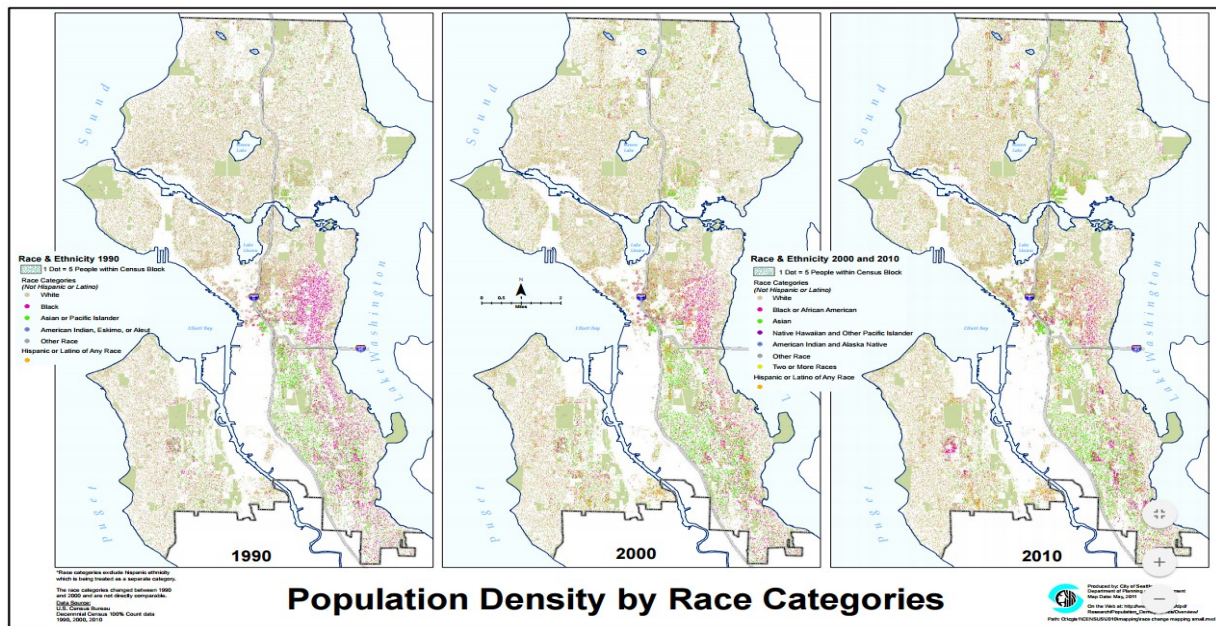


Figure 5. Census data on the population density for the racial breakdown in Seattle. (Planning and Development 2011)

The Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue Metropolitan area is considered home to 3.8 million people (Data USA 2016). The median age of people that live there is 37.1 with a median household income of \$78,612.00 (Data USA 2016). 2.45 million of the 3.8 million residents living in the Seattle metropolitan area, identify as white and 489,934 residents identify as Asian (Data USA 2016).

Looking past demographics, it is also important to acknowledge the history of Washington as a frontier state which highlights how Seattle uses its frontier identity, in order to disengage from the deeper structures of race in the U.S., thus bestowing an honorary whiteness on contemporary Asians of a particular class. This essentially is what allows parents to perpetuate an ideology of color blindness that can seep into the ways adoptees think about their race and identity. According to the Korean Historical Society in Washington, many of the members believe that Koreans as a people, are “defined by *han*, a collective sense of suffering, oppression, and hardships” due to colonization, racism, and wars (Korean Historical Society 2015, 9). When Koreans first came to the United States and left the clutches of Japanese colonization, they were met with similar ethnic classification as they were before (Korean Historical Society 2015, 12). They were legally seen as Japanese subjects and therefore, faced racism and discrimination, which led to restrictions as far as what type of careers and businesses they could have (Korean Historical Society 2015, 9). Many of the first Korean male, residents in Seattle, worked in Alaska and then moved to Seattle to work in canneries (Korean Historical Society 2015, 15). The women that arrived in Seattle were a part of the growing number of picture brides that came to the United States in the “second decade of the twentieth century” (Korean Historical Society 2015, 16). Many of the Korean women that came over did not have it easy, they often married men who worked farms, which left the women to tend to other labor-intensive work (Korean Historical Society 2015, 17-18). They often “remember a more arduous life shaped by racial discrimination, social isolation, and daily hardship” (Korean Historical Society 2015, 17). Both men and women were faced with racism and discrimination no matter where they lived in the United States due to “anti-Asian laws and practices” (Korean Historical Society 2015, 19). In 1913, “Koreans in Washington and many other states were subjected to

state laws prohibiting them from leasing or owning land which made them perpetual aliens in the supposed land of immigrants” (Korean Historical Society 2015, 19-20).

Further along, after the Second World War and the Korean War, the relationship between the United States and Korea grew favorable and “initiated a new wave of migrations across the Pacific as well as boosting Korea into a new role in global geopolitics” (Korean Historical Society 2015, 29). Many Korean War brides ended up moving to the Pacific Northwest to be with their military husbands and some ended up in Fort Lewis, close to Tacoma (Korean Historical Society 2015, 29). Both Korean brides and Korean adoptees that came out of the infamous Holt International Adoption Agency in Oregon, could not escape the problems associated with “white supremacy, even if disavowed, it remained the norm” (Korean Historical Society 2015, 29). Despite dealing with racism, the University of Washington in Seattle, in response to the war, the university created the Korean language program “which has evolved into one of the largest and most prominent programs for the study of Korean language, culture, and history in the United States” (Korean Historical Society 2015, 52). Because of this program, Seattle became a “center for Korean social and political life as well as offering a venue for Koreans to explore their history, culture, and identities” (Korean Historical Society 2015, 52-53). This growth of Korean language, culture, and history within Seattle, has helped support Korean adoptees.

Some ways that adoptees or adoptive parents have fostered a connection to Korean culture, is seeking out areas with Asian populations. Korean-American adoptees may spend time in the International district, in Seattle, which is a cultural and ethnic hub. Chinatown is placed along King Street within that district, as well as a large Japanese grocery store Uwajimaya. The International district was historically a place where Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Vietnamese,

and African American settlers built and lived in the same community (Seattle 2016). The district remains one of the few remaining ethnic enclaves in the city due to its inhabitants' history of immigration and dedication to keeping it preserved and unique (Seattle 2016). Figure 6 shows the area that the International district encompasses.

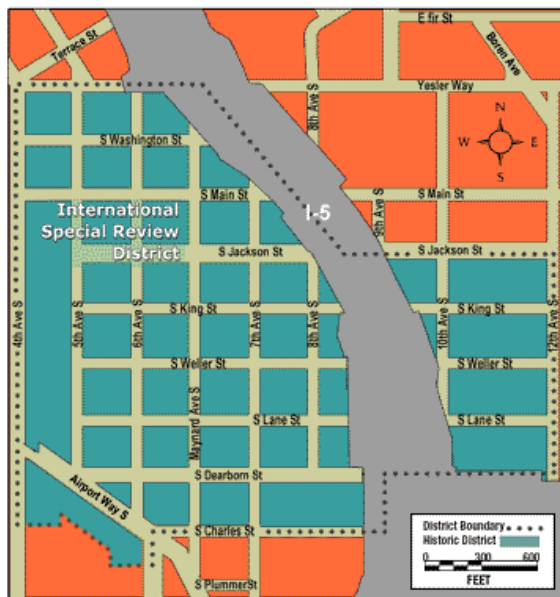


Figure 6. Seattle's International district boundaries. (Seattle 2016)

The Wing Luke Museum is a hub where Asian Americans can see their own heritage and stories on display, which is where I have previously received some interview transcripts of adoptees from a previous exhibit on adoption. Through my own interviews with adoptees, I looked for those clues that connected them back to their birth nation, Korean culture, or their adoptive family's culture.

Some Korean-American adoptees, like myself, attended Korean Culture Camp when they were younger as a way to learn about their birth culture, meet other adoptees, and to tie them back to Korea. Camp Casey was host to the 2016 KIDS Korean Culture camp for Seattle area children (Korean Identity Development Society 2015). While this is a great place to interview people, I chose not to interview kids since they fall under a protected class for the Human

Subjects Review Board. As such I interviewed adults, some of which are members and participants of the Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington community group. The group sprung up in 1996 after several adult adoptees got together to discuss an organization (Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington 2017). They hold monthly events in Seattle, offer mentorship, point to resources, give talks, and offer a place where adoptees can feel like they belong. There is also an online community that consists of the members of AAW. Given that many people communicate over Facebook and blogs, I also looked for possible connections from online groups to get in touch with potential participants. This, I thought would be a good entrance into the community before I attended an AAW event. Since the events do not happen that frequently, I reached out to the two coordinators for the event that I was able to attend, ahead of time to let them know that I was conducting a study and was looking for participants. This was a way to ensure that they did not feel I was coming in under false pretenses, as well interrupting the purpose of the event and making people feel uncomfortable by asking them to disclose their experiences.

Meeting the Informants

I would like to provide a brief, introductory portion to share some first impressions and some quick insights.

Lee: He works in information technology and lives in a very nice house in an expensive suburban neighborhood. He looks kind of nerdy at first glance, but I think it is just his reserved and serious nature when you first meet him. He is married to a Chinese woman who introduced him to Asian culture and really allowed him to embrace his Asian-ness. He always thought he was an only child until he made a trip back to Korea and found out more information about his

origin story. It turns out he had two brothers and one sister who he remains in touch and tries to visit at least every two years.

Cassidy: She seems very city-oriented. We met in a crowded Starbucks in Ballard to conduct our interview. She seemed very savvy and very connected to and proud of her career as her friends. She was aware that she is blessed in having a tall, thin frame, which allows her to fit in more. She is an only child and grew up in two small native villages in Alaska.

Eric: He is a new dad to a baby boy. His girlfriend is Chinese, so thinking about culture and heritage was definitely something he was cognizant of when he thinks about how he will raise his son. Eric has two brothers and even though his whole family is into football, he has decided he likes playing hockey. He was involved very briefly with some of the events with the Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington, but he felt like their focus on problematic issues of adoption was unhealthy.

Douglas: He is a very intelligent guy. He was tested for being a gifted kid when he was younger and was sent to a gifted school in Wedgewood. He was closer to his grandma than he is with his mom. He does not really get along with his younger sister who is biologically related to his parents. He dresses more Asian because he is diminutive and likes the Asian brands of clothing. But really it is a necessity because he has a small frame and is short, many American style clothes do not fit him so he sticks with Japanese brands of clothing that fit better.

Janine: She has an adopted twin sister and both of them engage in critical Korean adoption research and are both critics of the overall systems in place that promote adoption from Korea and other countries. They have co-authored many books that incorporate perspectives from Korean adoptees as well as a book that focuses on her own experiences as an adoptee. She is also very protective of her two daughters and considers herself a hermit.

Kara: I actually went to high school with her although we did not meet and did not participate in the same groups. She was very close with her mom who she lost to cancer a couple years ago. Her mother used to work at an adoption agency, which might explain why her family is quite large. She is one of six siblings. Three of her siblings are white and adopted, she is one of two Korean adoptees, and then the youngest sibling is biological. Kara is an excellent Tae Kwan do artist and is at the competitive levels. She is very energetic, grew up vegetarian, loves to cook, and is religious.

Moving on, I will go into the methods I employed when I gathered information from my informants.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODS

This chapter will elaborate on the methods used in the study that have furthered my understanding of identity construction for Korean-American adoptees in the context of being placed in racially and ethnically different adoptive families. Over the course of a month, I conducted semi-structured interviews with adoptees in order to gain insight into the variety of experiences and decisions that shape what ethnicity or race Korean-American adoptees identify as. Using the information gathered during my research, I have analyzed their words to find common themes about race, identity, and kinship. The objectives of this study include the use of kinship and adoption theory to better understand where adoptees fit in with common ideas of kinship ties and how that might affect their understanding of their self-identity. The study drew from readings on material culture and rituals to gain insight into Korean adoptees' identity construction through the lens of material and economic choices and performances of culture. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Korean adoptees, coupled with the background of past literature on adoption by Korean adoptees as well as interview techniques that address the issue of the insider position of the interviewer.

Objective One

The first objective of this study was to explore how Korean adoptees construct their identity in relation to society, culture, and their family. In order to make conjectures about identity construction, key works on kinship theory and adoption as well as readings on self-identity and identity construction were read. An individual course of study on kinship and adoption was taken in order to help guide this objective. Using Robin Fox's argument that

kinship is organized in an idiom of consanguinity, not pedigree, is helpful in framing how people understand adoption as an alternate and unique way to form kinship ties (Fox 1967). As Signe Howell and Robin Fox have asserted, many societies have some form of adoption in their history or present era and we know that it is not unusual, but differ in the range of acceptance (Fox 1967; Howell 2009). Howell's research on adoption and kinship states that with transnational adoptions, parents are worried about their children dealing with race, and in the U.S., parents go to extra lengths to keep their children in touch with their birth country origins, especially with Chinese kids (Howell 2009). According to Howell, this idea--along with positive views of Chinese people, Asian exceptionalism in America, and large diaspora groups--adoptees often identify with their birth country and adoptive country (Howell 2009). I departed from this conjecture for my study because I believe that identity is much more nuanced and varied for Korean adoptees in terms of how they identify ethnically, racially, and how they construct their identities. Based off of Kim Park Nelson's ethnographic work, identity for adoptees can be multiple and situational (Park Nelson 2016). Using readings on identity, I bring in the well-known idea that culture and society heavily influence the individual based on approved and acceptable traits and behaviors, and use that to assess where Korean adoptees depart from that belief or where they fall in line with it (Benedict 1934). I also use ideas from *The Trajectory of the Self*, to further examine how Korean adoptees create their own narrative and identity through self-reflection and lifestyle choices (Giddens 1991). It is my hope that by critically reading these sources, I can better understand how Korean adoptees create their identity, whether on their own, or through social networks.

Objective Two

The second objective was to use readings on material culture and cultural performance and apply them to the choices, performances, and objects of Korean adoptees as they build their identity based off of understandings of self, family, and their adoption. Objects have meaning because we assign meaning to them, much like how adoptive parents look for objects they believe carry cultural meaning, like a panda bear or a traditional dress (Louie 2009). Using concepts of objects as ties to culture, I hoped to ascertain whether adoptees practice similar buying patterns like their adoptive parents, or if they connect with certain objects based off of how they interpret their identity and culture. Winnicott's writing on transitional objects, elucidates meanings of objects with particular focus on treasured items that connect back to a birth mother, birth country, adoptive mother, or another significant or important moment in Korean adoptee's lives (Winnicott 1953). Transitional objects might be a piece of clothing, the only thing that connects an adoptee back to their life before adoption. According to Stallybrass, "clothes receive the human imprint through sweat, smells, and even shape" (Stallybrass 1999, 28-29). Keeping a blanket or an outfit that is tied to a Korean adoptee's adoption experience or their pre-adoption life might be very telling in how they construct and present their cultural and ethnic identity. There are other ways that people exhibit culture and identity; that is cultural performance. Korean adoptees might take part in sports, theater, or act out in ways that reflect their understanding of their cultural or ethnic identity. Ideas of cultural performance as ways to present and define cultures can also be applied to individuals in regards to learning how Korean adoptees might choose to represent Korean-ness, White-ness, American-ness, or other chosen identities.

Objective Three

The third objective was to effectively use past ethnographic studies done by Korean adoptees, readings on native anthropology, and reflexivity in order to prepare for interviewing participants that I share common experiences with, as well as looking for best practices, techniques, and proven methods. By acknowledging that I am an insider for the study topic, I consider how I am already privy to many things. But as an ethnographer, it is important to remain as objective as possible and to actively reflect on my role as an interviewer within the Korean-adoptee community (Schensul 2013). Like Kim Park Nelson, I made it explicitly known that I was a Korean adoptee who was interested in the experiences of other Korean adoptees (Park Nelson 2016). Similar to her acknowledgement of being an insider and her techniques of self-reflexive ethnography, I based part of my methods and techniques, off of her proven success of open-ended interviews (Park Nelson 2016). I used my insider position to gain entrance and prove my status as adoptee by asking Korean adoptees questions and sharing my stories in return for confidence and legitimacy (Park Nelson 2016).

Objective Four

The final objective was to use proven ethnographic methods to crack open previously hidden, sensitive, or subtle aspects of the Korean-American adoptee experience. Looking to articles that discuss mixed-methods, open-ended interviews, subjectivity, and emotional interviews, I found ways to deal with sensitive topics and emotional fatigue (Hoffman 2007; Ellis and Flaherty 1992; Park Nelson 2016). Going off of the third objective, I employed the semi-structured interview method approach in order to come at the questions in multiple ways to possibly illicit more in-depth information. I had hoped to use a mixed-method approach that would handle several tactics in order to find out valuable data that would have otherwise never been revealed in a semi-structured interview or other method. Using objects or diaries are both

alternative ways to get participants to share their experiences without the direct contact and gaze of the interviewer, which might give more telling information (Schensul 2013). I was not able to utilize a mixed-method approach with objects or diaries due to time constraints. Personal questions about dating or marriage, like “What kind of people did you date in your youth and adulthood?” “Do you like to date interracially or do you have a type?” were asked instead of having participants reveal other information via diaries. The answers to these questions reveal how adoptees think of themselves racially or how they think of Koreans, Asians, Caucasians, and other races.

With an extensive reading of kinship and adoption concepts and research, a better understanding of how Korean adoptees construct their identity in relation to their adoptive family and their position as a product of fictive ties might occur. By gaining knowledge of well-known ideas of transitional objects, material culture, and bodily performances of culture, I hoped to ask questions relating to these topics in order to gain a new perspective on Korean adoptees’ identity construction. Looking at past ethnographic methods and insider based studies in Korean adoption literature, I also hoped to use proven methods and techniques such as insider information sharing to confirm insider legitimacy and a more reflexive and sympathetic response to open-ended interviews (Park Nelson 2016) (Schensul 2013). I believed that by following these methods in order to meet my objectives, I would be able to discover important and valuable data that may currently be hidden.

I will also go into some detail about my own experiences growing up and how I came to this topic of Korean adoption and Korean adoptees as a focus of research. I will then move on to the complicated history of adoption from Korea that began during the Korean War. Focusing on the relationship between South Korea and the United States, we will begin to see how the war

and the military presence has influenced the growth and the sustainability of transnational adoptions since the 1950s. The issue of who has authority to represent history of Korea and what is left out often relates to the similar position that Korean adoptees are in when talking about the Korean diaspora. The ongoing presence of outside forces in Korea, like the Japanese colonization and the dynamics of the unresolved Korean War, trauma, memory, and loss are all important components in understanding how the Korean adoptee has a troubled lineage. The militarization of the Korean peninsula before, during, and after the Korean War have also led to the humanitarian movements that were led by American Christians that have had a lasting effect on Korean adoption. After discussing the history of Korean adoption, the Korean diaspora, and other histories that relate to transnational adoption and the Korean adoptee, I then move on to discuss kinship and how adoption reshapes the American understanding of family. Kinship is more than just biological ties or immediate family, it can also refer to kinship between an individual and a nation, and in the case of adoption, it would be the adoptee and their birth nation. A discussion about the economics of adoption and the creation of family is important when considering what it takes to adopt a child from Korea versus from the United States and what that means in terms of the commodification of children. Further on in the thesis, I will look at the issues of race and ethnicity and how Korean adoptees address their own ideas of both. Race is something that is often times forgotten when we think about adoption, it is more about the making of a family and giving a child a shot at a good life. But race is how many people identify and judge people in the United States, so when Korean adoptees are with their families, friends, or co-workers, their Korean-ness can be erased or stigmatized. Micro-aggressions, the model minority myth, and overt and subtle forms of racism are also something that Korean adoptees face, but may deal with in a multitude of solutions. In the last chapter, we

can see how race and ethnicity may be ways that Korean adoptees can begin to figure out their chosen identity versus the identity that was given to them from their origin story and the one that slowly develops through their childhood. Using past literature, ethnographic research, and my own research; the construction of identity can be seen in concert with culture as well as rites of passage, and rituals. This study aims to give voice to Korean adoptees and their experiences by acknowledging that they are different than Korean Americans in the Korean diaspora. The history of Korean adoption and the unique placement of Korean children in white, American homes, are all things that may shape who adoptees are either subconsciously or consciously.

CHAPTER FIVE
RACE AND POSITIONALITY

Yellow Like A Banana?

From the eyes of this young child, this foreign couple appeared like “fat American man and a yellow-haired woman.”

Kim Goudreau, “Born at the Airport”

Essay from *The “Unknown” Culture Club: Korean Adoptees, Then and Now*

Recently I was speaking with my husband and I jokingly referred to myself as “practically white.” But what does that really mean? Am I just a banana? Yellow on the outside and white on the inside? I believe that it is much more complicated than that.

Being adopted at six months of age from South Korea has impacted me. Being raised in a white, middle class family in a wealthier neighborhood in the Seattle area has perhaps impacted me more than being taken away from my biological family.

When I was very young I did not think of myself as being different from my parents. I thought that I looked like a re-creation of both of them, fair skin and big eyes. My two sisters are also adopted from Korea, but I did not realize that we were different from our parents until it suddenly clicked. As I got older, it became more pronounced that we were different, especially when we were outside of our home.

There is this one memory of my sisters and me accompanying my mom to the gym and this lady fawning over us because we looked like “brown berries.” Our skin was dark and tanned from being outside all summer, but it just felt odd that this should be highlighted. Sometimes people would refer to us as “little China dolls,” although I’m pretty sure our haircuts—my mom

requested bowl haircuts with equally insufferable bangs that ran straight across our foreheads—did not help our cause. Other times we would go out and people would just stare, or if they were bolder they would ask if we were our parents’ kids. It would always get a little intense when we travelled across the Canadian border. Our mom would tell us to be quiet out of fear that the border agent would not believe we were family and think that we were kidnapped.

Despite having this obvious division of what was considered family and what was not, I felt like we were family, but there was always some nagging feeling like we were not really a family. I was envious of people who would comment about similarities between themselves and their parents or someone else in their family. As for me, I am sure I have adopted a lot of similar phrases, body language, and behavior from my parents, but I can say with certainty that I do not have any physical similarities to them. When I was younger I did not think anything of comments such as, “our family is known for this” or “that’s a Browne family trait.” It never occurred to me that it might not apply to me.

At a certain age I definitely wanted to reflect my parents’ cultural heritage. My mother is Romanian Jewish and grew up in Hollywood Hills, California. My father is of Norwegian ancestry and grew up in Greenwood, Seattle. When I was in middle school I was really interested in reflecting my parent’s heritage. I wanted to learn Norwegian at one point, but really I wanted to be white. My first boyfriend in middle school was blonde haired and blue eyed. Sure, we only were an item for a week or so, but at that point I knew what I liked and what I did not. There was no way I was going to date an Asian guy. My older sister had said at one point when we were younger that she would never date an Asian guy because she wasn’t attracted to them. I think I knew what she meant at that time, but at the same time I think we just did not think we were attractive. Which in retrospect, it is more recognizable as internalized oppression.

In this chapter, I look at the historical reasons why the phenomenon of Korean adoption is so prevalent in Western societies like the United States or in Europe, where a large amount of transnational children are being adopted in to. I also use past ethnographic research on Korean adoption as a way to highlight how Korean adoptees have been studied and represented in the field of ethnography. Lastly, I examine Korean adoption and adoptees through the lens of native anthropology as well as a reflexive approach to my study of Korean adoptees as a Korean adoptee. Using semi-structured interviews, I was able to find new ways of hearing and sharing the experiences of Korean adoptees.

Native Anthropology

I recently went to an event held by the Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington State (AAAW), and one of the questions asked during the dialogue was, “Would you consider adoption?” I immediately thought to myself, “No.” It did not take any time for me to wrestle with that question. It was not a matter of having a bad experience with my own adoption or having bad adoptive parents or siblings; it was really a matter of education and knowledge. If I had not researched about transnational adoption and considered for more than a second how children became a so-called “orphan,” then I would not have critically considered the history between the United States and the peninsula of Korea and the trauma that has been carried over from one generation to the next. Because of my opportunity to study transnational adoption during my undergraduate, and now my graduate career, I feel like I have gone past the discursive and somewhat artificial way of viewing my adoptee status and the history behind that. I do not want to say outright that education is what makes adoptees understand their position as an adoptee more critically, but it is definitely a key part seeing adoption as more than creating a family through rose-tinted glasses. So how can I combine my experiences as an adoptee and my

experiences as a scholar and use both to study transnational adoption? Luckily anthropology has engaged in a discussion about researcher positionality for several decades, thus Native anthropology can be used in different ways to critically reflect on the social position of the researcher within the field that they study.

Native anthropology uses an approach in which a “native” anthropologist studies an area that is native to them, therefore having more knowledge on intimate and detailed levels that a non-native would have access to (Narayan 1993). The whole issue of insider versus outsider anthropologist is divisive amongst the discipline of anthropology. Some believe that native anthropologists can yield more insightful data and give a stronger voice to cultures traditionally under the ethnographic gaze, who typically occupy positions with less power. The issue of power is really what is at stake. The power of representation is what anthropology is struggling with. The discipline has spent the last five decades coming to terms with the history of colonialism and the methods that were used to study “natives” and the definition of “native” and “non-native” (Jones 2009). Furthermore, the definition of native is troublesome because the position of the insider within their community is assumed to be authentic and full of meaning (Jones 2009, Narayan 1993). This automatically assumes that the insider can speak for the experiences of all people within the group. It also does not take into account the flexibility of spaces and the multitude of identities that people can take on (Narayan 1993).

Kirin Narayan wrote against the clear division of native and non-native, considering that “anthropologists’ identities tend to move and change depending on the communities they study and the issue of power relations” (Narayan 1993). Not only the position of the anthropologist, but the people that they are studying are also always moving and changing, therefore she argues that instead of focusing on the “native” term we should “focus on the quality of relations with the

people we seek to represent in our texts” (Narayan 1993). There is the interesting dichotomy between the anthropologist that uses their insider position to advance their career or their own motives and the anthropologist that uses their insider position to bring native voices to the forefront and perhaps even use participants as researchers in the investigation (Narayan 1993). This is not the only problem that she sees with native anthropology. There is also criticism of the Western influence on the field of anthropology and its colonial agenda that dictated many of the methods, including the terms “native” and others which are so problematic (Narayan 1993). These issues of authority are especially pertinent considering the fact that “it was only those who received the full professional initiation into a disciplinary fellowship of discourse who became the bearers of the title ‘native’ anthropologist” (Narayan 1993). This system of inducting white males into the “native anthropologist” club was an issue because not only was it biased, but it further confirmed the Western, white male structures of dominance as well as the overwhelming power of bearing witness to another community and people and recording it. To gain the title of “native anthropologist,” men would often use their colonial power to secure access to the natives by using an informant that would have the “real data,” and thus have more authenticity. Therefore the so-called “native” would just be another arm of the white anthropologist, because they were allowed to work for them or in the off chance that a native person produced original research, it was usually overlooked (Narayan 1993). Narayan is not the only anthropologist who has questioned the position of the “native anthropologist” and the structures of power that are historically attached to it.

Delmos J. Jones’s main critiques of native anthropology are focused on issues of social justice and social equality (Jones 2009). Furthermore, his assessment of the field of anthropology in general concludes that it “is essentially a discipline that studies oppressed peoples” (Jones

2009, 58). But the problem is that “the concepts and theories do not adequately deal with the realities of their oppression” (Jones 2009, 58). Several things must be considered when a person from the oppressed group studies their own group, such as the problems with “anthropology as a discipline, the individual, and the socioeconomic status of the population that the native anthropologist belongs to” (Jones 2009, 58). To Jones, the problem with anthropology is that it has long been used as a rationalization for “colonialism and oppression” (Jones 2009). If native anthropology aims to be distinct from anthropology, then it should work against the systems of oppression and work towards freeing the “native” from the antiquated “other” status, situating this identity in terms of a flexible position wherein one voice does not speak for many. Native anthropology should aim to break down inequalities and preconceptions of “homogeneous and cohesiveness” within groups (Jones 2009, 59). With any research, the “observations may come from many positions which include race, gender, social class, political ideology” (Jones 2009, 59). The acknowledgment of those positions actively engage anthropology in resisting “racist oppression, gender inequality, class disparities, and international patterns of exploitation” (Jones 2009). The insider must be cognizant of their multiple positions when researching and be aware of the “political and cultural divisions within a group that could become an aspect of domination” (Jones 2009, 60). Another thing for researchers to be aware of are elites within a group who may want to take control or have power over the narrative in order to further subjugate others within their culture, which Jones warns against, writing that anthropologists should not give “into peer pressure for them to achieve it” (Jones 2009, 62). Thus, the native anthropologist “is not a dispassionate observer of a social scene, but an active player in it” and “may even fall into the same type of ideological and political traps that traditional

anthropologists do” as well as “choosing how relevant their personal experiences of oppression and discrimination are” in order to progress a certain narrative (Jones 2009, 61).

Another anthropologist who sees ways in which researchers can move beyond anthropology’s relationship to colonialism and a Western narrative of other cultures, is Lanita Jacobs-Huey. She is not calling out the issues of social inequality or social justice like Jones, but like Jones and Narayan she “shuns the term ‘natives’ as one that connotes a monolithic group of peoples confined to a distant exotic space” and calls upon the researcher to “critically consider their own cultural biases in order to negotiate various ways of seeing while investigating and ‘translating’ culture(s)” (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 791). She points out that “researchers are increasingly expected to account for how their own positionalities, ways of asking, seeing/interpreting, and speaking influences their production of ‘partial’ representations of their engagements in the field” (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 792). A native anthropologist must be aware of their own ideas about their culture and see them as being reflective of a part and not the whole. They should understand that by using a “reflexive perspective, researchers can be more sensitive of the socially constructed nature of knowledge production” (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 791). As a native anthropologist, one must also be aware of how they interpret their insider position and how connected they truly are to the group they are studying. As Narayan and Jacobs-Huey agree, “native anthropologists that solely celebrate the privileges associated with being an insider fail to expose the negotiation of identity and legitimacy that is necessary of all anthropologists” (Cerroni-Long 1995, 792, Narayan 1993). Another faux pas that native anthropologists can make is assuming that because they are insiders, they share many traits with the research participants, instead of acknowledging that they might make assumptions based on the “presumed commonalities of ethnic, gendered, and class backgrounds” (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 793).

Even with all of these warnings and advice that native anthropologists should consider before commencing study of their own environments, their research can be extremely beneficial. If they move beyond native anthropology as “a privileging endeavor, they can use their insider position as an empowering gesture and critique of the positioning of natives in the stagnant slot of other” (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 800).

E.L. Cerroni-Long seems to suggest that the term insider or native is superfluous, “given the multiplex nature of identity, there will inevitably be certain facets of self that join us up with the people we study, other facets which emphasize our difference” (Cerroni-Long 1995, 6). Furthermore, every anthropologist can claim “multiplex subjectivity so which one are anthropologist choosing to use depending on the context and the prevailing vectors of power” (Cerroni-Long 1995, 6). So the question is, “What precisely is ‘home’ for people with multiple identities?” (Cerroni-Long 1995, 6). Cerroni-Long sees the need for the field of anthropology to reclaim the term “culture” from other disciplines that mutate the meaning. (Cerroni-Long 1995) These days, people can claim many identities and associating culture, so how can native anthropology exist when there seems to be so much blurring of the cultural lines? The problem is that using the comparative method that cultural anthropology is known for; we must have clear cultural boundaries. What makes this task difficult is the ever increasing blending and fluidity of culture and identity. “The difference between alien and native also disappears, and, as it does, anyone studying a social setting becomes an insider by the mere fact of ‘being there’ to study it.” (Cerroni-Long 1995, 2) So how can we tease apart the insider or native label? Cerroni-Long argued against Robert Merton’s “idea that knowledge is group-specific” because that would mean that only a person who is similar to another can understand them with no exceptions (Cerroni-Long 1995, 7). But there is some truth perhaps in the term ‘status-sets’ that signify

people's multiple identities and ability to navigate in different environments based on which status they put forward (Cerroni-Long 1995, 7). Cerroni-Long believes though, that there is a difference between native and insider based on how knowledge is given (Cerroni-Long 1995, 8). "As a native, knowledge is imparted through birth and therefore we become insiders either by choice or through natural progression as well as having access to knowledge" (Cerroni-Long 1995, 8). Culture is driven in at a young age into the "areas of emotion, expression, and cognition and cannot be easily undone" (Cerroni-Long 1995, 8). So, to be an insider and not a native, according to Cerroni-Long, is to be a part of the community and not immersed in it from a young age. An insider may have 'status-sets' that allow them to claim affiliation with natives, but they are not truly native.

Native anthropology has many things to overcome and one of them is being "mindful of the difficulty of interpreting the oral tradition for people steeped in the written tradition" (Gwaltney 1998). There will also be "people who tell you your material doesn't mean anything if someone else has not collected it and written it down" (Gwaltney 1998). But if what we are searching for is authenticity, then with native anthropology, "the truth, still resident in the people, needs to be written down" (Gwaltney 1998). Using the oral tradition as a way of finding truth comes with a caution according to Gwaltney, "we have to take the gospel whenever it's possible, but with a grain of salt" (Gwaltney 1998). So not only do native anthropologists need to read between the lines in the behavior and words of their research participants, they also need to dig deep within themselves to make sure they are not falling victim to generalizations about a community, re-asserting stereotypes, assuming commonalities, and so on. All the meanwhile they need to be reflexive of their own experiences and position.

So how do I identify according to the multiple opinions and ideas about what native or insider anthropology is and is not? In some ways I know that I am not truly Korean, but what does that really have to do with being a native to Korean adoptees? I am native in the sense that I was born into the position of an adoptee, but I do not think I can claim I am native to Korean culture according to Cerroni-Long's definition. I have not been steeped in Korean-ness since a young age, either in language, knowledge, everyday practice, or traditions. I have been cut-off and exiled to another culture that I now can claim affinity to. I am not sure I can really say that I am an insider to Korean-adoptee culture either. I have not participated in adoptee seminars, groups, activities, activism, and so forth until recently. But perhaps that is a part of being an insider in adoptee culture. Perhaps we all reach a point where we can choose to investigate the history behind adoption, or just be content in our adopted culture. When I was interviewing participants, I felt a bond with them even if I did not have the exact same experiences. The fact that we all came from the airport and that we all at some point reflected upon our position as an adoptee, made it easier to talk to them. There was an implicit understanding of what we may have gone through. I felt a closeness to their stories, but distant at the same time because I wanted to be as objective as possible. Despite my efforts in not being completely drained from interviewing the participants, I felt tired, depressed, and incapable of finishing the transcriptions. The more I listened to the recordings of the interviews, the more I thought about my own experiences. It was an exhausting experience, but one that I would gladly repeat.

In the next chapter, the history of Korean adoption is explored critically. To some people, this will be eye-opening in terms of understanding the long-term effects of the un-ending war or the war that is typically forgotten. I still see older men wearing Korean War veteran hats every once in a while, and they smile at me. I usually smile back, but then I wonder why. I was not

there in Korea back in 1953; I do not have family in Korea. But then I think, well I probably do or I least I used to. So what really is my connection to the Korean War, besides being Korean and adopted? The title *Hushed and Fractured* refers to the Korean people that were pulled apart by the brutal Japanese colonization and the horrors of the Korean War. Bodies were fractured, the nation was divided, and children were severed from their biological families. Hushed refers to the deliberate silences and the quietness that came from the inability to talk about such trauma. A critical look at Korean adoption history and the paths that have led to the proliferation of it, includes an understanding of how humanitarianism and the militarization of South Korea, play a part.

CHAPTER SIX

EMBODIED HISTORIES

Hushed and Fractured

“It may sound like an excuse, but it would be too cruel to raise you as the child of a single unwed mother in this society because of the way people would treat you.”

“Letter Six” from *I Wish For You a Beautiful Life: Letters from the Korean Birth Mothers of Ae Ran Won to Their Children*

Stereotypes and misconceptions about Korea, Koreans, and Korean history permeate and perpetuate the circumstances of transnational adoption. Mrs. Han Sang-Soon, the director of a home for unmarried pregnant women, gives food, shelter, counseling, and guidance for up to 200 women per year in Korea (Dorow 1999, 1). She asserts, “In Korea, there is much misunderstanding of birth mothers, as well as prejudice against them. They are often criticized for not showing responsibility for their babies and for being concerned only about their own well-being” (Dorow 1999, 1). But she wants people to understand that “such behavior by birth mothers is a sign of even deeper conflicts, it is defensive, and is the result of the scars and pain of the negative experiences in their lives (Dorow 1999, 1). If we look at this issue critically, we can find that the scars and pain go deeper and are historically embedded in the post-Korean War ethos and memory.

2013 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War Armistice and while many people know of the Korean War, it is mostly remembered as the “forgotten war.” When President Obama spoke to veterans at the Korean War Memorial back in 2013, he “changed the

emphasis to victory in the war from what had previously been a focus on the hardships of an unknown war” (S. Kim 2015, 51). This conscious attempt to rewrite history was not unusual during this time period. Several years before 2015 there was a “renewed effort to valorize American interventions during the Cold War” (S. Kim 2015, 51). “In South Korea and the United States, public spaces, including memorials and museums, have been increasingly privatized, leading to charges of ‘Disneyfication,’ while state violence and war have been justified as the necessary price of (economic) freedom” (S. Kim 2015, 53). This changing over of historical facts and memories can help show how powerful the control of narrative is, and how effective it could be in changing people’s understanding of what happened and perhaps change people’s memories of it.

Memory

Suzy Kim argues that “the Korean peninsula is at the center of the vortex where the Cold War lingers in various guises, not directly as a result of the un-ended Korean War” (S. Kim 2015, 53). It shows up in the “anti-Americanism that is fostered in North Korea through its own contested history of civilian massacre in Sinch’on” and in the “2014 ruling by the South Korean Constitutional Courts, to disband the Unified Progressive Party in which was deemed a threat to national security” (S. Kim 2015, 35). This action highlights the way “politicide committed during the Korean War continues in different forms even after the so-called democratic transition” (S. Kim 2015, 35). One can see the ways in which the Cold War and the Korean War affect the very deliberate narratives that are now propagated in both the United States and the Korean Peninsula. Not only are memorials and museums areas in which history and memory can change, but also the language that is used can speak volumes about how history should be interpreted.

What is said or unsaid, or what is seen and unseen, are very effective tools in directing a narrative. In the People's Republic of China, the Korean War is remembered with strong anti-U.S. imperialism. It is very much described as the victory of people's power against authoritarian imperialism. The use of language in the Sinch'on Museum in North Korea shows how easily the meaning can change. There are "noticeable competing references to the 6.25 War, the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War, and the War to Resist America and Aid Korea, which show how fraught the process of naming is in the original languages" (S. Kim 2015, 54). "The use of 6.25 (*yugio*) to name the war with the official "start" date expunges the war of its social context and political causes to isolate the timing, and the North's action on that day" (S. Kim 2015, 54). By using the date, it "avoids having to refer to Korea in the Korean language, which would invoke the difference between the North's use of *Choson* and the South's use of *Hanguk*" (S. Kim 2015, 54). These rhetorical dynamics recall those analyzed by James Young, in his readings of how different Holocausts are remembered and discursively deployed in his comparative study of Holocaust memorials across Germany, Poland, Israel, and the United States, in that every nation's memorial and museums, a different Holocaust is remembered, often to conflicting political and religious ends" (S. Kim 2015, 54). Every museum or memorial has a mission and a target audience, but some are made to strengthen the main narrative. James Young posits that "Memorials and museums generate various kinds of memory and some are built in response to a government's need to explain a nation's past to itself, to educate the next generation, expiations of guilt, or as self-aggrandizement, and some are just to attract tourists" (Young 2008, 357). No matter what the reasons for constructing a memorial or museum, they have the power to represent different sides of the story and can often hinder progress for the "present or future in terms of reconciliation" (S. Kim 2015, 55). Museums are places that are "not as stable as they

may seem” and “no matter how much they consciously or unconsciously produce and affirm the symbolic order, there is always a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory” (S. Kim 2015, 55). Museums and memorials have the power to tell the public what is “important about the war, what were the major effects, the origins, and whose experiences are worth remembering” (S. Kim 2015, 56). So, what do we really know about the Korean War, or, as some people call it, the “forgotten war?” There is no homogenous version of what happened because of the deliberate erasure of events and fault.

The figure of the Korean adoptee emerged during the Korean War at a time when the peninsula was experiencing immense destruction, violence, loss of life, as well as recovering from the brutal Japanese colonization of WWII. Adoption was first seen as an option to deal with mixed-race children whose parents were African-American soldiers and Korean women. Coming off the heels of WWII, the U.S. was implanting the United Nations sanctions to ensure human rights and humanitarian standards as well as preventing and managing wars (Conway-Lanz 2005, 50). The U.S. military was serious in their goals to protect refugees based off of their experience in WWI, but despite their ambitions, U.N. sanction, and the signing of the Geneva Convention; they had many difficulties ensuring the safety, health, and care of civilian populations in Korea (Conway-Lanz 2005, 50, 52, 53). The U.S. military was responsible for the destruction of many villages, as well as the massacre of No Gun Ri and many other unnecessary killings of civilians due to the military’s poor communication, information, safety concerns of soldiers, racism, and travel issues with having too many people moving on roads (Conway-Lanz 2005, 55). What is interesting is that at the same time these events were happening, back home in America, the public was being pushed on television, radio, and print, that the Korean people were in desperate

need for aid (Conway-Lanz 2005, 73, 74). This was to help civilians as well as the mixed-race children of American soldiers that “were a subpopulation that defied the myths of racial and national homogeneity” (Korean American Historical Press 2015, 45). Not only did this wave of humanitarian aid help out Korea by getting rid of mixed-race children, it also was the beginning of a social service system that would be largely sponsored by the U.S. (Korean American Historical Press 2015, 44). By “replicating the anti-communist ideology of containment, Americans became, at least in their self-image, the heroic saviors rescuing helpless ‘orphans,’ most of whom were not actually orphaned” (Korean American Historical Press 2015, 45) By the deliberate actions and militarized involvement of the U.S. within South Korea, thus began the long relationship that is often times seen as contradictory (Korean American Historical Press 2015, 45).

Authority

It can be difficult to promote one singular perspective on a historic event, especially when history textbooks in the United States, South Korea, Japan, and China, all present “inconsistent and often times conflicting views of the Korean War” (Lin, et al. 2009, 222). History is taught in schools all over the world and yet it can offer very different versions of a singular event. “History, perhaps more than any other subject, is to offer and cultivate a sense of national identity, heritage, and common values” (Lin, et al. 2009, 223). This is certainly true for American history that is taught at lower levels of education. It is not until college that more conflicting sources and opinions are offered about American history, much less global history. “Textbooks are central to the transmission of national values and that they present an ‘official’ story that highlights narratives that shape contemporary patriotism, therefore the content can involve educational and political conflict” (Lin, et al. 2009, 223). Can we really call it history if

the flows of knowledge are restricted or constrained? In 2005, textbooks in Japan were censored in regards to Japanese conduct during World War II. This of course caused an uproar not only in Japan, but in China and South Korea (Lin, et al. 2009, 223). With the representation of the Korean War, Japanese textbooks, “do not provide detailed reasons for why Korea was divided into South and North and assert that in 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea in an effort to unify the whole peninsula” (Lin, et al. 2009, 225). As far as United States textbooks, it is asserted that the “Soviet Union aided communist North Korea as they invaded South Korea and because the Soviet Union was at odds with the United States in the Cold War, the United States came to the aid of South Korea to assist the United Nations forces” (Lin, et al. 2009, 225). As for how the Korean War ended, in the United States textbooks, “there is no glory or valor, the war is described sparsely with no discussion of the aftermath of the war” (Lin, et al. 2009, 227). For Japanese textbooks, it is acknowledged that the war provided Japan with economic means to rebuild after WWII and that the use of United States military bases in Japan, plus the materials and supplies bought from Japan afforded an accelerated economic boom” (Lin, et al. 2009, 227). Overall all the textbooks hold a common theme of avoiding the messy and violent details of the war, particularly how the war affected individuals and how much land and property were damaged. And virtually all the “U.S. books put the U.S. deaths of soldiers at 50,000 and only a few mention the casualties sustained by South Korea” (Lin, et al. 2009, 228). In actuality, “the total number of deaths suffered by South Korea alone amounted to about 1,500,00 which led to a great number of war orphans and displaced families” (Lin, et al. 2009, 228). This level of destruction cannot be underestimated, especially coming on the heels of Japanese occupation. So how is it that the Korean War is remembered or more purposefully forgotten?

Generational Trauma and Silences

Korean Americans that did not live through the war still live with the war in a multitude of ways. “Research on the Holocaust and Japanese American internment provides insight into how political trauma in the past can carry forward into the present in the psyche and life course not only of those who experienced the trauma directly, but their children and grandchildren” (Liem 2003, 113). Surprisingly, silences are what carry trauma throughout generations, but speaking out and remembering out loud are ways in which the silences can be lifted (Liem 2003, 113). The Korean War occurred only “five years after liberation from the brutal Japanese regime that left a people with 4,000 years of shared history, permanently divided, and with nearly 10 million people separated from family and relatives” (Liem 2003, 114). That was barely enough time for people to even begin to feel the pain and loss left by missing family members. The Korean people did not have time to get back on their feet before the Korean War started. Asians were still vilified in the U.S. as communists. During the Korean War, “Civilian casualties comprised 70 percent of total losses as compared to 40 percent during World War II and yet another tragedy is the war is not over; it remains stalemate, a country divided, and contains one of the most heavily fortified borders in the world” (Liem 2003, 114). Even if people were able to cross the border to the South, they were often met with more uncertainty: “During and following the war, families migrated from the north to the south where regional and political conflicts with their southern counterparts often limited their economic and social opportunities in South Korea, which is why many chose to migrate to the United States” (Liem 2003, 115).

Lee Chang-Mo lived in Seoul when the Korean War began, but after the war he was constantly harassed with questions about his family members and if they had gone to the north, “he could not escape it” and so he left Korea and came to the United States even though he really

did not want to (Liem 2003, 117). The legacy of the war pestered him to the point that he had to move to another country to escape ostracism. For some people, they are too distant from the actual war, but still feel the aftershocks of it reverberating from family members. “The inability of some families to speak of the past creates an ‘audible void’ covering over foreboding and anxiety which children sense in their relationships with parents or the family emotional climate” (Liem 2003, 119). Kevin Ryu is a second generation Korean American and recalled feeling like his life was almost like other kids, but “there always seemed to be this tension going through my family like an unhappy wind, there were silences which became part of the fabric of our daily lives...the fear and terror of that time period have carried forward into my dad’s life” (Liem 2003, 120). This cracking of the veneer of life in America, can help younger generations of Korean Americans understand their family members better, as well as going beyond the “contemporary era of ‘multiculturalism’ in the United States where they often resort to naïve culturalism to explain older generations” (Liem 2003, 122). Ramsay points to the “history of Asians being exoticized by the west and rendered cultural rather than historical beings” as an obstacle for younger generations to adequately empathize and come to terms with their families’ history (Liem 2003, 122). She poses an interesting question, “How much of what is culturally stereotyped as ‘Korean’ is actually the product of a lived past of civil war and years of recovery, and colonial subjugation? ‘Koreanness’ may be in the blood but some of it got there when that blood was shed during the Korean War” (Liem 2003, 122). If we are to believe this transmission of trauma, then we can begin to understand how much the Korean War is still affecting many Korean Americans today, as well as the effect of the Korean War on the Korean diaspora.

Re-emerging Within the Korean Diaspora

As Ji-Yeon Yuh asserts, “post-1945 Korean migration has been shaped by the division and militarization of the Korean peninsula and most fall in the category of ‘refuge migrants’ not ‘refugee’ who were seeking refuge from the consequences of the Korean War” (Yuh 2005, 278). Even though adoption cannot be added to this category, adoptees, largely to the United States, were the first groups to migrate because of the war, along with military brides (Yuh 2005, 278). Even though it cannot be lumped in with refugee migration, adoption migration can be linked to the Korean War. The beginnings of adoption from Korea started with a couple from Oregon who were spurred by religion and a desire to help bi-racial, orphaned children who were products of relationships between U.S. soldiers and Korean women (Yuh 2005, 279). Harry and Bertha Holt started the first large transnational adoption agency in the United States in 1955 and it is still one of the largest transnational adoption agencies around today (Holt International 2018). Adoptions that occurred after the initial boom of bi-racial and war-orphaned children were because of poverty and later it was the stigma against unwed mothers with babies that caused the steep rise in transnational adoptions from Korea (Yuh 2005, 279). Yuh stated that back in 2005, the “approximate number of adoptions to the United States was 200,000 with another 50,000 to Europe as well as 2,000 adoptions still occurring annually” (Yuh 2005, 279).

Other migration that has occurred due to the Korean War, included a group of about 50 Korean prisoners of war that decided to choose Brazil as their new home instead of returning to Korea (Yuh 2005, 280). These prisoners of war began the larger scale migration that resulted in 50,000 Koreans that now live in Brazil, that the “1963 Emigration Act and the Park Chung Hee government pushed to relieve pressures of unemployment and to increase foreign exchange earnings” (Yuh 2005, 280). It is easy to see migration as looking for the American dream, but

Yuh stays firm in her belief that the Korean War has caused a large “refuge migration” that follows Koreans wherever they go. (Yuh 2005, 280-281) She points to the “United Nations definition of refugee migration in comparison to refuge migration, being that one is fleeing immediate danger and the other is fleeing from perceived dangers” (Yuh 2005, 281). The difference between refugee and refuge migration, is the immediacy, quality of life, and post-traumatic stress. With refugee migration, people are fleeing because they lack food, water, or are escaping a dangerous area. Yuh’s idea of refuge migration is that people have already suffered through lack of food, water, safety, security, and have already lived through traumatic experiences. “Refuge migrants are motivated by a deep psychological need to leave behind chaos, and insecurity, and trauma, and they seek out a stable environment that doesn’t always feel like it is threatening to explode” (Yuh 2005, 281).

Migration does not always have to be when people are leaving one country to another. It can simply be moving within the same country. In this case, the Korean War fractured so many lives that many wanted to get away from “their social alienation in the South as a northerner, the fear of a renewed war, and the lack of stability and security” (Yuh 2005, 284). According to “South Korea’s Ministry of Unification, 1,285 North Koreans entered South Korea in 2003 and with resettlement aid from the South Korean government, the process of reintegrating was thought to be smooth, but it is often difficult” (Yuh 2005, 286). Many within the Korean diaspora who have fled from the North “see the flaws of the capitalist South as well as the flaws of the communist North, and thus many find themselves struggling to find meaning in their lives and to reconcile their historical and social perspectives with those of their new comrades” (Yuh 2005, 287). As Yuh asserts, Koreans who have settled elsewhere in the world are no longer using

the Korean peninsula as a source for their identity; they are finding new ways to be Korean and to different meanings about what that is (Yuh 2005, 288-289).

Militarization of Korea

Even as Koreans within the diaspora are looking to create separate and distinct identities that are not based upon their ideas about the Korean peninsula and its realities, they are in many ways bound to the past and living in the shadow of the Korean War. To Jodi Kim, this question of understanding the “forgotten war” is not an issue because she sees the Korean War as the “unending war” (J. Kim 2015, 807). The militarization aspects of the Korean War are why she chooses to refer to it as unending. In her words, militarization “is the colonial and neocolonial nexus of state and capital that generates a proliferation of military logics beyond formal military institutions and sites, and beyond the war-making, peace-keeping, and security functions of the military itself” (J. Kim 2015, 809). It is a “pervasive force that structures not only international geopolitical relations, but also the intimate scales of adoptee kinships and subjectivity” (J. Kim 2015, 809). Kim refers to the “unending war,” and applies that term to Korean transnational adoption and how it is “constituted by militarized and gendered diasporas that mark the ongoing presence of the US military in South Korea” (J. Kim 2015, 808). Women’s bodies are often times used during times of war to placate soldiers and keep morale high. Korean women were coerced and forced into sexual labor during WWII and the Korean War. The presence of the U.S. military after the Japanese colonization, made it easy for the “comfort stations” to be put into use again. “This militarized diaspora is also gendered, revealing a transnational and transgenerational economy of reproductive injustice for Korean women” (J. Kim 2015, 809).

Sexual Trauma and Silences

Jodi Kim is not the only adoption scholar that sees the proliferation of Korean adoption as the continued mistreatment of women. Grace M. Cho traces the history of comfort stations during Japanese colonization to their rebirth during the Korean War (J. Kim 2015, 809) (Cho 2008 , 94). Both works seek to connect the United States military to the ongoing abuse of women and the growth of the flourishing Korean adoption system. Grace M. Cho introduces the figure of the *yanggongju* as one that haunts people of Korea and is forgotten by the United States, much like the Korean War (Cho 2008). The *yanggongju* is the Korean sexual laborer. Her beginning was as a comfort woman in the comfort stations, servicing the Japanese soldiers (Cho 2008). Her path then led to her next iteration as *yanggongju* during the Korean War, then “Yankee whore” as she sought to find ways to leave Korea (Cho 2008). Her last stage was as a “GI bride” and then finally she was assimilated as a Korean American (Cho 2008). Cho argued that the changes over time show how deliberate the erasure of trauma and shameful pasts are made by the United States and Korea (Cho 2008). Cho wrote her book because her mother was “haunted” by the ghosts of trauma and was a former *yanggongju* who later married an American GI (Cho 2008). Cho’s book is a search for the beginnings of the haunted figure and where her story began. Many people have asserted that it began during the Korean War, but Cho argued that it began earlier with the end of WWII and the arrival of the United States military presence in Korea (Cho 2008).

Cho asserted that the system of comfort stations that were left over from the Japanese colonization were inherited by the United States military. Sexual labor during times of war was not a new concept, but it is important to acknowledge the systems that put young women in that position and what were the decisions that they were making. Militarization ultimately uses

women's bodies and views them as disposable. It was not until the 1990s that the trauma of what had occurred to Korean women began to be uncovered. Forty years later is quite a long time to be silent about trauma, but as Cho's mother illustrated, silence was a way to hide. Cho argued that trauma seeps not only into the bodies of the accosted, but also into the lives of others that are around them (Cho 2008). Cho remembered the silences her mother conveyed and the questions that were raised in her neighborhood about her white dad and her Korean mom (Cho 2008). The idea of "transgenerational trauma" is explored in Cho's work, which she draws from Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's work (Cho 2008). She asserted that the trauma is not released after a person passes, it is continued by the creation of trauma as its own entity, therefore affecting others (Cho 2008). What she also argued is that the transgenerational trauma is passed on, but still rendered invisible through the denial to acknowledge that it occurred or that it was indeed traumatic (Cho 2008). The figure of the yanggongju is effectively erased in the Korean diaspora because of the denial, the cover-ups, the silences, and the shame. So when looking at what the possible push factors are for this population of women who have endured trauma, one can see that moving away from their country that was torn apart by war makes sense, but also their change from a brave young maiden who worked in camp towns to rebuild her country to a greedy "Yankee whore" that grew too fond of sweets and material goods from Americans is another way of discarding and erasing the horrors that women befell (Cho 2008).

Many women in camp towns thought that marrying an American soldier was a way out, but also a way to assimilate into American culture (Cho 2008). The soldier is always presumed white because, as Cho argued, white is the top of the pyramid of success (Cho 2008). It is another way to assert the hegemony of white supremacy and its' narrative of the white savior. Forgetting the trauma of war and sexual labor is possible through marriages to white American

men and entrance into white middle class suburbs. Hiding in the safety of an American family was a way to forget the past, but also a way to erase the yanggongju and her past (Cho 2008). Her children become foreigners to her and are no longer Korean because they speak English and act white. This is another way of silencing the trauma, but also extending it to other generations (Cho 2008). Erasures come in the form of both family and society. Finally, her assimilation bears more trauma through the gaps in knowledge that her children seek (Cho 2008). It is truly a kinship of trauma.

Economics

The ending of the Korean War left many children homeless and parentless, with a conscious “production of legal and social orphans” (J. Kim 2015, 811) Children “who had a least one surviving biological parent,” had been “surrendered to orphanages under the pretense that it was temporary” (J. Kim 2015, 811). Orphans were made available for adoption by legally severing parent and child connections. By saying that children were orphans and had no remaining family, it made it easier for people to see them as needy and as a possible child that could fill a void within families in the U.S. and in Europe. “The orphan was and continues to be a legally constructed figure, an abstract or undifferentiated fungible body upon which a constellation of desires condenses” (J. Kim 2015, 811). Not only is the Korean orphan a creation of and a product of the Korean War, it has promulgated one of the largest economically successful adoption systems in the world (J. Kim 2015, 816). “South Korea’s most precious natural resource and export is the South Korean child, its growing institutionalization are a significant component of the economy of the unending Korean War” (J. Kim 2015, 815). Many adoptees and their new parents speak of how much they were wanted or how much the parents wanted a child in terms of love and determination. What is not usually said is how much money

and time it takes to actually adopt a child. It is no small task to birth a biological child, but wanting a child from Korea can induce a lot of spending. The estimated total of Holt International adoption fees are anywhere from \$39,235 to \$54,430 (Holt International 2018). These fees mean that the people are able to adopt are usually of middle to upper class status economically. Holt International also has a full list of eligibility requirements for parents wishing to adopt a child from Korea that range from the number of years prospective parents have been married to the body mass index of each prospective parent (Holt International 2018). With such requirements, it is clear that a certain set of parents are what Holt International is looking for as a suitable family.

South Korea is by no means a poor country anymore. Its economy has “been a success story whose GDP used to be ranked amongst the poorest countries in the 1960s to 2004 when it became a part of the trillion-dollar club of world economies” (Central Intelligence Agency 2018). So why is it, that adoption is still needed for the country if they are economically competent and modern? We know the reason to be traced back to the Korean War in which the United States and South Korea began their interdependent relationship of military support and social welfare solutions. “The macroeconomics of the adoption industry is twofold: it funnels millions of dollars into the South Korean economy even as it functions as a substitute for government investment in social services that would make it possible for birth families to raise their children” (J. Kim 2015, 817). While the business of selling children to the United States and other European countries began as a way to deal with the post-war economy, a need to rebuild the country, and the need to deal with the fracturing of families, it soon became apparent that Korean children were a popular commodity on an international scale. Yet this heavily “export focused economy at once produces and renders vulnerable large segments of South

Korea's population, particularly the impoverished and unwed young mothers" (J. Kim 2015, 817). The post-war economic miracle of adoption was built on the literal backs of lower-income women to a significant extent.

Happiness and profits are made off of the labor that unwed Korean women provide. Their own nation chooses to keep the status-quo, maintaining negative perceptions about unwed women. They are cast aside and given little afterthought. "Even as women and children are displaced by this economy, value is produced on their very backs" (J. Kim 2015, 817). This is yet another example of how women are used in the larger system of transnational adoption. There is no logical reason why a wealthy country that is fast becoming modern, needs to continue sending Korean children to other countries for adoption, other than it creates good business, maintains a working relationship with the United States. There is also a demand for adoptable foreign children. The phrase "money speaks" is quite evident, but there is more to the story than just supply and demand. Parents in the United States were and are legitimately looking to help children in need. What they fail to look deeper into are the reasons why the children are needy in the first place and how that fits in with their own understanding of the United States and South Korea's relationship since the Korean War. Is the practice of adopting children based on humanitarian reasons or is it just an extension of U.S. militarization and by in large the humanitarian project leftover from the Korean War?

Humanitarianism

The growth of transnational adoption can in large be traced to the Korean War through United States military involvement, not only through their connection with aiding South Korea, but the sexual relationships between U.S. soldiers and Korean women, and the start of humanitarian aid to help the Korean "orphans" (J. Kim 2015, 813, 815). Arissa Oh coins a new

term to the sudden spurt of humanitarianism after the Korean War as “Christian Americanism” (A. H. Oh 2015, 79). “Christian Americanism took hold in predominately White, middle-class families and somehow equated Christian values with being exceptionally American and not one bit surprising, but these Americans were the ones who shepherded the adoption of Korean G.I. babies” (A. H. Oh 2015, 80). What Oh also points to as an important factor in the creation of Korean adoption is the way that the Koreans were portrayed during and after the Korean War. There was a conscious effort to begin “globalizing” Americans’ understanding of other people and cultures in the world (A. H. Oh 2015, 83). Links to Christianity also helped many Americans begin to view Koreans in a positive light and one that would also help promote the idea that Koreans were on the same side as the United States in fighting communism (A. H. Oh 2015, 83). Although “Christian Americanism only thrived until the 1960s, the fervor and demand for Korean children had already been created” (A. H. Oh 2015, 81). Harry and Bertha Holt were religiously motivated by their Christian faith to help Korean children and in their mission, they helped pave the way for large scale adoptions and in turn created one of the most successful and well know adoption agencies still around today (Holt International 2018).

The link between the Korean War and the birth of Korean adoption can be traced through many lines such as trauma, militarization, humanitarianism, and so on, but one question remains to be answered: Why do Americans feel the need to adopt children from Korea or other countries when it can be said that many children in their own country need homes? Are there economic reasons that push the continuation of transnational adoption? Or are there ideas of multi-cultural or blended families that have a certain social ranking that says something about the kind of parents that would adopt a child from another country?

In the next chapter we examine and analyze Korean ideas about family. What it means to them and who is a part of it. The idea of what makes a family has changed since the Korean War so now adopted children do not have to explain their family to others as much as adoptees have in the past. Because of the large influx of Korean children to the United States since the late 1950s, many other children from other countries have become a part of multi-cultural families in the United States. This re-building of what constitutes an American family might really be about how Americans view race and ethnicity. How do adoptees and their families deal with and live with multi-culturalism on a day-to-day basis?

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE LIMITS OF KINNING

A New Family

“While Myung-Sook urinated on the edge of the road, the yellow-haired woman stood over her like an annoyed owner of a precious possession, like a dog at the moment for which she did not want to lose sight.”

Kim Goudreau, “Born at the Airport”

Essay from *The “Unknown” Culture Club: Korean Adoptees, Then and Now*

Victor Turner once wrote about the liminal period of *rites de passage* wherein initiates in different societies face a point in which they are in limbo or “betwixt and between” (Turner 1967, 93). He states that “*rites de passage* not only speak to movements between ascribed statuses, but also achieved status such as membership into a particular society or club” (Turner 1967, 95). The person who enters this state of liminality is considered a “transitional being” or a “liminal *persona*” and enters what is effectively known as “the separation stage” (Turner 1967, 94-95). Turner sees this “transition as a process, a becoming, or even a transformation like a pupa changing from grub to moth” (Turner 1967, 94).

Korean adoptees can easily be put into this definition of the *liminal persona*. It is said the “the structural ‘invisibility’ of liminal *persona* have a twofold character. Not only is the actual labor that brought them to their new family essentially invisible, their race is often times invisible to their parents. They are born, then born again, into a family of white, middle-class

status. They are no longer classified and not yet classified” (Turner 1967, 96). As the Korean adoptee exits their birth country and begins their journey to a new land, they are in limbo and have no home to call their own. “Symbols are often associated with liminal persona such as embryos, newborn infants, or sucklings that are modeled on the processes of gestation and parturition” (Turner 1967, 96). As babies or young children, Korean adoptees are already symbolic in their being placed in planes on route to America.

My mom likes to refer to my birth as funny. She thinks it is funny because she thought that my sisters and I might associate birth with the airport. As all of us flew on planes and arrived at Sea-Tac airport, it was this moment that was a re-birth for us. Douglas, one of my informants said, “My parents filmed the whole thing, of me arriving. It was on a VHS, but I recorded over it at some point with *The Pink Panther*” he laughs... (Winslow 2018, 1). He clearly was not as sentimental as his parents, but perhaps he also did not think of his arrival in the U.S. as a big deal. The fact that he erased most of his arrival is telling that he is perhaps at odds with it. This idea that adopted children from another country come into the United States with a clean slate of sorts, seeks to underplay the separation stage in rites of passage. But with separation, comes attachment. I refer back to Signe Howell’s work on the process of kinning in that there is a perceive malleability of Korean adoptees as they are sometimes seen as blank slates, unconnected beings, which makes them far easier to re-kin (Howell 2006). Her understanding of kinship is similar to American views which foreground the biological understanding of parent and child relationships. In the case of Eric, one of my informants, his mom liked to say” Well you have two mommies, you have a tummy mommy and a heart mommy” which Eric thought was a great way to explain the concept of adoption to a kid (Proulx 2018). With transnational adoption there is a distinct severing of ties and detachment occurring. There is the initial severing

of the umbilical cord and the physical detachment between the birth mother and the child. The biological ties are broken, as well as a tie to the birth nation. Perhaps the plane ride, car ride, and journey to a new home is the transitional period, where the child has no attachment, they have no name, no identity. They are an infant, but not a part of someone's family yet; they can make no claims of kinship.

Another idea that Turner brought up in his writings was that during the liminal period, neophytes were often seen as sexless because in the transitional phase, there were no structures, social, or culture indicators that required knowing the sex of a person (Turner 1967, 98). They were not yet who they were meant to be or supposed to be. This apparently structure-less period allows for adoptees to appear malleable and more conducive to fitting in with their new homes. In a way, Korean adoptees are seen as unknown, they may have pictures sent to the prospective parents, a caregiver may have shared early assumptions about their personality, but essentially they are still strangers. In the words of Turner, they have extreme "sacred poverty," with nothing to tie them to others that will give them agency or power; they are without kin (Turner 1967, 98-99). For adoptees, the liminal period is like a second gestation, they are waiting to be born again.

As Eleana J. Kim wrote, "trans-nationally adopted Koreans are symbolically situated at the border of the nation," which acknowledges their liminal *persona* at that point in time (Kim 2010, 173). Not only are they placed in a position of waiting for a new family; they are also placed in between nations. Birth nations are like family in a sense, especially when the country begins to see adoptees as a missing member, which is exactly what Korea has begun to voice more recently. The 2004 Gathering in Seoul in which the South Korean minister of health and welfare, spoke to Korean adoptees, there are mixed feelings about his "declaration of love as an expression of the nation's paternalistic affection and pride in its children" (Kim 2010, 172). On

one hand it is like a long-lost family member embracing you back into the fold, but on the other hand, children were still sent away in high numbers even after the economy had recovered. Some adoptees stated they were unsure and uneasy about his comments and had the following response:

Thank you for taking our children, thank you for raising our children, it's like a thanks for taking care of my dog for a while. It just seems like an odd sentiment, which I guess is kind of a prelude to the Korean government claiming us, because they wouldn't thank someone for taking care of something if they didn't think it was theirs, right? (Kim 2010, 174)?

At the same time Korea seems to be staking claim to its long-lost children, but as a "Canadian adoptee wrote in a personal essay, the speeches that Korean government officials make have a strong sense of pride that hides the shame that essentially adoptees were abandoned, rejected, and burdens to their families and country" (Kim 2010, 174). So, in terms of adoption, children are separated from two families; one is their nation, and the other is their biological kin.

These themes of separation are also highlighted in Signe Howell's reflections on her own experience as an adoptive mother. She defines the "process of 'kinning' as universal to all cultures, but more specifically it is the process by which a fetus or a newborn child is brought into a significant or permanent relationship with a group of people" (Howell 2006, 8). But as she points out, kinning does not only refer to babies, but can also be used when studying adoption, for instance when an adoptee is "kinned, they are transformed from unconnected, non-social being to becoming a relational person" (Howell 2006, 8). Kinning not only refers to creating relationships from person to person, but with person to society (Howell 2006, 9). As Korean adoptees are brought into American families, they are kinned with their immediate relations, but

they also become kinned to the larger society that they function within. They learn that they are a part of a larger group that they may share similarities with as far as politics, religion, food preference, etc. To kin a person with another or with society is as Howell wrote, “not a trivial or automatic process, it must be made manifest for the person to become a part of a kinned community” (Howell 2006, 9). Being kinned is an active process, and in the case of adoption, the effort begins with the legal form of kinning. Another process that adoption narratives sometimes leave out are the processes of de-kinning that take place before a child is so-called eligible to be kinned to another family (Howell 2006, 9). The paperwork, transfer of money, time, legal hoops, and most of all the fracturing of the mother and child bond are what make de-kinning possible and what allow for the re-kinning of a child. This behind-the-scenes work that occurs is sometimes glossed over or left out when Korean adoptees are re-kinned in America.

Christina, an adoptee from Seattle who was interviewed by the Wing Luke Museum for an exhibit, recalls how her “parents made her very aware of her adoption, of who she was, and told her right off the bat that she was adopted, but she was given up for a positive reason” (Betts 2004, 1). What was this positive reason that her parents are referring to? Perhaps they are referring to the positive experience that they had due to adopting her, or maybe they thought that she was better off being adopted into the United States instead of staying in South Korea. Whatever the reasons were as to why, they did not expand upon the wording; they chose to leave the circumstances out of the conversation. To her parents, it was more about reassuring her of her status in her new family and creating a new beginning. According to Howell,

Transnational adoption is about making kinship; it is about making significantly kinned sociality when biology fails to do the job. From an ad hoc and sporadic practice, often based on personal relationships and often undertaken in a spirit of charity, it has turned

into a highly organized and regulated practice whose purpose, in most cases, is to provide involuntary infertile couples with the possibility to become a family. Ultimately transnational adoption raises profound questions about inclusion, exclusion, and about belonging (Howell 2006, 34).

Even so, overcoming biology does not mean that kinning is automatic. There were times in which Christina felt her biological differences stick out more. “When I was little I would wonder why my eyes were different from everybody else’s because you know, we ‘got to choose you and adopt you’ kind of thing” (Johnson 2004, 2). The idea of being able to choose a child invokes the gratefulness that adoptees may feel or feel pressured to feel, as well as implying that they are better off now than they would have been. No matter what the reasons were as to why Christina’s parents “chose” her, she still felt like an outsider in her re-kinned society. Which highlight the true limits of kinning.

Looking back, Christina asserted that even “growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood, I don’t think I had much of a problem fitting in, I guess because I was adopted by white parents they didn’t think of me as Asian, you know like, ‘Oh you’re not like the other Asians, you know’ it was never said, but it was always presumed” (Johnson 2004, 2). So even though she is Asian, she felt like she fit in within her family and it was only as she got older and “started learning about Asian American history, and especially Korean history, Korean American history, and expressing interest, was when the trouble came in” (Johnson 2004, 2). As Christina began to explore her position as a Korean adoptee living in America, she began to push against her parent’s understanding of her as a part of the family. She was suddenly asserting herself and “acting too Asian for everyone” (Johnson 2004, 2). She “never had trouble fitting in because she never acted ‘Asian’ or what it would be to act Asian because she didn’t know anything. I didn’t

know Korean culture, or even Chinese culture, or any kind of culture besides what she grew up with” (Johnson 2004, 2). Of course, what she was acculturated to was her kinned family’s culture and the larger society that they functioned within. This whiteness that she was surrounded by was only exacerbated by her parents’ erasure of her Asian-ness. In her parents’ efforts to kin her to their family, they already had prescribed notions of what it meant to fit into the family. When she began to branch out and not act in accordance to her family’s traditions or culture, she became somewhat of an outsider.

Her parents wanted to include her in the family, but focusing on the fact that she was adopted seemed to make it difficult to fit in. Looking back, Christina reflected that, “I knew I was different because it was told to me all the time, like, you know you are adopted, you know you don’t look like the rest of the family” (Johnson 2004, 1). Despite her parents wanting to make it seem like she was a natural part of the family, the full disclosure of her adoption, and keeping her aware of that, may have led to her feeling less a part of it. “It was almost like you were put aside as like a poster child of adoption for the family” (Johnson 2004, 1).

When I interviewed Eric, he had brought his young son along with him, who was still in a stroller and napping when I met him. I asked Eric about his family. He replied, “I have two younger brother that are biologically related to my parents, so I’m the minority in the family. My brothers and I are all two years apart. My younger brothers are closer to each, but I am still pretty close with my youngest brother, I was the first one he called when he got a tattoo” (Proulx 2018). There are the obvious ways in which Eric sticks out from his family, but the more subtle ways are that, “both of my brother are big into football, they actually both went to college playing football. I went to the University of Washington in Seattle, not on football” (Proulx 2018).

Luckily my sisters are both Korean adoptees, but I can see how Eric would feel distinct and awkward about his lack of athletic skills in a family that is very into football.

I can definitely relate to feelings of being singled out amongst the homogeneity of my family. My sisters and I were sometimes asked to put on our traditional *hanboks*, to show off to visiting company. It was more than just wanting to show off the beautiful design of the dresses, and more of pointing out how different we were. So in one sense my parents, like many others, tried to smooth out the seams of difference when creating this new version of family. The fact that I was not biologically from my parents was highlighted many times. Biological kinship is what many people in the U.S. understand as what constitutes familial relationships. “The fact of birth (begotten, conceived and born by whom to whom) has been, and continues, to be the pivotal analytic reference point” (Howell 2006, 37). It is no coincidence that my parents chose to adopt after they discovered they could not conceive naturally, so it makes sense that their ideas of kinship come from an understanding of biological connections. But as Signe Howell points out “adoption is practiced in some form or another in all known societies, and as a social practice it goes to the heart of what we take to be kinship” (Howell 2006, 38). So, the idea of a non-natural child within a family is nothing new nor surprising, since adoptions from Korea have been occurring for over fifty years. “Adoption both challenges and confirms un-reflected notions of relatedness. As a social practice, adoption is meaningless without a biological model for kinship as a reference” (Howell 2006, 38). Both Christina’s parents and my parents have created a new type of family that goes against the 1950s version of a nuclear family in that biological connectedness is essential to creating kinship ties. But in a sense, they are still trying to recreate kinship by assimilating us into American culture within the home and outside. The parents are relying on a symbolic paradigm of standard biogenetic kinship. Howell has studied kinship and

adoption in the context of families and adoptees in Norway, but there are similarities to be found in her research and the experiences that both Christina and I have felt. Howell has noticed during her research that,

Norwegian adoptive parents, as well as adoptees, have a tendency to fluctuate according to context between foregrounding and backgrounding biology and sociality as explanatory models for kinship. However, it is the biological understanding that remains the model for their understanding of the parent-child relationship (Howell 2006, 38).

On one hand it can be said that most families do not focus on the biological differences of their adoptive child in order to create a safe and loving home. But there are instances where the differences may stick out, or where pointing them out may serve another purpose, such as the colorblindness of the adoptive family. There exists an assumption that differences are something to overcome when creating a family and adopting a child from Korea or any other nation, and those parents must be able to overcome this in order to have a family. And this assumption reveals the biological biases that shape Europeans and Americans understanding of what it means to be kin.

In the case of *Cramblett v. Midwest Sperm Bank, LLC*, the understanding of kinship was biologically, racially concerned, as well as dealing with sexual orientation and social class (Lenhardt 2017, 2071). The couple was looking to start a family, one where their child would reflect their skin color, which was white. As a lesbian couple, they were searching for validity from American society in which family is a signal of success (Lenhardt 2017, 2073). Despite both parents “bonding with and loving the child easily,” they felt like their attempt at creating a family was ruined when they discovered that a “white donor’s sperm had been mistakenly replaced with the sperm of an African-American donor” (Lenhardt 2017, 2073). This mixed-race

child did not fit their image of what their family should look like. To them, a similar biological and, obviously, phenotypical connection should have been made between the child and the couple. This case exemplifies the “complex issues of identity, kinship and community about how it involves thinking more deeply and how race informs and structures family life in the 21st century” (Lenhardt 2017, 2074). It also shows the other side of colorblindness and how race and kinship can often be overlooked. R.A. Lenhardt points to the “new kinship” that has arisen in the United States more recently that recognizes “intimate associations, parental relationships, and affective ties that are increasingly forged outside of traditional marriage and amidst dramatic demographic shifts in the family, LGBT rights efforts and the rise in assisted reproductive technologies” (Lenhardt 2017, 2075). The major flaw in this “new kinship” is that it has done so without “engaging in questions of race in any meaningful way and that kinships either old or new are being framed as essentially race-neutral” (Lenhardt 2017, 2075). The *Cramblett* case shows that this is not a reality because to many people, race and kinship are related even if race is ignored within kinships; it is still an aspect that can be brought up in an instant.

Mark Auslander asserts that “the American nuclear family is designed to self-destruct and regenerate from generation to generation” (Auslander 2012, 46). Couples work so hard to build a home for a family, but once the children is born, they do everything to ensure that the separation of child from parent will succeed. Changes are made with every re-generation of a family. In the case of adoption, the structure of the family remains the same, but the child that is introduced is inherently different. This child may merely be a product of economic consumption that Auslander sees as one of the “domestic rituals in which middle-class Americans mediate between two opposing parts of life—work and family” (Auslander 2012, 446). The economic consumption of the adopted child is a signal of success. To be eligible, the couple must be in

good financial status, have good references, want to provide the best for the child, as well as seeing past race. Love is the most important ritual to be conducted. This adoption process is not only the economic consumption of a child, but also can be understood as a ritual that “and to some extent redresses this fundamental tension between love and labor in middle class households” (Auslander 2012, 47). It highlights how “middle-class wage levels have, in principle, been tied to the cultural ideal of home ownership and reproducing a subsequent generation at least at the same socioeconomic level as its antecedents” (Auslander 2012, 47). The ritual of adoption is a stand-in for the “multi-leveled ritual process of birth in modern American society in which the newborn is produced as a social person” (Auslander 2012, 55). The rituals of preparing for birth are to “socially legitimize the mother and her partner to make them a couple and further into a family with the birth of the child” (Auslander 2012, 55). Adoption allows the re-making of the family with similar rituals and preparation for the adoptive child. It also is the re-birth of the adoptee into a white, middle class family; a far contrast to what would have been their experience in Korea.

Teresa, an adoptee who was interviewed by the Wing Luke Asian Museum, remembers that “Our parents would always celebrate the day that my twin sister and I came over and when they picked them up from the airport, or they would celebrate the day they found out they were adopting us” (Betts 2004, 1). In the case of my informant Douglas, his parents had actually filmed his arrival at the airport. To have the tape was a marker of that important occasion for his parents, but one that he did not necessarily share. Both of these celebrations were markers of specific moments in the simulation of the ritual of birth. Except in their case, it was a rebirth. These celebrations are also ways for the parents to acknowledge their entrance into parenthood and their child’s entrance into their new family. Nari recalls “My father was the one more

intimately involved in my adoption since my sister was three, my mother had to stay home while he visited several times before Nari was officially adopted” (Baker 2010, 3). She said that “it took nine months for me to be adopted so it kind of like folded well, timing, with kinda this...I don’t know, manufactured, uh...natural birth, kind of” (Baker 2010, 3).

Economics of Transnational Adoption

How can we begin to see the system of international child adoption as a large economic force? It might be difficult to view the sale of children as a form of commodification, but in reality, that is exactly what it is. Large amounts of money are paid to adopt children from foreign countries including the fees that go to third parties or the go-betweens for the adoption process.

The switch to thinking about children as a commodity can be found in the “emphasis on freedom in forging the relations of adoptive kinship, which is deeply embedded in adoption law.” (Yngvesson 2002) Children must be given away “voluntarily and unconditionally surrendered” and organizations or social workers must make sure that nothing has interfered with the “freedom” of the birth mother to give her consent to relinquish her child. (Yngvesson 2002) The degree that people need to ensure that no form of payment or compensation has taken place to encourage the mother to give up the child serves as a way to influence how people perceive adoption. If people can claim that no child was stolen away from a mother or enticed, then it makes it easier to transfer the child to another parent. “The notion that adoption is not contractual is so powerful that it obscures the extent to which bargaining is intrinsic to a transfer of a child by birthparent in exchange for a promise by adoptive parents or an agency to support and care for the child and thereby relieve the birthparent of these legal duties.” (Yngvesson 2002) Of course there are the other duties that are obligatory when taking on a child such as supporting it to adulthood both financially and emotionally. Despite the guarantee of breaking the legal duties

of the birthparent, the child is still viewed as a piece of property or as a commodity that can be transferred to another. Or it can be viewed as a gift since there are no precedents to repay the giver of the gift back with another one.

One of my informants, Janine, is in the unique position of being a critical scholar of transnational adoption and specifically Korean adoption. Her twin sister and her engage in research, activism, and try to spread awareness of the problematic issues surrounding adoption. As she described her family and growing up, it did not sound too pleasant. “I am adopted and I was adopted with my twin sister. I have two older brothers and the oldest one was a domestic adoption. He was a late discovery of finding out he was adopted. When our parents were divorcing, my dad wrote in a letter to him, you are not my son. My brother was 32 years old when he found out he was adopted. My mom passed away in 1997, when I was young we didn’t get along, I think she had trouble bonding with us” (Myung Ja 2018, 2). As far as now, “My two older brothers, we care for each other, but we don’t have a talking relationship, it’s not even Christmas or Easter. We found our oldest brother homeless in 2004. We were able to find a piece of property for him, and we can help him financially. We want to make sure everyone is okay, that they have their basic needs met (Myung Ja 2018, 3). But as her tone got more quiet and sad, she reflected that her mom and her did not have a strong bond. She feels more of obligations to her family more than anything sentimental, except her twin sister who she talks with every day.

“The combination of freedom to choose (to exit from a parenting relationship that is presumed to be natural and given) and closure (the new relationship is exclusive to other ties) are both dimensions of a global market economy in which commodity thinking defines the meaning of personhood.” (Yngvesson 2002) The child has no say in the matter; they are just a piece of property at that point. The idea that children are priceless and therefore no cost can be associated

with them is false. Clearly monetary terms can be applied to the sale of children, because of black-market, child-trafficking schemes. Children have value either in the labor they can produce or the value of having a child when one does not have one. There is also the emotional labor that goes into having children and the value that comes out of that. “The transferal of a child from one ‘owner’ to another unsettles this relationship of product to producer of a nation to ‘its’ citizens, a parent to ‘its’ child, or a person to his or her nature.” (Yngvesson 2002) But what has caused sending nations of children to stem the outflow, is beginning to think of adoptees as lost profit. Their removal is essentially lost labor and productivity to the nation.

In 1985, Justice Bhabwati, of the Indian Supreme Court, passed a landmark decision in the case *Lakshmi Kant Pandey v. Union of India*. (Yngvesson 2002) He “declared that Indian children were a ‘supremely important national asset’ on which the ‘physical and mental health of the nation is dependent’ and which should be kept, whenever possible, in its nation of origin.” (Yngvesson 2002) This ruling recognized the fact that many Indian children were becoming mere commodities in an export market that thrived off of the adoption of children. (Yngvesson 2002) This ruling voiced the opinion of many critics of transnational adoption. Many see it as a “demand-driven market for babies, from which parents in rich countries benefit at the expense of those in poor countries.” (Breuning 2013) Because there is a demand for babies, “the motivations that drive parents to adopt children, influence the incentive structure of adoption agencies and sending countries.” (Breuning 2013) Many parents in receiving countries want to know that their child has come to them in legal and ethical terms, but that does not mean that the in-between mediators of the adoption transactions are on the same page.

“Attention often focuses on the so-called baby trade, which claims that prospective adoptive parents aim to adopt infants and use intercountry adoption to satisfy their desire for a

child.” (Breuning 2013) But really it is a need or demand that is met by the supply in which “the market is often driven by its customers that in turn feeds corruption: “Unscrupulous go-betweens buy or abduct infants from needy biological parents and sell them to eager adoptive parents.” (Breuning 2013) Most adoption agencies or other adoption organizations do not engage in illegal activities to provide adoptable children and diligently adhere to adoption laws and the Hague Convention. (Breuning 2013) Therefore it “is unlikely to be a strong incentive for agencies to manipulate the legal parameters for arranging adoptions from sending countries when interest in children from that country is limited. However, when there is a very strong interest among prospective parents in a specific sending country, agencies are faced with strong temptations.” (Breuning 2013) So what happens when there is a dip in demand in sending countries that have historically had high numbers of children adopted out to other countries?

Russia, China, and Korea have all had periods of large growth for transnational adoption. Korea sent 6,188 children in 1986, after which the number of adoptees to the United States declined. (Breuning 2013) The reason for the decline was not because of the lack of demand, but for the steady economic growth in South Korea. “The South Korean government has made a move towards a long-promised ending of transnational adoption after 55 years, during which time Korea has been transformed from a war-torn developing country with a population problem to one of the richest countries of the world with one of the lowest fertility rates.” (Selmen 2009) In reaction to this, both Russia and China acted as substitutes to fill the void and supply for the already established demand. (Breuning 2013) This ties into the hypothesis that strong nationalist sentiments affect the rate and willingness of sending countries for transnational adoption.

A Russian politician sponsored a ban of adoptions to the United States and when explaining her reasoning, she stated, “No normal economically developed country gives away

their children, I am a patriot of Russia.” (Efrat 2015) When countries exhibit strong nationalistic rhetoric, they tend to not send large amounts of children to other countries for adoption and therefore prospective parents will not be eager to deal with adoption processes within the sending country. (Efrat 2015) South Korea is an example of a country that has ties with the United States through the Korean War, which has led to a relationship that has lasted from the ends of Japanese colonization to the present. While there are strong nationalist sentiments in South Korea and strong emphasis on bloodlines and ethnic purity, the country has been the stage for hundreds of thousands of adoptions, especially with the United States as the receiving country. This history helps support the idea that “prospective parents’ own familiarity with the sending country also affects the magnitude of transaction costs. Parents with a good cultural or legal understanding of the country, language fluency and local contacts can more readily navigate sending country rules.” (Efrat 2015)

Because the United States and South Korea have a friendly relationship and a history of one of the largest systems of transnational adoption, most American prospective parents would feel more comfortable with the culture and intercountry agencies would already have established guidelines in place to make it easier for parents to adopt. (Efrat 2015) “Prospective parents also prefer to adopt from countries with lower transaction costs and a higher probability of successful completion of adoptions” like South Korea. (Efrat 2015) “The US State Department’s guidance for prospective parents further illustrates that the costs, duration, and likelihood of a successful adoption are central considerations” which is telling because the adoption tax credit shows how the United States encourages adoptions, but also indicates how costs can be high for parents. (Efrat 2015) But why are prospective parents worried about costs, since the typical prospective parent is Caucasian, middle-class, and college educated?

Adopted children typically come from poorer and less developed countries or transition economies to richer nations like the United States. (Hogbacka 2008) According to Hogbacka, the “adoption of children is independent from the demand, but if you look closer, global inequities and extreme poverty are common factors and other factors like the development of global markets, economic liberalization and privatization have had a clear adverse effect on the well-being of women and children.” (Hogbacka 2008) “The structural imbalance between demand and supply in transnational adoption results in the paradoxical situation of adoptive parents queuing and waiting for long periods for ‘adoptable’ children, while at the same time there are certainly lots of children in institutions.” (Hogbacka 2008) Critics and supporters can all agree though, that the system of transnational adoption is “self-perpetuating” in that the structures are already there, as well as the supply and demand, so it really is up to countries and laws to “regulate the market elements” (Hogbacka 2008).

There are many driving factors for prospective parents when considering transnational adoption, but it really comes down to transaction costs and the historic ties and willingness of sending countries that already have systems in place to support adoption and prospective parents. There are clearly inequalities that surround the reasons why certain countries send children and others receive them, but it is the duty of the agencies and governments to look out for ethical issues. It is important for prospective parents to be conscious and smart ‘consumers’ when considering transnational adoption and to consider the negative externalities of the physical labor of a woman that goes into their ability to procure a child in the first place.

This last two chapters have provided a foundation for further examination of Korean adoptees’ experiences. The American family is at the heart of where ideas of kinship, support, behaviors, and expectations come from. The adoptee passes through the liminal stage, barely

recognizing it has happened. The re-birth of the Korean child is celebrated with new rituals surrounding the arrival of the child into their new home. In the next chapter, we move within the family and outside of it, hearing stories of racism and misunderstandings, weird looks, and hurtful comments. We also hear about how adoptees deal with situations of racism and whether or not they even feel as though they encounter it at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RACE AND RACISM

So where are you from? No, where are you from?

“In no particular order, I have been called: Korean. Orphan. Adoptee. American. Asian American. Slant-Eyes. Flat-Nose. Christian. Shy Kid. Good at drawing. Nail biter. Oriental girl with really long hair. Tom Boy. Honor Student. Piano Student. Potty Mouth. Model Minority. Dyke. Faggot. Drag King. Punk. But before I was any of these things, I was a number. K77-1383 was my case number.”

Darius X, “The Pastor’s Kid,”

Essay from *The “Unknown” Culture Club: Korean Adoptees, Then and Now*

Recently I was attending an Asian adoptee dialogue series in Seattle and all the adoptees were going around sharing our stories of racism and derogatory stereotypes we have encountered over the years. Many of us could recall having people ask us, “Where are you from?” They expected us to say something other than Seattle. In their frustration, they would always ask again in hopes of reaching a more satisfying answer, like Korea. I personally have had so many encounters of racist comments and questions that are often times meant to be harmless, but still alarming to handle. For instance, when I was working at Starbucks Coffee Company as a barista, a very sweet, older man asked me if my family was okay. This was a day or two after the 2011 tsunami in Japan. I replied, “Yes, as far as I know, since they live in Bellevue.” I laughed it off. I can understand that it was coming from a place of concern, but he was making a very large

assumption. More recently I was looking through my Facebook page and came across a post about dogs that were rescued from crates that were going to be shipped for meat purposes. As I scrolled down the comments, I came across several that were explicit in their content. One commenter said something like, “We should have dropped all the bombs on the chink assholes.” Other racist comments about Asians in general were made. Stunned and trying to grasp what I had just read, I thought about how many of my peers, friends, and family have never come across such vitriol as that. White people do not have the same experiences to draw from and cannot fathom what it feels like. Sure, it wasn’t directed at me personally, but I still feel the sting of it because I realize that people make these generalizations about me and other Koreans and Asian minorities based on the way we look. I could go on about the many times I have experienced racist comments and weird looks, but what good does that do besides get me fired up to go on a long tirade? What is more constructive is to listen to others who have felt similar jeers and taunts and let others know this is real and still happens. How can parents, friends, and peers be more supportive to Korean adoptees, who are basically growing up in white homes, but who look different and who will most likely experience racism that their parents do not know how to empathize with or perhaps talk about with their children?

Janine, who had traveled to Korea back in 2004 recalled that her dad asked, “Why would you do that? You’re white, just like me” She replied, “No I’m not, I’m Korean” Her father’s response was, “Well why would you want to be Korean, you are white like me” (Myung Ja 2018, 5). “There was a total lack of understanding and the mentality that we were raised with. A colorblind family, we were worth something if you were blinded to your race” (Myung Ja 2018, 5). Experiences like this will not happen to every Korean adoptee, but they are definitely a common thread that many live through as they navigate environments that are predominately

white. Christina Johnson tells of a “time in high school when most of her friends were white and they would tell me, you know, ‘Stop acting so Asian’ and I’m like ‘How could Asian not be what I am?’- well, being Asian is not a fad or a trend—it’s not this mask that you can put on it’s just who you are and I don’t think my friends liked that I was starting to become different from them” (Johnson 2004, 3). This inclusion into a group that had no diversity led to the erasure of Christina’s Korean-ness. When she started to claim her position as an Asian, her friends began to push back in discomfort.

This sort of passive colorblindness approach has happened to me many times. My own parents have even said to me that they do not see me as Korean or Asian. Before I began to see racism as something that I could acknowledge happening to me, I used to think that my experiences of racism were just weird or funny because my parents would just laugh it off or disregard it. There is definitely a gap in our relationship that we don’t have the vocabulary or shared experiences to talk about, particularly moments of passive or active racism. In a study about “Korean American adoptive families, it was reported that parents over assumed discriminatory treatment towards their children as infrequent and harmless” (Nelson 2016, 111). The other aspect of parents not fully understanding the racism that their children face is the colorblindness that many parents employ. “There is a popular understanding that colorblindness is inherently antiracist, but parent’s commitment to the colorblind ideal prevented them from being able to identify racism beyond superficial name-calling” (Nelson 2016, 112). Because I grew up with two Korean adopted sisters, we were able to lean on each other when we encountered racist situations and name-calling. “Even when parents were open to hearing about the racial issues that their adopted Korean children faced, several adoptees were, they said, reluctant to tell their parents about these problems or avoid discussing them, believing that their

parents will not be able to help them” (Nelson 2016, 113). We never talked to our parents about our encounters with racism and still feel hesitant in thinking about broaching the wider topic of race and racism. There is just a feeling that they won’t understand and will be shocked and saddened that it happened and that we never spoke to them about it. As for Gabe, an adoptee from Kim Park Nelson’s ethnographic study, “he recalls how his mom was always surprised to hear that people made fun of him because he was Asian, he never told his parents or made a big deal out of it because they would’ve called the school district and made a huge deal out of it” (Nelson 2016, 113). When she later found out that he had been experiencing this throughout his childhood, “her response reinforced Gabe’s belief that his decision not to tell her had been the correct one” (Nelson 2016, 113). After finding out that he had experiences of racism, she said, “Well why didn’t you say something?” (Nelson 2016, 113). Her response makes him inadvertently responsible for the racism he experienced. There are also “parents that knew about racist incidents” that their children encountered, “but still refused to see them as a person of color” which is equally as damaging to the adoptee’s understanding of their racial or ethnic identity (Nelson 2016, 112). Adoptees like Gabe and I, are not only shielding our white parents from our encounters of racism, but we are also protecting ourselves from being let down and having our experiences not acknowledged as important. “White parents potential to mismanage a responses to racism, adoptees can avoid being disappointed in their parents, and avoid further trauma to themselves” (Nelson 2016, 114). Which as Kim Park Nelson points out, adoptive parents are then “allowed to believe that they, and their children, can live in a world free of racial conflict” (Nelson 2016, 112).

For Lee, one of the adoptees I interviewed reflected upon growing up in New Mexico and being exposed to mostly whites and Hispanics. “I didn’t feel Asian at all even though I looked

Asian I felt that I didn't fit the part of a typical Asian person" (Derks 2018, 1). "I didn't know how to use chopsticks and I never ate rice as a primary dish for example, it's like these stereotypical qualities of Asians" (Derks 2018, 1). To be Asian, Lee had to refer to the stereotypes of Asians. Without having an Asian family, friends, and community, he did not know what Asian looked like. As I was interviewing him, he recalled being "in elementary school and the kids picked on me 'cause I was the only Asian in the entire school and so they always made fun because my eyes were slanted and big, big ears and stuff" (Derks 2018, 1). After he shared that, I replied, "For sure, I got that a lot too growing up. Did you ever hear that, like, saying, 'Chinese, Japanese...' (Derks 2018, 1)? I didn't even have to finish the rest of the phrase, he already knew what I was referring to and replied, "...Yeah, exactly. I hated that" (Derks 2018, 1). The phrase or rhyme I was referring to goes "Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these," all the while, the person reciting the rhyme would use their fingers to pull their eyes out and up to resemble the almond shaped eyes of many Asians. Growing up in predominately white areas, getting looks from others is common. "At first, 'cause I was adopted, people would always look at me and my mom and think, like, 'Is this boy really her son?' We would get questioned all the time for that. Especially in New Mexico it's very rare to see an Asian child with a white female" (Derks 2018, 2). That was one of my biggest insecurities when I was younger, having people not know I was related to my family and asking me if my mom was really my mom or asking how we were related. It was this fear that I did not belong and that someone would figure it out. For Lee, because he was living in these white spaces and feeling uncomfortable, there was no way for him to vocalize to his mom how he felt, even if she felt uncomfortable with the stares and questions. Her experiences would in no way equate to his awareness of his racial differences. Ultimately, his race and ethnicity were at the root of those moments of awkwardness.

To further expand on ideas of colorblindness, some parents take the approach of “looking beyond skin color as a way to reduce prejudice, but in some cases, the parents really do not see their adoptive child as a member of another race” (Crolley-Simic and Vonk 2011, 173) Because my parents do not see me as Asian or Korean and just see me as a daughter, I have in some ways internalized this concept of colorblindness. I see myself as Korean on the outside, but with the brain and experiences of someone who is very much white. The fact that I do not see this as a problem or somewhat confusing, shows how the deletion of my race has seeped so deeply into my own understanding of who I am. Debra, an adoptive mother who was interviewed for a study on reflections of white international adoptive mothers, said “I don’t see my daughter as Asian very much. She is just my daughter. She is a part of my family.... For all practical purposes, though she’s not Asian she is an American kid. She is growing up here and I am not Asian” (Crolley-Simic and Vonk 2011, 173). This deletion of her daughter’s race is not just a perspective, but also a frame for how she interacts with and relates to her daughter. Another mother whose adopted child is African-American “downplayed race yet valued her child’s exposure to persons of color” (Crolley-Simic and Vonk 2011, 173). She recognized her child was African-American, but it was on her terms and her child’s race was easily disregarded most of the time, except when she wanted to expose her child to her co-workers.

He doesn’t know that many African American adults except the ones that I work with.

They are not stereotypical ghetto blacks. I show him that these are good people and they are just like us. Without actually saying it out loud, because to say it out loud you are pointing out differences (Crolley-Simic and Vonk 2011, 173).

Her child’s interaction with persons of color was on her own terms, limiting the child’s engagements to only those Black people that she felt would be a good influence or role model.

The mother also was hesitant to say outright the racial differences that were obvious in fear of pointing it out. But when you think about it, why would she be fearful of acknowledging her child's race, since she sought out African-American co-workers who she thought could expose her child to the "right" kind of behaviors. It is almost though she is scared of her child's race, but downplays race when it is convenient. She is scared that her child has the potential to become "ghetto" given her racist comment. She wants her child to be black on her own, white terms. Of course, the child most likely was aware of their different race and the lack of straightforwardness of the mother could be seen as affecting their own racial or ethnic identity. Her statement also reveals her own racial discrimination and views of African Americans, which seems consistent with the tacit biases of mainstream American constructions of whiteness.

The best-intentioned parents who acknowledge that racism is real or have a colorblind approach to parenting are only one part of the larger family that a child may operate within. Just because parents adopt a child of another race, doesn't mean that they will be met with open arms from extended family members. Many adoptees "reported name calling outside the family or racist incidents that arose during family arguments or debates" (Nelson 2016, 112). Eric, an adoptee that I spoke to, recalled his two brothers, who are biologically related to his adoptive parents telling him to go back to Asia where he came from (Proulx 2018, 4). This happened whenever they got in fights especially during elementary school. When he told his brothers about it later on as grown-ups, they were completely horrified that they had even said that (Proulx 2018, 4). It is funny now, but I can only imagine what it felt like to hear that as a child.

Even if racist remarks were not meant specifically for the adoptee, some have mentioned that racist remarks meant for others was distressing to them. Erin, an adoptee that was part of Park Nelson's ethnographic work, "recalls an experience with her uncle, which has contributed

to her estrangement from her family in which he said ‘I still don’t have a problem calling people gooks and niggers’” (Nelson 2016, 112). This experience exposed the internal racism with Erin’s extended family that led to her separation from them. My father has family in the South and has mentioned that he was not close to them because of their close mindedness and racism and was pretty sure they would not have been accepting of him having Korean children. I consider my parents to be pretty accepting, but they have definitely said things that are racist about other ethnic groups without even realizing how I might respond because of my ethnicity. Family members and “parents’ colorblindness allows them to harness racist feelings toward persons or groups external to the family, seemingly without directly violating immediate family members” (Nelson 2016, 113).

Another way in which parents’ views or ideas of race can affect their children are the ways they talk about their own experiences with Korean culture, people, or food. Barb, an adoptee interviewed by Park Nelson, “remembers how her parents never spoke to her about Korean culture, no Korean food, language, or anything” (Nelson 2016, 113). The parents’ lack of exposure and knowledge about Korean culture led to them not introducing or promoting Barb’s ties with anything Korean. “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” (Nelson 2016, 113). Her father’s negative experience with Korean food most likely shaped her views on Korean food in general, therefore making her less likely to want to try it at all. Her father’s reaction most likely made her avoid Korean or Asian food, as well as anything Korean, because of her father’s negative experience with Korean food. This may even have induced negative feelings about herself because of her Korean heritage.

Food can be seen as way to connect oneself to their birth culture. Lee sees food as one of many signifiers that someone is Asian. He takes pride in his “passion for eating and trying new restaurants all the time with his Asian friends” (Derks 2018, 3). Food to Lee, is “a huge component of being Asian as well as having a tight family bond, taking interest in Asian news, and having interest in what’s going on in Korea and China” (Derks 2018, 2). In Kim Park Nelson’s ethnography on Korean adoptees, she noticed that many of them “grew up with having little contact with other people of color and that their racial isolation began at home since out of the sixty-six adoptees that participated in her study, only two were not adopted by white couples” (Nelson 2016, 116). Luckily, I have two sisters who are also Korean adoptees, so at least we had each other. But for some adoptees who have siblings that are biologically related to their adoptive parents, there is the potential for further isolation.

Kim Park Nelson noticed that among the adoptees she spoke with, many of them “described a number of coping strategies to deal with racialization either ignoring racist comments or situations, or others who worked against it” (Nelson 2016, 114). Park Nelson interviewed Wendy, an actor. She would commonly come across roles that were meant for Asians, but both Wendy and her casting agent chose to seek out roles where race was not explicit. This sprung from the “racist casting she was exposed to early on and discovering the phenomenon of ‘white assumed,’ meaning a role that is not specifically designated racially, it is meant for a white actor, even if the roles where race is in no way a part of the characterization” (Nelson 2016, 115). As an adoptee, perhaps she didn’t encounter any issues with her race until she began to see patterns in her career choice, where white actors were given more leading or supporting roles than minorities. Instead of letting this be the end of her career, she subverted the

typical casting calls and went to audition for roles that she knew were most likely meant for white actors, though race was never written into the descriptions.

In Park Nelson's ethnographic study on Korean adoptees, Adam said that he had worked against "the racial stereotype that all Asians know martial arts and used it to his benefit. He used this skill to short-circuit racist incidents at school" (Nelson 2016, 115). Even though he recalled never having to deal with racism in school, he thinks it might have to do with a presentation he made in one of his classes. "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" (Nelson 2016, 115). The show of power and strength no doubt deterred people from picking on him, but other adoptees take a more active role in ensuring no one picks on them. For Kye, also interviewed by Park Nelson, his encounter with racism came from some of his friends.

They were joking what our (referring to Kye and his white girlfriend) babies would look like. And of course they were doing this kind of thing (makes hand motion, stretching out his eyes), and I just kinda go up to them, "What is that?" 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 was stretching out his eyes (Nelson 2016, 115).

As a kid I never did that in response, but I did pull my eyes open wider, to emulate white people when they were teasing me about my slant eyes. The racist experiences that Korean adoptees come across happen every day and can happen at any place. For me, they always catch me off-guard because I do not go about my day constantly reminding myself that I look different than other people. For instance, I was sitting in the Japanese garden at my university, eating lunch with my friend, who is white, and two young men pass by pretending to take pictures (or perhaps

actually taking pictures). One whispered “They’re in their natural habitat.” I did not say anything at that point, but later on I vented to my friend about it and she was shocked. It had never occurred to her that they were referring to an Asian person sitting in the Japanese garden as being “in their natural habitat.” She just saw it as two young men being weird and young. Some people might say that is over assuming or that I am being too sensitive, perhaps they are right, but it still made me feel angry. I don’t like that racism creeps up on me when I am just going about my life, it feels like a very rude interruption that can send my mood from good to worse in an instant. An adoptee (who we’ll say is named Jess) whom I met at an adoptee event, revealed her recent experience at the airport. She flies a lot for her job, which has earned her the status of boarding first. As she was waiting in line to board, a lady bumped into her and said “Excuse me” several times. But Jess did not hear her. The lady mumbled under her breath that Jess most likely didn’t speak English and finally asked Jess what she was doing in the line. She further explained that preferred customers get to board first, but everyone else has to wait. Jess replied back that she knew that, and that she was in fact a preferred customer who was in line to board first. The lady grumbled some more but did not apologize to Jess. This sort of experience completely caught Jess off-guard because she speaks English and considers herself American. Her day was ruptured by this rude interaction with another person who judged her based on her outward appearance.

This particular case was explicitly racist, but other times these experiences are what critical race theorists call micro-aggressions (Oluo 2018, 169). As Ijeoma Oluo explains in her book, for people who don’t receive racist remarks, a way for them to understand micro-aggressions is to put it in other terms, like “a hypercritical parent who says ‘Nice to see you are finally trying’ or ‘That’s a lovely dress, I can’t even see how much weight you’ve gained’ which

both comments may seem harmless on the surface” (Oluo 2018, 168). These quick remarks may seem harmless, but at the root, they are very damaging. “Micro-aggressions are small (hence the “micro”) and can be easily explained away. It is very easy to dismiss a small offense as a misunderstanding or simple mistake,” which is what many Korean adoptees do. If I took offense to every micro-aggression, I would probably lose my mind. Other adoptees that I spoke to at the last Asian adoptee event said similar things; that they could not acknowledge racism all the time because it takes so much energy. They felt that if they let it get to them too much, they would end up either a very angry or a very depressed person. What is most harmful about micro-aggressions is that they “are cumulative, on their own, each doesn’t seem like a big deal, but just like one random bee sting might not be a big deal, a few random bee stings every day of your life will definitely have an impact on your life” (Oluo 2018, 169). Many times I just let these moments pass. For one, they catch me off-guard so I don’t know how to respond quickly. Also, it takes too much energy to get worked up about it. Awhile back I was visiting my husband at work and this white guy was trying to get my attention and finally he spoke loud enough that I heard him and said hello. He was very friendly, but then he said “What are you, Chinese, Japanese?” and I just responded back, out of habit I guess, that I was actually Korean. And then he went on to say “That’s great, my wife is Thai. I should get you in touch with her. She keeps saying that there are no Asians here, but I keep telling her there are.” I just smiled back and said I had to go somewhere and left. “Micro-aggression are constant reminders that you do not belong, that you are less than, that you are not worthy of the same respect that white people are afforded. They keep you off balance, keep you distracted, and keep you defensive. They keep you from enjoying an outing on the town or a day at the office” (Oluo 2018, 172). Ijeoma’s description of how

micro-aggressions “keep you off balance” is a great way of explaining how I felt in this moment, I just went to go see my husband at work and instead was met with questions and stares.

Racism is not always derogatory, especially for Asian Americans. Stereotypes of “hardworking, financially and academically successful, quiet, serious,” and so forth are still harmful though (Oluo 2018, 191). Oluo admits that in America, many people, including her, view race through the black-white dichotomy (Oluo 2018). Other minorities are often left out of the conversation because the racism that is directed at other minorities is seen as less harmful than what many Americans think of Blacks. Asian-American minorities have experienced racism and violence against them only fifty years ago. There are still remnants of the extremely racist and damaging remarks that plagued Asians. It was not until the late-sixties that less vulgar terms were used to describe Asians. “Originally coined in 1966 by sociologist William Peterson to profile the socioeconomic success of Japanese Americans, the ‘model minority’ myth has grown to become a collection of stereotypes that present them as the ideal minority group in the eyes of white supremacy” (Oluo 2018, 193). Some people may not see that being considered hard working or good at math is a bad thing, but it is for all the different cultures and ethnicities that fall under the monolithic category “Asian-American.” We are not all the same, nor is the model minority myth without harm.

I remember moving the year before I began fourth grade to a school that had split-grade classes. I was placed in a fourth and fifth grade classroom where children’s math levels were definitely higher than mine. I remember being embarrassed because I did not know my multiplication tables that well, but it was assumed that I did and that I was just being shy. I really wish I was good at math, like the stereotype of the Asian math whiz, but I am not good at it. But

peoples' assumptions that I am led my math skills to slip without notice, which is not uncommon for other Asian minorities to experience issues like this.

Studies have shown, many K-12 educators believe that Asian American students need less academic resources to succeed, they often face lower acceptance rates to colleges and universities because they are seen as 'overrepresented' in higher education, and the stereotype that Asian Americans excel at math and science discourages students from pursuing careers in the arts and humanities (Oluo 2018, 196).

Even if you get to college, your success can often be discounted because of your Asian-American identity. It is assumed that you did not have to work hard to get where you are because academic success comes easy to you.

Stereotypes go beyond the usual model minority myth into ones that are specific to gender. Asian women are seen as "docile and subservient" or exotic and can become fetishized (Oluo 2018, 198). "Between 41 and 61 percent of Asian American women will be physically or sexually abused by their partners in their lifetime—twice the national average for all women" (Oluo 2018, 198). My own mother has even said that she thinks that, in the past, my white boyfriends, and even now my white husband, must be attracted to me because I must seem exotic or exciting somehow. This is problematic, not just because my mom thinks that is driving factor in why men are attracted to me, but it immediately sexualizes Asian women and connects back to the many Asian women that were forced into sexual labor before and during the Korean War. On the other side of that coin, Asian male sexuality is often de-emphasized. They are seen as lacking sexual identity, which most likely translates to the workplace. "In a 2011 study, it showed that Asian Americans made up only 1.4 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs and 1.9 percent of all corporate positions, and 63 percent of Asian American men reported feeling 'stalled' in their careers"

(Oluo 2018, 197). My oldest sibling has repeatedly said that she is not attracted to Asian men. She never dated any Asian guys. My younger sister and I dated Asian men in the past, though we ended up marrying white men. I think we were all brought up thinking these hurtful stereotypes about Asian males and thinking that they would not be adequate romantic partners. In a way I think that we were also placing some of that dislike onto Asian men, when it was really aimed at ourselves feeling inadequate and not white.

Unfortunately, the realities for many Korean adoptees—and other adoptees that are racially and ethnically different from their adoptive families—are that we will face racism throughout our lives. We will deal with it in varying ways, but to say that it doesn't affect us all deeply would be incorrect. As Korean adoptees, we are brought into families that are predominately white. We grow up and live in white areas and go out into a world that is extremely racialized. By the point many of us reach adulthood, we have already experienced micro-aggressions over and over and some of us have experienced visceral and extreme forms of racism. But as an adoptee, you are commonly operating under the pretense that you are American, you are perhaps white, you do benefit from your family's economic and social status, you have privileges that other Asian Americans are not afforded. If you have a white-sounding name, people will be expecting a white person when they meet you. It is like you were reborn in America within a bubble of whiteness that is slowly punctured, as you grow older. Some of us are lucky enough to not have the bubble punctured, or some do not realize the bubble is getting holes, some of us patch it up with tape, and others burst the entire bubble and build a new one. As many adoptees have stated, their parents', families', and friends' understanding of racism and how to talk about it can affect the ways the adoptees deal with confronting racism. The colorblind approach is not helpful for adoptees and further isolates them and prevents their

parents from acknowledging their child's race. It seems that breaking free from people who do not acknowledge or harbor racist ideas and stereotypes about minorities are some of the ways that Korean adoptees can avoid racism. But ultimately having conversations with people may be more helpful. The problem is that after already enduring micro-aggressions or full out racism, adoptees may not be in the mood to have a conversation that turns into a teachable moment. Do you really want to be the one to have a conversation about race in America, white privilege, the model minority myth, and so on? Most likely the task seems exhausting. So really this task should be put to everyone.

In the next chapter, we discuss identity. The title of the chapter is *Hyphen or No Hyphen*, meaning that many times, Korean adoptees experience different and often times, flexible identities. Based off of the situation and people they interact with, different identities or behaviors, language, clothes, may play a part. Adoptees may even construct an identity that does not fall in the expected categories of what we might think. Can a Korean adoptee identify as white?

CHAPTER NINE

IDENTITY

Hyphen Or No Hyphen

“I’m not really proud of being Korean. And I’m not particularly proud of being adopted. Or even American. I’m proud of being myself and raising my daughter and being an okay mom at least most of the time.”

Patty Sang, *Becoming Real*,

Essay from *The “Unknown” Culture Club: Korean Adoptees, Then and Now*

If I am Korean, then why do I feel white? This is probably a question that pops up for Korean adoptees at least some point in their lives. We are raised by white parents and are surrounded by white family members and most likely friends. As adoptees, our origin story is something that always looms in the background. Some have more information than others, even a Korean name, but many have very little to that connects them to Korea except the way they look.

As stated before in an earlier chapter, Lee said that he did not feel Asian, most likely because of the environment in which he grew up. He states that it was not until meeting his wife that he truly “embraced Asian for the past 13 years he has been married” he finally “feels the Asian qualities that include having close families, very close ties, having respect for elders, there’s also understanding history and taking Korean language classes at Bellevue College” (Derks 2018, 2). Lee was lucky to be selected for a free trip back to Korea with the sole purpose to find out more about his Korean background and to see if he could find any of his blood

relatives. His desire to feel more of a connection to his Korean roots sprung out of an unlikely place,

...Talk shows in the mid-nineties like Maury Povich, Ricki Lake, and every now and then they'd have these specials of finding biological parents for adoptive kids and I'd watch these and I think to myself like I know I don't have any family 'cause that's what my parents told me, but just what if there is someone out there for me and so I started to question it and it came to the point that I actually wrote to the Maury Povich show (Derks 2018, 8).

Despite being told much of his youth that he didn't have any family back in Korea, he later found out that his origin story had some missing information. Instead of thinking that "I had been abandoned at a police station and didn't have a name, birthdate, or any history, I was actually was not abandoned, I have a Korean name, I have a real birthdate, and actually have family in Korea" (Derks 2018, 8). The mystery of "what if" that surrounded his adoption story was something that always haunted him. Coming to terms with the fact that he had originally had two brothers, one sister, and a father (who was overwhelmed when his mother left with only a vague explanation that she could not handle taking care of so many kids) was mind-blowing (Derks 2018, 15). Lee's older sister had been struggling to take care of her three younger brothers, but her father decided to put all three sons up for adoption (Derks 2018, 15). He then was able to take two of his sons out of the adoption system, but wasn't able to do so in time to get Lee back (Derks 2018). The discovery that Lee had a family in Korea—and one that really wanted him, but lost him—is something that he was ecstatic about at first, but "depressed to think about" later on (Derks 2018, 16). "The story is that he (Lee's father) had too much guilt in giving away his son so he drank a lot and eventually died very shortly after putting us up for adoptions" (Derks

2018, 16). That would be hard for anyone to live with, but what Lee struggles with are the “what-if scenarios, what if he got me out of the adoption system like what would I be doing” (Derks 2018, 16). He sees how “my siblings in Korea are living happy lives in Jincheon, his sister and her husband operate an interior decorating store and have children, his younger brother is single and works for his uncle making windows, and his older brother lives in assisted living due to a motorcycle accident that occurred when he was eighteen” Lee thinks about how he could be living a whole life in Korea if he had not been adopted and who is to say that it would be worse. “Content is good, especially if you don’t know what else, I probably would not be in the IT field or as successful as I am here, I’d probably just be really content in the small town with a Korean wife, I wouldn’t have the luxuries that I have here... But there is nothing for certain to say I wouldn’t maybe I would have done really well in school and moved to Seoul, I don’t know” (Derks 2018, 17-18). As Lee and I were talking, he mentioned that after he went to visit his sister in Korea, one of the biggest things that was pointed out to him was how American he looked. At that point in the interview, Lee opened his photo gallery on his phone and showed me a picture of him, taken shortly after his visit to his family in Korea. His sister and family members had teased him about his hair and his clothes. So, in order to fit in more with Korean styles, he got his hair permed. As he showed me the picture of him with his wavy, longer hair, I could definitely see how he looked more Asian, it wasn’t a typical hairstyle you might see in America. It was a style I have seen many Korean male pop stars and Korean drama stars embrace. As we laughed about his picture, Lee then mentioned other ways that he felt more connected to his Asian and Korean culture through material expressions of his identity. As he mentioned before, the consumption of Asian food was a big part of being Asian, as well as taking interest in Korean history, language, and sports such as the Olympics. Since he is married

to a Chinese American woman, he roots for both China and Korea. Yet after explaining how he has really taken a liking to his Asian-ness with the exposure to Chinese culture from his wife and her parents, he feels like he is distinctly Asian-American with an emphasis on American. (Derks 2018, 3). He did mention that he feels like both his Asian and American identities are flexible, in the “professional workspace I am 100% American and then when I am at home, I am definitely more Asian” (Derks 2018, 4). One of the reasons he feels more Asian at home is because currently his wife’s parents are living with them and they are first-generation Chinese with limited English-speaking skills. Lee says, “You just come home and it just feels like you’re kind of transformed from an American home to a Chinese home, cause they’re always taking care of us in terms of doing stuff around the house, making sure we are always fed, cooking for us, and making sure we never have to do anything extra that would make us tired” (Derks 2018, 4). He contrasts this to how it is living in an American home where “you never want to live with your parents, you visit them maybe once a month or whenever the holidays are. I think that in American culture the family unit is very different, you are meant to separate from your parents versus in Asian culture, parents want to live with the kids as long as they can and for the most part the kids want to live with their parents” (Derks 2018, 4). Despite these changes towards a more Asian home, Lee feels like his American and Asian identities are equal. He does not prefer one over the other and can easily switch back and forth, although sometimes he wishes he could have more of an American home and not be bothered by his in-laws and have more space between them (Derks 2018, 5).

Other ways in which he feels more American is when he goes to Asian grocery stores. “I can’t stand going there, ’cause it smells, it’s super crowded, and I just feel like people just walk around without any action plan. There are just meandering, they’re just stopping, I’m like, get

out of my way” (Derks 2018, 6). As he described this scenario, I could recall my own experiences going into Asian grocery stores and being shocked about all the weird food and smells. Because both Lee and I identify heavily with our American-ness and because we are only used to American grocery stores, we have a cultural dislike to Asian grocery stores. But it goes further than that. We are not only judging the food and smells, we are also judging the people and their behavior. We might see the place as dirty, stinky, full of people with no manners, and people who do not care about personal space. We are also seeing a reflection of ourselves that tell us that we are uncomfortable with our Asian-ness.

When he began dating as a teenager in New Mexico, he “always wanted to date the ‘American girl,’ so blonde hair and blue eyes that never happened cause like I felt like there were girls, but they never really wanted to date a short Asian guy” (Derks 2018, 7). In this case he felt American on the inside, but his Asian outward appearance prevented him from dating the stereotypical white girl (which is problematic in itself.) As he got older and was in college, he wanted to date Asian girls, but then he felt that he was too American and felt uncomfortable and intimidated (Derks 2018, 7). He even “joined a Korean group in college, they were really friendly, they invited me out to their houses for Christmas parties and stuff. I never went because they’d be taking part in like traditional Korean activities, I always felt like an outsider cause like I don’t know what to do at a Korean Christmas party, like I don’t know what food to bring and that kind of stuff” (Derks 2018, 7). It seems like Lee is comfortable with his Asian and American identity. Although from what I could tell, he is more at home with an Asian identity that is not specifically Korean. His lack of exposure to Korean people and culture early on in his life has affected his dating choices, food and shopping choices, and confidence to be around Korean people that are not adopted. His discovery of his Korean past and family have brought him closer

to them, as well as learning more about Korean holidays, clothing styles, hairstyles, and customs, but being married to his wife, who is Chinese, has seemed to have more of an effect on his identity as an Asian American. He has had more exposure to Chinese culture, food, language, family dynamics, and so forth. It took marrying his wife for him to truly embrace his Asian-ness and to solidify the areas of his life where he clearly identifies as American.

Another adoptee that I interviewed, who had similar feelings of being fully-Americanized was Cassidy. “One of five total sisters, I was put up for adoption because my father’s mother wanted the family to have a son and was very traditional; since I was a girl, I could not work on the family farm” (Davis 2018, 1). Cassidy had a sister that was born after her, but died early and most likely would have been put up for adoption as well. Since coming to America at three months old, she has grown up in two small, native villages in Alaska. Cassidy attributes that to her identity: Not only was she an only child living with two white parents, but she was a minority twice over because, “In Barrow, Alaska, whites were also a minority (among Alaskan natives)” (Davis 2018, 1). “Barter Island was smaller than Barrow, which was also more ethnically diverse with a large Filipino population and I identified with being around other Asians or people of Asian descent, so that was helpful” (Davis 2018, 1). As far as Cassidy’s parents’ attempts to expose her to Korean culture, “there was a janitor that was Korean and they asked him if he could maybe teach me Korean or interact with me in some sort of Korean capacity, but he wasn’t interested in it at the time. So, my parents tried to, but they were very limited as far as where they were living” (Davis 2018, 2). Even though they were living in smaller towns with constrained resources for Korean culture exposure, Cassidy’s parents were nonetheless open and positive when speaking with her about her adoption and why she looked different. They were aware that she might benefit from an introduction to anything Korean.

When I asked Cassidy how she would identify herself as perhaps Korean American, Asian American or White American, she replied, “I would honestly identify myself as primarily...I don’t really know. I feel like, I more recently got in touch with my birth family about three years ago so I feel like I’ve had the opportunity to really immerse myself with Korean culture, but I’ve actively sought it out.... All of my extended family is white, I’ve only ever dated white men, most of my friends are white, so do be completely honest, I feel like I identify as essentially being white with a Korean exterior” (Davis 2018, 3) The question of her identity was something that Cassidy had not dwelled on. Even as she answered, she seemed like she was just coming to her conclusion. I asked her if she thought that she benefitted from white privilege. She answered that she most likely benefits from class privilege. “I grew up in a pretty affluent family, we never went without, my college was paid for, I think because of that I have been afforded a lot of opportunities that other people who have not have had that situation were” (Davis 2018, 4). One example of when Cassidy’s Asian-ness disrupted her view of her privilege and the way she identifies, was when she was working at Nordstrom, a Seattle-based, high-end clothing retailer. “There were quite a few Asians that worked there and one lady came in and said she didn’t like Asian people” (Davis 2018, 4). And so Cassidy was lumped into the group of all Asian-descent employees. Based off the lady’s interaction with all Asians she had ever encountered, she made a blanket statement about Asians, and in that Cassidy’s racial identity was singled out. This was a weird moment for her because class did not categorize her, but instead by race. Cassidy said she identifies similarly with her friend’s class privilege. They are all coming from similar backgrounds in which their parents’ money has allowed them certain opportunities to gain upward mobility in education and jobs. So, for her to not be identified by her class was odd to her.

Cassidy's parents have since moved to rural Idaho, which they really enjoy. But when she goes to visit them she feels some apprehension.

If I didn't have that association with them, if I had an accent, if I didn't use correct grammar, people would definitely judge more. There is a credibility that is given particularly in rural areas, and this is just my chip on the shoulder opinion, that if I wasn't with them [Cassidy's parents) and people couldn't hear me speak, that based on that, they would have certain stereotypes or ideas about what I might represent, or how I may conduct myself (Davis 2018, 6).

She realizes that even though she is Korean, she identifies as White, and more specifically of an affluent class. When she travels outside of Seattle, to places like rural Idaho, she has to be prepared to confront the identity that other people may give her. Most of her life she has been surrounded by white people or lived in areas where there is little diversity. This has influenced her dating choices. "Of all the places I've lived, the majority of people have been white, I have not been exposed to Asian men, or Korean men. I would certainly be open to dating an Asian man. Of the Asian men I know, they are passive, shy, socially- awkward. I have never been romantically interested" (Davis 2018, 7). Cassidy is currently in a long-term relationship with a white man and appreciates that he is not passive, shy, or socially awkward.

As we spoke I shared that my older sister has never been into Asian men and has only ever dated white men. Both of my sisters have married white men, as have I. I do not think this is a coincidence, since my older sister identifies more as white and my younger sister identifies as Asian-American, but has fully embraced the American dream lifestyle. Both are very successful at their jobs, make good money, their husbands work full-time as well, and have really nice houses. My older sister has two daughters and my younger sister has one son. My sisters don't

really see themselves as Asian except for the fact that they look Asian. They don't make it a point to find a connection to Korean culture and have never had any interest in travelling to Korea to look for their birth families. As my younger sister has mentioned, she doesn't have any connection to anything other than America. As for myself, I have never had too much interest either because I am worried about the language barrier and the possibility of not finding anyone. I guess one of the other possibilities is that I would find family in Korea, but I might be rejected again and I don't think I want to put myself through that situation. I was only six months old when I came over to America, so I didn't have too much time to take in all the surroundings, but I did have women who took care of me in the orphanage. I even have a picture somewhere of a woman holding me. I have no idea who she is. I don't know if it is more my personality, or the fact that I was younger than my sisters when they were adopted, that I have more of a curiosity about my Korean culture, but I just may fall in the middle of the spectrum when it comes to wanting a connection to Korea and not wanting anything to do with it.

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

When I first set out to conduct this study; I thought that it would be hard to find people who would want to talk openly about their experiences. My two sisters, who are both adopted, do not want much to do with their Korean-ness, let alone talk about it unless prodded. They have never expressed any interest in traveling back to Korea to find their mothers or biological family. Even I, as the researcher, had not really thought about going back to Korea until about five years ago, when I began to think more critically about transnational adoption and to truly think about my position as an adoptee. I have spent much of my life being content, being the whitest Korean, and being a mystery to some people. I think it is hard to admit that you have a yearning to learn about your past, because in some ways it makes you seem like you are wanting too much. Comments like “You should be happy that you are in America” or “If it wasn’t for you being adopted, you most likely would have been growing up on some poor rice patty working on a farm” and other similar sentiments were often said by friends and strangers when they learned that I was adopted. I have even said to others that I know that I am lucky to be here because I am sure it would have been worse in Korea. But I guess I never truly believed it or else I would not be studying Korean adoption and adoptees. There have always been these lingering questions of “why” and “what if” that come up, and I know that I will never know the “what if,” but at least I can find out why Korean adoption began in the first place and why so many Korean children were sent away to mainly white, European nations and the U.S.—and for so many years. By building research around these questions, I was able to get to some level of understanding of

Korean adoptees' experiences in the U.S. and place them the framework of the Korean diaspora as more than just a side-note.

Native Anthropology and Looking Inward

As I began this thesis, I had a loose idea of what I wanted to do. I knew that I wanted to talk to adoptees and I knew that I would be using myself as a research tool. As I began taking coursework on kinship and adoption and Korean history and adoption, I was told many times that, at points during my research, I would encounter moments that were difficult. Not difficult as in academically challenging, but emotionally challenging. Looking into the mirror and staring back at myself would be a tough task. Not only that, but as I began to construct my interview questions and fill out an Institutional Review Board Human Subjects approval form, my advisor and committee members told me that doing fieldwork was fun and exciting, but also exhausting. It would be even more exhausting because of the subject matter and the fact that I had emotional and experiential ties to the subject matter. Being a skeptic, I chalked it up to my professors just trying to make sure I was ready, but what I experienced was indeed emotional. I had such a fear of failing and letting my study participants down that I had a hard time writing their words. There were times as I listened to the recordings and transcribed, that I cringed at the questions I asked. Many times, I could anticipate the answers to the questions, but the fuller experiences of each person were truly enlightening. Creating a study that focused on Korean adoptees' experiences was the easy part, but turning the questions towards myself as I listened to other adoptees was tough. Being someone who would much rather listen and stay on the peripheries watching things happen, it was hard to put my experiences up for discussion. But at the same time it was empowering to research Korean adoption, interview adoptees, and write this thesis.

Reflections on Family

My own experiences within my family have no doubt influenced the way I asked questions as well as the ones that I asked. What was surprising was how few differences were found amongst the adoptees that I interviewed when it came to family. We all have an origin story that permeates our lives through the ways that we talk about our adoptee status. Our gratefulness, our positive attitudes towards our American life, our humbleness, our defiance, our acceptance, our curiosity, and the what-ifs; can be different facets of being an adoptee. Families can often be seen as safe-zones, a context in which you can be yourself and no one will judge you—and if they do, it comes from a place of love. For adoptees, families can often times be places of contention, racism, and loneliness. But they can also be places of love, acceptance, and privilege. Part of being an adoptee is realizing that we most likely are better off in the U.S. not just because we have a family that wants us, but because we now have access to more opportunities. What is often the case is that due to restrictive and prohibitive measures that adoption agencies employ, only certain types of people are able to adopt. White, middle to upper class, heterosexual couples, along with other attributes depending on the agencies. Becoming a part of these families, offers Korean adoptees a way to benefit from class privilege, but it unfortunately it does not extend to all areas of their life.

Race and Racism

Feeling safe inside your family unit is often something that is taken for granted. For some Korean adoptees, experiencing racism inside their family can be hurtful, even if later in reflection, they laugh about it. The issue of colorblindness is pervasive both inside the family and outside of it. Adoptees can feel like their Korean-ness is not important, meaningful, or recognizable. Based on how their family, friends, co-workers, and strangers interact with them, their race is ignored, pulled into question, or stereotyped and demeaned. Experiences of micro-

aggression are ways in which adoptees can get a wake-up call about their race. They are used to being in spaces where their race is not acknowledged or is forgotten, so when these moments happen, they are reminded of their true exclusion into white spaces. Some adoptees exhibit feelings of discomfort about their race and question racism as something that they *might* have experienced. Adoptees can even face discrimination from other Koreans because they do not fit in with their understanding of what a Korean person should be. Because of this, Korean adoptees can be stuck in the in-betweens of society. They do not necessarily fit in with Koreans, but they definitely do not fit in with white people because they are Korean.

Identity

Because adoptees do not fit into known racial categories of Korean or white because of their duality, they often times bypass racial ideas of conformity and identity as Korean-American or Asian-American. They do this because they look Korean and Asian on the outside, but they have American roots. Their families are white, most of their friends are white, and they often work in places where whites are the majority. They are comfortable in white spaces and feel more at home in American style clothes, homes, and stores. Even if they are conflicted about the system of transnational adoption and are keenly aware of issues of racism and white privilege, they are so thoroughly American that it is hard to identify as anything else. The United States ideologies of race and racialization are frameworks that Korean adoptees work within as well as working outside of the typical understandings of it. While adoptees may look Korean, their outward appearances are all American and strictly within their understandings of what it means to be American and white. What Korean adoptees can tell us about identity, is that it can be more than singular? They can encompass a multitude of identities that can easily be accentuated and dimmed according to their environments.

Lessons Learned

So is it a problem that Korean adoptees grow up in white homes and become American? If one views adoption as a step-up from where they came from, then yes. But Korea is no longer a nation that is recovering from war. The economy has been steadily rising on the list of developed nations. Even Korean beauty regimes and skincare and beauty products are now coveted. K-pop groups are popular, even Psy, the Korean singer, made a crossover into the U.S. music scene. So really, is it that bad to be Korean?

It is problematic that Korean children were placed in white homes where parents have little knowledge or experiences to draw from when it comes to race. Their Korean-ness often gets erased as well as their connection to their birth culture. It is viewed more as an afterthought and a rite of passage for adoptees to travel back to Korea. These heritage trips are another way Korean adoptees are set apart from their birth culture. They come back and often times view it from a vacationer's perspective; they feel no real connection to it. Their indoctrination into the U.S. is complete and usually permanent. Some Korean adoptees have chosen to move back to Korea and some have decided cut Korea out of the picture completely (M. Jones 2015). These are both on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of wanting to maintain a connection to Korean culture, but many adoptees are somewhere in the middle.

It is easy to say you are grateful for the life you have after you have been living it for a while, but who can say for certain that your life would be worse if you would not have been adopted. For some adoptees, they cannot say that, without questioning the truth of that statement. We know our lives are good now, we are happy, we have jobs, a loving family, money, access to opportunities. Because we know what we have, we also know that we would most likely not be happy if we were without those things. We simply cannot imagine our lives without our families,

friends, children, jobs, and so on. So, to say the lives we could be living in Korea would be worse is based solely on our experiences up to this day. This sort of weighting one against the other is biased. The “what-ifs” will always haunt us, because no matter how much stuff we acquire, and the successes we achieve; we will still wonder about the lives un-lead, back in our nation of long-lost mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers. Where would we be today?

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT

Written Consent to Participate –

Hello, my name is Barbara Hammersberg. Because you are Korean and adopted, you have been chosen to be in an ethnographic study about Korean adoptees in the Seattle area. This ethnographic study involves research. The

purpose of this study is to further the understanding of identity construction in people of a different race and ethnicity than their adoptive parents, with focus on Korean adoptees in the United States. The duration of participation is at your convenience: It will take as little as thirty minutes or as much as several hours of your time. If you choose to participate, we will have an audio-recorded conversation about your adoption story, your family, dating or marriage stories, your friends, and objects you surround yourself with. Time, date, and location are scheduled at your convenience.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. Potential risk may result from breach of confidentiality, therefore I will do my best to keep your information confidential, but I cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Participants might experience discomfort talking about their adoption especially if they feel like they might be dishonoring or showing ungratefulness towards their adoptive parents. Participants might also experience stress talking about their experiences of racism. Our conversation will be audio recorded and the recording will be erased once transcribed. In the transcribed interview, your name and identity will remain anonymous and I will use a pseudonym. Once transcribed, I will be the only person with access to the interview.

If you have questions while taking part, please stop me and ask. If you have further questions about this research study after our conversation, you may contact me:

Barbara Hammersberg
Phone: (360) 265-3404
Email: hammersbeb@cwu.edu

You may also contact the CWU Human Protections Administrator if you have questions about your rights as a participant or if you think you have not been treated fairly. The HSRC office number is (509) 963-3115.

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop.

By signing this consent form, you are not giving up any legal rights. Your signature means that you understand this study, have been able to ask questions about the information given to you in this form, and you agree to join the study.

Initial here ____ if you give permission for a short summary of 200 words or less to be included in a small, public exhibit. These might include stories about dating, your adoption, etc. Please be aware that by agreeing to this, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Participant's printed name: _____

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

Semi-structured interviews are conversations that are organized around themes. The themes for this research are “family,” “identity,” and “style.” Below are examples of general questions and more specific questions that may arise.

Family ----- **General Question**
Can you describe your family experiences to me?

Family ----- **Specific Questions**
What is your family like?
Are you close to your family?
Do you have siblings?
Do you have a large or small extended family?
What do you like about your family?
What were your family experiences like?

Style ----- **General Question**
Can you tell me about your style?

Style ----- **Specific Questions**
What kind of outfits do you like to wear?
Do you have a certain style?
Where do you like to shop for clothes?
Do you like certain brands of clothing?
Do you avoid some styles of clothes?
How would you describe the design on the inside of your home?
What types of art, objects, or important pieces do you have on display?
How does it compare to your parent’s home?
What would your home ideally be like?
How would you decorate it?
What would you show off?

Identity ----- **General Question**
How would you describe yourself?

Identity ----- **Specific Questions**
Were you friends with any other adopted children?
Do you feel like you fit in, within your neighborhood?
Did you ever experience any racism?
Where would you like to live in Seattle? Why?