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**LOCATING KOREAN AMERICAN ADOPTEES: RACE, EMOTION,
AND OUT-OF-PLACE SUBJECTIVITY**

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Louisa Schein

Based on multi-site ethnographic methods and in-depth interviews, my dissertation explores identities and subjectivities of Korean American adoptees. Korean adoptee experiences of racial discrimination and the stigma of adoptee status enable their out-of-place subjectivity, indicating that a common identity can be constructed over the life course out of everyday mundane interactions. Drawing on methodology of Willis' "ethnographic imagination" (2000), I examine mundane social interactions as ethnographic moments that engender and sustain out-of-place subjectivity.

As Korean adoptees mature, shared experiences of being alienated and stigmatized intensify the affect that they feel toward each other. The affective identification that they feel provides the bases upon which they can build a lasting bond, an emotional kinship. This creation of bond is aided by spaces centered on adoptees, such as culture camps, adoptee gatherings, and heritage tours, where Korean adoptees meet and interact. I further analyze the sociocultural factors that give force to the adoptee bond, drawing on the concepts of "racial melancholia" (Eng and Han, 2000) and "haunting" (Gordon, 1997) to comprehend this unique emotional bond among Korean adoptees.

In contrast to the iconic representations of Korean adoptees/Korean Americans in media as perpetual foreigners, Korean adoptees' "stories" illustrate that they are just as much a product of varied American cultural milieus as anyone. As such, generational differences are found among Korean adoptees of varying age cohorts, deriving from historically different cultural discourses and practices, as well as changing sociocultural contexts in which international adoptions have taken place. By listening to adoptees from various life stages conceptualize their adoptee status and identity, this dissertation underscores the fact that adoptee identity is a product of complex process, emerging over the life course rather than a static category.

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PART ONE

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal (Said, 1984: 55)

Chapter ONE. Introduction

Ethnography is the eye of the needle through which
the thread of the imagination must pass
(Willis, 2000: preface).

Today you are you! That is truer than true!
There is no one alive who is you-er than you!
Shout loud, "I am lucky to be what I am!
Thank goodness I'm not just a clam or ham
or a dusty old jar of sour gooseberry jam!
I am what I am! That's a great thing to be!
If I say so myself, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME!"
--Dr. Seuss, *Happy Birthday To You*

Everyone has a birthday. That is the starting point of life history for most of us. No matter where we are, we know, or at least we think we know, the clear beginning of our time on earth. The annual ritual of celebrating or even remembering one's own birthday is often overlooked in its cultural and affective significance.

In a spacious room inside an Italian restaurant in a metropolitan city, long tables were arranged at the front of the room, seating almost 100 people. This night, unlike the night before, people adorned themselves with beautiful evening gowns and dresses. This was the last night of a local gathering that was held over 3 days. Right after dinner, while waiting for a stand-up comic to arrive, an organizer for the meeting announced through the microphone that tonight was David's¹ birthday, adding that, "let's sing 'Happy Birthday' for David, or better yet, let's sing that in Korean for him... (Chuckles) Nah." Another organizer who arranged for me to join in on the weekend said something to David who was sitting at the table right across from mine, and David turned around to look at me. As a volunteer to teach Korean language and culture, I thought that I could at least sing for him in Korean. So I did. After the song, David came to me with teary eyes and thanked me for the song. Like David, some other adoptees were also teary-eyed. But that moment slowly passed with the arrival of the comic.²

¹ I have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of all adoptees and acquaintances that appear in the pages of my dissertation and altered any information that could be used to identify them or other related individuals.

² In this dissertation, the excerpts from my own fieldnotes quoted in separation will be presented in italics.

It was not until I came home that night that I realized the symbolic significance of my performance. What does it mean for a Korean³ woman to sing “Happy Birthday” in Korean for Korean adoptees? As some are in the active process of finding their Korean birthparents, they struggle with a sense of abandonment. What their births meant to their birthparents would constitute a painful but important dimension in this search. Such was my positioning vis-à-vis the adoptees that I befriended and got to know during the course of my fieldwork. In fact, quite a few of them could recall this moment easily, and I was taken by surprise a few times later, when the adoptees I thought I had just met easily recalled this event, “oh, so you were that person! Yeah, I remember you.”

This event, taking place early in my fieldwork, was significant not only in terms of delineating my place among adoptees, but also in raising two important questions for my research. First of all, the fact that it took some time for me to understand the significance of the seemingly mundane activity of a birthday celebration among adoptees indicated the need to reexamine the basis of the taken-for-granted assumptions about family, kinship, and identity that provide the conceptual basis for the cultural world that we inhabit. In order to understand the sociocultural processes which enable Korean adoptee subjectivity, it was crucial for me to question the world as we know it. I learned that everyday sociocultural encounters that Korean adoptees face engender a specific positioning for them.

Further, despite differences in social and geographical locations, Korean adoptees’ experiences contained commonalities that illuminated their specific subject positions. By sharing this positioning, Korean adoptees connected with each other and created meaningful relationships that were akin to kinship. The event mentioned earlier, for instance, was

³ In this dissertation, I use “Korean” and “Korea” to denote South Korea. I have not yet encountered any adoptees that were adopted from North Korea.

attended by adoptees who had not previously met each other. But many shared their tears as David shed his, and this was one of the moments that I felt cemented the affective bonds that adoptees shared.

American adoption of Korean children, starting in 1956, began the trend of transnational adoption of Asian children in the United States. Comprising 34.8% of all transnational adoptees (Shiao and Tuan, 2006), Korean American adoptees constitute the largest⁴ transnational adoptee group in contemporary US society. Studying Korean transnational adoptees, whose ages range from 21 through 60s, thus enlightens us in general about the meanings/practices of transnational adoption and the transnational adoptee experience in this country. It also brings to light some of the cultural ideologies and discourses that powerfully shape their lives in the US.

The increase in the number of Korean American adoptees⁵ who have matured into adulthood has resulted in the formation of numerous local adoptee organizations throughout the United States. Gatherings, conferences, meetings and adoptee-led culture camps testify to the rapidity and vibrancy with which Korean adoptees have proceeded to claim a visible space for their existence. We also witness a proliferation of cultural expressions of identity

⁴ Korean adoptees are one of the oldest groups of transnational adoptees as well. There were, however, some war orphans adopted from various regions of Europe right after World War II, which was shortly before the arrival of Korean adoptees.

⁵ Interestingly, Gailey (2000) suggests that mass media plays a role in scandalizing adoption by exaggerating the actual rate of American adoptive families in the popular imagination. She estimates that between 2 to 4% of US families include an adopted child, only half of which are stranger (that is, non-relative) adoptions. Pertman (2000), diverging from Gailey's viewpoint, emphasizes the prevalence of adoptive practices in constructing American families, calling America an "adoption nation." This discrepancy among the various commentators writing about adoption is not atypical. Nydam explains, "if 2% of the American population is adopted, and you add four parents (two birth parents and two adopting parents) then about 10% of the population is involved with adoption" (1999: ix). If you include relatives, siblings and friends, the number of people impacted by adoption rises further. Pertman, in a recent talk given at the Adoption conference held in November 2009, agrees with Nydam's statistics. On a more cautionary note, some US adoptions have been handled by private agencies and private intermediaries (such as doctors, lawyers, etc.) from the beginning. These private adoptions may not be included in national statistics.

among these adoptees: autobiographies, (e.g., Bruining, 2003a, b, c; Cho, 2000; Clement, 1998; Cox, 1999; Robinson, 2002), literary works (e.g., Aeby, 1992; Dorow, 1999; Register, 1991; Steinberg and Hall, 2000; Wilkinson, 1985; Wilkinson and Fox, 2002), artwork,⁶ and films (e.g., Adolfson, 1999; Ahn, 1994; Arndt, 1998; Borshay Liem, 2000; Jang 1991; Lee, 2008; cf. Franco and Dolgin, 2002, Gardner and Thai, 2002). Taken together, these cultural practices illustrate the ways in which Korean adoptees negotiate their sense of belonging to a subjective terrain that is yet to be examined. According to Kimberly Kyung Hee Stock (1999), Korean adoptee consciousness can be characterized as “a fourth culture,” engendered in the interstices of Korean, American, and Korean-American cultural topographies (see also E. Kim 2000, 2003, 2007, 2010).

This dissertation attempts to delineate the socio-cultural factors that engender, structure, and sustain this “fourth culture consciousness” (Stock, *ibid.*), using knowledge gathered from ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative interviews with Korean adoptees and my analysis of cultural works by adoptees. In order to comprehend Korean adoptee culture and identity, we must look closely at the sociocultural interactions that circumscribe their unique subject position, which engender what I call “out-of-place subjectivity.” Drawing on Willis’ “ethnographic imagination” (2000) as a theoretical methodology, I analyze many different moments of sociocultural interaction that are crucial to the formation of Korean adoptee subjectivity.

Korean adoptees’ unique subjectivity provides a fertile ground upon which they identify and form affective bonds with one another. Building on affective identifications,

⁶ By artwork, I include photo and art exhibitions that are often held in conjunction with adoptee gatherings and conferences. For instance, “Korean Adoptee Art Exhibit” took place in Seoul, Korea, in 2004, when the international adoptee Seoul gathering was held. On another occasion, a film viewing event “s/kin deep” organized and curated by M. Weimer and Eleana Kim in October, 2005. This was a viewing of adoptee experimental videos, most of which were untitled.

many of these adoptee friendships develop into something akin to kinship. Adopting a strictly social constructionist view on emotion and affect, I assume that emotion is socio-culturally constructed and always instantiated in social contexts (Lutz, 1985, 1998; Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990; Lutz and White, 1986). My fieldwork in various adoptee meetings and gatherings explains the role of these events in building and sustaining adoptee bonds.

I learned through participant observation and interviews that Korean adoptees describe the emotions that underlie their bonds as “Han,” borrowing a Korean emotion term. Han, in Korean usage, denotes feelings of depression, sadness, and resentment due to long periods of oppressed experiences. In order to delineate the social factors that are at work to engender the structure of feeling -“Han”- among Korean adoptees, I highlight the sociocultural and historical contexts in which adoptees were raised, contextualizing this emotion as a social product. Through the concept of “racial melancholia” (Eng and Han, 2000), I identify commonalities between Korean adoptee experiences and those of Asian immigrants in general. As Asian minorities, Korean adoptees have faced the similar experiences of being the object of exclusion and stereotypical (mis)representations. Their experiences are deeply inflected by ideologies of gender and sexuality regarding Asian Americans in the US, illuminating bifurcated experiences for male and female adoptees.

Nonetheless, Korean adoptee experiences diverge from conventional (Asian) immigrants’ accounts, as they deal with the issues of family and identity in ways that differ from other immigrants. I try to illuminate this difference by drawing on the concept of “haunting” discussed by Gordon (1997). Unlike other immigrants, Korean adoptees’ lives are complicated by the fact that they have a duplicated set of families, one in America and the other one in Korea. Whether one actively searches for one’s birthparents or not, the absence/presence of birth families has an impact on adoptees’ lives that is subtle yet

powerful. I explore this complexity to bring out the unique experiences of Korean adoptees and make them more comprehensible.

This dissertation also adds the voices of adoptees that are of different ages and at different life stages. Taking the ages of the adoptees as an important starting point for understanding differences among various cohorts of adoptees, I include adoptee interviews, organized by age groups: Older (age 49 and over), middle-age (ages 40-48), and younger (below age 40). My research was initially designed to have two age groups divided as older and junior adoptees, but as I gathered interviews and talked to more adoptees, I determined that further delineation was necessary.

Depending on when they grew up, the adoptees articulate identities generated partially in response to the cultural ethos prevalent in each particular epoch. My study elucidates how these differences in epoch are translated into individual life-trajectories and life-experiences and examines the historical, political, economic and cultural changes that work to shape and mediate the processes through which Korean adoptees have come to an understanding of their own social locations. Those who grew up in the cultural milieu of the 1950s and 1960s had their ethnic identity as Koreans erased by the mandate to assimilate to being “American.” As US society embraced multiculturalism and cultural sensitivity in the late 1970s and 1980s, attitudes about the need to assimilate began to wane. Instead, adoptees were urged to interact with other adoptees from their country of origin, a mandate facilitated by the development of “culture camps,” which many adoptees of this age group remember attending when they were young. By utilizing their knowledge of culture camps and activities, these adoptees grew up to create adoptee-organizations and events. Those adoptees who came to this country in the early 1990s have grown up in yet another cultural milieu within

which they encounter diverse ethnic and racial groups in physical and visual proximity.⁷ Chapters 6, 7, and 8 will demonstrate the different articulations of identities enabled by socio-historical changes taking place within each cultural epoch. These diverse adoptees' accounts are also inflected by their current situations and life stages, emphasizing yet again the importance of age as a factor in making sense of diverse perspectives existing among adoptees.

Korean Adoptees and Literature

Initially I was overwhelmed by the amount of research on adoption and adoptees' adjustment to their new families and cultural surroundings. Most of these works are concentrated within the social work, clinical psychology, and psychiatric literature, and deal mostly with domestic adoptions (Austin, 1993; Barth and Berry, 1988; Feigelman and Silverman, 1983; Groza and Rosenberg, 1998; Kirton, 2000; Pertman, 2000; Rosenthal and Groza, 1992; Simon and Altstein, 1987, 1992; Smith and Sherwen, 1983; Smith and Miroff, 1987; Smith and Berridge, 1993). They analyze data gathered from young children and youth, rather than adult adoptees. Focusing on one event, the adoption, often a painful fact of an adoptee's life, as the major stage of her life may have unfavorable consequences, such as exacerbating the effects of pathological "self-fulfilling prophecy," in which some adoptees

⁷ Although the number of Asian Americans living in some parts of the United States (especially the Midwest) does not reach sizable proportions, it is important to underscore the increasing number of media portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans in recent years. This has been enabled by growing transnational traffic and increasing political economic exchanges between Asia and the United States. The whole gamut of media representations regarding Asian/Americans currently circulating in this culture are an important way in which the adoptees craft the sense of belonging in an "imagined community" or "imagined ethnicity," or weld identities vis-à-vis these portrayals. Needless to say, this issue applies to adoptees of all generations, although these images and representations became more diverse in recent years. See Ch. 4 for more discussion on this.

themselves fall victims to a never ending cycle of self-doubt and self-hatred presumably originating from “the Big Hurt.” By investigating the psychodynamic bond between adoptive parents and adoptees, the extant literature and research at first glance seems to indicate that the “abnormality” of adoptive kinship may require corrective measures attuned to understanding psychological dimensions of family dynamics, reflecting deep-seated US cultural assumptions about “normal” family and its “normal” functioning. This approach also brackets off adoption issues as mainly applicable to the domestic family system without adequately addressing the larger sociocultural context in which adoptive family practices are conceived, practiced, and made sense of.

The quantitative works done by sociologists, lawyers, policy-making institutions, social workers, and journalists (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997, 1999a; McRoy and Zurcher, Jr., 1983; Pertman, 2000; Simon and Altstein, 1981, 1987, 1992) enable us to delineate the psychosocial dynamics of adoptive families and other demographic factors that may be helpful in comprehending adoptee experiences in general. However, it has been difficult to come across any ethnographically grounded works on adoptive families and adoptees that can shed light on the meanings and practices of adoption in people’s lives.

A few ground-breaking works have utilized in-depth interview methods, interviewing either adoptees or adoptive families or both to comprehend the issues and challenges raised by adoption and adoptive family practices (Brodzinsky, et al., 1992; Ladner, 1978; Modell, 1994; Nydam, 1999; Patton, 2000; Simon and Roorda, 2000). One of the problems that remain in these works, however, is the way in which transnational/transracial adoptees’ stories and experiences tend to get overlooked in their myopic focus on transracial adoption as a mainly domestic adoption issue, treating transracial adoptees as the ones adopted domestically. In fact, this stems from ideological and institutional discourses that divide

international and domestic adoptions into two separate practices. Transnational adoptees are largely conceived of as characterized by *national* differences, whereas transracial adoptees are thought to be largely African American children characterized by *racial* differences (Patton, 2000; Rothman, 2005; Shiao and Tuan, 2007). This reflects the dichotomous conceptualization of the human race popular in US sociocultural discourses that posits the existence of only two “distinct” categories of Americans: Blacks and Whites⁸ (for a few examples, see Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Dyson, 2004; Fish, 2009; Ginsberg, 1996; Roediger, 1998, 2000).⁹ The sporadic mention of Native Americans, and more recently Latin Americans, along with an add-on approach to Asian Americans in broader discussions of racism and racial relations in the United States reflects this hegemonic conceptualization of American cultural citizenship. Despite increasing immigration of other groups and a growing population of multi-racial/multi-ethnic groups that defy this dichotomy, American cultural citizenship has not yet been extended to Asian populations living in the United States, known by now-familiar monikers like “forever aliens,” or for exceptional cases, “honorary Whites” (R. Lee, 1999; Li, 1998; Nguyen and Tu, 2007; Tuan, 1998; Wu and Song, 2000).¹⁰

⁸ In order to emphasize that “race” is a socially constructed fact, racial labels such as “White” or “Black” are capitalized in this chapter and the rest of this manuscript.

⁹ According to Brodtkin (1998), this binary scheme regarding racial ideologies is a cultural and historical product utilized, reinforced and manipulated by the capitalist reorganization of labor in US history. There are nonetheless, a few works that have tried to incorporate various ethnicities/races in discussions of US race and racism (See Gregory and Sanjek, 1994; N. Kim, 2008; O’Brien, 2008; Omi and Winant, 1986; Rasmussen, et al., 2001; Wu, 2002). But in large measure, the dichotic conception of race and racism in the US continues.

¹⁰ In fact, the phenomenon of not fitting into already existing categories of racial identity also addresses the overlapping experiences of Asian Americans and Latin Americans (see Hamamoto and Torres, 1997; O’Brien, 2008). With the modern increase in interracial and interethnic marriages and families, this may apply to a population that continues to expand. Brodtkin’s (1998) analysis of the “whitening” of Jewish Americans is extremely enlightening. She questions the meaning of “whiteness,” linking it to political economic ideologies buttressing the construction of racial identities in the US.

The “othering” of Asians in this country is a result of institutionally engendered ignorance¹¹ and conceptual erasure, given that the historically documented labor of early Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants contributed to the building of this nation (Chan, 1986, 1991; Friday, 1994; Hing, 1993; Hu-DeHart, 1999; Lowe, 1996, 1997; Odo, 2004; Osajima, 1988; Takaki, 1998(1989), 1990(1979), 1993; Wu and Song, 2000). Undeniably, Asian Americans have been a part of the cultural and economic mosaic that characterizes this country, but their presence has always been a paradoxical one. Wu (2002: 20-21), in his text, *Yellow*, argues that

Asian Americans have been excluded by the very terms used to conceptualize race. People speak of “American” as if it means “white” and “minority” as if it means “black.” In that semantic formula, Asian Americans, neither black nor white, consequently are neither American nor minority. . . . Movie producer Christopher Lee recalls that when studio executives were considering making a film version of *Joy Luck Club*, they shied away from it because “there are no Americans in it.” He told his colleagues, “There are Americans in it. They just don’t look like you.”

As the adoptees’ stories testify below, this ignorance is not as trivial as it first seems. Rather this abjection of Asian subjects (cf. Li, 1998; Shimakawa, 2002), or distorted and/or stereotypic portrayals of “Orientals” (Feng, 2002; Hamamoto, 1989, 1994; Hamamoto and Liu, 2000; R. Lee, 1999) in American cultural imaginary creates a powerful and crucial site from which we can gain insights into what it means to be an American both culturally and racially. Korean adoptees’ experiences bear out the difficult place that they occupy in this context, illustrating their continuous struggles with self and the larger society which pathologizes and eclipses their existence.

¹¹ For example, Hirabayashi’s (1999) exposé of anthropological research focusing on WWII Japanese – American concentration camps clearly demonstrates the ethnographers’ compliance with the institutional power that effectively curtailed the rights of Japanese Americans.

Korean adoptees and other transnational adoptees from Asia have also been overlooked in the literature on immigration. Asian American literature on immigration and other historical accounts of Asian Americans have often failed to acknowledge the existence of these children who arrived in the States without any material support or familial ties to claim. A “quiet migration” of Asian transnational adoptees (Weil, 1984) was also invisible, as most of these children were adopted by White parents, wittingly or unwittingly cut off from Asian American communities and their habitus.

However, as the number of transnational adoptions has increased in recent decades, and as Korean American adoptees who mature into their adulthood grow in numbers, we witness a proliferation of autobiographies written by these adoptees (Bishoff and Rankin, 1997; Cho, 2000; Clement, 1998; Cox, 1999; Jo, 2005; Lee, et al. 2008; Robinson, 2002; Trenka, 2003; Trenka, et al., 2006; Wilkinson and Fox, 2002).¹² Recent cultural productions by and about Korean adoptees (Arndt, 1998; Borshay-Liem, 2000; Bruining, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; E. Lee, 2008)¹³ indicate that adult Korean adoptees are indeed emerging from, to paraphrase Traver’s (2000), their “cloak of invisibility.”

Social sciences have also responded to the growing focus on transnational adoptive kinship by paying more detailed attention to the phenomenon of “international adoption” (Bowie, 2004; Howell, 2003, 2006). Revealing its disciplinary origin, the term “transnational adoption” came to be used among cultural anthropologists long intrigued by transnational movements among diverse groups of people. A 2003 special issue of *Social Text*, for example, was published with the subtitle of “transnational adoption” (Volkman and Katz, 2003) and

¹² There are also numerous fictional accounts that deal with adoption or adoptees. Marie Lee’s *Somebody’s Daughter* (2006), for instance, is one of the many fictional works that are written and/or produced by non-adoptees.

¹³ See E. Kim (2000) for a cogent analysis of auto-ethnographic aspects of films produced by Korean adoptees.

includes articles that deal with international adoption in the era of globalization and the development of technologies that facilitate ever-increasing numbers of them. Unlike previous works that pushed aside transnational¹⁴ adoptees' experience by subsuming and minoritizing it under the rubric of transracial adoption, anthropological analyses of adoption put transnational adoption at the center.

Dorow's *Transnational Adoption* (2006) is a case in point. Through her ethnographic fieldwork and its journey through various US adoption agencies and Chinese orphanages and public offices, we learn how transnational adoption is practiced and routinized by participants acting in different capacities. Further, she provides a critical analysis of the many interviews she conducted with adoptive parents of Chinese children, and in the process, we can glimpse the conceptual landscape in which these Chinese adoptees will come to terms with their transracial, transnational adoptee identity. Although Dorow's study focuses on the adoption of Chinese children, it is highly applicable to transnational adoption of children from other nations such as Korea and Vietnam, since these children face similar predicaments as they struggle through orphanages, foster parents, agencies, adoptive parents, and immigration procedures.

Methodology: Fieldwork, Interviews & Analysis of Cultural Productions

¹⁴ The term "transnational" connotes both inward and outward migration. It brings to light the transnational movement—both physical and conceptual—that adoptive parent(s) had to make in coming to terms with their decision to adopt a child from another country. Even afterwards, the adoptive parents had to grapple with the transnational connections their child brought home. Therefore I use "transnational," popular among anthropologists, rather than using "international" to denote this type of adoption.

Following anthropological conventions, I utilized methods of participant observation (Angrosino, 2007; Bernard 1995) and “itinerant ethnography” (Schein, 2000, 2002) for studying Korean adoptee gatherings (conferences, mini-gatherings, gatherings, local meetings, Culture Day activities, etc.), culture camps (Asian- and/or Korean heritage-oriented), and the lives of adoptees who became close to me. Expanding Marcus’ concept of “multi-site ethnography” (1995), “itinerant ethnography” entails the compilation of data from various sites and venues, rendering fieldwork more dynamic. This proved to be an extremely helpful method to keep my focus steady as I crisscrossed multiple sites and events to observe Korean adoptees in order to comprehend affective bonds that the adoptees form at these various places. Through this method, I could explore the role of emotion in engendering the continued bonds that Korean adoptees form among themselves, and the adoptee identity articulated in such diverse settings. Detailed record-keeping of the proceedings at these events in the form of fieldnotes (Bernard, 1995: 180; Emerson et al., 1995; Sanjek, 1990) gave material shape and form to fast-moving interactions and events. My observations included not only the goings-on of the meetings, but also naturally occurring talks (NOTs) (Silverman, 2006) among adoptee participants. I focused more on attendees and participants rather than organizers, looking at how the participants made sense of and experienced these meetings and gatherings apart from the organizations’ goals. Consequently I could obtain wide-ranging responses to the gatherings.

I have participated in multiple ways at these various venues: as a fellow Korean-American and friend; as a cultural connoisseur who instructed adoptees about the intricate cultural meanings and practices of Korea; as a language translator who facilitated their induction into Korean culture and language; and as a researcher who studied their life-experiences in the United States. My participation in these gatherings and meetings was

designed to gather information about the roles these meetings play in adoptees' lives and how adoptees understood and made sense of the meetings and the information that they obtained there. My attendance at these gatherings also helped me identify individuals that might be interviewed at a later time. In addition, I was fortunate enough to acquaint myself with a few key individuals in these settings who provided me with all the support they could at any given time.

There are sporadic gatherings by Korean adoptees taking place across the U.S., with a few national gatherings and conferences held every year. KAAN (the Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network), for example, has been holding annual national conferences since 1999. However, despite the fact that these meetings are announced in the public media –magazines, on-line newsletters, and websites associated with adoptee organizations –local organizations recruit locally available adoptees for participation and volunteer activities in their on-going events. Thus, most of these gatherings and meetings are attended by local participants, although several attendees came from far geographical locations, especially if the meetings were held over the weekends. In order to see the impact of locality and of types of meetings upon adoptee experiences, I observed four national conferences and gatherings that were held on the East Coast and the Midwest. I also participated in a total of three culture camps as a volunteer. A few trips were made to visit with adoptees living in distant places to conduct interviews, keep up with their lives, meet new adoptees and establish future contacts, or just to chat and visit. I also helped out as a volunteer translator and friend when a few adoptees made visits to Korea and attended two adoptee conferences (in 2004 and 2007) that were held in Korea.¹⁵

¹⁵ Gatherings held in Korea attract many European/Australian adoptees as well as American ones.

To further facilitate an analysis of adoptee experiences and adoptee subjectivity, qualitative in-depth interviews (Bernard, 1995; Briggs, 1986; Gluck and Patai, 1991; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002; Riessman, 1993; Ritchie, 2003; Yow, 2005) were conducted with 27 adoptees. The contacts that I established at sites of participant observation proved to be important conduits through which I could establish rapport and set up interviews with people whom I had not previously met. Interviews were conducted in restaurants, coffee shops, their homes or mine. Initially, I strove to conduct the interviews in person only, thinking that reading body language, pauses, and background might give me additional clues to interpret what was being said. However, as I started to feel the difficulty of getting enough interviewees,¹⁶ and as there were a few willing participants in this study who lived far away from me, I began conducting interviews over the phone as well.

The interview sample of Korean adoptees was selected through purposive or judgment sampling (Bernard, 1995: 95) and snowball sampling (*ibid.*, 97-98), with particular attention to factors of age and gender. The Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees (D.C., 1999) was organized by age groups, based on the year in which adoptees were adopted. Earlier on in my research, I realized that this was an important distinction that the organizers had the prescience to make, as I observed noticeable differences in articulations of identities among adoptees depending on the generations to which they belonged.

Geographical locations in which adoptees grew up were noted (Meier, 1998, 1999), although these turned out to be not as significant a factor as I initially imagined them to be in shaping adoptee identities and experiences. As adoptees moved around the US and abroad

¹⁶ My research plan was to gain at least 35 interviewees, evenly spread out for geographical locations and age groups. I managed to complete 27 interviews, and my goal of achieving even distribution in terms of ages and geographical locations was not fulfilled.

for job and educational opportunities, the importance of their locales seemed to diminish. Rather, their accounts were shaped by the places where they had been and where they currently resided, and their social situations in the present seemed to influence the reflections of their childhood. Hence my observations and interviewees included Korean adoptees from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation,¹⁷ class, and geographic location.

Once selected, interviewees were given questions that incorporated two types of interview techniques: structured and unstructured (Bernard, 1995: 208-237; Briggs, 1986). Structured interview questions were used to gather statistical data such as age, sex, class and educational background, tour experiences in Korea (times and duration), and the location in which an adoptee grew up. These were followed by open-ended questions that characterize unstructured interviews, eliciting the interviewees' elaboration (Bernard, 1995: 208-237; Briggs, 1986; Silverman, 2006).

Both structured and unstructured dimensions of the interview were designed to elicit data on the construction of adoptee identity and on their life experiences as adoptees in the United States.¹⁸ My further goal in conducting interviews was to locate individual life trajectories and experiences in a larger cultural milieu. Questions addressed adoptees' experiences of growing up in adoptive families, the ways in which childhood experiences shaped their understanding of adoptee status (or identity), difficulties arising from transnational/transracial adoptee status, understanding of birth culture and the practice of taking birth country tours, among others.

¹⁷ "Sexual orientation" is not a significant variable in this research, as the majority of the interviewees were heterosexual. Only two interviewees self-identified as homosexual.

¹⁸ These were recorded and transcribed. In the process of transcription, all identifying information was altered to protect the confidentiality of my interviewees.

To investigate aspects of Korean adoptee subjectivities that were hard to obtain through participant observation and interviews, I also conducted a close textual/ethnographic analysis of the various forms of cultural productions (e.g., films, songs, poetry, artwork, autobiographies, semi-fictional stories) made by, for, and about transnational adoptees. I treat these cultural artifacts, and the processes through which they are created, as a “creative practice” as Raymond Williams (1977: 206-212) defined it. According to Williams, artwork, and the making of any artwork, are not reflections but mediations of reality. By “mediation,” he meant to emphasize the creative processes rooted in material reality (*ibid.*: 95-100). I closely follow Williams’ dialectical approach to examining cultural production as both emanating from, and mediating, the sociocultural conditions that provide a basis for adoptee consciousness. In reading cultural works, I attempted to see how Korean adoptee subjectivity is represented and constituted and how *out-of-place positioning* mediates adoptee subjectivity (Williams, 1977). Where appropriate and necessary, I utilize adoptee essays and films in the following chapters to strengthen and complement the arguments that I or my informants make.

Research Questions & Findings

Going into the field, I had a few simple questions that I planned to answer. First of all, I wanted to find out how Korean American adoptees made sense of who they are, given their history of cultural transplantation and the well-documented trauma of being pulled out of their “natural” surroundings, including their birth family and birth country. Secondly, their ambiguous position as an insider/outsider in this country presented to me an intriguing similarity to that of an anthropologist who learns the native ways of being and grasps

invaluable insights into human relationships. I was interested to know how their liminal position has been constructed as such and what their positioning would tell me about the meanings of kinship and identity.

This dissertation answers some of these questions as it presents new research findings. First of all, Korean adoptees' identities are anchored in what I call "out-of-place" subjectivity. There are important differences between the meanings of the terms, "subjectivity" and "identity."¹⁹ Without going into the disciplinary aspects of these differences,²⁰ I here define "identity" as a largely objective label that social agents put on others and themselves. This label arises from social interactions and has multiple meanings interpreted by the actors in interactions (Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 2001; Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967; Mead, 1934; Shott, 1979). In the case of Korean adoptees, "Korean transnational/transracial adoptee" is an identity. But what/who is a Korean transnational/transracial adoptee? Being located in the interstices of multiple cultural topographies, Korean adoptees' understanding of themselves in relation to others produces certain forms of knowledge, partly circumscribed by the social positions where they are located, and partly by their desire to be recognized in their position. This is the moment of subject formation which implies the emergence of subject and the existence of social position where this subject is situated. Beyond obvious characteristics shared by Korean adoptees – "Korean(Asian)-looking," having a Korean birthmother, etc. — Korean adoptee subjectivity is what constitutes and sustains this adoptee identity.

¹⁹ My discussion below is informed by reading Althusser (1971), Butler (1997), and Foucault (1997) on power and subjectivity.

²⁰ The term "subjectivity" comes from literary criticism and psychoanalysis, connoting mentality, psychological state and/or consciousness. "Identity" is a more common term, frequently used and defined in sociology, anthropology, political science, etc, as a social label that one and others put on oneself.

In proposing to examine Korean adoptee subjectivities, then, my study charts important moments in which Korean adoptees articulate their desire (and pleasure) to be recognized against the power of cultural registers that have excluded their experiences. Korean adoptee identity cannot be sustained without Korean adoptees' desire to be identified as such. However, desire and pleasure to "talk back" to the power which has previously excluded them are temporal, meaning that there should be other kinds of desires at work to produce ongoing maintenance of the identity.²¹ By introducing the role of power and desire/pleasure, thus putting in the element of indeterminacy, subjectivity at once details and deconstructs the static notions of identity. Therefore, I do not take Korean adoptee identity as a fixed entity of some sort that can be deduced from the physicality of being a Korean adoptee. Rather, I assume that identity is constructed in *social processes*, which require detailed attention.

Korean adoptees' out-of-place subjectivity provides a further foundation for building their affective bond with one another. I learned early on that social interactions in Korean adoptee gatherings had a very personal, yet extremely open quality. It was hard to believe that most of the adoptees there were meeting one another for the first time. From the topics of conversation to the intimate hugging and caring for each other that I observed, they appeared as though they had been long-time friends before this reunion. The immediacy of adoptees' affective identifications with one another in these gatherings points to the importance of these meetings in creating moments of *communitas* (Turner, 1967, 1969) which provide a "transformative experience that goes to the root of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared" (Turner, 1969: 138). In order to

²¹ Here, I avoid going into further discussion about how this desire/pleasure itself is produced by the regime of power. See Foucault's texts for relevant discussions (for e.g., 1988, 1997). Cf. Stoler (1995).

analyze the ways in which these meetings are mediated by emergent feelings of affective identifications and how this “transformative experience” facilitates the development of adoptee identity, I examine the various sites where adoptees meet with one another.

As Korean adoptees often borrow the idiom of “Han” to describe what they were feeling when they met with other adoptees, I also look at the sociocultural and historical factors that contribute to the building of this emotion among them, drawing on the works of Eng and Han’s “racial melancholia” (2000), and Gordon’s “haunting” (1997). My contention is that, located in-between culturally legible grids of identities and as a racial minority group, Korean adoptees retain Han over time. This Han, as a collection of sedimented experiences of pain and suffering, finds expression in social settings such as gatherings in which they meet other Korean adoptees. A large part of that pain and suffering comes from a racial positioning that is not at all clear-cut. The concept of “racial melancholia” introduced by Eng and Han (2000) grasps Korean adoptees’ pain in ways that can be translated into wider collective sentiments shared by others such as Asian/Americans as a whole. Gordon’s concept of “haunting” (2007) points to the unique predicament of Korean American adoptees, as they juggle material and immaterial ghosts – i.e., the presence and absence of birth connections—that haunt their life trajectories. As Korean adoptees struggle with the ramifications of their border crossings in terms of race and class, the “haunting” presence finds its expression in their quest for identities.

Lastly, despite the commonalities that they share as a group, Korean adoptees exhibit generational differences. Adoptee interviews from different generations illustrate the diversity and generational characteristics that exist among Korean adoptees. “Experience describes the production of meaning at the intersection of material life and interpretive frameworks” (Frankenberg, 1993: 241). Cultural milieu is important because it provides the

“interpretive frameworks” for the lives lived within that historical time. It makes available discourses and discursive themes to make meanings out of one’s existence and life. These discourses are internalized by the individuals that inhabit the cultural epoch, and they negotiate the applicability of these discourses by tweaking them in unpredictable and nuanced directions. Experience is not “uncontestable evidence” nor “an originary point of explanation” (Scott, 1992: 24). In other words, the cultural epoch one inhabits delimits one’s conceptual framework in organizing one’s life history by affording one discursive tools to articulate the meanings of one’s life. It also provides the cultural context in which one’s active uses of these discourses make sense, garnering recognition and support. Therefore, experiences felt and narrated by actors are constrained and inflected by historical time in ways that have not been given adequate elaboration. The existence of these differences further illustrates the need to envision adoption as an on-going process, rather than one that ends when the adoptee reaches adulthood. It also points to the changing nature of people’s thoughts and feelings about adoption issues, depending on one’s own life stage.

Lessons from the Field: Thoughts on the Position of an Anthropologist & the “Sites” in Fieldwork

1. Not a “Native” Anthropologist?

Narayan (1997) acutely observes that anthropology “remains intrigued by the notion of the ‘native’ anthropologist as carrying a stamp of authenticity” (29-30). Although her claim is that “native” anthropologists are not necessarily more knowledgeable than non-native ones, the belief that the knowledge of “native” anthropologists is more authentic than that of outsiders is deeply rooted in the discipline. I found this notion equally if not more

prevalent among Korean adoptees. They place much importance on empathy and experience in understanding adoptee situations. In order to feel truly empathetic, they believe one must be an adoptee to understand and know another. “I have been there, and done that, and from there, I can tell you what I learned.” Missing this important link, I was at a great disadvantage. Part of the reason that I had so much difficulty obtaining interviewees was that I was not an adoptee, as adoptees tended to get deeply suspicious when non-adoptees came to them asking questions and expecting them to reveal one of the most personal, if not painful, aspects of their lives. When I was soliciting interviewees for my research, I was often asked if I was adopted. A few of those that learned my non-adoptee status still responded and came to be interviewed. For them, the issue then was not to mark insiders or outsiders, but rather to prepare themselves for the encounters.

As I learned the deep impact of stigma upon adoptee status, I could understand the fact that adoptees had a hard time revealing their vulnerability to an outsider. Unable to reciprocate their pain with equivalent experiences, I often felt sad and powerless as to how to communicate my empathy with them in ways which they felt comfortable. In the end, I was able to establish several meaningful relationships with those who gradually accepted me and were willing to open themselves up to my queries and friendship, but the feeling that I was a *stranger* in Simmel’s (1971) sense of the term, never quite left me throughout my fieldwork. Two important factors shaped my position in the eyes of my informants in the beginning of my fieldwork: the stigma of being adopted and my Korean identity. Nevertheless, I was gradually accepted by the adoptees in my study.

Stigma of Being Adopted & a Non-adoptee Observer

One night, at a mini-gathering that I attended, I found myself in one adoptee's hotel room. Several of us sat or lay on the two twin beds in the center of the room. Upon hearing that I was there to study their adoptee experiences, Kimberly, who is known for her outspokenness, spat out, "Why do you want to study us adoptees? Maybe you are one of those adoptee wannabees." She quickly added a chuckle to smooth over her own bluntness which bordered on rudeness. Her remark brought on a moment of silence, during which we stared uneasily at one another, not quite knowing how to bridge the seemingly vast gulf between us. To my great relief, YouMe²² chimed in with her usual bravado, "Why do you want to be an adoptee? What's so good about being one, full of self-hatred, life of drug addiction, excruciating phases of pill-popping identity crises ending up in years of psychotherapy?" Everyone smiled and our conversation started from there. By emphasizing their troubled position, rather than leaving it muted beneath our everyday politeness, YouMe positioned our difference as a starting point rather than an end. We all chuckled at her comments, although it took a great while for me to really appreciate their heartfelt laughter.

My ethnographic journey was circumscribed by my own positioning as an outsider and constrained by the specific historical moments which my adoptee friends and I inhabited. As a non-adoptee trying to learn what it means to be an adoptee in America, I unwittingly forced my study participants to duplicate the familiar but still painful process of having to explain their existence. Jim Milroy writes in his short story, "The Stone Parable": "My brother has never had to explain to strangers that he is adopted. *I have had to explain my adoption all my life.* People will believe that stones are cars [when we were playing with them] before they'll accept that my brother, or sisters, or father or mother is my *real* family." (1999:

²² See Ch. 7 for YouMe Masters' story.

59, emphases added).²³ To be sure, having to explain their status and “stories” on a regular basis, they were not surprisingly leery of yet another non-adoptee’s inquisitiveness.

As a matter of fact, some of the adoptees were not at all comfortable sharing their stories with me. This was not only about repetition, but about the powerful stigma attached to “being adopted” for transracial, transnational adoptees, as I will discuss in Chapter Two. This became clear to me over time, as some of the adoptees I interviewed or met in public settings such as coffee shops or restaurants lowered their voices when talking about their adoption experience when there were other people within earshot. Especially during interviews, they looked around to see whether there were people who might hear them. Their furtive sideways glances revealed the deep sense of shame they carried. This strong sense of shame made me cautious about revealing my non-adoptee status.

At one time, Judith, 31, and I met in a restaurant to conduct an interview. A friend of mine introduced her to me, and we communicated over the internet a few times before our actual meeting. Her first words to me were, “I THOUGHT you were an adoptee!” Just then, I realized she did not ask the question prior to our actual meeting, and that the intermediary did not explain my non-adoptee status to her. Her disappointment was so transparent that her husband, who accompanied her, blushed on my behalf. This was said as we were heading towards a table. I wondered what gave me away, as I made myself busy by taking out a tape-recorder, a pen and a notepad, while trying to find ways to handle the awkwardness that quickly followed. She answered almost all of my interview questions but without much elaboration, leading me to wonder whether she might have contributed more if I too had been an adoptee. I could not shake the feeling that my outsider status was shaping the information I was able to gather. Interestingly, however, she later invited me to

²³ This same excerpt is discussed in more detail in Ch. 2.

her home as an apologetic gesture. We ordered Korean take-out food and talked about her growing family and her impending reunion with a birth aunt.

Adoption remained a difficult topic to broach. For example, Maureen, who has known me since the beginning of my fieldwork, had shut me off completely when she came back from her family reunion in Korea a few years prior. “I don’t want to talk about it [the trip], okay?” She now talks about it in bits and pieces, but at the time, her avoidance of the topic and of me lasted for a few months. I also later learned that during the time she would not talk to me about her trip, she was actually talking about it with Laura, another Korean adoptee who was also close to me. Although I respected the distance that Maureen wanted to keep and did not pry, it hurt to feel out of the loop, and more importantly, to be excluded. The fact that it took 2 years or so for Maureen to talk to me about the issue of her reunion and what bothered her during her trip emphasizes the fact that ethnographic knowledge must be grounded in historical context.

Ethnography is a *momentary* snapshot of people who are going through life changes. An ethnographer’s sustained contact with her informants over time may bring a seasoned understanding of the behaviours and beliefs of those she studies. People change their positions and modify their beliefs, as they encounter the joys and tragedies of life over time, and my informants were no exception. Maureen, for instance, changed her status from that of a single woman to a mother of two, during the course of my fieldwork. Her gradual changes in attitude toward the issue of adoption might have been affected by the changes taking place in her life. Just like Maureen’s, the lives of many others shifted and were transformed throughout my fieldwork, and my findings and analyses shifted accordingly. Ethnographical truths are indeed partial and incomplete (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), and often affected by conditions in which they are produced. My job as an ethnographer was to

record these moments, utilizing anthropological insights to analyze the meanings of each moment that constitute our sense of self. In these moments, I cannot be sure that my role and my presence were fully separate from what I was observing and recording.

Being a Korean

However, because Korean adoptees were so anxious to learn about Korea and Korean culture, I stood out as a figure that shared an important characteristic with them; we were ALL born in Korea. My childhood experiences in Seoul during the 1970s and the 1980s, my knowledge of Korean culture and habits, my ability to speak Korean fluently, and my support as they navigated their own Korean heritage all carved out a conceptual place for me. They referred to this as “Korean American,” “Korean Korean,” and “*Real* Korean.” At times, these markings of me reminded me of the differences between us. My English consonants and vowels showed traces of Korean heritage. These differences also caused discomfort in certain adoptees, making it extremely difficult to get to some of them.

To complicate matters further, my adoptee informants seemed to hold certain ideas or stereotypes about “Koreans” in general. I first realized this when Maureen and I were waiting for her new adoptee friend, Linda. We were chatting in front of the building where Linda was working, and since I had never met Linda before, Maureen was very excited, telling me about her. “When I first met her, I didn’t know she was a Korean adoptee, you know? She so looks like *a Korean!*” I smiled, feeling a little dumb, not quite knowing what she was getting at. “What do you mean, she looks like a Korean?” “You know, the look!” Maureen half-heartedly answered, rolling her eyes, as if she couldn’t believe how dense I was. I wondered whether I looked Korean enough, but I used the temporary silence to decipher what she really meant. With suspense and thrill, I could not help but anticipate this Linda

person who seemed to embody “Koreanness” for Maureen. A few minutes later, Linda emerged in her three-piece suit, which consisted of long dark slacks, a cream-colored blouse, and a long gray jacket. Her pale face was accentuated with silver-rimmed glasses and her eyes were bright and shiny. While I watched Linda intently trying not to miss any details that would give out a clue as to her Koreanness, Maureen said, under her breath, “See, what did I tell you? She just looks Korean!” before calling out to Linda. Just as Judith spotted me without even talking to me, Maureen seemed to have mapped out a conceptual category, “Korean,” that allowed her to identify Koreans.

It should be clear by now that this conceptual category the adoptees had toward Korean/Korean Americans was not necessarily based on physical features. It seemed that cultural differences were expressed through the choices of attires and accessories/ commodities, creating a look that was considered to be uniquely Korean to the eyes of my informants. Therefore, the line between these categories was very permeable and ambiguous. For example, at one time, I volunteered at a culture camp as a culture class instructor for children aged 5-7. Although there were several Korean American youths volunteering for culture and youth-related activities, my age and the fact that I already knew a few adoptee counselors working there positioned me ambiguously. They asked, “What’s YOUR story?” as I listened rather than contributing to the discussion. My story was that I was not an adoptee, but a Korean person who wanted to know their stories. Upon learning that I was not adopted, Sally, a girl from Arizona raised her eyebrows, eyes wide with disbelief, “so you were NOT adopted?” At moments like this, I was reminded of the constructed nature of sociocultural boundaries that partition identities, despite some adoptees’ strong belief in the category of “Koreans.”

As we got to know each other better, and came to be friends, Maureen called me a “bad Korean,” with the closeness only friends could share. I wondered whether this was her realization that her preconceived notions about Koreans originated from flawed representations circulating throughout this culture, or whether she was setting me apart from other Koreans in her schema. My answer came when I visited her house one afternoon. She could not wait to tell me about a Korean couple that she had just met. “They are okay, but you know Koreans, they are too religious, talking about God all the time. I just don’t feel comfortable!”

However, my roots in Korea and my insider’s knowledge of Korean culture came in handy when adoptee friends tried to build additional contacts for me. My knowledge of Korean was the first thing they commented on to new acquaintances, and after this, a semblance of respectful conversation would soon ensue. Especially when I attended the conferences held in Korea, I was greeted respectfully by many new adoptees who heard that I could help them with their language needs. I made a few valuable contacts this way. In these circumstances, my status as a Korean who was born and raised in Korea was helpful in some ways, although it was not so productive in others.

These experiences made it clear to me from the very beginning of my fieldwork that there was no “ideal” or “objective” position that an anthropologist could occupy. I could not objectively detach my positioning from what I learned from the field. As a social being, I could not remove myself from the social scenes unraveling in front of me, and all social interactions between me and my informants were deeply impacted by my social status (my sex, age, occupation, ethnicity, and sexual orientation), and how I was viewed (or “read”) by my informants. I was deeply grateful that so many opened themselves to me, and also saddened when I was not in a position to give them any practical advice addressing their

concerns. In conferences organized by adoptees, there were several sessions closed to non-adoptees. These sessions, I was told, were created because of adoptees' negative experiences with social workers in the past. Adoptive parents were also prevented from attending these closed sessions, as the adoptees wanted a space of their own, free from family obligations and pressures. As mentioned earlier, one can surmise from this that adoptees put more faith in "natives," or rather, "insiders," than outsiders, no matter how much these outsiders know about issues related to adoption.²⁴

Mark of Acceptance: "Honorary Adoptee"

Since I began my fieldwork in 2001, there have been several adoptees who welcomed my presence and graciously adopted me into their networks. I felt their acceptance of me quite viscerally when they began to call me, "an honorary adoptee." Over the years, these adoptees often forgot the fact that I was not an adoptee. One said to me warmly, "Jane, you have been in these gatherings with me so many times, I feel like it won't be a gathering without you." I could not express how much her words meant to me at the time. They also told me, "we were adopted. We can certainly adopt you!"

The feeling of being accepted, of having a sense of belonging, is as deeply moving as the pain of feeling alienated. When I first attended adoptee gatherings, I was struck by my familiarity with their tones, voices, faces, and bodily movements. I could see my own reflections in them, in ways they described each other. Perhaps due to these physical similarities, there were times that my difference was not so obvious. In a way, I could get

²⁴ From my research, this strand of thought seemed to be strongest among adoptees who did not have extensive contact with other Asians and/or other adoptees.

around these unfamiliar settings thanks to the fact that there was an emotional bond among adoptees that was sometimes extended to me and others who attended these events.

2. Site-less Fieldwork: Nowhere or Everywhere?

My initial difficulty in building relationships or a rapport with my informants was partly due to the episodic nature of my fieldwork. I attended conferences, mini-gatherings, and culture camps organized by/for adoptees, but these often did not provide me with the sense of consistency necessary to establish lasting bonds or meaningful contacts. These events were populated by different people at different times and locations, although there were a few regular attendees at some events.

Due to the episodic nature of these gatherings, my immersion in the field, in the conventional sense of anthropologists who travel to remote areas and immerse in an alien culture never quite happened. Rather, my field seemed uncertain, and the natives were too fast-moving to catch up to at times. In addition, during the course of 6 years or so of fieldwork, many adoptees became a part of my life, and I theirs. It was at once a blessing and a curse. I could not draw a clear boundary between my fieldwork and the rest of my life.

If you are doing fieldwork in a town or a village, remote from the location of your “home,” you might be able to separate yourself geographically from the field. But my fieldwork was often initiated by a drive to Washington, D.C., and other places reachable by New Jersey’s transit system and the Newark airport (cf. Passaro, 1997). I had no sense of the immersion practiced by most anthropologists, especially those who study other parts of the world than North America. Thus, my fieldnotes were taken at different meetings and diverse locations, rather than regular and constant recordings. With technological advances, my

adoptive informants could contact me at any time of the day via e-mail and phone calls.

Especially, when one adoptee kept calling me at inconvenient times, I often pondered where to draw the line between home and the field.

“The field” was hard to pin down in yet another way. I live and work in parts of New Jersey where a growing number of interracial adoptees make their home. It was not uncommon to see a White²⁵ mother with two or three Asian children shopping in a local grocery store. I began to get acquainted with a few adoptive parents of Chinese children, and they were curious about my research. They would tell me their personal stories as adoptive parents, counting on my understanding ears. Their stories helped me to appreciate the changing cultural attitudes and practices related to adoption in recent years, and invitations to their homes provided me with fuller social contexts in which I could comprehend adoptive family dynamics.

Especially for a new immigrant anthropologist studying adoption and its relationship to American culture, the field was, in a sense, everywhere. Whenever I found representations of adoption stories in the mass media, and wherever I encountered adoptive families, the materials worth exploring accumulated. The friendships that I built with several adoptees developed outside the field, on our trips together to Korean restaurants, or visits to Korean groceries, or holiday/ seasonal events. These companions became not only the informants, but good friends who helped me keep my sanity and sense of self in this long fieldwork.

²⁵ In this dissertation, I use the term, “White,” to denote Caucasian Americans of various ancestries. I acknowledge this usage can be problematic. Like other racial terms, such as “Black” or “Asian,” “Whites” obfuscates important differences: ethnic diversity, class, gender, race, and sexual orientation that can exist among people grouped together by these terms. Many scholars have analyzed how various European immigrants and their descendants evolve through various ethnic categories over time prior to reaching “Whiteness” (Brodin, 1998; Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 2005). Despite my understanding of these complexities that constitute “Whiteness,” I found many –but certainly not all—adoptees use the term “White” to position themselves or to describe Caucasians –regardless of the social differences among these Caucasians.

With them and others like them who kept in touch with me over the phone and through e-mail, I experienced the profound difficulty of separating the roles of “researcher” and “friend.” Sometimes, an everyday activity like eating out with my friends yielded valuable material when I put “my foot in my mouth,” so to speak.

One spring day, Maureen, Irene and I were having lunch in a Korean restaurant. My daughter Josie was just over a year old and she had gotten into the habit of calling every man she saw, “Daddy!” My weekly grocery shopping trips with Josie were often embarrassing for me during this phase, as Josie would shout “Daddy!” to whichever man walking toward us, in her cutest baby voice. This made many a man blush, especially if they were shopping with their female partners. Confiding my feelings to Maureen and Irene, I said, “I am so embarrassed that Josie will call anyone, I mean anyone, even those who didn’t even look like her, ‘Daddy!’” Before I could go on, Maureen snapped at me, “What’s so WRONG with that?” She was blinking her eyes, almost ready to fight, before I realized the extent of my blunder. I was flabbergasted when I came to a belated realization: Maureen’s Daddy, blond and blue-eyed, does not look at all like Maureen. Irene quickly jumped in, deftly changing the topic, and directing us back towards the menu by saying, “Ooo-kaay, let’s see what we’re in mood for today.” Now, several years later, I still think Maureen has never forgiven me for that momentary insensitivity that betrayed my unconscious assumption of biological kinship. This incident also taught me about the depth of “common sense” that we have within us, and how it can hurt people who live on the edges of “common sense” ideology at most unexpected moments. Here, radical ways in which Korean adoptees transgress assumptions of, and boundaries set by, the “common sense” (Gramsci, 1999(1971)) world seem to produce numerous sociocultural interactions that cannot be taken lightly. This made me realize that for an anthropologist, even the most mundane activity can be a great source of

reflection and analysis. An elusive and porous boundary that delineated my field from the wider culture illuminated the fact that, in order to study the workings of culture, we need to expand our conceptual horizon of the “field” to include the powers of larger society and culture that shape and circumscribe the field.

My experiences have thus taught me that the conventional distinction between home and the field is illusory at best. Moments of epiphany can occur even when one is far away from “the field.” Rather, there is no field so far removed from the larger workings of sociocultural structures and ideologies that the people in it are not affected by them. A “field” is, therefore, an anthropological construction, a myth, that both enables and constrains ethnographical fieldwork.

Organization of Chapters

Willis states that a social scientist’s goal is “to tell ‘my story’ about ‘their story’ through the fullest conceptual bringing out of ‘their story’” (2000: xii). In order to present what I learned in analytical terms, I take an interdisciplinary approach, putting together theoretical insights from disparate disciplines; ranging from sociology/anthropology to Asian American studies. All the while, my analyses are grounded in various ethnographic sources: interviews, participant observations, and adoptee cultural works (literature and films).

In Chapter Two, I examine ordinary social encounters that enable Korean adoptee subjectivity, utilizing Willis’ “ethnographic imagination” as a theoretical methodology. Willis states,

Of fundamental importance to the ethnographic imagination is comprehending creativities of the everyday as indissolubly connected to, dialectically and intrinsically, wider social structures, structural relations and structurally provided conditions of existence. . . . The imaginative

construction of the everyday as ordinarily including creative cultural practices enforces a reverse impulse, the cusp of where aesthetic categories meet social ones, to explore the ways in which cultural practices make active sense of their structural conditions of existence, even within the context of the evident continuity of social structural formation (2000: 34)

Everyday mundane activities powerfully shape our sense of the world and our identities within it. “Ethnographic imagination” (*ibid.*) thus prods us to excavate the power of social situations in their nitty-gritty details. Ethnographic moments analyzed in Chapter Two stand as evidence of the fact that subjectivities and, by extension, identities, are always shifting and multiply layered. By focusing on subjectivity, I could see how their in-between social positions in relation to race and kinship play a significant role in shaping experiences and identities. As transnational, transracial adoptees, Korean adoptees have had to negotiate their skewed positioning with the “common sense” (Gramsci, 1999(1971)) world that often marginalizes their experiences.

In Chapter Three, I explore construction of adoptees’ affective bonds, by sifting through various sites where adoptees meet and gather: adoptee gatherings/conferences, culture camps and birth country tours. The affective bond among Korean adoptees is one important characteristic that cuts across these different types of meetings and gatherings. The actual meetings are physical places where adoptees come to recognize the commonalities that they share. The adoptees’ experiences at these diverse sites provide the solid ground for developing and sustaining adoptee networks and relationships.

Heavily relying on participant observation data, I show diverse responses of adoptees to these meetings/gatherings. Adoptees’ interpretations of these events differ depending on their current ages and social positions, and these meetings have their own conflicts and problems. Nonetheless, I argue that Korean adoptees, having been to one or more of these

actual encounters with others in collectivity, come to nurture the affective bond that cements meaningful long-term relationships.

Looking at three categories of sites of adoptee gatherings/meetings, culture camps, and birth country tours, this section pays due attention to the process by which adoptees come to realize the commonalities that underlie their social positioning. Some of the adoptees nurture the affective bonds that they experience by cultivating long-term relationships with those whom they meet at these sites. Despite the tensions introduced by different interpretations of adoption issues and experiences, Korean adoptees experience a sense of belonging to a community of their own.

Chapter Four continues the discussion of Korean adoptees' affective bond, highlighting the sociocultural aspects that give support to the adoptee affect in terms of racialization and cultural assimilation experiences. The practices and discourses of color-blindness that most Korean adoptees grew up with play a significant role in engendering and shaping Korean adoptee consciousness. In addition, I explore the gendered ways in which Korean adoptees experience the process of cultural assimilation in the US. Drawing on interviews, autobiographical essays, and the film, "Adopted: The Movie," this section will explore how, in some ways, the Americanization experience is predicated on imaginaries of *raced sexualities* for Korean adoptees, rendering Korean adoptee experiences deeply inflected by gender. Cultural stereotypes related to Asian Americans seem to divide the experiences of male adoptees from those of females. Whereas male adoptees have had to prove their masculinity, their female counterparts have had to deal with overly exaggerated sexuality.

At the end of Chapter Four, I return to the discussion of affective bonds among Korean adoptees, and examine how adoptees articulate and understand this affect. Korean adoptees often use "Han," a Korean emotion term, to describe their feelings. As stated

earlier, “Han” in Korean means a set of emotions, ranging from depression, sadness, to resentment and anger that was caused by a long period of experience of oppression. According to Elaine Kim, Han is “the sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression” (1993: 215). Rather than transplanting Korean “Han” to Korean adoptees’ affect, I contextualize “Han” with the help of two theoretical ideas: Eng and Han’s “racial melancholia” (2000), and Gordon’s “haunting” (1997).

In Part Two, we listen to what adoptees say about their own life experiences and how they make sense of their unique social positions. Chapters Five through Eight in this Part Two describe and analyze the experiences of Korean adoptees of various age groups in historical context. Accompanied by tables and figures, Chapter Five is an introductory chapter that lays out the social characteristics and demographic information of Korean adoptees and introduces the cultural epochs in which they grew up.

Chapters Six through Eight present adoptees as they articulated themselves in interviews, interspersed with my own analyses. I refrained from fracturing their narratives, as these excerpts are given as answers to open-ended questions that did not seek specific answers. This does not mean that these stories are free from my own assumptions and interpretations. Our interviews often moved in unforeseen directions, and I tried to put the themes that arose in analytic perspective when applicable. In so doing, my analytic purposes inevitably steered further discussions both in the actual interviews and in the brief discussions that are combined in these chapters. I use the term “experience” throughout this dissertation with these layered dimensions of narrative in mind.

As a whole, Part One frames the discussion of Korean adoptee subjectivity and sociocultural factors that are conducive to the production of emotional bonds among Korean adoptees. The chapters in Part One illustrate the ways in which the larger society

and cultural practices and beliefs influence and shape the social positioning of Korean American adoptees. Part Two introduces the voices of Korean adoptees, organized by three separate age groups. Korean adoptees employ diverse cultural discourses corresponding to their cultural milieu to articulate their positions and identities, illuminating the intersections between society and individual agencies. In conclusion, I provide an overall summary of the dissertation and point to future research directions.

Contributions

In her study of adoption of Chinese children in the US,²⁶ Dorow states:

Having been brought into the heart of the “national family,” Chinese adoptees disturb the assumptions through which that national family is made. Because they become attached to the nation by way of (usually) white and relatively well-off American families, the social organizing power of racial difference, including as it is articulated with class and gender, is not easily erased or defined. Questions of adoptees’ cultural identity prompt us to consider the relationship between hegemonic whiteness and both foreign and domestic minorities, the class expression and consumption of multiculturalism, and the importance the taming of migration has played in constructing the imagined American nation (2006: 207).

As will be seen in the chapters that follow, Dorow’s statement is highly applicable to Korean adoptees as well. An increase in transnational adoptions in recent years leads us to conclude that transnational adoption and adoptees will continue to be a part of US society for a long time to come (Pertman, 2000; Tessler, et al, 1999). The study of Korean American adult adoptees has far-reaching ramifications in the context of a growing number of

²⁶ Currently, the single largest source of transnational adoptees for the adoptive parents in the United States is China. This does not mean that Korea stopped the outflow of its children. Korea continues to be one of the top five sources of international adoptees for the United States. Further, most Chinese adoptees consist of female children, whereas Korean children of both sexes are adopted in the United States. Future comparison research of Korean and Chinese adoptees is an intriguing possibility.

transnational/transracial adoptees, by forcing us to recognize diverse routes of migration and the complexity of identity-making, and to acknowledge the continuing existence of alternative forms of family, which have not yet been accepted into American cultural consciousness.

In addition, Korean adoptees' ambiguous status vis-à-vis both their host society and their birth society (Korea) prods us to think about social constructions of nation, racial identity, and kinship. Inhabiting the terrain of "fourth culture" (Stock, 1999), Korean American adoptees occupy the position that does not easily fit into existing grids of identities. Looking at Korean adoptees' experience leads us to witness "the myriad forms of 'boundary work' that maintain the self-identity of dominant groups and ideologies" (Moore, et al., 2003: 28). Korean adoptees' stories problematize the complex ways in which various groups perform these "boundary works" and show how these adoptees envision alternative ways of belonging.

This dissertation brings into focus the importance of considering transnational, transracial adoption as part of a larger societal issue that cannot be relegated to the domain of familial institutions only. Further, it highlights the fact that adoption is an on-going process for the entirety of an adoptee's lifetime. Depending on life stage, an adoptee makes sense of adoption and his/her adoptee status in different ways that reflect current cultural concerns and issues. Adoptees do grow up and face the world with critical insights learned from their own experiences. They are astute observers of society and culture, and their humor and wit are born out of the pain and suffering that their marginalized social positioning has fashioned. Therefore, this study of Korean American adoptees can provide other transnational/transracial adoptees—both Korean and non-Korean—with a conceptual map of adoptee identity and experience.

Chapter TWO. “Bodies That Matter”: Exploring the Place of the “Real” & Common Sense in “Out-of-Place” Subjectivity²⁷

Experience and the everyday are the bread and butter of ethnography, but they are also the grounds whereupon and the stake for how grander theories must test and justify themselves (Willis 2000: iii).

It isn't easy to call people on their unconscious errors (Wu, 2002: 21).

In an adoptee conference organized for Korean and other adoptees and their adoptive families a few years ago, one parent shared a personal episode that involved her family and her adopted daughter from Korea.

My family went to a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown to celebrate my daughter's fifth birthday. We thought it would give her a precious opportunity to see people who look like her. To our amazement, when ordering the dinner, my daughter blurted out loudly in a roomful of Asian people, "Mom! Dad! We are the only White²⁸ people around here!"

Her account elicited laughter with sympathetic nods and looks from the audience. The episode poignantly illustrates the sense of misplacement and out-of-placeness among transracial adoptees²⁹ in their daily lives as it offers a moment among many wherein adoptees' confident sense of identity can be shattered by predictable social interactions that would ensue. At the same time, it reveals the ways in which the relations of kinship and family

²⁷ A shorter version of this chapter was published in Proceeding of the First International Korean Adoption Studies Research Symposium. See J. Park (2007). “Bodies That Matter” is a title borrowed from Judith Butler's book (1993) with the same title.

²⁸ To emphasize “race” as a socially constructed fact, racial labels such as “White” or “Black” are capitalized henceforth.

²⁹ Conventional usage of the term, “transracial adoption,” in adoption circles meant adoption of African American children by White American parents. By focusing on Korean American adoptees' experiences as transracial adoptees, this chapter will highlight the points of commonalities and differences that characterize diverse constituents of this practice. If necessary, I reserve the use of the term to denote those experiences that might be relevant to other transracial adoptees.

confer a sense of belonging, and raises questions about this sense of belonging in relation to race and culture, two concepts central to the construction of American identities.

This chapter is an exercise in thinking through the ways in which transracial and transnational adoptees' "out-of-place" subjectivities stem from their skewed relationships to what is considered as "the real" in everyday practices and cultural beliefs, which give conceptual and symbolic significance to the ideologies of "common sense" (Gramsci [1971] 1999). "Common sense," following Gramsci, connotes the distillation of ideological and material forces in popular consciousness. The role of "common sense" in maintaining and routinizing cultural worlds was noted by Hall, when he remarked, culture is "the contradictory forms of 'common sense' which have taken root in and helped to shape popular belief." (1986: 26).

One of the primary constituents of "common sense" is what is culturally understood as "real" in terms of concrete entities, such as people, places, identities, relationships and so forth, which give meanings to people's lives. The "real" also teaches social beings about the line between cultural legitimacy and illegitimacy, by delimiting what makes sense and what does not in our lives. Looking at the experiences of Korean American adoptees especially when they face "the real" that negates or obfuscates their experiences, this chapter will analyze the multiple registers upon which "the real" is constructed, and illuminate the resultant subjective terrains, which I term, as "out-of-place," that these adoptees occupy.

In order to comprehend cultural assumptions and prescriptions that underlie everyday "common sense" and "the real," it is important to scrutinize the nitty-gritty details of our everyday lives. "Common sense" and "the real" become historically sedimented practices and discourses via social actors' everyday cultural activities. Here I approach five interrelated dimensions of Korean adoptee experiences through elaboration on *ethnographic*

moments that crystallize each dimension. Examining the minutiae of daily lives enlightens us about the workings of power and culture in mundane forms. A Korean adoptee, Judith, age 31, once told me, “I think outsiders [to adoption practices] probably should open their ears, and understand that *things that seem trivial to them could be life-altering change for adoptees.*” Those “things that seem trivial” are what constitute “common sense” and the “real.” Korean adoptee experiences thus necessitate detailed examination of micro-social dynamics and interactions that are routinized and thought to be ordinary.

“Culture is ordinary,” said Raymond Williams (1989). I read his statement as illuminating the historically routinized and sedimented practices that constitute culture. Culture provides our way of being in this world. Willis (2000: 106) further expanded and developed Williams’ theorization, stating that “a view of creativity embedded in everyday cultural practices is less general, more troubled, less benevolent” than what Williams initially envisioned. Everyday cultural practices illustrate not only the creativity of individual actors in negotiating the cultural structures that are powerful and oppressive, but also how these cultural structures are reproduced by these same actors. Willis’ critical concept, “partial penetration” (1977) is to provide an analytical framework to examine these indeterminate moments when social actors’ practices simultaneously subvert and reaffirm the existing oppressive structures.³⁰ Willis thus argues that “there is no guarantee of an essential or automatic morality or goodness in the meanings of daily life, simply because they are

³⁰This concept was elaborated in Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labor* (1977), which examines working class youth and the ways in which they are incorporated into working class jobs in England. Willis introduces two concepts, “penetration” (119) and “limitation” (120) in order to delineate the complex workings of ideologies of gender and class that make the transition of working class youth into working class laborers seemingly natural and inevitable. Penetration refers to the creative moment in which people find productive ways to resist the workings of social ideologies. Limitation is the effect caused by the power of ideologies – hegemony—to re-incorporate the moment of penetration into the hegemony itself. I believe Willis’ theoretical insight comes from his notion of “partial penetration” (119) that points to the moments of indeterminacy in-between those of penetration and limitation. See also Willis (2000).

oppositional, alternative or different” (2000: 106-107). Korean adoptees’ confrontation of the common sense world shows precisely these moments. At one end, Korean adoptees’ skewed relationship to the common sense world exposes the culturally-rooted assumptions of that world. This offers us reflective moments to re-examine our own witting or unwitting complicity in sustaining this world. On the other end, Korean adoptees’ pain and suffering in their out-of-place positioning often find outlets in reinvesting in the very common sense world that leaves out their experience and existence.

In order to demarcate messy and interrelated dimensions of human experiences in an analytical framework, I divide five sets of ethnographic moments as frames to examine layered experiences that enable Korean adoptee subjectivities. Using accounts from participant observation in various locations and settings along with Korean adoptee autobiographies, movies, and literary works, the following ethnographic moments hope to illuminate the social interactions that enable Korean adoptee subjectivities in the very messiness and crudities of everyday life. Everyday social interactions often defy any neat categorization ripe for analytic inquiries, and here the concept of ethnographic *moment* is introduced as a heuristic device to facilitate intellectual investigation. These are charged empirical moments in which the social interactions at hand illuminate how social categories are imposed, resisted, and re-negotiated. In the end, everyday mundane *moments* collectively constitute our experiences, some standing out in our consciousness, others fading in our memories.

The following three sets of ethnographic moments illustrate the world constructed by “common sense” to which Korean adoptees maintain skewed relationships. These three sets, in fact, are deeply embedded, revealing the difficulties of drawing analytic boundaries over layered dimensions of everyday experience. As a whole, they explore the interactions

between sociocultural structures of power and the adoptees, focusing on their racially ambiguous positioning. Lewis points out that “though the idea that race is a social construction is widely accepted, the reality of race in daily life has received little mention” (2003: 153).

Everyday interactions, the moments in which the social category, “race” takes shape and is given meaning in social interaction, are the means through which boundaries between groups are created, reproduced, and resisted. . . . Although racial categorization is not externally imposed in an uncomplicated or automatic way, the range of available racial categories and the meanings associated with them necessarily shape and limit the kinds of racial identifications that are possible (*ibid.*: 152).

As will be shown shortly, Korean adoptees have a wealth of experience that can shed light on the processes in which group boundaries and racial categories get challenged, resisted and re-negotiated. The moments that are detailed in these three sets will help delineate “the kinds of racial identifications” that are enabled for Korean adoptees. At the same time, we can witness the vulnerability of a common sense world that struggles to define its cultural world, when Korean adoptees defy its assumptions in unpredicted yet intelligent ways. Their utilization of available cultural categories brings us back to the issue of the complexity of subjectivities.

In order to bring out this agency and creativity of Korean adoptees, the last two sets of ethnographic moments in this chapter deal with the ways in which Korean adoptees actively engage “the real” world by emotional investment and imagined belonging. Investing in “the real” world is one of the ways in which they try to authenticate their Korean identities. However, their reinvestment in this common sense world illuminates the complex tension between the “real” and their out-of-place positioning as the “real” is reconstituted by its repressed moments. Taken together, these ethnographic moments bring out the importance of *studying the mundane* in comprehending the process of identity constructions,

and highlight the processual nature of becoming a self, challenging the fixity of identities conferred by the world of the real and common sense.

Ethnographic Moments 1. Stigma: Rejected by Both Sides of the Fence

At the Super Valu[sic] I skip along.
 Dancing
 the cart past rows of Lucky Charms.
 Eyes Stare.
 Lipstick lines move
 “Is she yours?”
 My mother must explain that yes, she adopted me.
 Hurtful interruptions.
 Accusations.
 Inform and teach me that I
 am different.
 My family is not normal, not natural, not true.
 I don’t have a real mom and dad
 if I am not
 their race (Hanson, 1997: 61).

I always knew I was adopted. I don’t recall the exact moment my parents told me. But I knew it made me different from others, almost as if I was born with a handicap. I was careful not to reveal that I had this affliction. It made me feel ashamed about myself (Smith, 1997: 106).

This section deals with one of the socio-cultural dynamics surrounding transracial adoption arrangements in the US: Stigma and the “out-of-placeness” that it induces.³¹ Korean adoptee autobiographies invariably include various encounters these adoptees had as children with social strangers who questioned the adoptees’ rightful status. These moments that question their rightful place are constant reminders of Korean adoptee out-of-placeness.

³¹ Certainly, stigma of adoptee status is experienced by transracial and intraracial adoptees alike (cf. Wegar, 1997). There are clearly similarities and important differences among these two groups of adoptees. See fn. 11.

Just like Smith above, every adoptee that I met said that they always knew they had been adopted whether their parents specifically told them about it or not.³²

“Being adopted” in American culture is a highly stigmatized status (cf. Wegar, 1997, 2000).³³ As “abandoned children” or “orphans”³⁴ in the popular imaginary both reflected and fomented by children’s stories and fairytales, coupled with visual representations of “third world orphans” circulating in the adoption industry (Burditt, 2007; Cartwright, 2003, 2005), an adoptee is a figure of ultimate abjection, whose status is uncertain until his/her “real” identity is established.³⁵

³² Modell (1994) finds similar sentiments among domestic adoptees in the US.

³³ Along with the adoptees, adoptive parents have also been stigmatized in popular imaginary. As we are well aware, most fairy tales and stories for children utilize the assumption of step-parents as not quite as decent as the “real” parents (Pruitt, 1991). Bartholet claims that “a recurring theme” in children’s stories “is that whenever a child is taken from its birthparents, bad things happen to them until they either escape or are rescued by the ‘real’ parents” (1999: 252, fn.2). According to a recent survey on representations of adoptive families in media, “the largest category of adoption-related news concerns courts and crimes, and features adoption rackets and other abusive practices. One third of all adoption news stories deal with birth parents who are searching for or reclaiming their children. Television and screen dramas are similarly dominated by themes of the corruption and abuse involved in adoptive arrangements and of the search for birth parents and children” (*ibid.*: 252, fn. 3). See Ch. 8 of Bartholet’s *Family Bonds*. For the impact of children’s literature on adoptees, see Bergquist, 2007.

³⁴ Another image could be that of “bad blood” (see Ladner 1978; Wegar 1997). Children whose origins are uncertain may cause anxieties, as the recent Hollywood movie, *Orphan* (2009, produced by Jaume Collet-Serra), visualizes the fear.

³⁵ In societies organized by an economy of kinship wherein men relate to one another through exchanging their kinwomen and creating affinal ties with others, Levi-Strauss (1969: 39) points out that those cast outside of this economy of kinship include bachelors who could not marry due to their lack of kinwomen to exchange with other men, and orphans who do not belong to the familial unit which is integral to participate in the economy of kinship. Adoption is thus seen as a social strategy to incorporate orphans into fully functioning members of this type of economy. What is striking here in relation to Schneider’s view of adoption is that both anthropologists are intent on seeing how the marginality –or liminality in the case of orphans soon to be recruited –is subsumed by the power of legitimating practices. Both Levi-Strauss and Schneider planned to illuminate the structures of kinship albeit in different contexts and this plan framed their theses. Instead, I suggest that we should examine what the existence of marginality/liminality instructs us about the contradictions inherent in the structure of kinship itself. The potential “dangers” carried by marginals and liminals disrupt the ideological discourses of family and kinship. Rather than looking only at facilitative function of adoption as an instrument for extant kinship structure, we should ask: How could we unpack these dangers? How can we delineate the latent potentials that the boundary markers –such as marginals and liminals– obtain? In what ways are liberatory potentials of the boundary markers rendered impotent in generating incisive critiques of existing structure? In answering these questions, it should be clear that the boundary markers are stigmatized precisely because it brings to light limits of existing structure, making people to confront difficult questions about sociocultural environment and individuals in it.

Although I read materials and heard from several adoptees that they were ashamed of being adopted, I did not realize how deep feelings of shame can be until one day in late winter, when Laura, Irene and I were invited to Maureen's baby shower in New Jersey. I had never met Irene before this occasion. When I arrived, Laura introduced me to her, and all of us happened to sit at the same table. Soon, Maureen came over to us, and began to chat with Irene, asking about Irene's plan to go on to a graduate school somewhere in the Midwest. Laura and I were chatting and watching people come and go.

Suddenly, I heard Irene mumbling under her breath, "Oh, my god, I am so ashamed. The woman [who just passed our table] just yelled out, 'oh, here are the adopted ones!' Oh, I can't believe it, I am so ashamed!" Maureen calmly looked at Irene who was lowering her head. Laura diverted her eyes to the crowd. Silence came over us for this charged moment which seemed too long to bear. As usual, Maureen's guests were all White, except for those of us who were sitting at the table in the corner of the room. I was undoubtedly marked as another adoptee, but I could not fathom the depth of humiliation that Irene was feeling. Irene did not lift her head for a long while, looking intently at the plate placed before her. The table where we were seated was on the far left corner of the room, and I suddenly realized we were the only ones sitting at that table although there were several seats not taken.

Goffman (1963), in theorizing "stigma" as a social psychological phenomenon, instructs us about various dimensions of identity. Stigma is a product of powerful social dynamic, which can be managed by splitting one's self into virtual and actual dimensions of identity. A virtual identity connotes the self that is perceived by social others, whereas actual identity is a self that contains a secret, the stigma. Promoting virtual identity at the expense

of actual identity or an effective cultural management of these identities, helps one avoid being identified (i.e., stigmatized). “Passing” is such a strategy.³⁶

In the case of Korean adoptees, their actual identity as an adoptee can be a stigma. In a place where there are a large number of Asian Americans, they may be able to pass as one of them, or without being marked out as such, one can still nurture the “white” identity. But someone who knows your status can blow your cover at any time, as seen in the incident at the baby shower. Ahmed suggests that feelings of shame can be “the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence” (2004: 107, emphases removed). Then, stigma is attached to those assumed to exist outside of “normative” existence. Being an adoptee in a culture that believes in biological reproduction as *the* normal puts one in this precarious position of having to bear the affective cost of living outside the norm. Wegar states,

...most commentators, researchers, and activists have tended to cut off experiences of adoption from the cultural contexts in which these experiences are embedded. Personal accounts are certainly valid sources of knowledge, but they cannot be understood apart from the cultural vocabularies in which they are formulated. In my view, any account of experiences of adoption that ignores *the cultural symbolism and stigmatization of adoption* runs the danger of unintentionally reproducing the structures and stereotypes it sets out to debunk (1997: x, my emphasis).

By contextualizing the experience of stigma in everyday social interactions, we can see the process in which stigma is constructed and experienced. The stigma of the adoptee further stems from the fact that the adoptees inhabit a conceptual space of in-between categories. Seen from my observation above, individual adoptees experience a sense of shame related to stigma in different degrees. But even those adoptees who do not feel a

³⁶ There is an intriguing difference between intraracial and transracial adoptees in this psychological dynamic, which is predicated on race. I will pick up this issue in the next section, and merely note here that “passing” for intraracial and transracial adoptees may connote different axes. Transracial adoptees may never be able to “pass” as biological offspring to their adoptive families, while perceived racial similarities—or perhaps the illusion of white homogeneity—may facilitate the passing of intraracial adoptees on this respect.

sense of shame and the power of stigma related to their adoptee status still very frequently come upon everyday instances which question their belonging and stable sense of self.

Korean adoptees can easily recall these instances when they have endured stares, judgmental looks, and sometimes uneasy behaviors from the on-lookers whose “common sense” was unexpectedly shaken by the presence of adoptees. Audrey, age 28, recalled one episode that stuck out in her memories of childhood:

I went grocery shopping with Mom and my brother. I was probably about 7 years old. We did our shopping and waited in our check-out line. There was this Asian family, I think, Chinese family, waiting behind us. They had a small boy, and I was, maybe, staring at them, for a while. When we paid the cashier, and began to leave, the cashier calls out to me, “where are you going? Your family’s here!” My Mom had to explain to her how I was *her* daughter, not of these Chinese people. But I cannot forget the look on the cashier’s face when she heard that.

Some of the encounters that the adoptees –and their adoptive parents—have had with those strangers were violent and overtly negative. Register, for instance, named one of her books, “*Are Those Kids Yours?*” (1991) to describe the constant questions she as an adoptive mother of two Korean children had to answer to on-lookers. Recently, one of the mothers who adopted children from China described this episode.

I was coming out of Wal-Mart with my children the other day. People can be so insensitive. They saw us coming out of the store together, and this guy mouthed, “how much?” raising and brushing his thumb against the fingers in his right hand (tries to mimic the gesture she saw). You don’t do that! These kids are not blind! They can see you! I was so mad.

The mother’s anger at first comes from the fact that this total stranger equated her children with commodities. Additionally, by suggesting that she “bought” her children, the stranger treated her family as a consumable object in a market place. With the growing number of transnational/ transracial adoptions from different parts of the world, talking about the costs of adoption especially in comparison shopping mode –comparing costs of

adoption for different sending countries—, here translated by the man as the price of the children, is rather routinized in adoption circles. Herein lies the intertwined dynamics of market and love that characterize international adoption (Dorow, 2006).³⁷

In studying adoptive parents (mostly mothers) of Chinese children, Anagnost uses the phrase, “scenes of misrecognition,” to indicate the ambiguous social situations and “difficulties that adoptive parents face in their struggle for recognition as parents, a struggle that is intensified for the parent of a child identified as racially other” (2000: 395). From the transnational/transracial adoptees’ point of view, the phrase characterizes the many social scenes that highlight Korean adoptees’ in-between existence. These social scenes provide a glimpse into fleeting moments but that happen all the time with Korean adoptees and their adoptive families. Audrey’s experience at the grocery store, along with other similar stories told by numerous adoptees, shows how misrecognitions can become a part of mundane life for Korean adoptees and their families.

I was just helping my aunt, and of course I don’t look like my family. You know, when I was helping my aunt have a garage sale after my uncle died, I think, it was back in September, and this guy came up to me, because I was the one collecting the money, and this old gentleman, he looked at me, and said, “well, who are you?” “Well, I am here with the family.” “That’s your family?” “Yeah, of course, don’t we look alike?” I get that a lot. You know, my husband is a Puerto Rican. So my children are mix between both of us. I think, it’s kind of more accepted now to have this interracial, you know, family. I am noticing myself more interracial couples, which I think is fantastic. You know, I get a lot of looks when I am with, you know, my adoptive family. My Mom even made this comment. When my sister and I were little, everybody in her family had, you know, like light hair and real tall, and there were two little different children, you know. And now, when we go away to Florida, my sister, my husband, and my children have all dark hair

³⁷ Dorow’s (2006) argument for this point also includes the practices taking place in China among orphanage personnel, social workers, and even government. Putting material value on “abandoned children” unwittingly translates into changed perceptions among child caretakers and others in regard to these same children. Creating a market for children, previously regarded as stigmatized and unworthy, transforms them into “valuable” commodities that need care and love. One is here doubly struck by the contradictions between market and love. See also Miall (1987) for comprehension of social stigma carried by adoptive parents.

and my Mom with the blonde hair standing out. So she is the one who stands out now versus us standing out, you know years before. It's like a playback. I mean, when we were little, they would look at my sister, 'cause my sister looks very Asian, even though she is Spanish. We would always joke in the elevator, when three of us are there, people would stare at my Mom, and at my sister, and at me, and we were pretending that we spoke all these different languages. So my Mom had a good sense of humor about it (Judith, 31).

Judith's description brings out the kinds of ambiguities that transracial/transnational adoptive families grapple with. Generally family members are supposed to be alike in appearance, so these families defy common sense. Judith's elaboration is also intriguing because she puts the perspective of time into consideration when thinking about who is being marked out in these families. When young, Judith and her sister were the ones marked out as different in a family characterized by light hair and tall physiques. But, over time, the introduction of her Puerto Rican husband and their children into her family inevitably marks her mother as misplaced. Her mother's good sense of humor and her family's humorous outlook on life are borne out of this family arrangement that seems unconventional at moments, changing its composition over time just like any other families.

I met Maureen after her sister-in-law's engagement party. Maureen was engaged to Bill, a white man of Irish descent, who had a sister who just got engaged to a Chinese American man, John. She tells me about a "funny" episode she encountered at the party.

There was a reception dinner after the ceremony, right? I am sitting at this table assigned to Bill's family, and John's [fiancé of Bill's sister] mother comes up, and motions me to go over to her. She is making a room for me at her table, and I am wondering what brings me over there. She goes, "why are you sitting over there? You must sit on this side of the room! But by the way, do I know you?" She thought I was a guest to her side of the family since, you know (rolling her eyes). I guess she didn't realize that Bill was engaged to me (laughs).

At least, this was an incident that Maureen could laugh about afterwards. There can be painful episodes in which their sense of identity is seen as suspect. Kevin 25, talks about his boss at work.

I hated this boss in the shop where I worked before. He's Polish, he says. He goes, "oh, can you speak Korean? If you can't, you are not really a Korean, are you?" I bet he can't speak a word of Polish! But he can say that he is Polish, and I can't do the same? What does he think he is? He can't tell me what I am or what I am not.

Kevin here points to the important differences between Whites and non-Whites in relation to ethnic identities. While his boss can claim his "Polish" ethnicity without having to perform cultural behaviours that may pertain to being a Pole, Kevin's claim to Korean identity seems to be suspect due to Kevin's performance of White (superficially read here as American) mannerisms. Further Kevin's lack of knowledge in Korean language renders him unable to claim his Korean identity. Here, Kevin's comment poignantly indicates the socially significant line between "people for whom ethnicity is an option rather than an ascribed characteristic" (Waters, 1990: 12) and others. In her examination of meanings and practices of ethnicity in the US, Waters argues that there is a

disparity between the idea and the reality of ethnicity for white ethnics. The reality is that white ethnics have a lot more choice and room for maneuver than they themselves think they do. The situation is very different for members of racial minorities, whose lives are strongly influenced by their race or national origin regardless of how much they may choose not to identify themselves in ethnic or racial terms (1990: 157-58).

This is one of the reasons why the distinctions between concepts of ethnicity and race have not always been clear in the United States.³⁸ For a racial minority, ethnicity is something that

³⁸ Definitions of race and ethnicity seem to differ by scholars and disciplines as well. Thus it is onerous but necessary to define what one means by race and ethnicity. Yanow's (2003) study on how political

they cannot think in terms of choice. Kevin's comparison between him and his boss clearly brings out the contradiction of cultural assumptions underlying ethnic identity claims in the US.

Korean adoptees' experiences come not only from their encounters with others in mainstream America, but also from Koreans and Korean Americans, although the distinction between the two in their narratives is not always clear.³⁹ We have already seen adoptees whose relationships to Korean significant others did not succeed due to their adoptee status. Stratified by class and social status of familial relationships, Koreans find difficulty understanding and marrying adoptees whose familial relations are, in their minds, uncertain.⁴⁰ Smalkowski (1997: 79) puts it this way:

I've heard that Korean immigrants, no matter what generation, tend to look down on Korean adoptees. I don't want to assume all Koreans are like this, but the few experiences I've had with them, first, second and third generation, have not been exactly positive.

Especially those adoptees who were adopted earlier --in the late 1950s and early 1960s --could recall some painful rejections they felt from Koreans living in America. One adoptee, Victoria Graves who is in her early 50s, described her experience:

Growing up in Iowa, I never had any encounters with many Koreans. I had a brother from Korea that was adopted with me, but he was the only one. Finally when I got to junior high, I learned there were two Korean students in the same school. Not knowing anything about Korea, but feeling really

structures such as census surveys and political labels can elicit and maintain identity categories in terms of race and ethnicity in the US is very helpful here.

³⁹ One of the reasons can be that the label, "Korean Americans," includes people with a diverse understanding of, and relationships to, America. Korean immigrants bring cultural assumptions from Korea to this country, and at the same time, they might impart their values and beliefs rooted in Korean culture to their children. Korean immigrants are not coming to this country in a blank slate, but bring their own understanding of American society, partially learned from consuming mass media products from Hollywood. See N. Kim (2008) for an analysis of Korean immigrants' subjectivity pre-, and post-immigration to the US. On the other hand, subsuming generational differences and other diversities among and within immigrant groups has been largely the mainstream American perception of immigrants. Korean adoptees' viewpoints here may reflect this dominant position.

⁴⁰ See Stephanie Carson's story in Ch. 8, fn. 178.

excited that there were people who came from the same place that I did, I approached them. “Hi, I’m Victoria Graves. I am a Korean, too. I am so glad to meet you.” They asked me, “why is your name Victoria Graves?” “Oh, it’s because I was adopted when I was four.” Oh, my heart fell out. They said matter-of-factly, “then, you are not really a Korean.” That experience became the only one that remained in my memory whenever I think about approaching Koreans here. The older adoptees, we all have a similar story like this one to tell you about Koreans.

Sometimes these stories were potential reasons why some adoptees did not have many Korean American friends. The power of rejection here should be understood on many levels. Korean adoptees are those children rejected by Korean mothers and Korean government. This is the ultimate hurt, the “Big Hurt” that adoptees grapple with. For instance, seemingly routine birthday rituals, in fact, remind us of the fact that we were indeed born into this world, and our birth was welcomed by our parents and relatives. Koreans, in their stories, add salt to an open wound that the adoptees carry in relation to Korea.

The ways in which one draws a boundary of belonging can take a dramatic form in childhood. Linda Gall, age 45, told me about her own experience with Korean children whom she knew.

I grew up in Long Island, attending a Korean church nearby. My parents made an effort to send me there every Sunday, you know. All the Korean kids there had their Korean parents. I was the only one adopted, I think. I was probably about 6, 7 years old. One day we were playing this hide-and-seek game in the yard outside the church building. It was my turn to seek, and they, the kids there, put the blindfold on me, and led me around. I felt a strange sensation, as I could hear the kids whispering to each other, giggling. When I took my blindfold off, I found myself in the middle of a deep puddle. I just couldn’t believe it. They led me there and left me in the middle of the muddy hole. My sneakers and pants were ruined, and they were laughing at me in my face! I just couldn’t understand why they were marking me out that way.

Emotional pain comes from the trust that is violated. Linda trusted that these Korean children were thinking of her as another Korean child, a playmate. The sense of

rejection and alienation is symbolized by the spatial separation between her playmates and herself, in which Linda became a spectacle, an object for derision. Incidents like these have contributed to some of the adoptees' mistrust and suspicions about Koreans, which might have skewed their first impression of me.

The chance for me to get a glimpse of how Koreans might view Korean American adoptees came unexpectedly. In the annual international adoptee gathering held in Seoul, Korea in 2007, I met a few adoptees who were in the initial stages of their birthparent search. One of them, Marybeth, age 41, asked me to accompany her to a local organization whose mission is to assist Korean adoptees in their birth family searches and in their cultural transition to Korean society when the adoptees plan to stay for a while in Korea. Since the birth of the organization, the staff members have successfully helped many adoptees from abroad with birthparent searches, lodging, and other services.

The director of this organization was a Korean woman who could not speak English, so Marybeth thought having me there would help her understand what was taking place. Marybeth had already contacted several local newspapers, and some of them carried her story in Korean. Within a couple of days, we heard that a man called the office claiming that he was a birth uncle to Marybeth. The organization checked his story and told us that he did not seem like a match. Nonetheless, Marybeth agreed to meet with him, and was getting nervous about the meeting.

She seemed very relieved to know that I would be there with her in the room, and thanked me profusely. Once we got to the office of the organization, I realized there were a couple young women working there, one of whom spoke English. Min-ah⁴¹ was in her mid-

⁴¹ Pseudonyms are used for Koreans as well as the adoptees. I also omit the name of the organization to protect its identity.

20s, and had been working as an unofficial interpreter for these occasions. They ushered us in to a small room, which had a big table with chairs on one side, and a couch on the other. Marybeth and I were left alone in that room for a few minutes before Director Yu, a woman in her early 40s, came in. She explained to us that the man was bringing his wife and kids, and that we should wait just a little longer before they would arrive.

While Marybeth was busy squeezing her fingers on her palms, Director Yu suddenly started speaking to me in Korean, “You are a Korean American helping them, right? You know, I can’t identify with adoptees from America. I worked here for a long time now, and met a lot of adoptees. I can certainly identify with adoptees from Europe. I think we share similar sentiments, you know, the emotional connection [jeong⁴²], but American adoptees are different. I think adoptees in Europe have gone through a lot of painful experiences. I guess, those adoptees from America are spoiled because they were just pampered too much.” I felt increasingly awkward although Marybeth was too focused on the impending reunion to wonder what was being said right now. Before I ventured to ask Director Yu for more elaboration on what she just said, Marybeth’s “uncle” showed up at the door, and the meeting ensued.

Director Yu’s comments reflect cultural assumptions that Koreans generally make about “those adoptees from America.” Koreans whose sense of self is drastically different from that espoused by the possessive individualism characteristic of Americans tend to get overwhelmed by the outspokenness of Korean American adoptees about “what *I* need,” “what *I* want,” etc.⁴³ I understand Director Yu’s critical comments as her attempt to display

⁴² 정(情) which roughly translates into “affection, sentiments, feelings, love,” etc.

⁴³ In order to comprehend Korean notions of self from an anthropological perspective, Kondo’s *Crafting Selves* (1990) is extremely helpful although this ethnography is on Japan. As Japanese notions of self are partially rooted in Confucian philosophy which pervades East Asia, Koreans share some characteristics of

her experiences and sophisticated knowledge in this field –helping international adoptees and making sense of and appreciating the cultural differences among adoptees from various places. Separated by cultural and language barriers, there can be a gulf of cultural misunderstandings that exist between Koreans and Korean American adoptees.

Ethnographic Moments 2. “Not White, Not Quite”⁴⁴

Regardless of *how white we may think* we act, dress or speak, to everyone else we are not white nor will we ever be considered white. We can never assimilate. At best we might be able to acculturate (Vance, 2002: 82, my emphasis).

“Daddy, when I grow up I want to be white, just like you.” –Aaron, age 3 (cited in Steinberg and Hall, 2000: 31)

My schoolmates and neighbors made fun of my accent and called me “Chink.” They jeered at my Asian eyes. It was painful wanting so desperately to fit in but always knowing that my physical differences hindered my attempts (Kobus, 1999: 44).

[I]t’s not the blatant racism I encounter that hurts me the most. It’s the *day-to-day things*. The family things. The internal things. Things that wear an adopted Korean down over a long stretch of time. Things that put us through test after test after test (Smalkowski, 1997: 83, my emphasis).

For most transracial adoptees, the stigma of “being adopted” is usually complicated by another dimension: “being racially different” from those around him/her. The stigma of adoptee status is glaringly visible despite one’s potential effort and ability to disguise it, especially when one is accompanied by adoptive parents who clearly differ in physical

the Japanese discussed by Kondo. Korean notions of the individual and the self are firmly embedded in familial and social ties. An individual’s identity makes sense only in relation to others in Korean culture. Therefore, some American adoptees’ expressions of one’s likes and dislikes without any consideration to what others might think, may come off as “selfish” or “thoughtless” behaviors. Since Koreans think that parents are largely to blame for their children’s misconduct, not surprisingly Director Yu thought adoptees’ parents are tolerant or even indulging these types of behaviors. See also Kendall (1985, 1996).

⁴⁴ Although this is not exactly a verbatim quote, the idea is borrowed from Bhabha (1984).

outlook. In their everyday lives, Korean adoptees' experience of pain comes from "common sense" assumptions that are embedded in "day-to-day things," as Smalkowski confirms above.

When visiting a family tree farm in rural Minnesota, Jim Milroy and his brother, not being allowed to bring their toys there, played with stones and pebbles as imaginary cars. Milroy writes, "Big quartz rocks became bulldozers. Long thin skipping stones were Indy racers driven by Mario Andretti" (1999, 58-59). His imaginativeness, however, turned cold when he realized the limits of human imagination reflected in the comments made by strangers: "My brother has never had to explain to strangers that he is adopted. I have had to explain my adoption all my life. People will believe that stones are cars before they'll accept that my brother, or sisters, or father or mother is my *real* family." (*ibid*, 59; my emphasis).

Racial difference among family members here is an indisputably charged marker in that it not only accentuates the—perceptual—absence of blood ties among family members,⁴⁵ but it also creates dissonance among observers who are accustomed to the idea—i.e., "common sense"—that relatedness manifests in likeness (cf. Bouquet, 2000). In the account above, Milroy's White brother, also adopted by the Milroys, was spared from the efforts to defend his status to on-lookers whereas Jim's Asian physiognomy constantly marked him as "the Other." Self-consciousness of one's difference and the level of self-esteem is negatively related in Korean adoptees' stories.

I was ashamed of my ethnicity. All my friends were white. My parents were white. Who was this Korean in the mirror? The mirror was the inescapable reminder of where I had come from. Most days I was able to forget it. But there were times when my Koreanness stood up like a big, barefaced lie I

⁴⁵ Phenotypic distinctions among races are never stable. Popular perceptions of racial difference are often quite erroneous. Lazarre (1996) poignantly presents her dilemma as a White Jewish biological mother of two Black sons. Strangers often could not recognize the physical likeness between her and her sons, and were surprised to realize that Lazarre and her sons belong to one another. The ambiguities of racial categories frequently generate contradictory responses from on-lookers.

could not cover. I learned to play the mute, and let the hot shame ebb and wash away in its own time (Kauffman, 1997: 46).

In Goffman's terms, then, a White adoptee in a White adoptive family may carry a "discreditable" stigma which leads to "passing" –i.e., passing as a biological offspring to the adoptive parent(s) –in certain contexts such as Milroy's brother's case above, while a non-white adoptee in an otherwise White adoptive family carries "discredited" stigma (1963: 4, 41). In dealing with multiple dimensions of identity in social interactions, what one obtains is a productive hindsight, whether one terms it "double-consciousness" (Du Bois, 1989) or "outsider-within perspective" (Collins, 1991) or something more original.⁴⁶ Race is *the* salient symbol to identify likeness in a culture where people and their life chances are stratified according to racial differences.⁴⁷

However, Korean adoptees' racial identities betray complex interactions between sociocultural surroundings and selves, as they take on the identity of their family members and friends as their own. It is not uncommon to hear Korean adoptees profess that they are White. We should not be surprised by this, as it is by now well-known that our identities are

⁴⁶ The productive originality of Korean adoptees can be seen, for instance, in their naming of themselves as "AKA," which appears in organization titles, several Korean adoptee internet groups, and listservs. This abbreviation, by its polysemy, reveals a complex terrain in which Korean adoptees come of age in the US. AKA could mean "A Korean Adoptee," as they have been called and described on numerous occasions, or "Also-Known-As," as they deal with multiple names and identifications produced by geographical and cross-cultural relocation.

⁴⁷ Historical examinations of European contact with the Others provide further insights on people's conceptualization of us vs. them (cf. Gilman 1985). For instance, Herodotus, considered as the father of the discipline of history, might be the first ethnographer in human history. Studying fifty different ethnic groups by traveling far and wide, Herodotus illuminates the construction of the epistemological sense in which self /the Other emerged (cf. Whitten 2001, 4). His account illuminates that, in the European context, contact between different ethnic groups of people precedes the exclusiveness of familial concepts *per se* (cf. Stoler (1995) for a critique on Foucault's works on similar points). If we accept Engels' theorization of how family as we know it came about, this can be an interesting issue to elaborate further on its own. Particularly relevant to the discussion of the analogical relationship between likeness and racial classification is Bouquet's (2000) essay on museum collections. For practical implications of this issue for transracial adoption, see Steinberg and Hall (2000).

rooted in the sociocultural environment. Nonetheless, their White identity is always a vexing one, constantly shadowed by their Asian bodily self that they cannot deny.

I used to believe I was white. At least I was completely emotionally invested in this belief. Theoretically I was white, my family was white, the community I grew up in was white, I could not point out Korea on a map, nor did I care about such a place. The only thing I heard about Korea was that they ate dogs. I denied that I was Korean to everyone, most painfully, I denied it to myself. However, my image staring back at me in the mirror betrayed such a belief. There I saw it, the rude and awful truth...slanted-hooded eyes, non-existent eyelashes, "yellow" skin, short legs, and long torso. I hated myself, this betrayal, being given such a look without any knowledge of where it came from (Younghee, 1997: 86).

These moments poignantly illustrate the contradictions that some Korean adoptees feel between their familial upbringing and the larger society. This is one of the important predicaments waiting for Korean adoptees upon leaving home or their family for college or jobs. Their racial difference was never a topic comfortably, let alone vigorously, discussed within the sphere of family, which translates into their claims to White identity. Even in those few families that did make an effort to talk about Korea and Korean culture, some Korean adoptees still gave in to deep cultural pressure to fit in with the rest of their social network peopled with mostly Whites by actively negating a part of themselves.⁴⁸ Ill-equipped to deal with what is ahead, Korean adoptees find themselves torn between two seemingly irreconcilable selves: White and Asian.

⁴⁸ In Huh and Reid (2000: 81), a parent stated that her family withdrew from a Korean American Club where they had been active, due to her daughter's uncooperativeness: "She wanted to be just the same as every other kid in her school." Huh and Reid note, "like this parent, some parents explained that their child's lack of exposure to Korean culture was not due to the parent's unwillingness but rather to the child's reluctance to participate" (*ibid.*). But as the adoptees discussed here are mostly young children, adoptees' reservations about Korean culture may change over their life stages. Children interviewed suggested that they, not their parents, should be the one to decide when and how much of Korean culture to learn. Huh and Reid's study (2000) concludes that children who frequently participated in Korean cultural activities scored high on their Korean American identity development.

Korean adoptee narratives often depict their tortuous relationship with a self unmistakably alien in outlook, reflected in mirrors or photographs. Their desperate attempt to assimilate into mainstream America, imagined here as a largely White America, gets ever frustrated by their Asian body. In a society obsessed with physical characteristics, especially those related to racial categories, the Asian body and its unmistakable foreignness becomes problematic to their claim to their “real” Americanness.⁴⁹ I asked Rosie, age 33, whether she feels at home in America, as she just returned from her long-term stay in Korea.

It’s not so verbal. It’s like, looks, expressions, like, “wait.” Nothing to feel threatened by. And then there’s the explanation like, “oh, she is adopted.” Well, when I just got back [from Korea], there was this, my uncle and aunt’s neighbor. He said, “welcome to America!” They think that I am either fresh-off-the-boat (laughs), maybe I am, or an exchange student. I get that a lot.

Korean adoptees’ “Americanness” is also questioned in other contexts as well. One of the adoptee workshops in the gathering that was held in Korea in 2007 was entitled, “Living and Working in Korea.” There were a few adoptees currently living in Korea that presented their experiences in the workshop. One of the presenters, Jamie Andrews, talked about her initial encounter on the job market. Like many other American adoptees living in Korea, she was looking for a teaching position in ESL programs in Seoul.

When I arrived at the interview, they [the hiring committee] were clearly confused. I asked, “what’s wrong?” They said, “oh, we were expecting someone else. Because your name was Jamie Andrews, I thought you were an American.” “I *AM* an American!” “No, I thought you were White. You don’t look like an American.”

In the end, she found a job elsewhere, but the experience taught her to be more prepared for

⁴⁹ Concepts related to “Americanness” and other issues related to cultural citizenship in the United States are discussed in Ch. 4.

what would be in store for her in Seoul.⁵⁰ Although living in Korea may give Korean adoptees a sense of belonging that they have never felt before, it is a fragile bond that does not recognize the different dimensions of one's identity.

Just as their Korean identity is a precarious relationship, their "White" identity is also a tenuous one, betrayed by their frequent need to its claim: "I am White, you know." According to Frankenberg, "the extent to which identities can be named seems to show an inverse relationship to power in the US social structure. . . . The self, where it is part of a dominant cultural group, does not have to name itself." (1993: 196) Even when articulating their Whiteness then, Korean adoptees express their in-between self, against a culture that attempts to incarcerate them in one or the other identity.

Ethnographic Moments 3: What Are You?

When the teach[sic] had my parents try to explain to me what being 'adopted' meant, I still couldn't understand why I couldn't be Irish. If Da [sic] said he was Irish, then I was Irish, too. It didn't matter where I came from. At least it didn't matter until I became convinced that where I came from should matter, when I could no longer try to simply ignore the taunts of having a flat face, squinty eyes, and buckteeth. Then the traits that I thought I shared with my dad, his self-assuredness, his athleticism, his wit and aptitude for making friends, no longer seemed related to me (Kearly, 2002: 60-61).

As I journeyed through life, I was presented with many different types of questions. I just could not believe that the majority of the questions were from myself to me, . . . Then comes the section where I have to make a decision; it has a space for: OPTIONAL: CHECK THE BOX WHICH BEST DESCRIBES YOURSELF: AFRICAN-AMERICAN, ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER; CAUCASIAN; LATINO; NATIVE AMERICAN; OTHER. Once I reach this part, I am like a writer with a

⁵⁰ Koreans' understanding of Americans is racialized to the extent that they would rather hire a Russian national to teach English than Korean Americans, because the Russian was White, and in Korean minds that was almost the same as being an American. The Russian person was replaced after the students complained about his heavy Russian accent, and the story was reported in a local newspaper in Seoul. I thank my father who lives in Korea for letting me know about the local newspaper article where he read this story.

major writer's block. I begin brainstorming. . . . Should I check the space next to Asian/Pacific Islander since it does contain the word 'Asian?' . . . Maybe my choice should be the box labeled 'other' and I can explain the fact that I am a Korean adoptee. Do others have this dilemma? (Lind, 2002: 130-131).

When they realize that their "American" identity can be challenged by social others, most Korean adoptees grapple with difficulties in articulating their identities. One of the questions that boggle their mind is "What are you?":

What are you? is a profoundly American question. I know of at least one young woman, born to a Korean mother and an African-American father, who coyly answers "Presbyterian." *She knows full well what kind of information is being sought.* (Register, 1991: 152, my emphasis)

In a multiracial, multiethnic society such as the U.S., the question, "What are you?" is a seemingly ordinary question that can be thrown at anyone.⁵¹ Depending on the tone and context in which it is delivered, the question is one of *common sense* ice-breakers among relatively new acquaintances. But what is being asked here? What are the common sense assumptions that require the questioned to *know full well* what is asked? The understanding shared by the questioner and the questioned illustrates the interpellating power of ideological discourses (Althusser 1971) which bring the questions of identities to the fore.

In Korean adoptee experiences, the nexus of kinship, race, and identity is overdetermined by the ways in which common sense helps to construct the realm of cultural legibility (cf. Butler 2000, 78). The fact that transracial adoptees' answers necessarily entail long, if defensive, explanations about what they are speaks volumes about what is legible and

⁵¹ A slightly different but related question to this is "where are you *really* from?" It is an interesting twist in which biological registers of social locations are projected onto national cartographies. All Asians in the U.S. may be accustomed to answering this question, regardless of accent, as this question is usually posed before speech has even occurred. The mere appearance of an Asian face has long connoted foreignness and distant/exotic origins (Sohn, 2008). Cheng (2004: 66) nonetheless cautions us about the differences between these two questions. One question is about geographical origin, whereas the other is about "authentic" identities.

what is not in this culture. For example, someone would say, “I am Jewish in religious observances learned from my Dad. I am also good at Irish folk dancing since my Mom is Irish and she prodded me along. But I have another Korean birthmother and another father of unknown origin.” Of course, one can avoid going into such detail by answering, for instance, “Presbyterian” to the question. However, the understanding shared through questions such as “what are you?” illuminates the process of subject formation, a subject that yearns for cultural recognition.

The title of a recent collection of Korean adoptee stories, *Once They Hear My Name* (Lee, et al., 2008), also indicates the kind of social situations in which Korean adoptees feel they have to justify their existence. In an earlier section, I talked about Jamie Andrews’ incident that took place in Korea. Her name was mistaken to connote an “American” identity, for which she was not eligible. In the US, Adam talks about his episode:

At the beginning of my senior year in high school, all the students in my math class were seated in alphabetical order by last name. As the teacher was going through the seating chart she looked at me, looked at her chart, looked at me, looked at her chart, and finally said,
 “Are you Adam?”
 I said, “Yes.”
 “Adam Carlson?”
 “Yes.”
 “Are you sure?”
 Needless to say, I wasn’t particularly pleased (Carlson, 2008: 17).

[I]t’s always been such a large part of who I am that I automatically introduce myself as Adam Carlson, and in the same breath say, “Oh, yeah, I’m adopted from Korea.” That’s because people kind of look at me, with my quasi-Scandinavian name, and *I know they’re wondering*. I tell them, “Yeah, my Dad’s half-Irish, half Swedish, and my Mom’s all German and I’m all Korean (*ibid.*: 18, my emphasis).

Adam’s struggle with the discrepancy between his name and his visual status is shared by many Korean adoptees. That their existence requires explanation says volumes about the power of “normality” and the kind of “reality” to which Korean adoptees retain skewed

relationships. Their unique positioning gives them an interesting perspective where conventional notions of the “real” and the “normal” —which make up “common-sense”— can be critically, if with humor, examined. Following is a story worth quoting at length.

Whenever someone new asks me how I got my name, I’m faced with a choice—do I tell this person about my adoption or not? If I’m feeling at ease I usually dive right in. . . . Often I would rather not tell the story. Like paths that lead one to another, this story leads people to ask deeper questions. And sometimes it doesn’t seem right, divulging such intensely personal history. Sometimes I tell people I’m adopted and stop talking, hoping they’ll get a clue that the questions should end. But there are times when I meet people with no tact or sensitivity. It’s when these people insist on delving into my life, like it’s some amusement ride, that I resort to the following story. It goes like this—

“My great-grandfather lived in a rural farming area in Korea near Il San (I have no idea where Il San is, other than somewhere in South Korea). He was still a young man at the time a group of German missionaries set up a small trading outpost near his village. So, you know, of course some social mixing occurred between the Germans and Koreans. Anyway, one night all the men in the village were drinking with the Germans, telling tall tales, eating kimchee⁵² and sauerkraut, you get the picture. Now great-grandfather was a good-sized guy, even by German standards. And you know how things get when a bunch of men get together and drink—they’ve got to prove themselves. The biggest German guy wobbled to his feet and challenged my great-grandfather to a wrestling match. There was no way great-grandfather would have ever backed down from a challenge to his manhood. The stakes were decided like this—the loser of the match would have to take the winner’s name for the rest of his life. So a ring was drawn in the dirt and my great-grandfather and the German went at each other like two angry bears, kicking up clouds of dust, and knocking each other all over the ring. . . . [F]inally, my great-grandfather made a mistake and was pinned. He was angry and humiliated, but he knew it had been a fair fight. Being a man of his word, he took the German’s name—Kauffman. And that is how my great-grandfather came to be called ‘Kauffman Si Ha.’ To this day, there are still a number of Korean Kauffmans living in and around Il San.”

Sometimes the person knows I’m completely messing with their head. *But most of them buy into the story completely.* I imagine these nosy people feeling culturally empowered with this anecdote about a clan of Koreans with German names, rushing off to tell their friends. I’ve actually heard it related back to me embellished with the sorts of details that only come through telling and retelling. So what if it’s something of a defense mechanism? It’s great fun (Kauffman, 1997: 44-45, my emphasis).

⁵² A famous Korean side dish, which also appears in ethnic jokes about Koreans. It includes various kinds of fermented lettuces and radishes, and is known for its spiciness.

In what ways is Kauffman's fantasy-ridden story believable to people? The conceptual dissonance caused by a Korean body with a German name requires certain fantasy that restores the immutable difference between Koreans and Germans: "That's how! Of course, other than this story, how could a person who looks like you have a name like that?" This recalls Jim Milroy's question about the difficulty of on-lookers to grasp the fact that he was a son of his family, whereas they had no problem understanding that the pebbles and stones were imaginary cars. Kauffman's story reveals the kinds of creative, experimental, and humorous spirit⁵³ that I came to associate with Korean adoptees in general. Their humors are born out of their partial presence in cultural grids of identities that fail to encompass Korean adoptees' complex positioning. The space of "out-of-place" brings enormous pain and uncertainty in one's sense of self to the detriment of mental well-being for many adoptees. But this is also a space where Korean adoptees earn critical insights to bring to bear on the cultural understanding of identities.

Realizing that people were often confused about my racial background, I decided to have fun with my chameleon characteristics. I would wear a Mexican blouse one day, braiding my hair with bright ribbons. The next day I would wear a silk brocade blouse with a mandarin collar. On another day, I would wear a gauzy blouse with delicate East Indian embroidery. I derived pleasure in confusing people, watching them watching me, knowing they were trying to guess what I was (Vance, 1999: 177).

Vance's play demonstrates the performative dimensions of identities, borne out of someone whose out-of-place positioning enables an analytic look at the processes in which racial ascriptions take place. Most adoptees who have not met their birthparents do not know for

⁵³ Freud classifies jokes in intriguing ways in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1989(1960)). In his exposition, Korean adoptees' jokes may belong to abstract one on a technical level, and tendentious one on another level.

sure their racial/ethnic compositions. Coming from the uncertainty of existence as it were, the ambiguity in her racial identity becomes a tool to critically reflect on the importance of race and ethnicity in one's identity in American culture. By performing racial ambiguities in this way, Vance is deconstructing the fixity of "the real" in "common sense" assumptions.⁵⁴

As seen from the adoptee stories recounted in Part One, several Korean adoptees that I talked to used "banana" to analogize their racial identity.⁵⁵ They feel they are Asian on the outside, but do not feel "real" Korean inside. What they know and are familiar with is what they grew up with, which is White habitus. Maureen said to me, "I don't say [I am] Korean American. I don't know why. In my mind, a Korean American is someone who has Korean parents, who's either born in America or lives in America. I don't know, the whole check the box of what you are is always a little weird. I check for Asian." So some adoptees even feel distant from the label, "Korean American." This uncertainty toward "Koreanness" among Korean adoptees is reflected in their use of the modifier, "real," in calling Korean Americans and Koreans as "real" Koreans. Some even go further and call them "true" Koreans.

⁵⁴ Another way to read her performance was given to me by Chock (1987), who discusses irony as one of the central tropes utilized to engage ethnic labels operating in American culture. In analyzing Greek Americans' conversations related to their ethnic categorization and stereotypes, Chock discerns the role of irony that connotes ambivalence towards accepting ethnic categorization imposed on them. The trope of irony in this context is characteristically an American habit.

⁵⁵ The identity labels, such as "bananas," or "twinkies," etc., reflect variegated efforts to categorize otherwise complex identities into culturally legible conceptual categories. Most Korean Americans grew up in the past decade seem to use a dichotic schema of "FOB (Fresh-off-the Boat)" and "Twinkie" to illustrate their subjective positioning. The former includes recent arrivals from Korea, and who are oriented to Korean values and culture. The latter is a generation of Koreans who are acculturated into American culture. These labels seem to be used and accepted by actors in both categories. However, regional differences may come into play here as most Korean American high school students in NJ use these labels to connote their differences from other Korean schoolmates who are recent immigrants. S. Lee's (1996) study of Asian American (mostly Korean) high school students in a public school on the East Coast in 1989-90 reveals a complexity of labeling systems operating among Asian Americans. In her study, students used four labels to categorize their peers: "Korean," "Korean American," "Asian American," and "New Wavers." Therefore, a study of categories and labels of identities circulating among Asian Americans should pay attention to locality and historical specificity of the meanings that may not be easily translatable from one setting to another.

Korean adoptees' angst to mark out "true" Koreans in opposition to their positioning may reflect a general American penchant for cultural authenticity. Cheng argues that "modern and contemporary cultures—especially First World cultures—are increasingly marked by an anxiety over authentic cultural identity" (2004: 3). Since we live in a culture where physical characteristics define and locate people in socially recognizable grids, their seeming authenticity as Koreans living in the US is a burdensome expectation. But what does a "real" Korean mean? As Korean adoptees and other Koreans interact on more occasions and get to know more about one another, adoptees begin to comprehend the differences between them in ways that depart from their previous assumptions. However, these differences require patience and sustained efforts on the part of the adoptees to unlearn prejudices that they learned as a part of instilling American identity. To reconceptualize these differences as a starting point of conversation rather than avoidance is another step that takes time and motivation.

In analyzing several films produced by and about Korean American adoptees, Eleana Kim has argued that the common ground which underpins productions of various adoptee autobiographies is "the shared recognition and acceptance of 'living in halftones,' of *being a hybrid subject*, of existing between social categories, and of belonging to two families, across cultural and national borders" (2000: 62, my emphasis). What is intriguing about Korean adoptee experiences is the articulation of this hybrid subjectivity, which destabilizes and refigures the ground upon which the common sense world is put together. In the process of coming into consciousness of their hybridity, Korean adoptees enlighten us about the ever-precarious project of subject formation.

Ethnographic Moments 4: Fantasy & “The Real”

Children have fantastic imaginations. And adopted children, by nature of their own incomplete story, oftentimes create amazing characters whose lives tell wonderful tales of intrigue that any Hollywood producer would eagerly endorse. Both consciously and unconsciously are these stories woven into the identity of an adoptee and these stories live on well into adulthood. The stories are part of who we are (Carlisle, 2002: 101).

I had a childhood fantasy of returning to my family. If I was good at school, getting good grades, then, somehow I will be sent back to Korea. (Borshay Liem, *First Person Plural* (2000))

The previous three sets of ethnographic moments dealt with Korean adoptee experiences with the cultural structures of “the real” and “common sense.” We have seen how their out-of-place subjectivities emerge from the painful experiences of not being recognized by cultural practices and beliefs that are assumed to be “common sense.” In this section, we witness a way in which we can observe Korean adoptees’ emotional investment in “the real” and “common sense” world.

According to Modell (1994), whereas most American adoptees profess satisfactory relationships with their adoptive families, they still hold onto the culturally powerful assumptions of the biological family as a *natural* unit. This is partly evidenced by the adoptees’ ambiguous uses of kinship terms, such as “father” and “mother.” Some even add the seemingly final modifier, “real,” to these terms to connote either adoptive parents or birthparents.⁵⁶ Most Korean adoptees feel that their adoptive parents were fictively created

⁵⁶ There are those adoptees for whom a “real” parent means a biological parent. Other adoptees regard their adoptive parents as “real” parents since they raised them and knew them more than anyone else could. But this is often stated by the latter in a defensive mode against cultural hegemony of genealogical kinship. In contrast to the popular assumption that only adoptees with negative adoption experiences will search for their birthparents, no significant relationship has been found between the adoption experience and the adoptees’ desire to search for their birthparents. Modell (1994) rather locates adoptees’ need to know in US kinship ideologies that privilege blood ties. In Scotland, Triseliotis (1973) seems to follow this assumption, stating that mostly lonely or unhappy adoptees desire to initiate birthparent searches, although his sample included adoptees that do so to gain more knowledge about who they are. In Canada, March (1995)

through legal papers that could not take away the power of the biological connection, materialized in physical similarities. Borshay Liem thus narrates in her autobiographical documentary film, *First Person Plural* (2000):

There's a way in which I see my parents as my parents. But sometimes I look at them and I see two White American people that are so different from me that I can't fathom how we are related to each other, and how it could be possible that these two people could be my parents. When they adopted me, they really accepted me as their child. And I really became a part of their family. Although I wasn't related to them by blood, it was as if I had been born to them somehow. As a child, I accepted them as my parents because I depended on them for survival. But as an adult, I think that I haven't accepted them as my parents. I think that's part of the distance I have been feeling with them for a lot of years.

Borshay Liem seems to think of her family relationship in terms of biological kinship, in which relationship manifests in likeness. By describing her adoptive parents as White American people looking so different from herself, she underscores the immutability of physical differences. Meanwhile, Borshay Liem's reunion with her birth family is described in this way:

What struck me when I was with my Korean family was *the physical similarity*, the amazing feeling of looking at somebody's face that one resembles. Because for so many years, I had looked into blue eyes, the blond hair, and all of a sudden, there were these people in the room who, when I look at them, *I see parts of myself in them*. There is a sort of physical closeness as if my body remembers something but my mind is resistant (my emphasis).

suggests that birthparent searches are not necessarily about the adoptees' adoption experiences. Rather, these searches should be understood as the adoptees' desire to complete their own biographies. Most adoptees that I knew expressed the desire to know. Whether they put their desire into doing an actual search or not seems to depend on where they are in their life stages and other circumstances, unrelated to their relationships to adoptive parents. My assessment is confirmed by March (*ibid.*). The common fact that the adoptees use the modifier –“real”–to denote either birth mother or adoptive mother, but never both, elucidates the “fidelity to the singular” in subject positioning in familial subjectivation (cf. Faubion, 2001) that simultaneously constructs and affirms the “fixity of the ‘real’” (Eng, 2003: 28). That the adoptees who grapple with multiple dimensions of their subject position long for certainty of the “real” validates the power and confirmation of the familial structures in conferring identities and in interpellating individual subjects in culturally recognizable positions.

The desire to look for someone who shares physical similarities with them is quite common among adoptees. The need to know where one's nose or eyes came from, seems intensified in a society where those very attributes become a mark of derision and contempt. One of my interviewees spontaneously commented, while I was inserting tapes into a tape-recorder, "you have the same eyebrows as mine." I looked at his eyes, and he was smiling contently, not having to think about differences in our looks but only similarities. Jane Jeong Trenka wants to say the following to those who wonder what adoptees feel like.

I want to know what you feel like, when you look at your family and people look like you. I want to know what you feel like when you're at your grandparents' house, and they haul out the box of family photos, and all the aunts and uncles talk and laugh about how you're the carrier of the family nose or the family eyes, or how you look just like your aunt when she was your age. What does *that* feel like? What does it feel like when you hug your mother, and you're just the right size so that your face comes up to her belly, where you came from? What does it feel like to pass a mirror and *not be surprised?* (2003: 38, *emphases original*).

Tom, 21, described his feelings about a family gathering. We had the interview around Thanksgiving, and knowing how close he was to his grandmother, I asked him how often his family gatherings were.

We would gather around holidays usually. It's mostly my Mom's side of the family, 'cause my Dad's, uhh, family lives spread out far away, and from what I can gather, they don't usually get along very well. But my Mom's family, I guess, being Italian and all, likes to meet over the holidays and birthdays.

JP: do you enjoy these gatherings? What do you like to do?

Well, I am close to my grandma, but you know, these gatherings, they gather around, and say things like, "so and so looks like Great Aunt Josie," and stuff, as if I am not even there! I want to shout, like, "well, I don't look like anyone else you folks, so what?" you know? I would rather visit my grandma at her home for a short while, you know, these gatherings are okay, but I don't know.

The yearnings for physical connection and the desire to see one's self in others are palpable. The motivation for searching for birthparents is deeply related to the meanings people attach to this "natural" family that is supposed to look alike. In fact, adoptive parents, adoptees, and birthparents all share –although in varying degrees—the common sense assumptions of biological reproduction as the legitimate model of familial relationships (Modell, 1994). Reading adoptee autobiographies and listening to adoptees in interviews and other contexts, reveal their deep-seated desires to search for birthparents (cf. March, 1995). Mi-K Ando (1995:180) writes,

Sometimes I feel my life would be different if I just knew what my birth mother and father looked like. I want to be able to see my eyes in my first mother's eyes, to know where the shape of my legs came from, the softness of my nose, the paleness of my skin. If I could just see a photograph, maybe all these years of feeling displaced and disconnected could be transformed.

Here one realizes that these seemingly private, individual narratives and stories of adoptees gain cultural legibility and force via affective investment in biological kinship as the "real" which brings completion to a sense of self. Pivotal to the maintenance and legitimacy of the familial ideology is not only the natives' emotional investment in family, but also the affective investment in the figure of Mother. One does not have to mull over psychoanalysis to understand the fact that Mother is the one who physically gives birth to you.⁵⁷ If the familial relationship is centrally about determining who belongs and who does not, the physical symbiosis between Mother and her fetus is no doubt the crucial symbol of the family.

⁵⁷ This is what the current reproductive technologies so successfully destabilize. By introducing novel methods such as egg transfer, ovum donation, embryo implantation, and such, the NRTs (New Reproductive Technologies) engendered a possibility of having multiple mothers for one baby: for instance, egg donor, gestational surrogate, and the legal mother could all be involved in the production of a baby (see Kahn, 2000; Ragone, 1994; Ragone and Twine, 2000). How these technologies impact on people's emotional and psychic investment in Mother will be an interesting topic for future research.

Discussing adoptees' imaginary tales of "what ifs," Honig states, "many transnational adoptees live with phantom lives, lives defined as possible but unlived" (2005: 215).

Intriguingly, the fantasies that comprise these phantom lives often revolve around the figure of *the real* Mother. Clearly in American culture, the loss of a Mother

is a major disruption in a person's biography: motherless children and adults thus have no readily available narratives in which to fit the details of their life stories. This produces a sense of fractured identity and an uncomfortable state of linguistic liminality in which an individual is betwixt and between available structures for narrating experiences (Davidman, 2000: 47).

Davidman's statement comes from her research on men and women whose mothers died when they were very young. Growing up motherless, her subjects struggle to narrate coherent biographies. Adoptees' situations are comparable to theirs, as adoption itself can be seen as another major disruption in one's life, effectively terminating one's ties to past relationships and histories. Adoptees' loss of a mother is implicit but certain in the adoption transaction. Davidman is here referring to the cultural taboos surrounding death as producing silence and a lack of narratives about "motherloss" (2000). This could be one reason why the subject of birthmother was hard to deal with, when adoptive parents face their young children. Especially in cases where little information is given about the adoptee's pre-adoption history, for all the adoptive parents know, the birthmother might have been dead. Further, in adoptive families, the figure of the adoptee's birthmother is a troublesome one that invites alternative stories for the adoptee (and the adoptive parents), and endless what-ifs.

But, precisely because the birthmothers can be imagined without certainty of death, Korean adoptees are able to entertain limitless possibilities that cluster around the birthmother in their imaginary. Many Korean adoptee autobiographies and cultural productions describe the birthmother whom they cannot remember and yet yearn for. Some

literary productions by Korean adoptees describe their fantasy of meeting a birthmother unexpectedly or of letting a birthmother know that they love her as can be seen below.

i do not know you.
 i do not need to know you
 because
 i know your Love and it is returned.
 Jun, Warg Pyo lives in your heart.
 i will always be in your heart, for
 you
 REIGN
 in mine.
 i love you, birth mother (Pyle, 1999: 71).

A mystery
 Someone never seen
 Existing, but non-existent
 Real, but imaginary
 The one whose memory is old now
 The reflection of the one
 Who should have reflected her.
 Invisible like the breezes in the air
 Transparent, but she does exist
 Someone without a name (Brown, 1997a: 18).

I am with you all the time.
 I'm in every shadow
 Your form in the sun
 creates

every impulse you experience
 once belonged
 to me (Brown, 1997b: 19).

Caught in the passing crowd of dark beads, I wonder if my birth mother is somewhere inside. . . . I fear I might miss my opportunity to see my birth mother in person. *Our eyes will meet and a look of feared recognition will pass between us.* How could we not recognize each other? She sees a reflection of herself twenty years past, and I see myself twenty years in the future. "Uhma-nim! [Mother]" I cry and hold out my hands to embrace the woman who breathed life into me . . . *whose blood coursed through my body.* . . (Stock, 1999: 96, my emphasis)

In many ways, then, it is apposite to name their return travel to Korea as “Motherland tours.” Especially for the early Korean adoptees many of whom were interracial, adopted in the late 1950s and early 60s, calling Korea “motherland” retains a literal meaning, as they were offspring of the unions between American (and other UN national) men and Korean women. However, for most adoptees, “motherland” holds symbolic meanings. One such meaning is predicated on the existing notions of gendered kinship: physical connection to the maternal body, represented in adoptees’ Korean physiognomy, may be the only thing that they could claim, after the loss of citizenship, language, and cultural heritage, all of which are construed as masculine symbolic.⁵⁸

Given the emotional intensity elicited and maintained by adoptees’ “phantom lives,” actual reunions may exacerbate, rather than resolve, the inherent contradictions of common sense assumptions related to “natural” family (Modell, 1994). One of the films made by Borshay Liem, *First Person Plural* (2000), depicts Borshay Liem’s reunion with her birthfamily in Korea as one of the key moments in the movie. Her narrative right after the scenes of reunion⁵⁹ is instructive here:

⁵⁸ Especially given the fact that early Korean adoption was built on the assumption of saving American children left by the American army, the term, “motherland,” contains not only gendered symbolic but literal resonance. I find that Schein’s work on “the erotics of homeland” (1999) offers an intriguing juxtaposition to Korean adoptees’ conceptualization of homeland as motherland. Does the term, motherland, necessarily connote asexual, reproductive assumptions we hold about “mother”? I met one male adoptee from the conference who boasted that he visited Korea several times, and that he had series of Korean girlfriends there, in the name of learning Korean language. I have not found anyone else who would talk to me on this issue with such forthrightness, but this is an interesting area for future research. What are the desires and pleasures underlying Korean adoptees’ return to Korea? How are these inflected by complex positions Korean adoptees hold vis-à-vis US and Korea? Further, Schein argues that the sense of loss that the diasporics have toward their imagined homeland “not only derives from a static moment of separation from homeland, but something that is continually generated in the myriad cultural scripts of videos and media” (2001). What are such cultural scripts in the lives of Korean adoptees?

⁵⁹ The visit taped on the film, *First Person Plural* (2000) was not her actual first reunion. Not being able to conceptually process the fact of having two drastically different families in two different locations, she decided to bring her adoptive parents and birth family together by going on a trip to Korea with the Borshays. The film shows the meeting of these two families.

I felt more like a visitor, and, a visit, a temporary visitor to the family. What occurred to me last night was that, um, I want to be close to my Korean mother and to my Korean family, and uh, I am wondering whether the only way that I can actually be closer to my Korean mother is to finally admit that she is not my mother really anymore.

When I was, uhh, younger, I think I held onto this fantasy that if I was good enough in my new home and good enough with my American parents, that if everything was perfect and I behaved properly and did well in school and all of that, then I would somehow be sent back to Korea to be with my Korean family. What's happening is that that childhood fantasy of returning to my family is starting to get away from me. Um, and that, I have to develop another relation, a different kind of relationship with my Korean family. It's not like I can just hop back in as a child. It's no longer my childhood fantasy. *It's, uh, it's approaching them as an adult* (my emphasis).

According to Honig, “return journeys to the adoptees’ country of origin are so important and yet so difficult because they are moments when a somewhat settled narrative of possibility is strikingly tested against a great deal of new information, and almost certainly has to be revised. That revision cannot, however, be confused with resolution” (2005: 216). Borshay-Liem’s sharp realization of the need to break away from her childhood fantasy is one such revision. Borshay-Liem’s film ends with a display of family photos that suggest her continued efforts of building new memories and new connections. The photos show her Korean mother and American parents together in the US, and include a photo of Borshay-Liem, her husband and young son. By juxtaposing these photos, Borshay-Liem seems to support Honig’s statement that revising one’s fantasy based on reality is far from resolving one’s angst and inner conflicts. Rather, this ending emphasizes the process of becoming a family, as opposed to a simple recovery of a lost family.

To sum up, Korean adoptees’ investment in the “real” mother and family –by extension, the real world—is thus a precarious one. Their fantasy constructions reveal adoptees’ attempts at restoring what was lost in their early lives in ways that are satisfying to them in the present. These fantasies can change with time and new information that they

acquire on their way toward adulthood, but they fulfill both the cultural and psychological need to make one's presence "real" and recognized. As adoptees are acutely aware of the predicament of their fantasies, these moments when they rework their relationship to the "real" world via fantasies and tales are the conceptual exercises through which they come to terms with their own in-between positioning. These fantasies, yearnings, and searches for their "real" parents, riddled with the powerful desire to emulate the real world —i.e., having the genealogical relationships— nevertheless contradict much of what is taken for granted in common sense world. As seen above, Borshay Liem's realization that her Korean mother was not her "real" mother in *First Person Plural* (2000) painfully exposes the socially-constructed nature of human relationships —even those primary relationships that we term, "family,"—that is at odds with deeply-rooted cultural assumptions that sustain the common sense world. Korean adoptees' journeys toward the "real" are not always straightforward. Rather, Korean adoptees' writings, films, and journeys in this section underscore the fact that their out-of-place positioning offers us a unique lens through which to reexamine the world construed as the "real."

Ethnographic Moments 5: Consumption & Appropriation of Cultural Authenticity

With the increasing availability of, and accessibility to, Korean cultural goods in recent years, the practice of "cultural consumption" is a way in which Korean adoptees actively craft and mold their own in-between positions.

Summer of 2003, one sultry afternoon, a flock of Asian faces crowds a Hotel lobby in DC. As always, Korean adoptee conferences give me a moment of confusion of being misplaced somehow. Most of them came to this country, too young to retain a clear memory of language and original family. By various means, some of them try to recover the loss generated in the painful process of assimilation into a new adopted family. Here is the place where they can see and meet a lot of those who seem to share a similar predicament of being

a Korean adoptee in this foreign land. The stands that sell Korean artworks, antiques, letters, books, and so much paraphernalia of Korean traditions—some of them ironically displaying “made in US” labels—are populated by those adoptees who have never seen things Korean in so many numbers and in such diversity. I hurriedly help the merchant translate each item for Avery, whom I just met. Candy, an adoptee and successful academic, shouted with a big chuckle, “She is in that mode, you know, where you want to grab everything you see, because you have never seen Korean things before!”

When “culture” can be packaged neatly and priced numerically, we may be able to nurture the illusion of grasping it absolutely and finally. However, Korean adoptee consumption of things Korean is more than a reflection of 21st-century late capitalist practices of consuming “the exotic Other.” By purchasing the products of (and about) Korea, Korean adoptees attempt to materialize the memory and heritage lost in their cross-cultural journey to a U.S. family. This is to instantiate their desire to make “real” the experiences and histories that they brought to the U.S. On the other hand, the experiences and memories that these adoptees cling to in the act of consumption surely contain the elements of imagination. Histories, i.e., past experiences, are constructed and legitimated with an eye toward the interests and purposes of the present (see e.g., Modell, 1994).⁶⁰ Not that these adoptees do not know this themselves. Cultural artifacts that they purchase elude their full comprehension of cultural contexts in which they are used, appropriated, and manufactured, just like their past. Material things here present them with simulacra of their predicament.

When it came to cultural consumption of things Korean, my presence was a welcoming one for the adoptees, but a potentially anxious one for me. Adoptees were glad that someone with an insider’s knowledge was there with them, imparting the wisdom and hidden meanings of objects that they cannot seem to comprehend. I was often embarrassed

⁶⁰ For a similar argument in other contexts, see Boyarin (1994) and Rappaport ([1990] 1998). This can also be seen in the phenomenon of so-called “invented traditions” especially in the midst of nationalist consciousness-raising in many countries. See, for instance, Das (1995).

by my own ignorance but as time passed, and my understanding of adoptees grew (my sense of self-importance began to subside over time), I realized my ignorance might not matter in the big picture. This belated realization greatly relieved me of my discomfort on these occasions, although I have to confess that, on a few occasions, I did not enjoy “losing face” as a “real” Korean. I could often “pass” as they say, but over time my close contacts came to realize the extent of my ignorance. They kindly accepted that, calling me a “bad Korean,” with a friendly wink. The following note shows one of the contexts in which my little knowledge of, say, Korean folk objects and rural belief systems might not have mattered much.

One day in early summer of 2004, when I visited YouMe in her home, Victoria, another adoptee who was a good friend to YouMe, came by. We chatted the good part of morning, and went out to get some ice-cream at a nearby Carvel store. Settling down in our booth, YouMe asked Victoria, “do you ever go by Vicky? Or something like that? Or is Victoria okay for you?” Victoria, said with wide smile, “I am okay with Victoria. It’s a Queen’s name, and I have it! Call me Queen Victoria!” Her bittersweet tone betrayed an ironic twist as the words floated above our heads, and I appreciated the lingering laughter even after those words vanished into thin air. On our way back home was a bookstore that dealt with mostly feminist-oriented materials. I was fascinated by what they carried. The names of the authors and titles were all too familiar to me, and it was refreshing to see all of their works in one place. There was a new section in the middle that displayed children’s books. Unmistakably, there were many books particularly aiming at adoptive parents of Asian children. I grabbed one and pointed it out to YouMe who was away looking at the artwork hanging on the wall. She shrugged her shoulders. It was her neighbourhood, and of course, she knew. We strolled down the aisles perusing items that pleased our eyes

immensely. Once back at YouMe's place, Victoria was talking to me about my upcoming trip to Korea that summer. "I wish I could go. But I heard that it would be difficult for someone like me. You'd better know some Korean." YouMe briskly jumped up from her seat and went into her room. She came back out right away, holding something in her hand. "This is a bead-bracelet that I got from a monk while I was in Korea." Victoria admired the handiwork of the wooden bead-bracelet that had Chinese characters on each bead. "But I am not so sure it is a Buddhist bead. He said it was made by a Moodang [a shamanist]." As Victoria looked at me in anticipation for native knowledge, I chimed in, not knowing exactly what it was and what it meant, "then, it's supposed to ward off evil spirits." With a slight nod, Victoria caressed each bead, trying to make out the letters. "You have it," YouMe said to Victoria with sisterly warmth, "I knew you'd like it." "No, I can't," Victoria resisted, but YouMe said without any hesitation, "no, I got it for you." Victoria, growing up in the 60s, did not have many resources to learn about her heritage. She found her inner peace by reading about Native Americans, with whom she identified deeply, and had lived close to a Native American reservation for a long time in her mid-life. It was not surprising that Victoria loved exquisite handicrafts that signified something spiritual. Thus, for her, this bracelet meant something more than just a good-luck charm. If I knew exactly what the bead bracelet meant, would it mean something more significant to her? Perhaps. But I guess that all depends on what it exactly means or what we need to hear. Material objects often acquire meanings independent of their original utility or *raison d'être*.

In consuming things Korean, food and contexts provide an important place to start thinking about the relationship between cultural consumption and identities. In contrast to some younger children that I met at culture camps who frowned at the smell of kimchi,

shouting, “I don’t eat that kind of stuff,” many adult adoptees gleefully enjoy spicy Korean food, and even those who cannot tolerate Korean spice and peppers make a genuine attempt to savor Korean dishes, despite foreseen stomach troubles. In the company of many adoptees, knowing what to order and how to properly eat Korean food was a mark of knowledge. Those who spent some time in Korea or knew Korean food well were eager to teach the others what each of the dishes was and whether this or that was spicy. A few of them were adventurous enough to cook Korean meals on their own, although no one ever went farther than Jean Kim Blum, who experimented on combining her knowledge of Korean cuisine with other ethnic foods.⁶¹

In her study of Korean military brides, Yuh argues that, “the primary meaning of Korean food for most Korean immigrants, . . . seems to be that of homeland and identity” (2002: 128). Food signifies a cultural connection to the homeland among these Korean adoptees as well. For older generation adoptees and those adoptees who have not had Korean food while growing up, learning to appreciate Korean food is a process that parallels their negotiations with Korean identity. Although those adopted at infancy may lack a visceral connection to the food and homeland that Yuh’s military brides (2002) or Mannur’s immigrants (2007) retain, Korean food seems to signify both emotional and bodily connection to Korean cultural heritage that the adoptees want to claim.

Cultural encounters at a Korean restaurant can further add complexity to this process of negotiating identity. Barthes once said, “food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation” (1997: 26),⁶² and these situations offer ethnographic moments worthy of analytic attention. As will be seen in Timothy Klein’s story in Ch. 6, the

⁶¹ Blum’s story appears in Ch. 6.

⁶² Barthes specifies that this applies to France. However, I found this was often the case with Korean American adoptees as well.

interactions that take place between the adoptees and Korean workers at Korean restaurants illustrate differences between the conceptual worlds of these two parties.

On one sunny afternoon in January, Maureen and I were in a Korean restaurant. She had invited several of her Caucasian friends and was so excited that I could be there to teach her and her friends about Korean food. Maureen is well-informed about Korean food now, and can say a few things in Korean, but back then, she did not know much about, nor even like Korean food. Korean food usually comes with several small side dishes and Maureen wanted to know what each of them was. I was familiar with most of the dishes, but that did not mean that I knew all the ingredients they were made out of. While we were busy exploring, the waiter for our table came to take our order. He was not at all hesitant to address Maureen, rather than me, in Korean, “What would you like to order?” Maureen’s face drew blank, with her eyes looking directly into mine, begging for help. The waiter was taken aback for a minute or two, by his own misreading of who a “Korean-speaking Korean” must have been. After the waiter left with our orders, Maureen complained, “I really don’t understand. I’ve been coming here for a while now, and they always do that to me. Why wouldn’t they remember I can’t speak Korean?” She was in her casual purple T-shirt and a pair of blue jeans, and had her hair in a pony tail, with no clear sign of make-up. With freckles and her brownish-tan skin, she could be anyone from a rural area in Korea. As I began to ponder how to go about helping her understand the cultural cues, or miscues rather, our food arrived. Interestingly, these regular misunderstandings did not stop Maureen from frequenting the only Korean restaurant nearby.

Maureen’s experience is not an individual story. Many adoptees told me similar stories but they never failed to visit Korean restaurants regardless of the misunderstandings or discriminations that they felt against them. Some utilized these encounters to learn more

about Korean culture, making friends with the workers there, and trying to learn a few Korean phrases. Others understood these encounters as a reflection of Korean culture and went there only for food. Taken together, stories about Korean restaurants and food among Korean American adoptees are about their acceptance of in-between positioning.

As Americans, Korean adoptees have often been treated as outsiders in Korean settings, not knowing how to navigate cultural encounters that Koreans/Korean Americans would be well-accustomed to in these settings. But their attempts to retain the “Koreanness” of their identities, regardless of the lack of acceptance, reveals that they are claiming and embracing their in-between-ness as a part of their identity. By learning to appreciate Korean food and putting themselves in cultural contexts that require their painstaking comprehension, Korean adoptees pull together their seemingly irreconcilable Korean and American identity in these contexts in ways that defy distinctions between the two.

I will add one more story about Andrea who does not particularly favour Korean foods but still feels obligated to use them when necessary. The following is a note that I recorded about Andrea’s party.

My friend and Korean adoptee, Andrea, calls me one day. Having just given birth to a girl, she was already planning her daughter’s 100th Day Party, which is an occasion for a big celebratory party in Korea. Having heard from a Korean friend that she needed 4 kinds of rice cakes for this party, Andrea is asking me the specific items to use for this party. Despite my own ignorance and inability to impart any information, thanks to her technological savvy, she had found the information she needed on internet. On the day of celebration, Andrea ordered 4 kinds of rice cakes from a nearby Korean grocery store. The guests, all white except me, were hesitant to try the sticky rice cakes which were brightly colored in pink, green, yellow, purple, and white. I saw one guest pick one up out of politeness but as Andrea turned her back toward him, he threw it swiftly into the wastebasket nearby.

For Andrea, her daughter’s conception was expected and longed for. Although she does not have any memories of Korea, and asserts that she is American and not Korean, it must have been important for her to show her daughter—however young she may be—and others that

her mother was Korean American. I wonder whether her desperation to find and procure ethnic products reflects her “*out-of-place*” anxiety, due to the lack of a culturally available narrative that legitimizes her experiences as indisputably Korean and American at the same time. Cultural consumer goods here signify the interplay between self-representation and materiality, which is one of the ways of self-creation proffered by late capitalism. Enriching her daughter’s 100th day with a variety of ethnic products that she herself did not know when she was young, Andrea fashioned her Korean American identity anew.

Trans-cultured and out-of-place, Korean things and Korean adoptees who don or display them in a characteristically American manner illuminate the cultural interstices in which they craft their selves and identities. What they want to convey, it seems, is their refusal to choose either an American or a Korean identity. Attempting *conspicuous* appropriations of Korean culture, Korean American adoptees try to combine multiple dimensions of their identities in their own unique ways. A product of a racialized economy of family and kinship, Korean American adoptees chart out a new niche, in which their ambiguous identities are legible and given proper cultural elaboration. In so doing, they clearly show that their identities are always in the process of *becoming*.

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The five ethnographic moments described in this chapter show concrete sociocultural contexts in which one can discern Korean adoptees’ subjective positioning. First three moments shed light on the mundane sociocultural interactions that constantly position these adoptees into a conceptual space that I termed, “out-of-place.” As seen from above, this space is a fertile ground from which to examine the constant ways in which the commonsense world visibly and viscerally draws its boundaries. In their confrontation with

the commonsense world, Korean adoptees claim an alternative vision that places them in the “outsider-within stance, a peculiar marginality” (Collins, 1991: 11) that is productive of critical assessment of their own predicament. Collins explains, “as the ‘Others’ of society who can never belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order” (1991: 69). As a figural and literal limit of the social and symbolic order, Korean adoptees occupy and claim their unique space. The power of “ethnographical imagination” (Willis, 2000) lies in its ability to illuminate these moments of confrontations that expose the workings –i.e., processes of sedimentation—of powerful cultural ideologies that continuously shape and condition our conceptual world.

The last two moments reveal the indeterminacy of challenges introduced by Korean adoptees’ unique positioning. These are the moments when the hegemony of the commonsense world is restored, if partially, by Korean adoptees’ reinvestment in the very world that excluded their existence in the first place. Willis’ “partial penetration” (1977) connotes precisely these indeterminate moments where people’s agency is compromised by the extant structural power. It is here important to note that Korean adoptees’ emotional investment in commonsense world is not a straightforward acceptance of that world at the expense of their critical consciousness. Their investment and cultural practices reflecting that desire point to an alternative conceptual space that they mark out as their own. Here is the place where we witness the ingenuity and resilience of Korean adoptees.

Chapter THREE: Sites of Emotional Belonging

For the first time in my life, I truly felt that I
belonged to a group of people –Korean
looking...American sounding. . . .For the first
time, all the pictures on the wall were crooked,
and it was the white wall that was out of place
(Stock, 1999: 97-98)

Over the course of my fieldwork, I developed an admiration for older adoptees, especially females. They, as a group, were at the forefront of Korean adoption history, and as such, a lot of pain and hardship was in store for them in the US. On top of adjusting to a new cultural environment, they had to endure racial and sexual discrimination with little support from their own ethnic group living in this country. But they survived the challenges their lives threw at them and emerged triumphantly.

Katherine Cho, whom many of us lovingly call, Kat Cho, was one of those women. She is a well-known figure in Korean adoptee culture camps throughout the US. Adopted at an older age and living with a physical disability, she maintained an almost militant attitude when it came to her responsibilities. Now in her early 50s, Kat Cho comes across as a woman driven by a zeal for perfection, which surprises and often frightens those around her. She has many educational degrees and is an experienced professional counselor. I met Kat at an adoptee gathering, and she invited me to a camp where she would be a coordinator.

When I arrived, Kat was already there. She had flown in before the other campers and even some volunteers.⁶³ As soon as she unpacked her luggage, she rolled up her sleeves and began cleaning and organizing the cabin rooms, looking for spots missed by the staff.

⁶³ The director of this particular camp was newly appointed, and she was also an adoptee. At the end of the camp, her role as a director was publicly assessed and she was given constructive feedback in a meeting of volunteers.

Liz, a White female social worker in her late 60s and a general coordinator for the camp, called out to her, “Hi, Kat! It has been a while.” Liz and Kat regularly met in these culture camps held over the years. Liz was hard of hearing and had a tendency to yell, “WHAT?” In addition, her blunt attitude intimidated some adoptees, as some of them later let me know. “I can’t believe how cranky she is,” they whispered. But as cranky as she did seem at times, Liz was quite sweet to Kat, tagging along on Kat’s numerous walks to and from the center to their cabin. After dinners, Kat and Liz would teach me how to play Chinese card games while Kat showed off her dealing skills, learned during a brief stint as a dealer in Las Vegas.

For the last day of camp, Kat organized a special party in which the adoptees could taste Korean food. “Where else can they see and eat Korean food?” said she, without expecting an answer. Kat brought a comprehensive knowledge of Korea to the camps. I was much embarrassed when she asked—in fact, instructed—me to assist her in cooking Korean food for the campers to enjoy. The dinner preparation went without a hitch, largely due to Kat’s careful attention to details and her extensive knowledge of Korean recipes. The camp staff tried to follow her orders to-a-T. The camp was staffed by mostly adoptee volunteers except a few Asian Americans, but all of the kitchen staff was provided by the camp. So the kitchen staff consisted mostly of middle-aged Black or White American women, except for Kat and me. It seemed to me as though they had never seen an Asian woman in charge, barking out her orders in English. I saw their jaws drop whenever Kat yelled out what we should do next, as if we were all in some kind of military barracks. Some rolled their eyes, but they tried to perform their tasks to Kat’s satisfaction.

Over time, I learned that Kat’s most endearing quality, despite an intimidating perfectionism, was her unique blend of seriousness and warmth. It was not surprising to discover why so many Korean adoptees mentioned her name in relation to the culture camps

they attended as well as other adoptee-organized activities. Kat was serious about culture camps because these opportunities provided a kind of emotional rapport and sense of belonging so important to young adoptees. As a senior adoptee who grew up without the benefits of culture camps, Kat knew how critical these venues were, and she generously donated her time and energy to camp efforts throughout the United States.

Kat, who was not adopted until she was 13, started her early adoption years in the Midwest. Because she was already a young teen when she was adopted, Kat clearly remembered the circumstances leading to her adoption, although her grasp of the Korean language was a long-lost memory. Her birthmother died when she was very young, and Kat remembers her birthfather telling her that he could not take good care of her. She was crippled due to childhood polio, and her family was too poor to accommodate her needs. Kat had younger siblings, but she could not shoulder the household responsibilities as many first-borns did at that time. She still recalls details of her neighborhood in Korea, where other children taunted her for her disability, mimicking her steps and poking fun at her gait. She accepted her father's suggestion and agreed to an adoption by an American family. However, she could not forget her birth family, and after she got married in the early 1970s, she and her husband moved to Korea. Her experience of living in Korea in those years reinforced old lessons about the prejudices and discriminations common to Korean society.⁶⁴

I just had my first daughter and I remember riding a bus with her. People kept staring at us. One old woman, who was sitting right next to me, looked at my face, and then, my daughter's face, and started yelling something. I didn't know what she was screaming about. I was with a Korean friend who was married to a US soldier, and she knew what the old woman was saying.

⁶⁴ Kim and Choi's *Dangerous Women* (1998) offers critical essays on gender, class, nationalism in Korean society. Especially Elaine Kim's (1998) own essay in the volume deals with cultural notions and practices surrounding gender and sexuality in Korea during the 1980s. She also provides a brief but poignant story of her own experience of staying in Korea in the late 1960s (see fn. 1) which is not dissimilar to the experiences described by many Korean American adoptees who visited Korea during and right after this period.

So, she told me to get off at the next bus stop, and we did. She wouldn't tell me what happened in the bus, but, later I learned that the old woman was calling me a "Western queen," treating me like a prostitute, for having this Amerasian child. There are so many instances where I learned about Korean prejudices and discrimination. 'Cause I like Korean food a lot, we would often go to a Korean restaurant for a meal, and some waiter once spilled the hot soup all over my lap for being with a White man. It was intentional. I just felt it, the hatred toward me, you know. I couldn't speak Korean very well, so that added a problem, too. Oftentimes, I was mistaken as a prostitute. At one time, I was waiting in a hotel lobby, right, for my husband to come down, and this man, this White man comes up to me and asks, "where's your VD card?" I didn't know what he was talking about. Again, later, I learned that VD card is a sort of health identification card carried by prostitutes working around the US army bases.

As might be expected, Kat did not retain any nostalgic feelings for Korea. She knew Koreans to be both kind and cruel, just like the people she knew in the States. "But these kids [at the camps], they idealize Korea, you know? I try to give them some sense of what is going to happen if they go back and search for their birthparents." She felt that it was the responsibility of senior adoptees to impart some of the wisdom gained from their own experiences to the young generation. Culture camps became her passion. "For us, this is a place where we can see each other and learn that we are not alone."

Kat relayed to me one episode that renewed her commitment to building an adoptee-oriented community. While in college two years ago, Kat's daughter was admitted into a hospital emergency room. Since Kat lived in the West and her daughter was attending college on the East coast, she was extremely worried about her daughter's well-being. Due to her demanding work schedule, Kat could not be with her daughter to make decisions about the surgical options that her daughter faced. But Kat remembered Ben, an adoptee friend living in the town in which her daughter's college was located, and contacted him. Ben immediately responded to her request and became an indispensable liaison between Kat and the medical staff. Emergency decisions had to be made and Kat's inability to be there on

those few critical days was acutely frustrating. She could not emphasize enough the importance of Ben's presence and his willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty. "I can't believe how reliable he was, and how dependent I was on his assistance in those few days. Ben was so sweet too, not leaving my daughter's bedside for one minute until I got there. He made our painful days bearable and I can't ever forget what he did for us."

Schneider (1968, 1977, 1984, 2004(1972)) argued that American kinship on the ground is governed by the code of conduct, i.e., "diffuse enduring solidarity."⁶⁵ Family means that you can count on one another's support in times of need. Kat's experiences confirmed her sense of kinship with other adoptees, as the sentiment sustaining adoptees' friendships closely resembled "diffuse enduring solidarity" that Schneider (*ibid.*) pinpointed as the major characteristic of American kinship. Despite the individual differences and geographical distances, Korean adoptees became a source of emotional and material support to one another. Once friendships have been made, these relationships snowballed into bigger and wider network of adoptees that they could count on in times of need.

Kat said she was a strong supporter of international adoption. Although it had its own problems and contradictions, "how else would these kids have parents and homes that take care of them?" She was critical of YouMe Masters'⁶⁶ approach, which bordered on hostile aggression towards the subject of international adoption. "Do you think she is happy?"

⁶⁵ David Schneider's analysis of US kinship (1968) raised important questions about the assumptions guiding kinship and familial institution for the following generation of kinship scholars in anthropology and elsewhere. He put forward two related analyses of US kinship in the 1960s. On one hand, the central conceptual symbol representing the family and kinship in the US has been none other than sexual intercourse. On the other, concrete individuals that make up real kinship and family on the ground have been bound by codes of conduct, which he aptly termed as "enduring diffuse solidarity". The ambiguous relationship between sexual intercourse as the biological foundation and "enduring diffuse solidarity" as an agent-oriented analysis of kinship in the US foreshadows the seeming confusions about "who calls whom what?" and whom to include in the category of "relatives" among native informants that participated in his research.

⁶⁶ YouMe's story is included in Ch. 7.

she asked, without necessarily wanting to hear my answer. But in the next moment, she added, “But if she ever visits my town, I will definitely go and pick her up from the airport. If she needs help, I will try to find a way to make it happen. Although I don’t see eye to eye with her on things, she is an adoptee. I will try to be of help in any way I can.” YouMe, in return, had a deep respect for Kat, despite their political differences. Upon learning about my camp activities with Kat, YouMe asked, “Isn’t she great? What did you think of her?” I answered, “A survivor,” using the term familiar to Korean adoptees. YouMe nodded without comment, her eyes deep in thought.

These are not contradictory feelings, but sisterly disagreements that can be present in many sibling relationships. The many differences in opinion and variables across social axes of gender, age, class/educational status, and sexual orientation that emerged among adoptees mattered little when they encountered other adoptees. Rather, these differences illustrated the diversity of the adoptee community and pointed towards an adoptee-centered community that was both inclusive and expansive. In the end, adoptees belonged to a community of their own that sustained itself via affective bonds forged by the shared experiences of living and struggling in-between culturally legible grids of identities.

Affective Bonds in Adoptee Kinship

From the early days of my fieldwork, I had noticed that Korean adoptees affiliate based on emotional identification rather than many of the other social axes that may differentiate people. Regardless of physiognomy⁶⁷ or other social characteristics, Korean

⁶⁷ Interracial adoptees –otherwise called Amerasian— and full-blooded Korean adoptees often look quite different in terms of facial structures, although these differences may change as adoptees age. Interracial

adoptees feel a sense of affective belonging with one another, empathizing with others' predicaments with support and care. In so doing, they create a form of community and moments of *communitas* (Turner, 1967, 1969) based on a shared structure of feeling, specifically cultivated by their own sense of *dislocatedness*. This sense of dislocatedness is amplified by their out-of-place positioning as I discussed in Ch. 2. In this chapter, I give detailed attention to this emotional bond, by examining the specific sites that instantiate affective belonging. Ch. 4 further explores the sociocultural factors that engender this affect and emotion among Korean adoptees.

I conceive of this affective bond as an important dimension of adoptee subjectivity and experience, and take it to be the foundation upon which adoptees relate to one another. Relationships thus built and maintained over time are described by adoptees as "family." In her study of gays and lesbians, Weston (1991) finds that they forge intimate relationships with friends that provide security, love and support. By conceiving of these intimate relationships as a form of kinship ties, Weston exposes the power of the familial institution as an idea rather than as a fixed essence. She astutely remarks, "in the United States the notion of biology as an indelible, precultural substratum is so ingrained that people often find it difficult to take an anthropological step backward in order to examine *biology as symbol rather than substance*" (*ibid.*: 34, my emphasis).

Korean adoptees already know how kinship actually works in the US. Lacking a symbolic element (biological connection) that ties them, Korean adoptees and their adoptive families "do" families based on emotional connections.⁶⁸ By doing so, they become astute

adoptees tend to be older and less enthusiastic about attending adoptee gatherings and meetings. I have not met enough interracial adoptees to analyze this difference.

⁶⁸ In her study of kinship represented in American soap operas, Stone (2004) delineated three different but overlapping orders that seem to be working simultaneously to create and consolidate the kinship ties people build. These are orders of nature, law, and choice. In contrast to the folk belief in kinship as an order of

connoisseurs at building meaningful relationships with people that are enduring over time. Especially when it comes to other adoptees, they feel emotional connections that are akin to the kinship bonds they have with their adoptive families. Sharing similar histories of abandonment and replacement in new families as well as other experiences unique to transracial adoptions, they have much more in common with each other than just their national origin.

Schneider's dictum that American kinship is based on the code of conduct or sentiment he terms, "diffuse enduring solidarity" (1968) seems highly applicable here, as this "diffuse enduring solidarity" also characterizes the intense affective bonds that they form with one another. Kat's story above indicates that there seems to be a code of conduct that is both supportive and caring among adoptees. This bond arises out of their meetings with one another. Adoptees feel invigorated and reaffirmed by attending adoptee-focused functions and meetings, seeing their own reflections in others around them. Once it is realized in the company of many like-others, this bond is an indispensable instrument with which adoptee communities and organizing efforts develop and expand. As with any human bond, it is continuously challenged and tested over the vast differences that adoptees bring to their jointly created communities. The power of this emotional bond can be seen in its ability to engender a sense of affective belonging despite individual differences. This bond is what connects adoptees to each other, giving them a sense of who they are as a group.

nature, she found that "any one order is insufficient in itself to create real kinship, but that any order that overlaps with the mutual choice of the participants can create real kinship" (406). In other words, an adoptive family is real kinship as it contains both orders of law and choice. But, emotion does not seem to figure in this configuration (although the order of choice comes close to it), because it can only be a product of everyday practices circumscribed by institutional structures. It is important to underscore the fact that emotional connection is what actually makes people feel they belong, and it can be gained by everyday interactions that involve love and care of one another among kin.

Sites of Affective Belonging

Adoptees bond affectively with one another, but the affects underlying this bond find outlets and catalysts in specific sites where adoptees meet and interact with one another. These sites provide a sociocultural context where individual experiences of alienation and dislocation merge with one another, engendering a sense of belonging, and transforming individual stories into collective experiences that give power and support to enduring relationships. In this chapter, I highlight three such cultural sites: culture (heritage) camps and similar culture activities, adoptee conferences and gatherings, and birth country tours.⁶⁹

1. Culture Camps & Cultural Activities⁷⁰

Since the early 1980s, the institution of culture camps has become a useful tool for adoptive parents seeking to introduce some semblance of “heritage education” into their adopted children’s experience.⁷¹ By all accounts, culture camps and adoptive family network

⁶⁹ Although internet communications –listserves, e-mails, websites, etc.—provide important space for networking among adoptees in far-flung locations, my research focused on the physical sites in which people interacted with one another in person. By meeting numerous adoptees face-to-face, I could get at how they made sense of and utilized these other technologies. How these technologies themselves limit and develop the course of adoptee organizing efforts will be an intriguing question to explore in the future.

⁷⁰ In some circles, culture camps are referred to as heritage camps. The same organizers of these ventures occasionally plan culture day celebrations (for culturally specific holidays such as Chinese New Year’s Day, Full Moon Day, etc.) and other culture-related activities throughout the year. These activities last about a day and involve local people. In this section, I am including these activities under the rubric of “culture camp activities,” as these occasions are smaller and more routine sites that incorporate similar types of activities. All these efforts legitimize and encourage attendees’ future participation in other cultural activities such as culture camps.

⁷¹ While focusing on those camps that bring participants to their birth country, Louie (2004: 61) mentions the development of summer camps for Overseas Chinese Youth that began in the 1970s as one of the many ways that the Taiwanese government tried to install itself in Overseas Chinese communities. Partially in response, the mainland Chinese government has sponsored culture camp activities in the US and other countries beginning in the early 1980s. The contemporaneity of these movements to heritage culture camps in the US should be noted. Although it is doubtful that there may have been connections between Chinese camps and Korean adoptee camps, this contemporaneity points to the 1970-80s’ sociocultural climate of encouraging and exploring the cultural heritages of diverse Americans in multiple venues.

activities existed long before recent growth in popularity and the presence of culture camps nationwide. We have seen the networking efforts made by adoptive families of some senior adoptees, such as Jack Hamilton and Jean Kim Blum. Their efforts were often little more than informal meetings with other families of Korean adoptees, in which they shared their concerns about parenting, and socialized with one another. In other situations, meetings were encouraged or even facilitated by adoption agencies, as a part of their post-adoption services.

Prior to my fieldwork, I was concerned with the seemingly regressive character of culture camps, which seemed to suggest the existence of “authentic cultural artifacts” that adoptees could eventually appropriate under the aegis of learning about culture and language. Given increasing critiques of multiculturalism and identity politics (Kaplan, et al., 1999; Lowe, 1996; Moallem and Boal, 1999; Trend, 1996 to name but a few), are these camps simply an example of White hegemonic attempts to confine the heterogeneous constituents of the US nation-state into the category of “aestheticized, unpoliticized, cultures”?⁷² Do culture camps facilitate the management of ethnic/racial differences as part of the project of nation building or consolidation of the status quo? My participant-observation in the camps and other culture activities, however, led me away from my initial skepticism to an understanding that was at once more complex and more practical.

Culture camps have undergone tremendous transformations since their predominantly localized beginnings. Internet discussion group postings and my interview accounts point to the dynamic nature of this type of social project which is constantly

⁷² By now, critiques on conventional conceptualizations of cultures and cultural differences are well-known. In academia, these critiques have come from various disciplines, such as literary criticism (Manganaro, 1990), postcolonial studies, cultural studies (Chow, 1993) and feminism (Behar and Gordon, 1995; Narayan U, 1997; Spivak, 1988), as well as the discipline of anthropology itself (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Dirks, et al, 1994; Fabian, 1983; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Rosaldo, 1993 (1989)).

negotiated and constructed by both organizers and participants. Whether adoption agency-originated or church-originated, most camps allowed enormous flexibility in terms of leadership and recruitment. Adoptees such as Leila, who now supported and organized camps, had previously been to one of these camps as participants when they were young. Their experiences at the camps were often summed up in one word: “boring.” Nonetheless, they agreed on one thing: the importance of their socialization with other adoptees in similar predicaments as them. Learning about the existence of others whose experiences overlapped with theirs was crucial to their healthy sense of self: “I was not the only one.” Feeling “outside of the norm” was uncommon in these camps. They helped adoptees build deep identifications with one another as they shared in the fate of being “lost and found.” This is illustrated by the enduring friendships among adoptees who met at culture camps when young. Some kept in touch with one another well into adulthood, regardless of the geographical distance between them.

Culture camps, especially when run by adoptees themselves, become a place of uplifting transformation for everyone involved, not just attendees. For senior adoptees such as Scott,⁷³ who never attended or even knew about the existence of these camps when he was young, they became a place in which adoptees could transform their understanding of their own identity and nurture new, alternative perspectives. Scott, 49, talks about his own transformation as a result of his involvement with culture camps as one of the organizers.

That was the first time I'd been around other adoptees. They were a little younger. . . . That was like my epiphany when I realized this. As a result of these culture camps, and some of us older people working there, that's how this gathering began. It's something we didn't have. . . . It was very difficult in a White society. You see yourself as White. You don't think of yourself as something different. It's very common, all around. That's the wonder of the

⁷³ See his story in Ch. 7.

culture camps for children. They get a little glimpse of this, because you see yourself in your parents' faces. Simple as that.

Scott had never been around so many Asian faces, reflecting a part of himself. This lack was deeply felt as he began to be unsure about his future as an aging Asian man. His camp experiences offered him a sense of belonging and purpose, as he took on the role of mentor and role model to younger boys attending the camps. Leila, 37, also worked with adoptee youth as a counselor on these occasions. For her and others like her, camps were

a positive thing. You know, it's kind of like mentor programs to understand how these younger kids deal with issues. Because at the time Tate [another adoptee] and I came, we didn't have that kind of support. Like they didn't know what the abandonment issue was, how American parents deal with us, our temperament. You know, I don't know [if] Tate ever got to do this. But during the time I was even in my 20s, late 20s, I got to do a panel for Chinese American parents, because they want to hear about our experiences, because Korean kids were the first to come to the US. So they had from age 7 all the way to my age, so that each parent gets different experience. So I am actually helping others with my experience now.

Christian, 36, is from a generation that benefited from later camps in which adoptees began to operate as leaders. He talked about his uneventful introduction to camp activities.

They [my parents] said "do you want to go there?" 'Cause they always encouraged me to learn something about my culture. I went up there and I thought *I was in heaven*. Because I see all these people that were Korean, it was so cool, as opposed to all these White people that didn't know anything about why I looked the way I did, or why I looked funny, and all that stuff. It was kind of cool to actually have that, you know, *immediate little family that I was so deprived of all those years*. That began my process of actually trying to get into, or belonging to certain groups and stuff like that (my emphasis).

Scott's earlier comments are nicely mirrored by Christian's sentiment. His description is filled with the positive feelings that the camps tried often to invoke among adoptees. Meanwhile, he focuses on his physical identification with others sharing an adoptee/ethnic status. This identification instilled in him a sense of belonging and acceptance that can be

compared to an extended kinship: an “immediate little family.” This camp-inspired sense of belonging cuts across different sites as adoptees utilize multiple camps, conferences, and other similar adoptee meetings to get in touch with one another. Their emotional connection is transformative especially in their first encounters with the groups of other Korean adoptees. The realization that they are not alone brings them to a renewed understanding of one’s identity.

I was excited meeting this *group of people that grew up like me*. Although our lives brought us to different parts of the country, our similar beginnings made me want to immediately bond with them. I wanted to hug everyone with the last name “Smith” and “Johnson” when we met for the first time in the *Wendy’s* at the Portland airport; ask them too personal questions. . . . *For the first time in my life, I truly felt that I belonged to a group of people –Korean looking...American sounding. . . .For the first time, all the pictures on the wall were crooked, and it was the white wall that was out of place* (Stock, 1999: 97-98, my emphasis).

Here Stock is meeting other adoptees in preparation for an impending birth country tour, but her sense of immediate connection nicely parallels Christian’s. In contrast to adoptees’ constant apprehension of being out of place, “[f]or the first time, all the pictures on the wall were crooked, and it was the white wall that was out of place.” The moments of connecting to other adoptees who inhabited similar social predicaments of being and living in-between offered them an occasion to reexamine their marginality and sense of alienation. From the company of many others like them, they caught a glimpse of the socially constructed nature of their marginality. This is a powerful moment charged with emotion and a sense of reawakening.

Younger generation adoptees now take for granted that they can join culture camps and/or birth country tours if they so desire. Undoubtedly, there are adoptees who do not share the sentiments that “I was in heaven,” as did Christian. In the case of 23-year old Amanda, it was her mother who insisted that she be more exposed to culture camps and

similar activities. When asked how she came to participate in culture camps, Amanda answered,

My Mom took me. And you know, I didn't like going. I remember I was not able to figure out why I didn't like going. For some reason, I didn't like going. Other adoptees that I met also didn't really like it. I think it might be, I am not sure, 'cause I am not a researcher, or psychologist or something or anything like that, but probably behavioral, like rejection of it. I thought it might be, rejection of something that has rejected you. That's how I found out. My Mom tried to get me to go. She made me go to some, but after a while, she chucked it. Now I kind of wish that I had done more. I feel like, now that I am older, all the other people my age knew things. They tried to grow up together. It is a little awkward for me to jump into it, I think.

The fear of rejection is deep among adoptees in general, and Amanda rationalized that this fear of rejection might have been behind her refusal to engage with her Korean heritage.

One important point that Amanda's answer brings home is that adoptee-oriented communities and activities are meaningful primarily to adoptees who are ready for the transition that these occasions bring to their lives. Amanda was too young to explore her heritage in a manner that was meaningful to her. Additionally, being forced to do something by their parents often precipitated negative interactions between parents and adoptee teens. Adoptees should decide themselves when and where to make that transition. When Amanda realized that her experiences could be a resource for others, she slowly recognized the benefits of culture camps despite her initial reluctance to share her story.

The structure of each camp slightly differs, depending on local contexts and the diversity of its attendees. Most of the camps and cultural activities that I attended included adoptees from Korea and other Asian countries. The growing presence of Chinese adoptees in these camps was increasingly noticeable among younger age groups, and most adoptee organizers were from Korea. It did not necessarily matter which country an adoptee came

from. For instance, national adjectives, such “Korean,” or “Chinese,” were not generally used in camp names.

Programs generally reflected cultural heritage in a larger sense, and more expansive terms such as “international,” or “Asian,” were used to identify camps that incorporated diversity among transnational adoptee participants. Parents’ participation may or may not have been required. Those camps where parents dropped their children off on a Friday afternoon and picked them up on a Sunday evening were generally geared towards child-oriented entertainment. A few classes, divided by age and gender, were organized according to the availability of volunteers and their time constraints. These classes might have included arts & crafts, sports, song & dance, language, etc.. On occasion, workshops and counseling sessions were planned for the youth groups (mostly high school age groups) if the camps were staffed with social workers and other professionals in this area of expertise.

Camps that required parental participation often included workshops for the adoptive parents as well. Organizers sometimes invited speakers or panels to discuss issues related to adoptive parenting and racism. Often, travel agents familiar with birth country tours held sessions where they provided adoptive parents with various options for planning them.⁷⁴ The size of the camps varies greatly, depending on the exact time and place of each camp and organizers. Most attendees are local residents, although it is not rare to meet adoptees and their families coming in from far-flung places.

The specific contents of cultural activities that the adoptees engage in these culture camps and other culture day celebrations did not differ widely, consisting of several well-worn repertoires, such as sessions related to Asian cultural crafts, storytelling, or

⁷⁴ This actually reflected who the organizers of the camp were. For instance, if the organizers or the majority of the camp participants are related to one country of origin, China perhaps, then the birth country tour guide that they invite may be a Chinese travel agent familiar with this type of tours.

music/dance. These activities were geared for children's entertainment, usually deploying by-now-familiar iconic Asian cultural motifs (i.e., origami-making, fan-dance, etc.). Nevertheless, the culture camps were not necessarily about adoptees' cultural heritage *per se*, but about the forging of community where adoptees became the center of attention and care. With the growing presence of adult adoptees in these camps, the camps have provided sociocultural contexts in which adoptees can envision an alternative space where their unique social positioning is the norm. According to Kimberly Kyung Hee Stock (1999), Korean adoptee consciousness can be characterized as "a fourth culture," engendered in the interstices of Korean, American, and Korean American cultural topographies (see also E. Kim 2000, 2003, 2007, 2010). These camps are one of the sites where one can witness the construction of consciousness that is integral to this fourth culture. In that sense, it was a truly cultural experience for me. These camps may become the building blocks for fostering a critical community of Korean American adoptees "as a site for alternative histories and memories that provide the grounds to imagine subject, community, and practice in new ways" (Lowe, 1996: 96).

2. Gatherings: Conferences & Mini-Gatherings

There are currently a few annual adoptee conferences that take place in the United States. KAAN (Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network) and IKAA (International Korean Adoptee Associations) are two major organizations run by Korean adoptees themselves, rather than social workers or adoption agencies. IKAA, from its inception, has brought broader perspectives that accommodate diverse needs of the

members coming from different countries.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, KAAN, largely based in North America, was formed just over a decade ago, having held its first conference in 1999. Over the years, it has developed into a significant source of information for adoptees and adoptive families alike on issues related to adoption (both international and domestic) and Korean culture. With the development of internet technologies, these organizations can disseminate information and announcements about future gatherings, problems and concerns about adoption policies affecting adoptive families, current economic and political state of Korea, and much more to a great number of people quickly and easily.

There are also gatherings of adoptees that are smaller in scale. Some of them are called “mini-gatherings,” connoting their focus on informality and sociality, in contrast to bigger meetings and conferences that are geared to a series of workshops that are largely informational rather than social. As informal events for socialization, these gatherings can come about any number of times, any time of the year, and most of the attendees are from local areas, although attendees may fly in from distant places. For instance, in one mini-gathering that took place in New York City in 2001, there were a few adoptees who flew in from California and other northwest regions of the US. A few even came from Holland for the weekend of union. This mini-gathering specifically had a hundred-some participants. The specific format and nature of each gathering depended on who the organizing parties were and what sorts of programs were in place for each occasion. For instance, in the case of the NYC gathering that I mention above, there were lectures scheduled wherein a social worker or adoption scholar would present the findings of her research related to adoption and adoptee issues. This reflected the organizer Ben Huh’s desire to provide intellectual sessions

⁷⁵ IKAA was originally established in Europe in March 2004 and was expanded by IKAA, USA that quickly followed.

where the attendees could take something away from the gathering rather than just making new friends. In contrast, the one I attended in the Midwest was much smaller, consisting of about 30-40 people: several adoptees, their partners and friends, and a few Korean American families. Most people resided in locally accessible areas. Organized by a local ministry that some adoptees were a part of, it was only for the day, and it felt more like a summer BBQ party.

Despite the variety of adoptee gatherings, there is one thing that connected all the meetings that Korean adoptees organize and run: a sense of affective belonging. This close intimacy among the conference participants may be a result of the goals of the meetings themselves: to create a community of their own. However, people blended in with one another in a way that was not conceivable from any other public conferences—whether formal or informal—in other settings. Even in the NYC gathering mentioned above where more than a hundred adoptees came, the atmosphere seemed to induce a deep sense of belonging. Some of the attendees were first-timers and others were regulars to the conferences held by Korean adoptee organizations. But, from the look of the interactions going on among them, one would be easily misled to see the signs of long-time friendship: intimate jokings, touching, and hugging, and so on. The kinds of questions and conversations that would be considered taboo in other settings were held without much hesitation. My being Korean facilitated my blending in with the crowd at the outset, although they knew who I was. I acutely felt the intensity of affect in these settings, because these meetings were of a more public nature than culture camps or travels where one is expected to “hang out” and socialize informally with new acquaintances.

Then, would interracial adoptees stand out in this Asian American crowd? How would they be perceived and treated? Whether they are interracial or not, Korean adoptees

have in their possession their birth certificates written in Korean letters, which are the material symbol for their Korean identity. I met Jenny in one of these gatherings, and she surprised me with an oversized name tag, placed on her bosom when I first met her. She had printed her Korean name in Korean letters underneath her name on the card, “Jenny.” Having a light brownish skin, big, wide eyes and a nose that stood high, she looked multiracial. She said with a wink, “I am a Korean adoptee too, just in case anyone was wondering!” As an interracial adoptee who did not physically look like a *typical* Korean, she had to display her Korean identity in such a marked way as to make her presence more acceptable at the gatherings. Since many adoptees often bring Caucasian partners and/or interracial children, Jenny’s presence was never conspicuous.

The Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees in 1999⁷⁶ set the precedent for many adoptees. Nicole, 34, philosophically reflected on her attendance at this momentous Gathering.

I’ve never been to any adoptee meetings except the one in 1999, for the purposes of my coming here to explore how receptive people including myself are about the issues that are relevant, very relevant. . . . [Y]ou’d like to talk to your friends about it, but they don’t get it. They don’t understand. For me, it is not to talk about something that is really important to me, but to talk about it, and have it brushed aside that is painful. It is not given any value. You are not going to diminish the value of it, because that’s certainly a huge part of your identity. Even more so, having been here [at another gathering held in Korea], sitting here, you think like what life might have been like if you were here? Would you have the same taste? You think about it when you hear about other people, you know. You could have gotten to Holland. You could have gotten to Denmark. You could have gotten to Australia. *Is it pure chance I am not where you are now?* Yeah, if anything, there is a generational gap. Some of them are quite young. They are at a different life stage. Whether you connect to other people or not, whether you like them or dislike them, *we have empathy*. 150,000, right? How difficult it is to connect to others like that? Understand where we have been. North Dakota, seriously, and you say that you stood all those people across the world, what are your chances of trying to, running into someone like that?

⁷⁶ I mark this particular gathering as “The Gathering” (in capital letters) throughout the dissertation.

JP: Did that meeting influence you in any way?

It's much more than what I have done for myself. It's been for a while. That was like the first time when I became aware of myself. A little more at peace with myself, perhaps? First time around like in 1999, you know, I never visually cried, but I wanted to cry. They did a lot of things. Some of the shows that they did basically were, people when they were born, the pictures of them. That always made me want to cry. Yeah, I don't know. I guess, I am at more peace (my emphasis).

Nicole's reflection brings to the surface an important dimension of the empathetic bond among the adoptees. She wonders about the unpredictability of what might have been, as it is, on a certain level, *pure chance* that one is sent to one country or another. In contrast to her utter loneliness that she felt growing up in North Dakota, where she had never seen, let alone met, other Asians, she realized in this Gathering that there were so many adoptees whose lives took different shapes and forms, uprooted in other places such as Europe and different parts of the United States. Here, adoptees feel a sense of connection to one another by the virtue of the arbitrariness that seems to characterize their early beginnings in their adoptive homes. *I could have been adopted to your family or vice versa.*⁷⁷

Becca Swick, (2008: 90-91) age 48, recalls a similarly moving sentiment in her autobiographical essay. Whereas Nicole considers the Gathering to be an occasion to renew her perspective and continues to ponder how to make sense of her own existence in light of this event, Swick made use of the informal network that the Gathering provided for her, developing it into a "family" that she could count on.

For me, the first "Gathering" in 1999 was a life-altering event, making me much more comfortable with myself as a Korean adoptee. For the first time I saw people that looked like me, talked like me, and had the same issues. Talking to people was amazing because you're sitting there thinking that I was going through all of this in my life believing I was doing it alone, and

⁷⁷ I elaborate further on this arbitrariness in Ch. 5.

here were all these people, and we were doing the same thing, all thinking that we were the only ones, and we weren't. I made some really good friendships there that I still have to this day. We have mini-Gatherings every six months, and with the Internet, my communications with people have just opened up in an amazing way. Before the "Gathering" I didn't even have the idea that it would be possible to try searching for my birth family. The friends I met there gave me the support and the courage to search. . . . I have discovered that the people I met at the "Gathering" and the mini-Gatherings are my Korean family. Every time I go to one it's like finding more family. It doesn't matter how long between the events, everyone picks up like it was yesterday. It's like a big family reunion. I guess it really is (Swick, 2008: 90-91).

As Swick's description and other adoptees' stories in later chapters illustrate, the Gathering precipitated the emergence of adoptee community, by giving rise to so many local gatherings and organization efforts in subsequent years, providing a sense of belonging to adoptees who previously felt extremely isolated. Especially when adoptees face difficulties in birth searches and more emotional events in their lives that they find hard to talk about with non-adoptees, the friends that they made at these gatherings become an invaluable source of support.

For adoptees who did not attend the first Gathering, subsequent gatherings and conferences still produced a similar sentiment. A younger adoptee, Michelle, 30, who was surprised by other adoptees' experiences that did not parallel hers, described the meetings this way:

It's hard when we are in groups, and you hear about all the negative experiences people had. It's also opened my eyes a little bit, and also confused me a little bit about adoption. I certainly understand why people more preferred to have Asians adopt, here Asians meaning Koreans, Korean babies that are given up and orphans. I struggled, though beyond that, of "is that better to have that child raised in an orphanage, or would it have been better for that child to be raised in a Caucasian family and got through some of the same struggles that I had?" When I think about it, I struggle with what's right, not having an answer. I don't claim to have an answer. But, you have to wonder, what would my life have been like if I hadn't been adopted? So it's definitely a struggle. But, overall I think the conferences are very beneficial, extremely emotional, but at the same time, uplifting, to be surrounded by so many people that love you and understand you. *Yeah, there are some heated conversations amongst the adoptees, but at the same time, a lot of great*

memories and long-lasting friendships are developed. I mean, I still speak with some of the adoptees years and years ago, and rely on them, as if, you know, they are my brothers and sisters. So, overall I'd say they are positive experiences (my emphasis).

The adoptee-oriented community that these gatherings bring to life, however, has its own limits. Michelle went on to talk about the sharp contrast between this community and its outside. The exhilaration that Michelle felt in the company of like-others rapidly dissipated once she returned from these meetings. Her attendance at the meetings and gatherings of adoptees

improved my outlook on life. But I think, at the same time, it's a double-edged sword. Because you are in such a great atmosphere with all these people, and you don't know what your reality is. It's like, "gosh, you know, I miss having that community consistently around me." And it can also have the opposite effect of bitterness and having a feeling of anxiety, just not being able to be in that comfortable environment again. "Gosh, now I am back in this sunken, this White community again where everybody assumes I can't speak English, assumes that I don't know anything, and having to constantly answer where you are from. 'I am from Wisconsin.' 'No, really where are you from? Oh, you speak really good English.'" You know, you get sick of that. So it's two-fold, you know, a double-edged sword. Sometimes yes, it's a great positive experience. I always am blessed by having them. But, if you come home, it's like, this reality. It's kids staring at you ask my parents questions and you know, sometimes that stuff you just kind of shrug off your shoulder. Other times, if you are having a bad day, and somebody says something, you go, "you know, where do you get off acting like that?" If you catch me on a good day, that's not so bad. But on a bad day, yeah, you never know what's gonna come out of my mouth. (Laughs) Like, for example, at my workplace right now, there's a new salesman who kept saying, "oriental," and I said, "no, that's not correct," and I told him why, and said, "you should recognize, you know, people of our descent as Asians." You know, just that small thing. He says that now. Because what's gonna happen is, he is going to hang out with his buddies, and his buddies are gonna say it, and he is gonna go, "hey, man, you know, it's Asian."

JP: Right. He is going to say, "this Asian chick at my workplace taught me that."

(Laughs) Right. Exactly! I'd rather have him say it that way than the other. It's just those small little differences. You don't have to go change everyone and just force it down anybody's throat. In casual conversations, you gotta be like, "listen, that's not right. That's like B- and N-word. And you don't say it," you know. And once you frame it up, and they understand. And then they go

down and they educate somebody else, and they educate somebody else. That's the great thing about being able to do just those little things.

Then, learning about the existence of others in the similar predicaments gives adoptees a moment to reflect upon one's positioning, no longer abnormal, but socially conditioned. It gives one a critical perspective as a transracial adoptee in the US, empowering and giving one a sense of direction and purpose.

Now that I am a grown-up, people wouldn't say so blatantly racial slurs. Back in 2000, or 2001, I went to WalMart, and there was a little girl saying, "there's this Chinese girl!" At first, I wasn't thinking, so I looked around to see where the Chinese girl was. Then, I realized I *was* the Chinese girl. You should resist, either just ignore it, or don't... If she was never been exposed, you know, I think it is really a good chance to educate her, just saying, "You know, I am not Chinese. I am a Korean." I think it is a good dialogue. So I had that experience (Rosie, 33).

Like Rosie and Michelle, many Korean adoptees work to educate people that they meet about adoption issues, Korean American culture, and their unique positioning in this country. Their efforts are not always made in big strokes, most of them based on routine and day-to-day interactions like Rosie's description above.

As more adoptees attend gatherings and local organizations grow in size, there needs to be a clear focus and direction that these meetings should develop. Otherwise, the meetings may repeatedly revolve around the same issues. Adoptees who attend them regularly may feel exhausted by the myopic focus on *individual* experiences. Christian's comment below betrays his frustration, pointing to the need for these meetings to reconsider what they plan to accomplish in each gathering for adoptees who come to them frequently.

I've learned that you just keep on going to all those things, and you get to the point to where you've already cried so many tears and complained about this or that or any other things, you've pretty much found closure somewhere along the lines, to where you just want to live your life. I think those things are there for the people that haven't had those, that need to vent those. For that facility, it's good that those things are there for those people to utilize

their feelings and stuff. They are always constantly being updated and improved on, because it's a growing creation that all these adoptees are creating, you know, to help one another (Christian, 36).

Certainly there are some adoptees who had attended a few meetings, but had a negative experience. They would not be particularly interested in connecting with other adoptees. As Michelle mentioned in her description of the gatherings, individual differences in adoption experience can become a source of disidentification. Wendy, 32, reunited with her birthparents a few years ago because they searched for her. Wendy had not been interested in birth searches previously, and had never attended any adoptee meetings before she went on a birth country tour around the time that her birthparents found her.

I went to the mini-gathering in NYC. That was in 2001. That was my first gathering after I got back from Korea, when I was interested in meeting other people and learning about the culture, how their trips were, and stuff. But, I mean, it was fun. And I kept in contact with a couple of people. Since then, I didn't really fit in with the group. I went to the KAAN conference last year, but I really didn't go to any of the workshops, because I didn't feel any of them were interesting to me or pertaining to me, because I never had any issues with my adoption. To me, people who complain about their identity issues and lying about it, you know, I understand that they have problems. I don't identify myself as an adoptee who's missing something. So it's hard for me to be a part of that group. Because I don't really, you know, identify with them. . . . KAAN conference was held in Seoul, last year. I kind of just used the conference as an excuse to go to Korea. I didn't really want to go to the conference. (Laughs) I went to one workshop where an adoptee had met her siblings. That was interesting to me, because I have that in my family. The other thing is, I didn't search for my family. My family found me. So even like, if I meet people who are searching, tell them, I feel bad to tell them my story, because not only did I not want to find my family, but they then found me. You know, it's just easy. I feel bad for those who are searching. They really want to find their family and need the answers and can't get the answers, so I don't like to tell people that. It makes me feel guilty. Not only she didn't even want the family, now she's got the family.

The adoptees like Wendy use the adoptee meetings for information purposes mostly, rather than networking opportunities. By providing workshops on a wide array of issues, conferences and gatherings are an invaluable source of information for adoptees who face

problems and questions that they do not yet have answers for. But, as Wendy suggests, some adoptees' negative perspective on adoptee identity and adoption issues can be frustrating.

Deborah, 38, complained that "there are too many people with bad adoption experiences. I hear myself thinking 'I wasn't like that. My experience wasn't like that.' The problem is those people with bad experiences keep talking about their stories."

The label, "Drama Queen/King," which will be discussed in Part Two, in relation to adoptee stories in interviews, usually refers to an adoptee with negative adoption experiences, who goes on and on about the sad happenings about his/her life. It is not that the adoptees are callous about others' bad incidents. Rather, feeling ambivalent about the life that they were placed in, as they wonder what might have been, bad adoption stories constantly remind one of the moral obligation of being grateful for what is given. Consequently, the refrain of bad adoption stories forces the adoptees to dis-identify with others whose experience differs from theirs, turning them to find the comforts in the language of "individual difference." Having been active in adoptee communities, Rosie, 33, has this to say.

Adoptees have the common thing or whatever. That's not always true. We find out that there's a world of difference, too. Once you passed to a new understanding, we realize that we are all human, you know, we are not all perfect. . . . Adoption doesn't define us, because there are many things that define us. But it's a part of us. We can't deny that. It's a choice whether you want to be in the adoptee community or not. I respect that. I think, being an adoptee, you kind of are also looked at as a role model, not also to the adoptees, but to the communities, in many different fields and groups. You just make an adoption defined by yourself, you know. It is undefinable [sic] but you can make it definable on your own terms. I think, some adoptees really get into being adopted, that's everything. Don't take it too seriously. Life is too short (Rosie, 33).

Amanda, 23, shares Deborah's sentiment, albeit with an important difference in perspective. I asked Amanda whether she had changed in any way after meeting with adoptees in gatherings or conferences. She answered,

I wasn't changed at all, and I know why. I went there August of last year. There was a girl in there who, I remember everyone else was actually kind of annoyed with her, 'cause she came in late after when it started, and then proceeded to talk, like, for five minutes about herself. She kept going on and on, and she started crying. Everybody else was crying and she was crying. She just had no desire to ever go back to Korea. She had no desire to ever meet her birthparents. She never wanted to. She was all about, you know, [her life] here. I guess, it's different, because like a lot of people I know, you wanna know. They are curious, they wanna know what's up, they wanna know what other parts of it is. She just didn't want. It was just so weird for me because it never even dawned on me that someone would not want to have anything to do with it. She never wanted to go back. She's like, "I love Mom. She is my real Mom." And I am like, you know, honestly, you make all of us look bad here, because I am not saying that I don't love my Mom. She is my Mom. She was just going on and on and all the parents were crying. We wanted to stop her from talking. She used up the entire time of questions and answers and we finally cut her off, and the meeting was over. She was a drama queen! (Amanda, 23)

In Amanda's account, unlike in that of Deborah, one can be a drama queen without having to have the bad adoption experience. Amanda had rather a great family relationship, and loved her adoptive mother deeply. The major source of conflict between this adoptee and the rest was that she equated wanting to know about pre-adoption history and doing birth searches to be in violation of her love for her adoptive parents. This put all other adoptees in a position that they felt they had to defend. Therefore, Amanda's account makes it clear that the "drama queen/king," regardless of one's positive or negative adoption experiences, is the one that blindly takes his/her own experience and perspective to be the ultimate source of who and what adoptees should be, without making an effort to understand alternative perspectives or others' differing experiences. In adoptee gatherings,

“drama queens/kings” may exhaust the momentum of building adoptee community, by tirelessly broadcasting their opinions as *the* truth about adoption issues.

Despite the divisiveness that the “drama queen/king” metaphor introduces to adoptee networking efforts, Korean adoptees take away from the meeting at least one piece of significant knowledge, if not more: that there are so many of them. Profound empathy that is expressed in these settings spreads into the internet community and local organizations of adoptees. Michelle, 30, said,

I can't believe how many of us are out there sometimes. With internet, I can find someone in Nevada, who says, 'if you want to come out here, let me know. If you need a place to stay, I have a space for you. If you need to hang out, that would be great, too.' Although we've never met in person, we know that if we need something of that nature, we can kind of depend on each other. I know I will do that same for her.

This aptly illustrates the power of emotion in creating a solid community that does not require constant interaction. Virtual technologies indeed enable the expansion of the adoptee community and more frequent interactions among people located in different parts of the globe. However, this is possible because of their previous participation in adoptee meetings and gatherings. They experienced the kind of emotion that connects one another in these concrete physical settings, and this facilitates the expansion of community. For instance, an adoptee who has never attended meetings, or has never met other adoptees in groups, tends to be very skeptical about the extent to which this community could provide a sense of belonging.

Bob, 25, has never attended a gathering. He says he has gone to a few websites, and is on listservs of a few adoptee groups. “Frankly, I don’t see any reason for me to try to connect with any one of them. If I want to find out more about my Korean culture, or language, there are places that I can go. It doesn’t necessarily have to do with adoptees.”

Partly due to his age (generation), and partly due to his nonparticipation in adoptee gatherings, he cannot fathom the fact that another adoptee 2,000 miles away can be a source of support. He explored his Korean heritage on his own, taking Korean classes here and there, and working in a Korean grocery store. Still very hesitant about attending any adoptee meetings, he was satisfied with the level of knowledge about Korea that he attained over the years.

On one evening, Bob and I had a chance to attend an adoptee film, “Adopted: The Movie,” screening event, where the audience consisted mostly of Korean adoptees and a few adoptive parents. He found out about the event via the internet, and asked me to join him. Because an adoptee gathering was taking place nearby,⁷⁸ the screening was announced at the gathering, drawing many adoptees to the event. After the film, which was both emotional and thought-provoking,⁷⁹ we had a Q & A session where many people wanted to share their perspectives. An adoptive father said incredulously, “I couldn’t believe how ignorant Jennifer’s [main narrator of the film] parents were. Jennifer is the only one that went to college in her family. Jennifer is an extremely intelligent person that is just suffering because of their ignorance.” To that, Bob felt the need to respond. “I don’t think it is a matter of intelligence at all. Even my parents said to me today, “Where are you going tonight?” I said I was coming to see this film. They asked me, “Why?” They just don’t get it, but they are not ignorant at all.” Another person in the audience agreed with Bob, saying that emotional maturity and intelligence are two very different things. On our way home, he was excited about having gone to the event, and having seen so many adoptees in the same room. The

⁷⁸ New York City, April, 2009.

⁷⁹ This film is described in more detail in Ch. 4.

event seemed to have somewhat reduced his hesitance to attend a future adoptee gathering, although it remains to be seen whether he would in fact take the leap.

3. Heritage Tours /Birth Country Sojourn

There are roughly three ways in which Korean adoptees visit Korea: institution-organized, conference-oriented, or self-initiated trips. An individual adoptee may utilize all of these options over the course of his/her life. Originating in early 1980s, institution-organized trips may be sponsored by adoption agencies or a branch of the Korean government. They may or may not offer financial subsidies to a small number of adoptees who cannot find the means to take the trip. These trips may last 2 -4 weeks depending on the program, but most have somewhat established itineraries of places to go and activities to engage in on a schedule. They are an excellent opportunity for adoptees who are not familiar with Korea and Korean heritage, as sightseeing of popular tourist sites and programs to learn about culture and language are all included in them. These adoption agency-sponsored trips provide the adoptees with cultural training that they can utilize in their later encounters with Korea and Koreans. For adoptees who grew up not knowing much about Korean culture and Koreans, these trips are an important and relatively safe introduction to a culture that seems at once alien and intimidating.

Since 1999, Korean adoptees have organized international adoptee gatherings and conferences that invite all Korean adoptees living abroad. Realizing the emotional and political significance of visiting Korea to Korean adoptees, they tried to meet in Korea at regular intervals. Their efforts have been very successful, as they met for conferences in Korea on several occasions, and the attending adoptees were able to learn more about Korea

and to explore further their connections to it. The number of participants and the breadth of workshops offered have greatly expanded in recent years, as adoptee organizations both in the United States and in Europe increasingly view Korea as an accessible location to hold their conferences and gatherings. An adoptee who has never been back to Korea but wants to visit may consider this occasion to be a safe start, since there are other adoptees to provide support, emotional and otherwise. Each conference or gathering usually lasts for 3-5 days, so some adoptees may organize group tours before or after the meeting. These group tours may bring adoptees to popular tourist sites all across the country, lasting a week or more.

There are finally self-initiated trips, where adoptees make a trip back to Korea on an individual basis. Self-initiated trips that adoptees take to Korea can originate from the calls they receive from adoption agencies or their birth family. It may take a form of a few friends making a trip together on a smaller scale, just to explore Korean culture and its famous places. There are many employment opportunities in Korea where Korean American adoptees can teach English. This becomes a practical consideration when the adoptees plan to stay in Korea for an extended period. Some of them take this opportunity to stay and learn about the culture and its people, living and working alongside them. Having Korean contacts in the form of friends and colleagues in place, obtaining a job in Korea prior to leaving, or on business-related travel, all these can bring one on a self-initiated journey.

Many people used this option after having taken one or both of the trips that I detailed above. All of these three types of trips to Korea represent different venues that are at one's disposal, and they are widely utilized by the adoptees, especially when they are thinking about the issues related to their birth heritage and birth connections. All different types of these tours provide one with an experience that is deeply moving and

transformative. Some decide to stay on in Korea for many years based on the experience that they had in these trips. The many different perspectives that living in Korea in contrast to traveling in Korea bring to one is an interesting area to explore, but here in this section, I group these together to highlight the moments of transformative affect that these experiences bring.

At first, a profound change in perception takes place during these trips. In-between workshops during an ICAA gathering held in Seoul, Korea two years ago, Cameron and I found ourselves in the ladies' room. While waiting in line, Cameron looked at me squarely in the eye, muttering, "you know, isn't this something or what?" I looked at her closely, and noticed her eyes were bloodshot, due to jetlag and emotional turmoil the gathering like this often brings to its participants. I asked her, "what are you feeling right now?" Cameron, 35, said thoughtfully, "it is refreshing to see, you know, *White people out of place for once.*" Carlson (2008: 8) gives a more detailed description of what Cameron was feeling.

The trip kind of gave me more of an idea of who I was because prior to that I really had never met too many Koreans. I had seen a lot of Koreans at the culture camps I went to here. But there I guess I was just inundated, just being in Seoul, looking down the street, and just seeing waves and waves of people with black hair, I thought for once nobody could identify me by saying, "Oh, yeah, he's the Korean one with glasses." *For the first time it was my mom, not me, who stood out in a crowd.* I think it was definitely a positive experience for me. At least that's how I remember it (my emphasis).

The feeling of being a majority was a new experience for Korean adoptees coming back to Korea. Now, surrounded by Koreans who share physical features such as black hair with them, Korean adoptees feel, for the first time in their lives, normal and entitled to be there, walking down the street next to them, not being marked out so easily as in the US. Although they could not understand the language and know little about Korean culture, they take away a feeling of visceral and emotional connection from the trips. Staying for a while in Korea teaches one a sense of normality that adoptees never experienced as well.

Living in Korea is something I never thought I would do. When I was younger, I never had any interest in it. It wasn't a place I felt connected to or needed to see. I would've preferred to visit Spain and run with the bulls. Now I sometimes forget where I am. I have become the norm. For the first time in my life, I am surrounded by Koreans. I can take it for granted. I forget where I am. I am met by Korean faces every day as I go to and from work, riding the sardine-can subway. My co-workers are Korean. The *ajosshi* [gentleman] at the newspaper stand has a weather-beaten Korean face. The sleepy-eyed cashier at the 7-Eleven is Korean. The perky girls in their department-store uniforms who greet me while I shop are Korean. So when I see a Caucasian foreigner, I do a double-take. They stand out. *They seem large, their body language seems awkward, almost clumsy, they sound louder here. They are like an exaggeration of the norm. They no longer are the norm. No longer the norm* (Ruth, 1999: 78, my emphasis).

Ruth's description of Caucasian foreigners in Korea may be a parody of how Korean adoptees may be viewed in the United States: Korean adoptees may look too small, their body language seems awkward, almost clumsy. They are like an exaggeration of the norm, forced to perform Americanness at every turn. By turning the tables on Whites in this way, Ruth instructs us about the socially constructed nature of the "normativity" that does not have any fixed attributes over time and places.

Being in Korea did not only enlighten the adoptees about their social positioning within the US, but also instructed them about the cultural differences between these two places.

There were so many vast cultural differences that I had to learn how to adapt to. I understood them, but I didn't accept a lot of them, so it was very hard. Sometimes it was a struggle to function, to just live in Korea and to be what I wanted to be, without feeling like I was being disrespectful, you know. There was one place I could smoke inside, but I couldn't smoke outside because I was a woman. Things like that! I mean, things that were so quirky and different that, you know, I had to get used to. Some things I never got used to. Other things I just embraced. I got spat on one time, hit, kicked, punched, and pushed on numerous occasions for transgressing (Annie, 45).

One of Annie's major transgressions in Korea was to smoke. Despite the fact that a high percentage of men smoke in Korea, female smokers are culturally stigmatized in Korea.

Although Annie wanted to conform to the expectations of Koreans and be respectful of the rules and cultural norms, she had to struggle through vast cultural differences between American and Korean societies. Indeed, many female adoptees, young and old, expressed discomfort and disapproval for what they construed to be misogynistic attitudes toward females and gendered social conventions in Korea.⁸⁰ Sandra, 24, recently went on a motherland tour.

I really liked the experience of being dignified. I liked that. There was a lot. Walking down the streets, downtown Seoul, there was just a lot of pride. You can feel it. What I didn't like, to be honest, was more about how the country would treat women that would have a child out of wedlock. There is no option. You have to give it up. You have to cut ties with it. With the rate of development over there, they should be over that by now. I think that was the part that was too much. I really didn't like that.

Another way one experiences a transformative moment in these trips comes with going to the birth country with a group of adoptees. Especially when an adoptee does not have any prior experience meeting other adoptees in gatherings or conferences, the trip brings a dramatic realization that there exist many other adoptees who seem to understand what one is going through without explicit explanation, just by the mere fact that they share similar experiences of growing up as an Asian adoptee in a family and community that did not have much to do with other Asians.

You know it's weird. I am sure you know. But the adoption community is very small. My first real exposure to Korean adoptees was at college. Then, a year after I went to college, I went on a Holt tour. And that was where I really had the biggest exposure, like 30 of us adoptees, ranging from 18 to 35 or 40. It was like, we all were just in awe. What an awesome experience to meet a lot of people who just knew you because you walked that fine line of, "are you Korean?" "Are you American?" I feel like there is a paradigm

⁸⁰ Interestingly enough, I have not encountered any male adoptees who felt as strong an emotion as their female counterparts on gender differences in Korea. Male adoptees rather held a high opinion of Korean history and culture.

almost that you are not really accepted by White people in its entirety, but you are not accepted by Korean community, which I think, echoes through a lot of adoptees. I think we all recognize that. I would say that is very difficult for us. Because you know it's one side or the other sometimes, and you are somewhere in the middle, and that exposure to the tour was like Wow, you know. There's a whole outlet of people here that know exactly how I feel. They probably grew up very similar. Lots of them came from small towns as well. White families. It was almost like, as I've heard and said before, a bond that nobody else can understand, but the adoptees. And that was my first exposure to, "okay you can network now." . . . So we keep in touch. Some of them would hear from word-of-mouth from other adoptees. "This conference is going on. FYI, Be on the lookout." And now, it's like city to city. It seems like I know somebody and can connect with them. For example, I just e-mailed an artist online and said, "hey, I heard you are a Korean adoptee. Just wanted to say hello, and if you are ever in Cincinnati, come by. I'd love for you to stay with me." And she reciprocated that same hospitality by saying, "gosh, if you are ever in Boston, please come to see me. I will pick you up. You can stay at my home." It's just that kind of exchange that I think we recognize and we really appreciate in one another, knowing that we can rely on one another. Like Chris [a Korean adoptee]. You know, he and I were bonded instantaneously. Now he is my brother. That's just the way it is. Regardless of the personalities or everything, they are my family. They are my closest kind of family that I can have besides my adoptive family and I value that significantly (Michelle, 30).

During the 16-hour flight to Seoul I met ten other adoptees about my age. It was strange to be with so many individuals who shared similar non-American roots. We all had many questions to ask yet did not know where to begin. However, once we began talking, we did not stop until we landed in Seoul (Kobus, 1999: 46).

Well, going on the trip was interesting. There were seven of us on the trip. We were all adoptees. Most of us had really no experience with other adoptees. So it was just funny like at first, to realize things that we had in common, stupid things like that none of us really wore deodorant. Things like that. "Oh, I thought it was only me!" We found out that Asians don't really wear deodorant. But we had never been around Asians growing up, so we all thought there was something wrong with us. . . . I never noticed nobody else had hair. Certainly I come from a hairy group of Koreans, comparatively. I could have shaved it, but I don't need to. (Extending her right arm for me to examine) You can't really see it. Yeah, stupid things like that, making fun of, who has eyelid creases and who doesn't. It was kind of funny (Wendy, 32).

As seen from earlier sections, these sentiments cut across different sites that I have discussed so far. Adoptees feel secure and normal within the company of other adoptees, regardless of the specific sites. These sites as a whole generate a sense of adoptee-oriented community in which they can safely communicate what they experienced and comprehend their positioning without shame and fear of ostracization. Adoptees are active producers/consumers of these sites, as they attend or organize these sites themselves, meet and network with other adoptees, and try to frame their positions in intelligent and productive ways that make sense to the majority of the adoptee communities.

The affective bond that adoptees build with others often gets transformed into the future consolidation of relationships that demonstrate “diffuse enduring solidarity” (Schneider, 1968) of which American kinship is made. Then, what are the sociocultural factors that facilitate adoptees’ bonding? The following section explores one framework within which one may examine the sociocultural bases of Korean adoptees’ affective belonging.

Affective Belonging & Adoptee Kinship

The emergent “structure of feeling” (cf. Williams, 1977) that underlies Korean adoptees’ intimacy in the social contexts thus far described is a complex cluster. Silenced and excluded in ideological articulations of the family and race, Korean adoptees have been ready for this moment of collective consciousness-raising. In adoptee gatherings and meetings, senior adoptees invariably act as both practical and intellectual sources of wisdom, giving out advice regarding younger adoptees’ problems and telling stories of reunions and afterwards. Similar-age cohorts have more in common, growing up in the same era, having consumed

similar mass media products (pop songs, movies, TV-dramas, etc.) and styles. Thus it is not very surprising that they socialize together, sharing their life stories and learning about common interests among them. Single adoptees who are “looking” are excited about the prospect of meeting potential significant others here who will truly understand what they are going through. Despite (or perhaps due to) various purposes and intentions, the adoptee consciousness-raising goes on through numerous meetings, gatherings, and conferences. In these settings, adoptees come together to support and care for one another by creating an atmosphere of indiscriminate belonging.

In claiming that Korean adoptee meetings in these diverse sites are mediated by emotion, I consider emotion to be a series of “pragmatic acts and communicative performances” (Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990: 11). Emotion and emotion discourses have been critically examined by cultural anthropologists who study cross-cultural differences in emotions and feelings (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Briggs, 1970; Lutz, 1985, 1998; Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990; Lutz and White, 1986; O’Neill, 1996; Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz, et al., 1992a; Shweder, 1984, 1991; Shweder and Bourne, 1984; Shweder and Levine, 1984; Trawick, 1990). These anthropologists successfully deconstructed the notion of emotion as a static, fixed essence that lies inside the human body, highlighting the fact that emotion is “an emergent product of *social* life” (Lutz, 1998: 5, my emphasis). Emotion and its discourses are the ways in which we represent our world, according to Lutz (1998). My analysis proceeds on the theoretically informed assumption that emotion is a socially and culturally constructed entity, and is given meaning in socio-cultural contexts (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1998; Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz, et al., 1992; White and Lutz, 1992).

Geoffrey White further suggests that “emotion talk [discourse] not only represents but *creates* social reality” (1990: 47, my emphasis). In other words, emotion, discourse, and

culture are *dynamically* interlinked to engender contextually-contingent meanings. Emotion is not only expressive of inner states of individuals, but socially generated. It, in turn, pushes the subjects into action, as illustrated by a Korean adoptee affective bond that gives impetus to the expansion of the community through other media such as internet and communication technologies.

In conceptualizing the powerful and transformative aspect of adoptee bonds, numerous works on *affect* prove helpful. They distinguish *affect* from emotion, pointing out that *affect* has not been yet fully theorized (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2004; Brennan, 2004; Massumi, 2002). According to Massumi, “an emotion is a subjective content. . . . It is intensity owned and recognized,” whereas affect is “not ownable or recognizable” (2002: 28). Defying the existing mode of (discursive) signification, affect is something more intense than emotion, something akin to “structure of feeling” that Williams(1977) described. “Structure of feeling,” in Williams’ definition is “social experiences in *solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available. . . . [I]t is primarily to emergent formations that . . . structure of feeling, as *solution*, relates” (*ibid.*: 133-4, italics original). Simply put, “structure of feeling” is the kind of experience that has yet to be articulated, due to its emergent and present nature. This is why Korean adoptees had difficulty articulating to me precisely what they were feeling. For lack of a better description, they put their experience in a culturally recognizable discourse of emotion: “They [these meetings] are just so emotional.” This description is often quickly followed by more detailed and varied exploration of the speaker into the reasons why. Here, both concepts of “structure of feeling” and affect point to the power of emergent feelings that defy description in culturally available discourses.

But how could we discuss this thing called “affect” if that is unnamable and transient? By paying attention to the social contexts in which adoptees meet and gather in organizational activities, and listening to their interpretations, we can discern the bases from which this affective bond emerges. The affective bond that Korean adoptees forge with one another emerges in concrete sociocultural contexts of their coming together in the various types of meetings that I have discussed so far. Turner’s concept and elaboration of *communitas* (1967, 1969) clarifies the context in which adoptees forge visceral connections with one another. According to Turner (*ibid.*), “communitas” is a social situation created by those who inhabit a *liminal* state—whether they are social outcasts or are in a state of status transition. *Communitas* is “the product of peculiarly human faculties, which include rationality, volition, and memory, and which develop with experience of life in society” (Turner, 1969:128). By enabling adoptees to come to see themselves in others, adoptee meetings help create *communitas* wherein each participant feels a moment of epiphany, only possible through their collective—albeit individually subjected to—experience and memory of exclusion, pain, and suffering.

What is intriguing about Korean adoptees’ bond is its everlasting energy that creates and solidifies the sense of emotional belonging that can be aptly described as “diffuse enduring solidarity” that Schneider (1968) termed as a central characteristic of American kinship. What are, then, the socio-cultural factors that underlie instantiations and maintenance of Korean adoptees’ affective belonging? What sorts of memories and experiences, then, engender the sense of *communitas* in adoptee meetings that give ample support to the resilience of this bond?

At first, my question was “is the speedy formation of intimacy and sense of belonging among Korean adoptees in these diverse settings a reflection of adoptee

experience in general or is it specific to Korean adoptees?” One adoptee answered, “when I hear from someone that they were adopted, I feel some strong current of emotion going through my body, thinking ‘you, too?’” But, she could not clearly pinpoint what this emotion was. So, on one level, this sense of bond and belonging to Korean adoptees can be extended to other people who are also adopted. Sense of loss, uncertainty of identity, or feeling of difference can be common to most adoptees who have to face the powerful hegemony of biological kinship in structuring one’s relationship and identity in the US. The next chapter continues this discussion of adoptee kinship by highlighting the sociocultural and historical factors that shape the formation of the emotional bond among Korean adoptees.

Chapter FOUR: *Han* & Adoptee Kinship

You are definitely Korean, but you are definitely American,
and uh, your whole way of life is different
(Alvine, Deann's mother, in *First Person Plural*, 2000).

Asian Americans were upset when the MS-NBC website
printed a headline announcing that "American beats out
Kwan" after Tara Lipinsky defeated Michelle Kwan in figure
skating at the 1998 Winter Olympics (Wu, 20002: 21).

In addition to their adoptee status, Korean adoptees have common experiences that constitute their sense of affective belonging. These experiences are unique to the experiences of transnational/ transracial adoptees in the US. In the following section, I attempt to analyze the kinds of experience that give impetus to the formation of affective bond and experiences of *communitas* with central focus on Korean adoptee experience of racialization and sexualization. I explore the ways in which Korean adoptees begin to articulate their affective belonging with the discussion of "Han," in relation to Korean adoptee experiences.

Internal Colonialism and Uncertain Racial Self

In discussing issues related to immigration and immigrants, many works refer to conceptual frameworks of assimilation and multiculturalism (or cultural pluralism) with most authors focusing on the process of assimilation (cf. Mangiafico, 1988; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Rumbaut, 1997; Rumbaut and Portes, 2001). The United States relied on the concept of assimilation to acculturate ever-continuing streams of

immigrants from diverse countries since the 1920s.⁸¹ The previous era of “essential racism” had assumed that racial differences were immutable and that these differences could be mapped in hierarchical terms. In contrast, the assimilation era posited that humans, regardless of racial/ethnic differences, share commonalities, thus anyone could be assimilated (Frankenberg, 1993: 14).

As a mode of acculturation into the host society, assimilation, i.e. Americanization, taught newly arrived immigrants to follow the natives in the cultural ways of being in this new land.⁸² On the way toward assimilation based on this “Anglo-conformist model” (cf. Chu, 2000: 8), the problems that got in the way were cultural differences, not those of races. The assimilation mode of thinking in this way has taken firm root in American culture, aided by an accompanying array of discourses and practices that have since been touted as “color-blindness.” Despite the ideal of equality exuded by “color-blindness,” the fact that this entity, “American,” presupposed Euro- American cultural self, is clear in the history of racialization and racism to which non-European immigrants and their descents have been subjected. Hence, Frankenberg concludes that “Colorblindness, despite the best intentions of its adherents, . . . preserves the power structure inherent in essentialist racism” (1993: 147)

Blauner (2001) cautiously associates the experience of non-whites in the US with colonization,⁸³ developing a unique analysis of “internal colonialism” that applies to the

⁸¹ Omi and Winant (1986) chart three historical moments in relation to concepts of race and racial difference in the United States. The era of assimilation, according to their framework, is the second moment that follows the period when concepts of racial hierarchy reigned as the legitimate way to conceptualize racial difference. Frankenberg (1993) expands on this, arguing that the difference between the first and second of these moments lies in the dissimilar perspective on human difference and sameness.

⁸² As many scholars of immigration already gave detailed critique of assumptions that underlay “assimilation,” here I will not delve into “ethnicity paradigm” originated from Robert E. Park’s Chicago school of sociology that emphasized the evolutionary framework of social development. Suffice it to say that this paradigm gave intellectual impetus to already extant way of thinking, in which social eugenics and other concomitant concepts developed. On this, see for examples, Omi and Winant (1986, esp. two introductions in the volume), Espiritu (1992), Chu (2000, esp. introduction), Blauner (2001, ch. 2), etc.

⁸³ For an illuminating discussion on this, see Ch. 2 & 4 in Blauner (*ibid.*).

minorities in this country. According to him, there are “four basic components of the colonization complex”:

The first component is the mode of entry into the dominant society. Colonization begins with a forced, involuntary entry. Second, there is the impact on culture. The effects of colonization on the culture and social organization of the colonized people are more than the results of such “natural” processes as contact and acculturation. The colonizing power carries out a policy that constrains, transforms, or destroys indigenous values, orientations, and ways of life. Third is a special relationship to governmental bureaucracies or the legal order. The lives of the subordinate group are administered by representatives of the dominant power. The colonized have the experience of being managed and manipulated by outsiders who look down on them. The final component of colonization is racism. Racism is a principle of social domination by which a group seen as inferior or different in alleged biological characteristics is exploited, controlled, and oppressed socially and psychically by a superordinate group (*ibid.*: 66).

Blauner’s exposition on colonialism is fully applicable to Korean adoptee experiences. First of all, as Korean adoptees abundantly claimed, their adoption was not their choice. They did not have any say in decisions that had a great impact on their lives. Their cultural heritage was, for the most part, ignored, downplayed, or silenced. Their early lives had been controlled and managed by state bureaucracies of both Korea and the United States. In the process of searching, the adoptees and their actions continue to be controlled by social workers and adoption agency personnel who are outside of their adoption arrangements. In their everyday lives, Korean adoptees continue to struggle with the world outside that tries to define and delimit their identities in ways that repudiate their experience. Further, their racial sense of self has been severely compromised to the extent that they came to retain skewed sense of their bodily self.

Borrowing Blauner’s concept of “internal colonialism,” and focusing on the last component of colonialism that he elucidated above, this section will grapple with the vexing problems of “color blindness” as a set of discourses and practices, in relation to the

construction of Korean adoptee racial identity. In the case of Korean adoptees and other Asian Americans, “internal colonialism” is greatly aided by “Orientalism” (Said, 1994(1979)) that has been in circulation. There are three overlapping ways in which Orientalism/Internal Colonialism makes an impact on Korean adoptees: White habitus⁸⁴ permeated by colorblind discourses, stereotypic mass media representation of Asian/Americans and its often timeless circulation, and “segmented assimilation” (Portes and Zhou, 1993) of Asians by gender. In the following, I analyze colorblind discourses and gendered assimilation among Asians in two separate subsections that respectively discuss the impact of colorblind discourses on Korean adoptees, and gendered ways in which Asians have become assimilated into mainstream America. As mass media representations of Asians influence and give support to both aspects, the role of mass media will be discussed concurrently in each subsection.

Now You See Me, Now You Don't: Colorblindness & the “Adopted”

Korean American adoptees’ experiences of racialization are more complex than the process of racial ascription operating in this society. In reading Bishoff and Rankin’s anthology of adoptee works (1997), Choy and Choy uncover the “troubled relationship between the visible foreignness of the Asian body and *the unique racialization of Korean adoptees*

⁸⁴ “White habitus” is something akin to Frankenberg’s notion of “white cultural practice” as a descriptor “of the things white people do or the ways white people understand themselves” (1993:233). By using the term, “habitus,” I mean to include a sense of boundary between many different conceptual worlds present in the US. Although the boundaries between and among these worlds are permeable and dynamic, there are many practices/discourses and *dispositions* (Bourdieu, 1984, esp. Ch. 3) germane to each world that seem to sustain the borders, and prevent more effective communications between these worlds. The “habitus” provides a world of its own, carrying its own interpretive framework and practices, informed by the larger society’s interaction with it. Hence, for instance, Black differences in the US are often termed, “cultural” differences, notwithstanding the fact that Blacks in this country are culturally more similar to Whites than, say, Latinos and Asians are. This also leads to problematic conflation of the two key concepts that pertain to human difference: culture and race.

in the United States” (2003: 263, emphases added). Most Korean adoptees have been raised by White parents, and their physical difference was not something that needed serious thought or discussion. This is one of the characteristics of colorblind discourses and practices reigning in American culture. Stephanie Carson’s description of the event in which she realized how different she was from the rest of her family in Ch. 8 is worth duplicating here.

The first time when I truly realized that I was different was when we went to Texas. I was about 6 or 7 years old. We went to my Grandma and Grandpa’s, and crossed the Mexican border. I was kept at the Mexican border, because the policeman at the border saw that I was walking ahead of my mom and dad and my family. The policeman thought that I was a Mexican and my family was taking me to escape. At that time, they didn’t have any proofs that said I was their daughter. No papers with them or anything. So they had to leave me there. The police would not let me go. My parents had called Omaha, the closest thing was Omaha, to have their papers faxed or something. We didn’t know, and at that time, I don’t think there was fax machine. We could get to Omaha like in a day or two. They said, “she had to stay in our custody until you prove that this is your daughter.” My mom and dad begged the policeman that they would come back again, but could leave with me. Basically the policeman was nice enough to realize that I was really their daughter, because I was like traumatized, crying and yelling, “I want my mommy and daddy? Why are you taking me away from my mommy and daddy? Where’s my mommy and daddy? You are a mean man. I thought the policemen are supposed to be nice and here to help people. You are not here to help. You are a mean policeman. You took my mommy and daddy away,” and all that stuff. That’s the first time when I realized that I was different.

Stephanie’s realization of her own difference was a moment when she saw the pitfalls of color-blind love. Whereas her family saw her as one of their own, the legal authority (and most others in larger society) saw her as a foreigner (or at least not belonging to her family). The fact that her parents were so enmeshed in color-blindness that they did not feel the need to bring any documents that legally testify to Stephanie’s belonging to them speaks volumes about the strong grasp of color-blindness in White Americans’ consciousness. Park Nelson writes,

The ideology of colorblindness has its appeal in the seemingly benevolent reposition of race as a social (rather than a biological) construct, and the recognition of race itself as the act around which racism occurs. Following this line of reasoning, if we do not recognize race (which as a social construct, can be just as easily removed from or maintained within society), there will be no racism. Not surprisingly, colorblindness has great appeal among whites who have not experienced racial discrimination and see a low-investment approach to solving America's race problems, and who do not want to continue to operate as the villain in white-dominated American race relations. . . . With the refusal to accept or recognize race as a significant and historically grounded difference among people, *the burden of passing shifts from a decision of the racialized individual to an expectation enforced by family, community or the general public instead* (2007: 196, emphases added).

Although her argument that Korean adoptees' racial passing is "an expectation enforced by family, community, or the general public" seems a little overstated,⁸⁵ Park Nelson's excerpt illuminates the compulsory dimension of "passing" placed on Korean adoptees, enabled by color-blind discourses and practices in larger society as well as those within individual transracial adoptive families. In other words, Korean adoptees' White identity is effectively cultivated by their families, White habitus, and consequentially their desire to belong to whom they know and love.

I use the recent documentary film, "Adopted," below, as a discussion starter to illuminate the issues that are highly relevant to other Korean adoptees. By blending other adoptees' comments and my observations, it will soon be clear that the film touches upon the issues that are common rather than individual. Through this exercise, I claim that the issue of racial identity is deeply related to adoptees' subjectivities, and that their psychological health depends on healthy relationship between their bodily self and

⁸⁵ The general public and community are not generally receptive to –let alone condone– racial boundary crossing of Korean adoptees (seen from Part One of this dissertation). However, Nelson's astute argument that Korean adoptees' racial passing is largely condoned and even expected by their families and informal network of acquaintances raises intriguing questions. Can transracial families be a model of a community where people can think and live beyond racial differences? The problem is that the larger society does not – rather, would not – recognize people's lived complexities.

sociocultural self. The psychic pain and suffering that Korean adoptees experience in confronting the discrepancy between their bodily self and sociocultural self stand as evidence to the pitfalls of colorblindness that surrounds most of their family lives.

A Korean adoptee's problematization of color-blind familial love is painfully depicted in *Adopted: The Movie* (Lee, 2008), a documentary film recently released. Produced by Barb Lee, the film is intriguing in its efforts to grapple with the *unique racialization* of Asian adoptees in this country. It juxtaposes two different families, one with a grown-up Korean adoptee, and the other who just now adopts a Chinese daughter. The film interweaves the stories and struggles that these two families are undergoing. For the discussion at hand, I will focus on the first family, the Feros. Jennifer Fero, a Korean adoptee in her 30s, yearns for her parents' recognition of her as a Korean American, as her time with her mother is running out. Her mother, Judy Fero, had been diagnosed with last stage brain cancer and she had only a few months to live when the documentary begins. Her mother's impending death reminded Jennifer that she and her parents might not have enough time left to resolve the issues and questions that had beleaguered her all her life. She starts her journey with these words:

My family told me many times, 'we see you as one of us.' Well, one of us is a White working class kid with blue eyes and big ears. . . . Like my family, I saw myself as White. I saw myself as a Fero. And that's why, when I would look in the mirror, I would be surprised! Only now am I beginning to unwrap that package from the police station⁸⁶ and inside are the secrets that I kept from my family and I kept them from myself, too.

The secrets she is referring to here are her painful realization that she needed to acknowledge who she is to her family and herself, and her pain and suffering that led to that

⁸⁶ Jennifer was found in a package left at one of the local police stations in Seoul, the capital of South Korea.

realization. One of the important events in her story is her adoptive father, Paul Fero's research on the Fero family genealogy. Paul Fero reflects on his project in relation to Jennifer who does not have any means of knowing her genealogy:

I guess you kind of wanna look back and make sure there weren't too many cattle rustlers or whatever in your families. Jenny doesn't have that luxury. I think it might've bothered her a little bit. I suppose if you want to let it bother you, it could. Um, one thing about her is she started out as *a clean slate*. She got, huh (laughs), no reputation to worry about (emphases added).

Using her knowledge learned as a history major in college and doing footwork in NYC, Jennifer traced one of the Fero ancestors, Peter Fero, who served in the Revolutionary War. Knowing how much this would mean to her father, Jennifer invited Paul and his brother to NYC, and they met with John Hilliard, working for "Sons of the American Revolution." The Feros were found to be eligible for membership in one of the most prestigious historic societies in the States.

Hilliard: Any of your descendants, your sons will be eligible, and then any of the women in the family, who descend also from Peter Fero would be eligible for the Daughters of American Revolution. This is a legacy that is, in many ways, better than money *because it teaches people about their place in American history*.

Paul Fero: Sounds like my family has missed out on a lot.

Hilliard: It also requires a lineal descent from a male or a female, who is known to have served the revolutionary cause. (glancing over at Jennifer standing next to Paul and his brother) *A biological descent*. That is the essential thing for both of these genealogical societies (my emphases).⁸⁷

⁸⁷ The fact that inheritance was a contentious subject in adoption is well-established in the historical development of adoption laws in the US. Although Massachusetts and Pennsylvania legalized adoption and included the rights of inheritance for adoptees, not all states followed the same suit. There were numerous cases wherein adoptees were denied their inheritance due to their adoptee status. See Modell, 1994: 24-26.

At this point, Paul pats Jennifer's back warmly to comfort her. Jennifer moves away, smiling, "But you love me anyway." Next we see the Feros strolling down the exhibition of Revolutionary War paraphernalia, and interweaved are the scenes of Jennifer lamenting her status as a "Fero-but:"

I am, but I am not.
 I am, but I am not.
 I'm adopted, but I'm not.
 I'm American, but I'm not.
 I'm Korean, but I'm not.
 I'm White, but I'm not.
 When I was in Korea, I mean, I lived there. I taught there. I didn't fit in. It was foreign. My culture's Fero culture. I'm not a Fero, a Fero, a Fero, I am a "*Fero, but.*" And it will hurt my adoptive father, when he hears me saying that, because it qualifies it. And our love is not qualified. But there's no getting around it. We've danced around the topic for 32 years, and we can't anymore.

The episode involving genealogy is a poignant reminder of the ambiguous membership that the adoptees carry in relation to adoptive families. When drawing a family tree, or filling out a medical form at the hospital about one's genetic history, adoptees grapple with the unknowns in their lives in ways difficult to imagine for many of non-adoptees. Love is what makes a family a family, but it is not enough to be, in Jennifer's terms, "qualified."

After the visit with John Hilliard, Jennifer and Paul make an excursion to a park nearby Chinatown. The following is the conversation between Jennifer and Paul who are now sitting on a bench, side by side, in a park, populated by mostly Asians.

Jennifer: Daddy, you know, I want you to know that I know that the gap of my lineage and genealogy, that's not your fault. You had nothing to do with that. You are the one who gave me the next best thing, which was pretty damn good. But we have a multiracial family, so let's get some, some more Asian in this family heritage. I don't want to be the only one that adapts. We all have to adapt. Do you know what I mean?

Paul: No-oh?

J: You don't?

P: No, huh-huh (laughs)

J: I adapt to you guys all the time, because I'm the only one that's Asian. And I want you to meet me halfway, a little out of your comfort zone.

P: I see.

J: What do you think about that?

P: I don't know (with all smiles).

J: Don't play dumb with me. (Paul chuckles) If I am really your daughter, okay, as much as like blood daughter would be, then you would be out there making sure that things are right for Asian girls or all people of color, because you chose a child of color.

Paul's⁸⁸ and Judy's impending deaths and Jennifer's inability to resolve her conflicts between two worlds, her family's and the larger society, lead to Jennifer's attempt to take her own life. She has been taking "mood pills" everyday to keep her sanity, but with her world as she knows it unraveling around her with another big loss –losing her adoptive parents—around the corner, Jennifer chooses to destroy herself. She is found just in time to be alive, but this episode lands her in a rehab, rather than a graduate program at Harvard where her application was accepted.

Jennifer's determination to be recognized as a racial "Other" to her family is largely unsuccessful as her parents struggle with their own impending mortality. In the midst of her parents' illnesses, Jennifer tries to reconcile her White self nurtured and loved by her parents with Asian self by almost forcing them to understand and see her as who she is racially. Her futile attempts are as heartbreaking as her parents' inability to comprehend the kind of pain that their unwillingness adds to depth of depression Jennifer has experienced. Eric, Jennifer's older brother, who, as a person living in the same cultural milieu as Jennifer, understands her reasons as to why this process has to take place. But he feels torn between his understanding of Jennifer's needs and of where his parents are coming from: "my parents still think it's wrong to see Jennifer as anything else than their daughter. You know, they feel like they still

⁸⁸ Her father was diagnosed with last-stage pancreatic cancer during the filming of *Adopted: The Movie*.

are trying to do the protection thing. You know, ‘we don’t want to talk about this, because we don’t want Jennifer to feel bad about this,’ you know.”

Jennifer’s depression-filled struggle is not a random or personal trial, as many adoptees profess their experience of depression that has the similar root causes as Jennifer’s.⁸⁹ The accounts given by Korean adoptees point to the important lapse that color blind discourses and the assimilation mode of thinking try to obscure. Especially for adoptees who grow up in relatively isolated areas where Asians were few and far between, the painful experience of discrimination and exclusion was enough to bring one to a psychological downfall. Nicole, 32, grew up in North Dakota, and her physical difference became the root cause of her deep depression that hung over her life for many years. I asked her what her growing up experience was like in North Dakota.

I grew up in Caucasian area. People making fun of my eyes, my nose, my face, ... Obviously some people are insensitive. Language thing, people making fun of me, coming right in front of me, making these weird sounds, or “do you know Karate?” and that sort of thing. I just ignored it mostly. ... I don’t remember how old I was. I said to my parents that I don’t look like them and they don’t look like me. I was very depressed. Just about a lot of stuff. My brother, who had a lot of issues, kind of consumed everything. I never felt myself attractive. I never went to prom, wasn’t very popular in high school. I still struggle with that. I never dated for 12 years. I laugh a lot about myself. I am in a nursing profession. That person [one of the patients in her care] has no teeth, one leg, and he has a woman that loves him.

⁸⁹ Huh and Reid’s study (2000) confirms that adoptees’ development of racial identity is deeply affected by their parents’ attitudes toward, and understanding of adoptees’ racial background. When adoptive parents did not see any difference between adoptees and them in terms of races, adoptees’ racial self-identity did not grow. This was especially so when adoptees were children. Jennifer’s confused sense of racial identity in her early years can be understood in this way. If the parents who refuse to acknowledge racial differences existing in their families seem extreme, at the other end, there are those who grasp anything related to their adopted children’s cultural heritage. Cheng suspects a sort of “roots mania” (2004: 73), wherein anxiety over cultural authenticity drives adoptive parents to extreme consumptions of things/activities related to their adoptees’ cultural heritage. According to him, this seems to be growing recently among adoptive parents with children from China, bringing about so-called “heritage industry” (Richards, cited in Cheng, *ibid.*: 74). We have yet to witness how these particular modes of parental investments in children’s cultural heritage will impact on adoptees’ development of racial identity. One thing to note here is that this pursuit of authenticity is largely a reflection of American cultural trend in recent years. Guignon (2004), for example, offers a cogent analysis of “the culture of authenticity” in the US.

JP: Could you tell me more about your depression?

The depression. My parents sent me to one of their psychologists, or psychotherapists. I don't know about others, but I don't know whether my problem was personal, really. You know, for me, Asians are not being portrayed as normal. You see the old lady, you know, all these negative images. You don't see any self-affirming image on media. Then I got to watch a good movie, called, *Farewell, My Concubine*. It's a gorgeous story. It's a good movie. But more for the, um, "oh my God, she is so beautiful! And she is Asian!" She is not White. She is not blond. She is not blue-eyed. She is not, you know, 5'10". You try to obtain certain similarities, and see your similarities reflected back at you. My mom was very pretty as a young woman, very striking. Blond hair, blue-eyes. I remember bouts of depression. I grew up people making fun of my nose, and walked around hating my nose, thinking "only I could get my nose fixed, looking more straight." People would come up to me and put their finger on my nose. How would that make you feel growing up? I remember lots and lots of depression. I am coming to terms with that crap. I think I am okay. I may not be this gorgeous woman. But then I am not some, two-headed, five-eyed monster, either. I identified with that for a long time. I felt horrendously unattractive. I never dated. I felt all my friends who are kind of White dated, and that never happened to me.

Nicole's depression was coming from the silence and "benign" ignorance that surrounded her racial/ethnic heritage. She went on,

My mom I remember, I do have of my mom dressing me up in a kimono once. That was her knowledge. When I told her I was from Korea, not Japan, she said, "it is all around the same area. What's the difference?" This was when I was young, like a little girl. Dress-ups, playing, and she put me in a kimono, okay? How am I entitled to that? I am an American. But what does that mean? Your identity is defined by your surroundings, right? In America, because you are not White, you are always a foreigner. Like the people that came up to me, who ask, "where are you from?" Of course, I know I am an adoptee, but I say something like "what about North Dakota?" And I laugh about it. I came to take it with a grain of salt. If you go back to where you are really from, where would that be? I am like, "Oh, my gosh!" If I were to go back to where I am really from, that's a pretty constant reminder of the fact that, in majority's eyes, you are not fitting in. You don't match (Nicole, 32).

For adoptees who live in areas where few Asians lived, or those who were surrounded by Whites in their lives, the only information that they could have about Asians

came from the mass media just like their White peers. It is hardly surprising for them to have the same prejudice toward Asians despite inherent curiosity toward them. Michelle put in intelligent terms what kinds of media she was exposed to in her upbringing:

I think, like everyone else, you were specifically exposed to a Caucasian world. That's one thing that, at the time I didn't recognize, but now that I am older and have kind of grown a little bit over time, and come to realize that now for the Korean American adoptees and all Asian youth, we need positive role models. Back then, we had none. You'd open up a magazine, and you'd be like, "wow, that girl is beautiful," but I don't have big blue eyes and blond hair, you know. Just even the littlest things like buying a make-up. I mean, even now, I still sometimes struggle finding a right shade. I need help. If you go to the counter and find somebody Caucasian, they know nothing about your skin. I think it was the combination of those things, the media. Thankfully Asians are trying to break through the mold slowly, but not fast enough in my opinion. Especially for Asian men. They certainly have a harder time. I hesitate to say this, but women, they should almost use it to their advantage. 'Cause, yes, you know, people view them as beautiful, exotic. But they are not those kinds of people, but if it helped them to get whatever in the industry, then I bought them. But looking back, hindsight being 20/20, that part disappointed me the most. Just not recognizing it then, but the fact even still we struggle so much to find positive Asian role models. And then, in the movies, you know, it's always, back then, a White man dressing up and acting like an Asian man, poorly and stereotypically. And yet, it's still seen today in current movies, and that's what's so disappointing. Whereas why not an Asian actor in there? And somebody like Pat Morita, who's passed, you know, he embraced those roles, because he knew that he had no choice. But at least he was on the screen, and people saw him. Bless his heart, even though he's now passed, but he had to play those stereotypical roles for the foundation of these Asian actors like B. D. Wong, Lucy Liu, those kinds of people, to get where they are now. You know, he had to start somewhere.⁹⁰

Korean adoptees were dealt the blows of tacit racism enabled by colorblindness.

Adopted represents one of the many ways to illustrate the ongoing struggle between colorblindness and race cognizance in the psychological lives of Korean adoptees. The fact that the presence of Asian Americans in this country has been largely invisible helped in some way to facilitate the consolidation of their, if ever ambiguous or tenuous, positioning

⁹⁰ The point that Michelle is making here is well-known among Asian Americans and remarked upon by many scholars of Asian American studies. Yuen thus terms "Hollywood as institution of racialization" (2004: 252), where Asian Americans are casted in roles that fit into already-existing stereotypes.

as honorary Whites. Especially the culturally powerful belief in racial dichotomy –White and Black—in the US, has also helped to create either/or choices for those who did not fit into this scheme.⁹¹ Park Nelson (2007) suggested above that the adoptees’ White identities are encouraged and even imposed on them by their parents and those in their familial networks. This at once reflects the power of dichotomous racial thinking and illustrates one of the ways in which racial passing that takes place is encouraged and cultivated.

However, this racial crossing occurs at the expense of Korean adoptees’ bodily self and their past connections. In shouldering the burden of racial crossing, i.e., passing, Korean adoptees experience indescribable amounts of psychical pain and suffering, usually named in psychiatry as mental depression. The next subsection deals with the sociocultural factors that give rise to gendered differences in the adoptee experiences of depression. Their psychical pain and its collective articulation will be the subject of the last section of this chapter.

Segmented Assimilation: Gender, Sexuality & Race

“Segmented assimilation” is a conceptual framework initially proposed by Portes and Zhou (1993) to account for the diverse ways in which immigrants assimilate into the US. In contrast to the previous assumptions of assimilation that predicted immigrants’ more or less straightforward march toward acculturation into the host society, “segmented assimilation”

⁹¹ This does not mean that Korean adoptees will always choose White identity, following this scheme. Rather, this is to describe a US cultural context which almost compulsorily puts those in the racial middle on a spot to make either/or decisions. There are many different ways groups in the racial middle deal with this *choice*, and the researchers are not on agreements about in what shape these groups’ racial identifications will play out in the future. Yancey (2003) predicts that Latinos and Asians will become White, seen from their increasing self-identification as White in census and elsewhere. Bonila-Silva (2006, Ch. 8) disagrees with Yancey, positing that Latinos and Asians will continue to stay in the middle, transforming the hegemonic biracial order in the US into the triracial stratification system. O’Brien’s (2008) recent study, *The Racial Middle*, seems to support Bonila-Silva’s argument that the racial middle will carve out their diverse racial identities, giving heterogeneity and complexity to the already existing biracial order.

does away with this unilineal conceptualization of assimilation, pointing to the needs to analyze how different groups of immigrants (first generation vs. succeeding generation, or Asians vs. other non-Whites, etc.) may experience various assimilation processes contingent upon the groups' negotiations of political and economic locations in the host society (Bonila-Silva, 2006; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut, 1997; Rumbaut and Portes, 2001).

Although Portes and Zhou (1993) and other scholars are mainly concerned with the processes of political and economic assimilation of different immigrant groups, here I use the phrase to connote disparate assimilation experiences segmented by gender. When talking to Korean adoptees, I realized that there were gendered differences in their negotiations of racial identities. These gendered differences were deeply inflected by sexuality and its relationship to racial boundary crossing. If physical difference from other Americans taught Korean adoptees to feel different in many implicit ways, racial discrimination was explicitly experienced through sexuality and its manifestations, as seen below:

I was the only minority student until my freshman year in high school when I saw an African-American senior. Parents wouldn't let their children out with him, even in a group setting. He asked my mom's friend's daughter to the prom, but she [my mom's friend] refused to let her daughter go. He had to go to other schools to get dates. I guess I was lucky that way since people didn't mind me going out in groups with their kids. They just didn't want me to date their sons (Swick, 2008: 82-83).

When I was in kindergarten and stuff, I started noticing I looked different from the rest of my Caucasian counterparts and stuff. I wondered to know why there weren't more people like me. It was kind of a strange, nuanced feeling, and I didn't know what to do. I handled it pretty good, 'cause there wasn't really something that I couldn't do about it. I wasn't like, it wasn't something that I suffered over. That was something that I learned to accept. It wasn't until like, I got into high school, the dynamics there was more discrimination towards me. You know, I always had to remind them that I just grew up like one of them. I was just raised by their John, and they wanted to say that I was different. In all reality, I wasn't. In reality, I was an American just like any of those people are. As far as dating girls and stuff, you know they carried it over there, because they were like, "I can't bring you home to my Dad" and stuff like that. "Well, I am not asking you to marry me.

I am just asking you to go out for a coke type of deal.” But I guess, they thought that I had deviant, ulterior motives or something (Christian, 36).

The message that my brother and I got from our peers, very clearly, was that it was okay for us to be friends with people, but dating was another situation. I was very aware of it and I’m sure my brother was, but we didn’t talk about it. . . . When I did date, it was usually somebody who wasn’t going to my school, someone a little bit older. I got the sense that somehow this was a huge leap for the person I dated, you know what I mean, like a huge concession. It wasn’t articulated, I just got the sense that he was being defiant or whatever. . . . there were conversations that went, “Well, I don’t care what other people think. . .” there was definitely that sense that dating me was outside of the norm (Bergquist, 2008: 148-149).

A similar theme is amplified in accounts from among senior or other adoptees that lived in the Midwestern part of the US where there were few Asian residents. The line of acceptance seems to be drawn most visibly in the matters of sexual association. Root states that “interracial relationships and particularly interracial marriages leave a permanent record of a transgression against what has been considered normal, ‘sticking with your own kind’” (2001: 165). Sexual relationship across the racial boundary thus being a serious transgression against normal order of things, Korean adoptees felt extreme alienation and a sharp sense of discrimination when they hit the dating age. But for many of them, this experience taught them the social hierarchy of races wherein one should aspire to associate with the better race, i.e., White partners.

When I was allowed to date, at sixteen, I did not have many offers. I think a lot of boys were afraid to ask me out because I was Korean. To them I was not a girl with high grades or good athletic and social skills. I was always “the Korean girl.” Boys who dated me would risk ridicule for going with someone supposedly so different. And I fell in with the racial rules. I internalized them and turned them against myself. For example, even into college, I would date only Caucasian boys. I refused to date Asians. Because I saw myself as less important than whites, to be seen with another Asian would have doubled my shame (Kobus, 1999: 45).

Perhaps due to this, a large number of adoptees from earlier generations were married to Caucasians. They usually mentioned the fact that there were not many Asians around where they lived and worked, giving them few opportunities to meet and build relationships with Asians. They also said that Americans (read Whites), unlike, say, Koreans, shared their cultural backgrounds. Kat Cho, with whose story I started this chapter, was also married to a White professional man. She said, “that’s just what I know,” trying to give me an explanation as to why she was not married to another Korean or Asian partner. But, despite the adoptees’ claim of shared backgrounds across racial lines, folk assumptions about racial difference still matter in people’s perceptions. Rosie, 33, describes an embarrassing episode that she encountered:

When I was little, it was from racial slurs, it was mainly done by boys. Girls just want to be petty, more psychological, you know, they would be like that if you are pretty or popular, those kinds of things. Then, there are like, older boys saying sexual innuendos. I had this one high school boy telling me, I can’t believe this, I was like in middle school, you know, things about sexuality or whatever, you are not very experienced about that. He said, “Asian girls, they have vaginas that are slanted!” I was so embarrassed. I said, “what, are you trying to propose something to me? ‘Cause you are not getting any.” (Laughs) Now that I think about it, that’s not only racial, but a sexual harassment. People were saying anyone looking Oriental, “you look like Connie Chung!” I am like, “no, I don’t!” That time, I was trying to laugh it off, you know. I didn’t know how to react, what to say.

As Nagel writes, “the sexual ideologies of many groups define members of other classes or ethnicities as sexually different from, usually inferior to their own normal and proper ways of being sexual. These class or ethnic ‘Others’ might be seen to be oversexed, undersexed, perverted, or dangerous” (2003: 9).⁹² Rosie was in her early teen years when this episode occurred. This could indicate one way in which growing youth learn to make sense of

⁹² For a historical discussion of stereotypes and the elaboration on intersections of racial difference and construction of pathology, see Gilman (1985).

socially marked differences such as race by trying to discover the bodily signs that represent immutable differences. As the history of colonization and colonialism has shown, sexuality is one of the many facets that give ample opportunity to fantasize and rationalize the racial differences (Gilman, 1985; Nagel, 2003; Stoler, 1995).

Korean adoptees' experiences show that there are disparate ways in which this *raced sexuality* operates for Asian men and women. This point was brought home to me one day, when I was talking with Maureen. We were reading a Korean pamphlet she had gotten in her trip to Korea a few years before. Maureen suddenly looked up from the desk where we were sitting, and said, "I've never gone out with an Asian man before. I'd never find an Asian man attractive." Startled, I asked, "Why not?" She answered without any hesitation, "Because they do not have any body hair. Eww, they must feel like a snake! I need my man with some hair on him." But soon, she added, "but after the trip to Korea, I thought I could have gone out with an Asian man. Since I am engaged now, it's impossible. But I would have if I weren't engaged." Maureen was not alone thinking that Korean (Asian) men were not as attractive as other American men. Many adoptees described their surprises at finding or having seen attractive Korean men. You-Me Masters described her surprise at finding her Korean brother handsome: "I don't usually find Korean men attractive. But he [my brother] is a handsome young man." Predictably, the interracial marriages between Korean adoptees and Whites are more marked in numbers among female adoptees than males.

Stereotypes notwithstanding, the relative ease with which interracial relationships between Asian women and White men have been accepted in this country has made Asian men feeling envious of their female counterparts' seemingly easier entry into White world. Christian, 36, curtly said, "I have a firm belief that Asian women get along better in this society than Asian men do." He elaborated further:

Some changes were noticeable [when I hit my adolescence] because I was Asian. Like I couldn't go out with, I couldn't get as many dates probably because I was Asian. If I was an Asian girl, I couldn't keep them from the door, just because of Asian girls and Asian guys are so different.

Relatedly, Eng states, “for Asian American men racial identity was—and continues to be—produced, stabilized, and secured through mechanisms of gendering” (2001: 16). Then, how are Asian men perceived in this society and what are the connotations of Asian male sexuality? The role of mass media in disseminating images of Asian men in this regard cannot be overstated. There have been several problematic Asian American representations in mass media since the beginning of Hollywood (Davé, et al., 2005; Hamamoto, 1994; Hamamoto and Liu, 2000; Yuen, 2004), and my informants both men and women collectively mentioned a few male characters that illuminated the range of the “controlling images” (Collins, 1991) for Asian men.

For senior adoptees, they frequently mentioned Charlie Chan⁹³ as one of the first Asian characters that they watched through mass media. The Charlie Chan series originated in the 1920s and was produced until the 1940s, depicting an Asian male detective whose image was relatively benign in comparison to the earlier icon of *Fu Manchu*.⁹⁴ Following a long history of racial representation in Hollywood, the role of Charlie Chan was played by Caucasian actors, and many informants noticed that.

We are talking about 1960s. . . . In early days on TV, the only thing that was Asian, was remotely Asian would be Charlie Chan. And huh, that was the part played by a Caucasians made look like Asian. He did have a Chinese son, a Chinese American son, but he had really minor role, so I did not really grow up with Asian role models (Monica, 49).

⁹³ Charlie Chan's image is firmly rooted in American culture, as the oppositional titles of Jessica Hagedorn's *Charlie Chan Is Dead* (1993), and *Charlie Chan Is Dead 2* (2004) suggest. These are collections of fictional works by Asian American writers that did not actually refer to Charlie Chan *per se*.

⁹⁴ See Chung (2005) for the images of bad vs. good Orientals in films. Given the time frame that the senior adoptees grew up, no one mentioned *Fu Manchu*.

In the next decade, another popular image of Asian men arrived in the TV series, *Kung Fu* (1972-1975). This is right after 1965 immigration reform which allowed massive immigration of Asian population into this country. As Lowe (1996, 1997) and Eng (2001) persuasively argue, relatively high visibility of Asian men in what were previously considered to be feminine jobs –laundry, cooking, housekeeping, etc.—“worked to underscore the numerous ways in which gender is mapped as the social axis through which the legibility of a racialized Asian American male identity is constituted, determined, rendered coherent, and stabilized” (Eng, 2001: 17). Alongside this material reality was the fact that “network television has exerted overwhelming power in molding the popular consciousness with its endless representations of Asian Americans exhibiting weakness, dependency, subservience, and vulnerability” (Hamamoto, 1994: 59).⁹⁵

In this context, *Kung Fu* shifted the tone of stereotypes related to Asian males, uplifting emasculated Asian manhood in the American cultural imaginary, while controlling it within the confines of narrowly defined positions, such as martial arts practitioners or docile subjects to the ancient philosophy. Especially the rise of Bruce Lee and his posthumous release of *Enter the Dragon* (1973) consolidated the image of Asian men as “hard, muscular, fighting bodies” (Nguyen, 2007: 272) against the petite and slender stature largely assumed by Asian men. The flipside of this “controlling image” (Collins, 1991) is that Asian American youth, especially boys, growing up around this period had to face the social expectations created by the stereotype of being a martial art practitioner as seen from the accounts given by both Timothy Klein and Scott Kinsey in Ch. 6 and 7 respectively.

⁹⁵ The examples of characters that Hamamoto cites appear in *Have Gun Will Travel* (1957-63). See *ibid.*.

As the 1980s rolled on, yet another figure emerged for Asian American men. When asked about experiences of racial prejudices in school, Christian's answer went right to the issue of mass media representations:

During that time, do you remember *Sixteen Candles*? They had that character called, bong dang dong [sic., Long Duk Dong⁹⁶], and everybody was calling me, bong dang dong. Back then, the image of an Asian male is dorky, geek, and weak and stuff like that. I think that's one of the other reasons why I went out for wrestling. *Sixteen Candles* was one of the strings of movies by John Hughes that was showcasing the Midwest, because at the time, it was either New York life or California life.⁹⁷ They really didn't have Midwestern life. It wasn't till that point where he came in and started showcasing Chicago life and Midwestern life. That was very good.

JP: But then, they had to alienate somebody? Was it something like that?

Yeah, there's always a token Black guy and a token Asian guy and stuff. Even to this day, they still do that. It's kind of taking them a long time. Until you get people of minority in power, it's always gonna be that way. Because where it is mostly the media get their stuff from, it's because of the people in power. Eventually it will get that way. There is a Senator in California who tries that. And there are some Senators that are Black. Eventually we will not overtake them. I don't think that's our intent. We just want to be represented fairly of minority means.

Numerous Korean adoptees told me about the movie, *Sixteen Candles* (1984). Written and directed by John Hughes as Christian mentions above, this Hollywood comedy depicted adolescent angst about uncertainty, sexual curiosity, and growing pains of high school students. Interestingly, there was an Asian character that portrayed an international student from an unidentified Asian country in the movie. Named "Long Duk Dong," this Asian student represented "every stereotype" of an Asian geeky male "rolled into one" (MacAdam,

⁹⁶ It was not uncommon for my informants to mispronounce the name of this character, Long Duk Dong. Rather than a name *per se*, it was his image—thick-rimmed eye-glasses with buckteeth, out-of-style-hair-do—and the foreignness of his name that they could not forget.

⁹⁷ Christian is astute in his observation. John Hughes is best known as a director for the series of comical films such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), which depicted suburban adolescent youth—especially high school population—and their angst.

2008)⁹⁸. Speaking broken English and with crude mannerisms, Long Duk Dong's image left an indelible mark on American culture, being one of the "controlling images" of Asian Americans (Collins, 1991). I asked Michelle, 30, whether she could remember watching Asian characters on TV programs while growing up.

The only one that I remember specifically is Margaret Cho's *All American Girl*. That was on around the time when I was in Junior High, or early High school. But otherwise, I don't remember any Asian actors besides Pat Morita from *The Karate Kid*. Of course, everybody remembers the *Sixteen Candles*. Lim [sic. Long] Duck Dong. Those are the kinds of things I remember. Unfortunately, for us Asians at the time, you know, it was like everybody thought all the Asians were like that, with the exception, I guess, of Connie Chung, who was a news broadcaster, the token Asian at the time. So that part is hard to swallow, I would say. Because obviously you know, kids are teasing you and what not, and they would compare you to those characters, and "why don't you automatically have that kind of dialect, or speech or language?" Just that part was really frustrating. These are the only things I remember. So I would say, Asians were absent from entertainment industry.

Rather than going away after their circulation in a particular period, Michelle's comment reveals that these "controlling images" of Asian men as docile subjects (Charlie Chan, etc.), martial arts players (previously in *Kung Fu*, now in *The Karate Kid* series in Michelle's generation), or geeky foreigners⁹⁹ have over time been added to a limited pool of representations that carved out a conceptual place for Asian American men in American cultural imaginary. As Goldberg states, "in a field of discourse like the racial what is generally circulated and exchanged is not simply truth but truth-claims or representations. These representations draw their efficacy from traditions, conventions, institutions, and tacit modes of mutual comprehension" (1993: 46).

⁹⁸ An NPR article posted by Alison MacAdam and dated March 24, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88591800>

⁹⁹ Of course, *Fu Manchu* and other earlier images should be included here. Since my informants have not mentioned them, I will not discuss these here. It is important to realize that the problems of representation for Asian Americans are historically rooted in American history and are deeply implicated in the construction of American national identity.

The consequence was that Korean adoptees grew up, battling this limited set of roles imposed by cultural expectations. We have seen how this was the case with Scott Kinsey and, to a lesser degree, with Timothy Klein. Scott Kinsey thus elaborated on the folk syndrome of SRs (i.e., Social Retards), who internalized and reflected social others' perception of Asian men as feminized and socially awkward geeks.

The SRs may be professionally ambitious, well-accomplished in their careers and heterosexual, but they cannot maintain socially rewarding relationships with the opposite gender. Intriguingly in Scott's narrative, these SRs are not necessarily defensive about who they are, nor too self-absorbed to realize their eccentricity. Especially in the company of other male adoptees, these SRs do not really hesitate to acknowledge the fact that they have problems associating with women. In turn, Korean female adoptees (and other American women in general) find them hard to approach and consequently unattractive.¹⁰⁰

Then, how do female Korean adoptees' racial experiences differ from those of their male counterparts? Examining women's experience here illustrates the disparate ways in which Asian women have been assimilated into American culture. It is not that Asian women fared better or worse than Asian men in terms of stereotypes and constructions of *raced sexuality*. Asian women have had (and continue) to battle stereotypes that are specific to their gender and sexuality, rooted in history of colonization.

It is interesting at first that, from both female and male adoptees, I have heard little mention of Asian female celebrities that they can remember watching from childhood. Most characters that they mentioned were men. Some younger adoptees mentioned Connie Chung

¹⁰⁰ Frankenberg (1993) indicates that sexuality –masculinity and femininity— is deeply related to racial identity in ways that need further analysis. White women in her interviews saw African American masculinity as largely aggressive and violent. However, Asian men did not figure in these women's fear of men of color. Therefore, Frankenberg concludes that masculinity cannot be analyzed without considering its racial dimensions.

and Margaret Cho, but their attention was more on male characters elaborated thus far.

Senior adoptees noted early lack of Asian female representation in mass media. Growing up in the 1960s and 70s left Jean Kim Blum, 50, with interesting memories:

I remember in the early 70s, when Nixon went to China, I remember that all the models in all the magazines were blonde, and they all suddenly had all those dark eye makeup around their eyes, looking like raccoons, and they had these articles about how to look exotic. You know, the blonde models were wearing little mandarin collars (laughs), you know, so that they could all epitomize the exoticism. I remember even at that time, thinking how peculiar it would be that all the blonde women can be exotic. Why didn't they have Asian women? Of course, that's before I knew that Asian women were not on the cover of *Housekeeping* and all these fancy magazines. They just aren't, you know.

Blum's description of "Asian exotic beauty" emulated by blonde models on the magazine covers barely scrapes the surface of history of Asian female representation and its related stereotypes circulating in this country (cf. Shimizu, 2007). Stereotypes and misrepresentation of Asian women seem to have been longer in history, and thus more muted in its visibility, but highly insidious.

In contrast to Blum's memory, with the history of colonization and the US military involvement in Asian countries that brought large number of military wives and/or "mail-order brides," the stereotype of Asian females as exotic, sexually subservient and docile women has long been popular in the United States (Shah, 1997; Tolentino, 1996; Wilson, 1988; Yuh, 2002). This partially reflects the culturally specific ways in which Asian females are incorporated into the mainstream American culture. Behind this is a long history of interracial liaisons and racialized sexual desires that are deeply related to colonization and political economic arrangements between Asia/Asian Americans and the United States

(Koshy, 2004).¹⁰¹ This is amply reflected in adoptees' stories. Janice, 49, said, "You know, people are funny. If I go out with my husband, they automatically assume that he is an ex-military man. He is FAR from it, never did anything like that in his life. He is an elementary school teacher, for god's sake."¹⁰²

Exoticism and these stereotypes of Asian women actually made them highly sexualized in American cultural imaginary (Shimizu, 2007). As seen in Part One, some adoptive parents' stories about their adopted children's abandonment reflect the power of this cultural imaginary concerning Asian women's sexuality: birthmothers' illicit affairs with men—either foreign or Korean—resulted in unwanted pregnancies. The well-known moniker, "dragon lady," which is an Asian variation of femme fatales, summons a figure of highly sexual, deviant, and deceptive Asian woman. One can get a quick glimpse at this reality by typing in "Asian women" on any internet search engines. You will soon be bombarded with enormous amount of weblinks that bring you to pornographic sites, displaying Asian women.

There is this gap of *benign ignorance*, because the adoption agency did not have lessons on race, on discrimination. You know, I wonder if they even do it today. I mean, if, you know, how many parents of Chinese daughters sit in class and learn about the Asian fetish that is out there, and the multimillion dollar industry that it is. Well, it's nice to have an Asian girl. They are submissive, they are demure. They will do anything you want. There are thousands, if not millions, of sex porn websites that are specific on Asian women. My parents, they had the responsibility to say you are not an exotic whore. I internalized the racism, because I played the part. I played the part. I'm, I'm, that's my expertise, as an Asian woman. And you know, that makes you pretty empty inside (chokes) (Jennifer Fero, *Adopted*, 2008, emphases added).

¹⁰¹ Lim (2006) provides a historical examination of the representation of Asian females between World War II and 1959, which may provide cultural context in which early Korean adoptees grew up. Lim argues that this period, born out of racial anxieties surrounding civil rights movements and US imperialism in Asia (and subsequent Vietnam War), exhibits a "new oriental wave" (*ibid.*: 156) wherein Asian females were incorporated as foreign beauties that made interracial marriages culturally acceptable. Female Korean adoptees' relative ease in terms of interracial dating and marriage in contrast to their male counterparts can be partially understood here. Blum's description reveals the continuation of this wave in Nixon era.

¹⁰² There is a significant presence of "military brides" from East Asia in this country. These Asian women came in large numbers since 1940s. On Korean military brides, see Yuh (2002).

This sexualization of Asian women can elicit not-so-funny associations in people's common sense world, and any female adoptees can tell you one episode after another on them.

Lauren, 31, relayed this episode.

I often have breakfast with my brother Eric at the IHOP. The other day when I was having breakfast with him, his colleague walked in. She came over and asked to be introduced. From the way she was glaring at me, I knew she mistook the whole situation. She said to Eric, "Does Robin know that you are here?" Robin is my sister-in-law. This colleague thought I was *the Other* woman, obviously, you know (scoffs). We had to explain to her that I was Eric's sister. At first, she thought that we were crazy, trying to cover up this illicit affair by making a ridiculous claim. She did not get it until we had to explain to her a couple more times. It was weird.

This sort of misrecognizing a female adoptee's family member (a father, an uncle, or a brother) as her romantic partner seems to be prevalent. Smalkoski (1997: 73-74) writes about her family:

The father has features of Norwegian and German ancestry. He could be anyone's father growing up in the suburbs of Minneapolis, cleaning a garage, mowing a lawn, going fishing, watching football on Monday evenings, barbecuing on the grill in the summertime. His daughter does not look like anyone's daughter growing up in the suburbs of Minneapolis. Everything about this father/daughter relationship appears normal. However, when she is my age, society, even Minnesota society with all its adopted Koreans, will not find them so normal looking. When she is much older and her father says to her in public, "Anna, this way hon," when she falls behind him, they simply will not appear so normal.

In addition to their ambiguous familial status becoming visible as they age, female Korean adoptees had to combat stereotypes about Asian women when thinking about romantic relationships.

I had a so-called boyfriend. He would date me only because they heard Asians are exotic, and women are easy and all that. I had one guy that only went out with me because of that. I overheard him saying that to his friend on our date. I punched him. I told him that I would want to walk home. Walking home, actually my town was a half-hour drive from home. How

long would it take? But at that time, I really didn't care. He felt bad, saying, "at least let me give you a ride home." I said, "No, you are a f--ing asshole. Get the f--- away from me. I had to deal with that all my life. I don't need my own so-called boyfriend to only date me because he thinks I am easy. I am not that kind of girl. You can go stick your p--- in some other girl. You are not doing anything with me." I ran and met some of my classmates. They saw me crying and wondered what was going on. They gave me a ride home. Thank goodness. I would have spent hours and hours walking home. Mom and dad would have called the police and sent the amber alert for me (laughs) (Candace, 37).

I think, back in college, the guys I dated, they dated me because of who I am, but there were some guys who had Asian fetish. They only date Asian women. They have this idea, their house or places like Asian, or something (Rosie, 33).

The joke that is going around among female Korean adoptees is about American guys who are intent on finding an exotic Asian woman for a partner. Brenda, 38, said,

You know, funny thing about being adopted for me, now being older and accepting of who I am, people would say weirdest things like, "I want to marry someone like you." I want to say to them, "I'm Irish," and I have none of them, none of the Asian features! They would still linger. You know, I want to put up my pictures on match.com. I want to put pictures of my mother up there, I don't know. I am so scared. I don't want to do it. "Yeah, there's an Asian chick. She will do my laundry, she will cook my dinner." No! (laughs)

As a single woman, Brenda has given some thought about internet service, such as match.com, for dating purposes. "I cannot imagine how many crazies I will get, if I post my picture online. They will say, 'oh, here's the Asian chick.' I might have to put up my Mom's picture instead!" She is clearly not overreacting as there seem to be so many men with the Asian fad that the term, "rice king" or "rice queen"¹⁰³ was coined to denote them.

As I moved on in search of the right guy, I found out that there are men out there who have an Asian fetish. In slang terminology, these men are also known as "rice kings or queens," depending on one's sexual orientation. I find this type of fetish annoying and offensive. In my opinion these men are attracted to a stereotypical image of a partner who is submissive and exotic. I

¹⁰³ In Meier's study (1999), the phrase used was "yellow fever" to describe the adult White men who accosted only Asian women for dating.

actually had a stranger come up to me and say, “I would love to have a girlfriend like you. My friend only dates ‘Orientals’ because they cook, clean, are good at sex and will draw a hot bath for their man” (Thomassen, 2008: 106).

In her study with adoptees from Minnesota a decade ago, Meier found that “female Korean adoptees are aware and had personal experience of the common Western perception that Asian women are highly sexualized and exotic while also passive and submissive” (1999: 37). Against these stereotypes and exoticism, Korean adoptees still continue to battle on a daily basis. Most of them voiced similar sentiment expressed in Swick’s following statement.

I am a Strong-Willed Asian Woman, a S.W.A.W. in all my glory. An adoptee’s husband coined the phrase at the first “Gathering” and the other husbands all laughed. It is so true. Most of us do not fit the classic stereotype of an Asian woman. We can be very outspoken and aren’t going to be found walking 10 steps behind anyone. We blow the stereotypes right out of the water (Swick, 2008: 97-98).

At first glance, female Korean adoptees are refusing to be the stereotypes, whereas S.R.s are the embodiment of the stereotypes. But, the relationship between sexual stereotypes and subjectivity is more complicated than straightforward. We have seen female adoptees dating guys with a knowledge that these men are only looking for Asian girlfriends, and that they are seen and understood in racial terms. As seen from Jennifer Fero’s narration above, some of them clearly played on the stereotypes, often redefining it to suit their purposes and contexts. I am reminded here of Gordon’s astute observation about complexity of personhood for victimized people who face oppression and hardships: “Complex personhood means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others” (1997: 4).

More importantly, these female adoptees also accepted the stereotypes concerning their male counterparts, partially reflected in their choices of partners in terms of race.¹⁰⁴ An overwhelming majority of senior and middle-age female adoptees dated or married (or divorced) Caucasians.¹⁰⁵ This is not to say that by marrying or dating Caucasians, the adoptees are being dupes of racial structures or yielding to stereotypes in any simple sense. What I want to point to is the discrepancy between male and female experience of the Americanization process for Asians, circumscribed –but never determined—by gendered cultural imaginaries criss-crossed by *rac(ed) sexuality* that surrounds Asian Americans.

Han & Adoptee Kinship

“Social suffering,” Kleinman surmises, “is the result of ‘the devastating injuries that social force inflicts on human experience’” (Kleinman, Das, and Lock, 1996, cited in Kleinman, 2000: 226). Kleinman is here primarily concerned with the impact of structural violence and socioeconomic injustices on the poor, but I expand upon the concept to include everyday forms of violence to which Korean American adoptees as a whole have been subjected.

¹⁰⁴ Shiao and Tuan (2006) argue that racial discourses and controlling images play significant roles in shaping personal preferences in choices of dates and spouses. They sampled Korean adoptees adopted between 1950s through the mid-1970s, and found what they call “racial culture” operating in adoptees’ choices of dating partners. Racial culture, consisting of wide array of racial discourses operating in the US, “rationalizes state policies and influences the common sense about race” (*ibid.*: 5). 95% of the adoptees in their sample dated or married White partners.

¹⁰⁵ If you look at the senior adoptee group, to be fair, many male adoptees married Caucasians as well. However, there were also many bachelors, and a few with Korean wives. Men’s choice of Caucasian partners was often described by themselves as non-availability of other choices. On the other hand, female adoptees took it for granted that they would marry Caucasians. One female adoptee simply said, “it is just what I know.” From the female adoptees that I know of, those that either dated or married Asian/Americans mainly come from younger cohorts. See Shiao and Tuan (2006) for more details that are in accord with my findings.

At first glance, Korean adoptees' experiences seem relatively benign, especially in comparison to the suffering endured by those impacted by wars, poverty and starvation. Their subaltern status and experiences living in the margins of Korean society (in orphanages or on streets) prior to adoption are easily effaced by their presumed elevation of status as a doted-on child of a well-to-do family. Their stories should indeed be a story of the chosen few, who defied the odds. They have only to move forward, basking in the glory of the second chance at life that evaded most children in a similar fate. There is no need to dwell on the past, and what-ifs. For those who believe in this kind of positive outlook on life, Korean adoptees' demands for recognition of their past loss in their "ascent" to a respectable status seem like temperamental tantrums thrown by a spoiled brat who does not know how to be grateful for what life has offered. Due to this transition of social status – from that of third world orphans and racial minorities to middle class honorary Whites—, Korean adoptees have experienced social suffering in ways that have not been adequately discussed. Especially in American culture, where positive thinking and a penchant for living in the present (and looking forward) seem to be the acceptable norm, the burden of letting go of loss and the past weighs heavily on Korean American adoptees' collective psyche. In addition, their racial difference from those surrounding them becomes something not worth mulling over, as if one can move away from the history of one's past that left indelible mark on their skin and body.

The importance of recognizing the social suffering that Korean adoptees endure is seen in the painful stories that they shared with me. Korean adoptees' pain originates in the initial rejection from the familial institution which has put them in a precarious position as a social subject. Thus, it is quite common for those adopted to be extremely cautious when developing social relationships with others. The specter of rejection by others who are

socially meaningful to them can elicit the return of the repressed memories that reinforce the insecurity of their own identity. For Korean American adoptees, this adoptee angst for security and belonging becomes intensified by their racial positioning in this country.

The sites of belonging that I explored previously become the very few places where they could be, if momentarily, free from negative feelings. Meeting and learning about other adoptees in these sites assist in the negotiation of their identities in relation to the larger society. Personal histories, though inflected by individual particularities, become that of the larger collectivity in these meetings. This is an affective and visceral process that brings many adoptees to tears. Further, it becomes a powerful foundation upon which future relationships among adoptees are forged and maintained. Then what are the sociocultural factors that give impetus to adoptees' affective bonding with one another? How could they themselves understand and articulate this phenomenon?

Early in my fieldwork, Pam, my adoptee informant, told me that Korean adoptees still retain parts of a Korean self. She went on to describe the emotional connections that adoptees make with each other in the idiom of “Han,”¹⁰⁶ familiar to Koreans and Korean Americans (cf. Pang, 1994). I asked Pam, “I am surprised by how open they [the adoptees] are toward one another. You can’t see that often in meetings like this. Am I right?” I was then gratified and yet perplexed by the kind of openness the adoptees expressed to me and others in gatherings. I wanted to ask her opinion about this since Pam was a social worker working on adoption issues. She assured me that I was right, confirming, “Yes, you’re absolutely right. I think it is coming from, . . . Han” Intrigued by her use of the Korean emotion word “Han,” I asked Pam to describe what Han was for her. She considered carefully before answering,

¹⁰⁶ 한 (恨).

I think it is a kind of angst. You lost a part of yourself, and you are always carrying that angst deep down. And here you see a lot of people like you. That brings out the emotions you suppressed for so long. You experience almost a visceral connection to people.

Han is a Korean folk concept that is taken by many scholars to be a *sui generis* characteristic of Korean soul (Chu, 2008; E. H. Kim, 1993; Pang, 1994; A. Park, 1993). Han is a complex term in Korean, which entails a wide range of emotions: a sense of regret, rancor, sadness, grief, and anger. What underlies all these diverse emotions is the profound pain both physical and psychological, caused by oppression. In Elaine Kim's words, Han is "the sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression" (1993: 215).

Pam described Han in a way that is culturally meaningful to her American self, which is not drastically different from the way other Korean Americans understand the meaning of the term.¹⁰⁷ Absent is the knowledge of Korea's colonial history and culturally specific ways in which Han is talked about and felt among Koreans. But, by invoking the same emotion term as Koreans do, Pam affirmed her Koreanness as a Korean in diaspora, and pointed to the common foundation of Han, which is the pain caused by discrimination and oppressive experiences. Pam is one among many adoptees who try to reconcile this Korean concept of Han with their experiences as Korean adoptees. J. Kim, an adoptee, puts it this way.

There is a word—han—that is at the very essence of the Korean experience. Han is an emotion, a state of consciousness, and a physiological state. Defining it is equivalent to grasping at a kite string just inches out of my reach; it's as if I can see it and know its shape and size but it is always twisting away, just at the moment I think it's in my hand. Han is the soil and mountains and vegetation of a country ravaged by war. Han is the collective consciousness of a people colonized, occupied, divided, raped, and beaten.

¹⁰⁷ Hirsch's concept, "postmemory" (1997), is especially relevant here, as Korean Americans understand and expand the notion of Han through "postmemory," without direct connection to where this feeling originated.

Han is in the blood and breath and dreams of Korean individuals. And han is inherently embedded in the experiences of the thousands of Korean children cross-culturally adopted to North America, Europe, and Australia (J. Kim, 2006: 152).

In thinking about Korean adoptees' experience of Han in this way, it is important to recognize that the main thrust of this pain lies in their experiences of racialization and cultural assimilation. Racial discrimination and alienation, for instance, seems to be a ubiquitous experience for adoptees of all ages and both genders, although specific images or stereotypes varied over time and for each gender. For instance, when asked whether she experienced any negative or discriminatory incidents, Michelle, 30, a young adoptee said,

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I think as Asian Americans, and as Korean adoptees, you come to realize that that's gonna happen for the rest of your life. I think it's a whole can of worms, you know, to open up and talk about that topic, because there are so many different experiences people have had. Very negative experiences. They probably affected them their entire lives, their appearances, you know, the way they feel about their bodies, and the way they look. I think everyone experiences those. I certainly did as a child, just because I was different. You know, the whole, you know, the way they move their eyes or things like that. I mean, obviously that was very hurtful.

Belonging to the younger generation does not exempt one from going through experiences of racialization unique to American culture. As seen earlier, the specific stereotypes and repertoires that concern Asian Americans in this country might have varied over time (Hamamoto, 1994). These changes have been superficial as the core cultural identification of Asian as foreign/Other remain the leitmotif for representation of the Asian population in this country. In addition, it is crucial to recognize the fact that, for Korean adoptees –along with other Asian immigrants, the process of cultural assimilation entails an indescribable loss. Eng and Han point out “how certain losses are grieved because they are not, perhaps, even seen as losses but as social gains” (2000: 692). In contrast, losses of minority groups, such as Asian Americans, who strive for assimilation and upward mobility

in a society in which political economy is largely racially stratified, are not given adequate articulations within the discourse of multiculturalism and liberal democracy. Eng and Han state, “the experience of immigration itself is based on a structure of mourning” (2000: 679) as the losses entailed in the process of immigration and consequent assimilation are diverse: “birth country, family, language, identity, property, status in community” (*ibid.*: 680) and more. On top of these losses, the “forever foreigner” status of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans renders ideals of American cultural citizenship unattainable and elusive. Are these losses located outside the realm of cultural intelligibility (cf. Butler, 2000: 78)?¹⁰⁸ Eng and Han (2000) construe this loss to be leading to what they call, “racial melancholia,” characterizing Asian American subjectivity.¹⁰⁹

[R]acial melancholia might be described as splitting the Asian American psyche. . . . That is, assimilation into the national fabric demands a psychic splitting on the part of the Asian American subject who knows and does now know, at once, that she or he is part of the larger group. . . . It is difficult not to notice that much of contemporary ethnic literature in the United States is characterized by ghosts and by hauntings from both these perspectives –the objects and subjects of national melancholia (2000: 675-76).

“By situating it [melancholia] as the inherent unfolding and outcome of the mourning process that underwrites the losses of the immigration experience” (*ibid.*: 680), Eng and Han not only depathologize melancholia but also shed light upon the

¹⁰⁸ In Butler’s words, “melancholy, the unfinished process of grieving, is central to the formation of the identifications that form the ego. . . . When certain kinds of losses are compelled by a set of culturally prevalent prohibitions, we might expect a culturally prevalent form of melancholia. . . . Where there is no public recognition or discourse through which such a loss might be named and mourned, then melancholia takes on cultural dimensions of contemporary consequence” (1997: 132-139).

¹⁰⁹ In contrast to the popular conception of Asian Americans as “model minorities,” many scholars point to the increasing need to examine the mental health of Asian Americans and recent Asian immigrants (Ida, 1989; Sue and Morishima, 1982). They point out that Asian Americans’ underutilization of mental health services cannot be an indication of the level of mental health that this group maintains. It may rather indicate cultural barriers or negative attitudes prevalent in Asian American communities toward resorting to this type of assistance. Many Asian American youths seem conflicted between the demands of their families and the expectations of the larger American society. Some exhibit psychological symptoms that indicate deep depression leading to suicide attempts or mortal thoughts (Ida, 1989).

comprehension of the Asian adoptee experience as a melancholic “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977). The concept of “racial melancholia” thus directs our attention to the sociocultural causes of “racial melancholia” that stem from Asian Americans’ complex social positionings vis-à-vis mainstream US society.

However, the Han that adoptees feel and through which they sustain the bond among themselves goes beyond shared experiences of racialization. Their precarious positions vis-à-vis normative kinship structures highlight for them the arbitrary nature of our own existence and the imaginative vision of alternative realities. Gordon’s concept of “haunting” (1997) aids in comprehending why the affective bond among adoptees has been so powerful in increasing the production of adoptee organizations, their networking efforts, and the sense of belonging germane to adoptee kinship. She utilizes the specter of “haunting” to “describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view” (2008(1997): xvi). Korean adoptees, beleaguered by constant reminders of their past, understand what haunting means.

It would be really beneficial if we learn the language, and learn about the culture of Korea, and meet another 47-year-old Korean, and find out what his life was like. Because that would have been the life of mine, my brothers, my sisters. That would be the parallel life that I would have had, so you always wonder about that. The best way to find out is not from a social worker, or a professor, but to meet a person my age, a professional like myself, working, to find out what they do, how many kids they have, on a social level, what they feel. They also grew up in a different time. They grew up in the 60s and 70s. What was that like? It was pretty much turbulent, different, I am sure, than other generations. What was that like? We would kind of fulfill this thing, kind of make some links and get a better idea of our identity. You know, that’s kind of my big goal. I don’t know how that’s gonna happen (Scott, 47).

The question that still haunts Scott is what-ifs. He wondered what his life might have been if he had not been adopted. Scott’s speculation is not unique, as most adoptees, wondering

about alternative possibilities, are *haunted* by the kind of lives that they might have led, the kinds of family and kin relationships that they might have been a part of, instead of their reality (Dorow, 2006; Honig, 2005). In 2007, at the IKAA Gathering in Seoul, South Korea, Deann Borshay Liem, a well-known filmmaker in Korean adoptee community talked about her on-going film project. Drawing from the success in her earlier film, “First Person Plural” (2000), Borshay Liem was in the process of searching for Cha, Jung Hee, in whose identity Deann was adopted (Borshay Liem, 2000). Deann wanted to see what Cha’s life must have been like, as Deann’s life might have been Cha’s and vice versa. For senior adoptees such as Scott and Deann, the recuperation of loss seems to be the acknowledgement of the nature of their haunted lives, trying to see eye-to-eye to what brought them here, and where their alternatives lie. Gordon elaborates that haunting is distinct from trauma, as the former elicits the sense of something to be done (2008(1997): xvi). As Scott attempts to maintain networks of contact in Korea to find his birthparents even after his failed birthparent search several years ago, and as Deann endeavors to unearth alternative life trajectories that she might have taken, we see their efforts to bring together bits and pieces of the past that leave a haunting presence in their lives. Senior adoptees’ efforts to organize and maintain an adoptee-oriented community via conferences, local groups, culture camps and so on, are also a part of their attempt to recover what has been lost or forgotten in their lives.

For the younger generation, the recuperation of loss relates to the recovery of self; the object of previous hatred and shame. By seeing one’s reflection in other adoptees, Korean adoptees begin to see themselves for the first time, with the increasing realization that they were indeed worthy of desire. It is reflected in their sexual object choices, as more adoptees in this generation marry or date other Asians. Michelle, 30, talked about her first boyfriend, who happened to be biracial.

He was half-Chinese, half-Caucasian. His father was a 1st generation Chinese American, and his wife was a Caucasian. And they grew up in the same area in Wisconsin and married and had two boys. And I dated their son for 5 years. He and I, I don't ever remember anybody saying anything about us in a negative connotation by any means. But I think people, it was almost like, people expected us to be together. You know, it's like, "oh, Asians, they should date one another," kind of thing. And that was it. Also the eye-opening thing was that I found myself more attracted to Asian men down the line, because, you know, *I'd been exposed to White people so long*, (lowering voice) you know, or maybe it's something subconsciously in my mind that, "oh, yeah, if I had a choice and there is an attractive Asian man, and an attractive Caucasian man, I'm gonna date the Asian man." [JP: gravitate toward?] Right! Exactly. I truly believe that. Yes. Some of my friends who are Asians don't. They just assume, they would go with a Caucasian, if Caucasian vs. Asian (emphasis original).

Korean adoptees' desires for and actual dating with Asian partners was more pronounced among younger cohorts. In fact, there were many young adoptees who dated or were dating strictly Asians. Leila, 37, said thoughtfully,

I've always wanted to settle down with an Asian American. First of all, this is the part of trying to find your identity. I think lots of Korean adoptees can't find their identity, and that's their preference. Lots of them lost their culture. Some of them don't want to know. I do. Just like you, your family. It's personal for me because I want my child to know the country. I still call Korea motherland country for me. It's still a part of me. I see too many of my friends who do interracial marriages, which is fine with me. I have nothing against that. But I get a little bit attacked when they say, "why do you want to marry an Asian American?" "Well, that's my preference, ok? Don't start telling me I am being biased about it. I am not biased. You made a choice to marry outside." But one of the things is, I think, you have to have something in common in culture, whether he is Korean American or not. As I got older, finding myself, I tend to date Asian Americans. I dated an American guy. I had nothing in common. It's not because they are not smarter. It's just that they are not culturally experienced. I like to be around somebody who is culturally experienced and diverse. I mean, like I said, coming from an American way, I have families living in the South, totally biased, okay? They grew up in a southern way with that Confederate thinking. So within my experience, I understand. I have families over here who love Asian Americans. For me, I want to marry an Asian American, because I want to, whether he is a Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese, Malay, or a Filipino. That's just been my passion and desire. So it has nothing to do with what people think of who my choice is, 'cause I am the one that has to live with that. My parents' friends and some of my friends tried to set me up. Lots of them are Asian Americans. But you know what? I've dated a Chinese

American, a Vietnamese, but there is no chemistry. It doesn't mean that every Asian that comes through my path, I am gonna be, "ah, I am in love with you!" It has to be the right person.

Leila locates her preference of Asian American partners in her yearning for diversity and cultural experience. But this is also partially a quest for finding her own identity as a hyphenated American. Often adoptees date other adoptees that they meet at one of the adoptee gatherings, making the gatherings a social occasion for finding potential dates and partners. Mary, 34, recently married Chris, 37, another adoptee whom she had met at one of the adoptee gatherings. Describing Chris as "the person in her wildest dream," Mary said that "Chris was everything that I prayed for except one thing. I prayed for somebody taller. That's all right. We've been dating a long time." Another way in which younger adoptees claim their loss is to educate themselves about Korean heritage through various means. The availability of Korean language classes across the US, and the ease of foreign travel, aid in their attempt to maintain a part of self that is important to them.

As they engage in the personal project of recovering the part of their past history and selves lost in the process of adoption and assimilation, Korean adoptees find other adoptees to be an invaluable source of support. Older adoptees often become role models, providing a sense of direction and valuable advice to younger ones going through periods of self-discovery. Misplaced in the structure of racialized kinship, they find in each other's lives alternative realities and potentials. They understand what it means to live on the edge of a common sense world. Regardless of little squabbles here and there, they are indeed a family of their own, maintaining solidarity over time and place.

PART TWO

The Yellow Peril! It is not racial, it is spiritual [otherness]. It does not involve inferior values; it involves a radical strangeness, a stranger to the weight of its past, from where there does not filter [to the Euro-based self] any familiar voice or inflection, a lunar or Martian past.
(Levinas, cited in Wilson, 2007: 168)

Chapter FIVE. Locating Korean American Adoptees

In twenty-five years as a practicing psychotherapist, I have often found myself awed by the ability of some people to transcend their hurtful past and, against all odds, find pathways to a satisfying adulthood. Yet virtually every 20th century theory on which clinical psychology rests, from psychoanalysis to behaviorism, insists that the earliest experience of a child's life in the family foretells the rest (Rubin, 1996: 2).

Despite the insistence on the everlasting impact of our early experiences seen in the quote above, some want to refute that meager early beginnings in life determine or dictate our lives. Along with Rubin, they want to claim that “[i]nstead, it’s what we do with those early experiences –how we internalize them, how we define and manage them, or whether we get up and move on each time we fall, or are pushed down—that determines how we’ll live our lives” (1996: 220). In examining adoptee experiences, the myopic focus researchers give to their early, often painful, beginnings of their lives is tantamount to reducing adoptees’ otherwise rich and variable existence to one shared trauma: abandonment, which adoptees call “the Big Hurt.” But what does the adoptee experience mean to *THEM*? How do they make sense of their out-of-place positioning in their day-to-day lives and what impacts do their unusual beginnings have on the framing of life journeys they have taken?

Ben Huh, one of my instrumental informants, told me one day, “I am glad that you are not studying us as if we are guinea pigs or something. People here [at adoptee gatherings] are deeply disillusioned by the way several research on adoptees have objectified them like they were some experiments, you know.” He was referring to the many studies that already exist on adoptees’ adjustment and issues of cultural assimilation among them, based on many variables, such as age of adoption and physical development at time of adoption. Often adopted children were seen as a group that could be used to determine or measure the

“normality” or “abnormality” of non-adopted children’s psychological development (cf. Grotevant, et al., 2006; Johansson-Kark, et al., 2002; McGue, et al., 2007; Scarr and Weinberg, 1983).¹¹⁰ It was not necessarily a question of whether these studies benefitted adoptees in general. Rather, being the oldest group of transnational adoptees in this country, Korean adoptees have long been subjected to the prodding and probing of researchers, exposing them to feelings of objectification and humiliation. Adoption researchers had not really looked at Korean adoptees on their own terms until the 1990s.

Korean Adoptees & “The Adoption Triad”

Adoption professionals in America emphasize three key points of reference if one tries to comprehend the workings of adoptive families. Often called “the adoption triad,” these consist of adoptive parents, birth parents and the adoptee.¹¹¹ This conceptualization of three points in thinking about adoptive family dynamics is highly problematic, as it compartmentalizes adoption issues only into the realm of family without adequately addressing the larger society in which the relinquishment and adoption of children occur. It also downplays the role of social others in shaping the adoption experiences of adoptive families. However, Korean American adoptees grow up well-versed in the jargons of adoption professionals. Some decide to help other adoptees by becoming social workers, psychiatrists, or child psychologists. A few adoptees offer workshops at adoptee meetings,

¹¹⁰ I am not disputing the findings of this literature. However, by treating adoptees and non-adoptees as significantly different groups of people, they reveal their cultural bias in viewing adoptive families as essentially different from “genetic” family. Consequently, they put undue emphasis on early childhood experience rather than other life-altering experiences, contributing to the pathologization of the adoptee status. Genetic connections among family members become the model of normality in these studies.

¹¹¹ See, for example, Wadia-Ells (1995) for stories told by these triad members in adoptions. Ito and Cervin’s edited volume (1999) also features stories and works by these triads.

educating other adoptees about their concerns about adoption practices. In these settings, adoptees seem to accept these three reference points as *social facts*.

Adoptive parents have been the most visible component of the adoption triad. Adoption literature, both academic and popular, usually conceives of its audience as current or prospective adoptive parents, offering advice on how to address some of the psychological and adjustment problems that adoptees may experience. Given the state of the international adoption market, in which adoptive parents are the visible initiators of most of the action, this visibility is largely anticipated by adoptive parents themselves. Adoption literature often presents itself as a guide for thinking about and initiating the first steps toward adoptive parenthood.

Adoptive parents are also often the producers of information, actively engaging in publication and dissemination of written works on adoption. Even before the emergence of culture camps geared to the promotion of cultural heritage among 1970s transnational adoptees, some adoptive parents made efforts to address the needs of their children by organizing formal and informal meetings with other adoptive parents. Autobiographies written by adoptive parents provide particularly critical insights, as the authors present their stories based on family practices that are considered against the norm. These stories emerge as important places in which to get a glimpse of adoptive parents' perspectives (Register, 1991; Rothman, 2005; Sobol, 1984; Steinberg and Hall, 2000; Winston, 2006).¹¹² With the increasing visibility of international adoption as a viable option for building and expanding a family in the US, adoptive parents' agency in this transaction has become a primary focus of

¹¹² Although I do not cite them all here, there has been an increase in both fiction and non-fiction works by the adoptive mothers of Chinese as well as Korean children, possibly as a result of increasing numbers of transnational adoptions.

sociocultural analyses as well (cf. Anagnost, 2000, 2004; Dorow, 2006; Jacobson, 2008; Traver, 2007; Volkman, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b).¹¹³

Because the decision to legally relinquish one's child creates the possibility of adoption in the first place, the importance of birth parents in this triad cannot be overstated. Whether there is a record of their existence or not, whether they are active participants in the lives of their children or not, their role as birth parents must be addressed (cf. March 1995, 1997). However, birth parents are relatively invisible in this triad. The stigma borne by those who give up their children in both the US and Korea may lead birth parents to give as little information as possible when placing their children for adoption (Dorow 1999; H.Kim, 2007a, b; March, 1995, 1997).

In transnational adoptions, adoptees face many hurdles when looking for information about their birth parents and the circumstances leading to their abandonment. Not only is the available information limited in scope, it is limited by language and cultural barriers that make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for adoptees to navigate the bureaucracies of Korean institutions and agencies. Currently, there are a few memoirs written by Korean birth mothers (Dorow, 1999). With advancement in communication technologies in recent years, Hosu Kim (2007a) notes the emergence of the internet as a place where birthmothers' stories can be heard as they have begun using websites in order to connect with their lost children. This may reflect the fact that the majority of recent birthmothers are young single women who have knowledge of and access to this type of

¹¹³ This is also heightened by the emergence and increasing use of new reproductive technologies. Van Balen and Inhorn (2002), for instance, examine the changes in the meaning and definition of "infertility," in the context of cultural practices and consumption markets that offer increasing possibilities for forming a family (see also Layne, 1999; Rothman, 2004; Van Balen, 2002). Disproportionate attention to adoptive parents rather than to the other two parties in the adoption triad can also be traced back to the American cultural ideology of motherhood that has been critically analyzed by other feminist sociologists and anthropologists (see Apple, 2006; Ginsburg and Tsing, 1990; Ragone, 1994; Ragone and Twine, 2000; Taylor et al. 2004).

technology. As will be seen later, the changing demography of Korean birthmothers over the last 50 years should be kept in mind (cf. H. Kim, 2007b). These young birthmothers' stories should be situated in the cultural and historical context of contemporary Korea.¹¹⁴

Despite the relative silence and invisibility of birth parents, they occupy a significant position in the adoption triad. Unmistakably, they become the center around which adoptees' insecurity and identity struggles are waged (cf. Cox, 1999). Dorow (2006) expands Gordon's conceptualization of "haunting" (1997) to illustrate the continued importance of birth parents and the child's pre-adoption history in the lives of adoptive family.

This dissertation is about adoptees, the third party to this adoption triad. It talks about Korean American adoptees aged 21 and above. Many transnational adoptive parents with young children confess a sense of bewilderment when they first meet adult adoptees. It is hard for them to imagine that one day, their own child, too, will grow up to be an adult. My friend, Sherry said to me one day, "Ha, I still can't get over what you said, Jane." I had just wondered aloud to her about what her daughter Betsy would be like when she grew up. "Betsy as an adult? I can't picture that, whew!" Sherry shook her head. She has two children adopted from China, Betsy, aged 8 and her sister, Ellie, aged 5. The difficulty experienced by many adoptive parents in imagining the adoptee as an adult can be attributed to the social work, psychology, and psychiatric literature that focuses primarily on the childhood

¹¹⁴ In my own fieldwork, I once witnessed a street demonstration of some sort, orchestrated by *Min-Deul-Rae* (Dandelion), an organization of birthmothers in Seoul during the 2004 International Adoptee Gathering. The demonstration, which took place right next to the hotel where the adoptees held their conference, took the form of a few individuals handing out flyers that described the transnational adoption statistics related to Korean children, and the negative sentiments of birthmothers toward the Korean government for letting this go on for a long time. It was unclear at the time as to how long this organization had been in place, how many birthmothers were involved, under whose leadership it ran, or even what the purpose of this flyer was. The end result of this action seemed to be simply alerting to the public, especially those attending the gathering, that Korean birthmothers—although largely invisible in this demonstration as those handing out flyers were only middle-aged men—are against international adoption of their children. The demonstration lasted only one morning on the second day of the gathering. For more information on Korean birthmothers, see Dorow (1999) and H. Kim (2007a, 2007b).

adjustment problems of adoptees. Further, adoptive parents' penchant for children who will complete their family or, in other words, their temporary fixation on children as their primary objects of desire hinders their ability to see the adoptee as a person who will go through all the life stages of others whom they know.

Korean adoptees do grow up to become full participants in the culture that adopted them. Their life stories are inflected by the cultural milieus in which they grew up and made sense of their experience. As the adult Korean adoptees in the next few chapters suggest, it is urgent that we listen to adoptees' voices as their agency in the adoption transaction has been silenced and vacated by their juvenile status. Often, my informants made sure that I understood that their "adoptable" status had been established without their consent. It is also important to examine their stories and glean whatever insights their experiences can provide us, as the story of their adoption is a story about the cultural milieus, the culturally constructed nature of family and human relationships, and the emotional pain of living in-between. Hence, Terrell and Modell can claim that "studying adoption will preserve the centrality of individual experiences in the composition of social worlds and cultural texts" (1994, 160).

Korean adoptees' experiences, in particular, address issues of race/ethnicity, and cultural citizenship that are central to the construction of identity in the United States. Further, their experiences, read collectively and historically, illustrate the "rites of passage" (cf. Van Gennep, 1960) as adoptees continue to deal with the fact of their adoption and ambiguous status of living in-between over the course of their lives. "Separation, transition and aggregation" were the stages Van Gennep (1960) described for social development an individual goes through in his life. Korean adoptees' experiences show that the adoptees go through these stages over their lifetimes in relation to their own construction of identity. In

this way, their experience strikes a chord with that of transnational/transracial adoptees in general, despite the many differences that exist among them.

Korean Adoptees' "Stories"

Aided by the autobiographical works of Korean adoptees, both in print and in media, I utilize 7 individuals' narratives to illustrate the differences and commonalities that undergird Korean adoptee experiences. At the outset, I conceive their narratives to be "stories," as they themselves put it.¹¹⁵ At one of the Culture Camps that I attended, the organizers handed out T-shirts that had an imprint of a Korean man's face. The line under his face read, "What is your story?" This reflects the lingo among adoptees that they use when they ask each other about their experiences. "What is your story?" they would ask. One starts by framing one's narrative, "well, the story goes, . . ."

Many symbolic meanings related to this seemingly mundane metaphor of "story" need fleshing out. When used in adoptee narratives, "story" speaks to the arbitrariness of our own existence, culturally situated status of truths that are presumed to constitute one's life, and the discursive nature of life experiences—especially those presented in interviews. Further, on another level, one's life as a "story" indicates the subjects' renegotiations of the givens in life, revealing adoptees' resistance to the negative cultural assumptions that powerfully affect their life courses.

¹¹⁵ There is a fine distinction between narratives and stories as Riessman (1993) points out. According to her, stories are the concrete products that interviewees articulate in interviews. Narratives, on the other hand, are what narrators (interviewers) weave out of the stories given by their interviewees. Narration gives a conceptual order to a story that comes in partial elements in an actual interview. In following my informants' construction, I forgo further discussion about the difference between the two.

In framing their own life circumstances as “a story,” Korean adoptees underline the fact that our lives are more or less a series of “stories,” with many plots and many different endings. Given the choices one has to make in life, your story may turn out to have yet another ending that you did not expect or could not predict. It acknowledges the arbitrary nature of an adoptee’s fate, paired with that particular adoptive family in this area, rather than another one in that area. This is one way that Korean adoptees can relate to one another. Coming from the same orphanage around the same time therefore arouses enormous empathy in one another, as they take in the possibility of her story into one’s own and vice versa.

Those who were not adopted, rarely think about the arbitrary nature of one’s *own* existence. We are all products of embryos, consisting of one particular sperm and one particular egg meeting at a precise moment for conception. The arbitrary meeting of this sperm, not that sperm, and that egg, not this egg, marks our beginning as a cell. In that sense, the adoptees’ understanding of arbitrariness of their fate does not only tell us about the arbitrariness of *their* relationships forged by fate and unpredictable circumstances, but highlights for *all of us* the arbitrariness of human conditions in general. The critical distinction lies in the fact that, despite our common arbitrary beginnings, the adoptees, by being raised by those who do not share their genetic make-up, have been regarded by the larger society as the product of *social* arrangements and less-than-normal relationships. We can see here workings of cultural discourses and practices surrounding kinship and family that conceal the arbitrary nature of these institutions by drawing the precarious yet culturally powerful boundary (or hierarchical order of some sorts) between kinds of arbitrariness that characterize our lives in general. Korean adoptees as a symbolic boundary marker force us to

reckon with the socially constructed nature of identities and relationships, and further, our own place in the world.

Korean adoptees' framing of life journeys as "a story" has another dimension. When they attempt to find out more about their lives prior to adoption, often what they manage to obtain is a "story" whose validity is always in question. Many older adoptees conveyed to me that their adoptive parents told them a story that consisted of stereotypes —i.e., prevailing cultural discourses—which, for some of them, turned out not to be based on any facts. These could have been partially due to the lack of information available at the time, and additionally, the parental angst to provide an explanation where there is none. Available cultural tropes based on stereotypes and misconceptions come in handy to make the explanation reasonable and acceptable if only temporarily.

Complexity of explanation becomes even more prominent when adoptees reunite with their birth parents as they come to grapple with the cultural ideologies in relation to secrecy and stigmatization of adoption in birth parents' lives. The quest for "truth" often turns out to be a never-ending journey that does not seem to have a satisfactory resolution. It is not an exceptional case when they feel that they are not told the whole story about what led their birth parents to give them up. Cultural and language barriers, culturally complicated situations surrounding their births, and the time lapse between their adoption and reunion, all play a part in exacerbating the ambiguity of the information that the adoptees can finally obtain. In this sense, Korean adoptees' framing of their life experiences as "stories" indicate their attempt to construct a stance that is far removed from the social events that affected their lives. By putting these emotionally painful events that led to their adoption into perspective, the adoptees portray themselves as healthy adults not necessarily marred by stigmatized events. They can look at their own life experience and see it as one possible story

line out of many unknown possibilities. This story is as good as any other scenario. Thus, it hints at their peaceful and more or less satisfactory resolutions with their life courses. At the very least, this is an attempt to maintain an emotionally stable self that could sustain itself despite the enormity of pain that any new information may bring to one.

Deborah, age 39, expresses her resolution to find satisfaction in the face of little information, “I will never know what the *real story* was. At this point in time, I think I am okay with that.” She reunited with her birth mother, Mrs. Kim a few years ago. Still, Mrs. Kim’s explanation surrounding the relinquishing of Deborah, who was then 7 years old, left Deborah with even more questions rather than the resolution she was looking for. Mrs. Kim insisted that she had to give up Deborah because her husband (Deborah’s birth father) died suddenly and she had to remarry another man. But Deborah wonders, “Why do you have to give your child up to marry a man? That is something that I will never be able to forgive her for.” Superficially, Deborah’s sentiment here can be interpreted as a woman who does not fully understand the culturally specific gender ideologies operating in Korea which effectively subjugate women by curtailing their employment opportunities once they are married or have children. A part of Korean cultural and political economy for decades after the Korean War has been a lack of a social welfare system that can support single mothers and continuously rising living costs against lower wages of female workers (D. Kim, 2007; H. Kim, 2007b; H.M. Kim, 1997). However, on closer examination, Deborah’s inability to comprehend her birthmother’s situation comes from Deborah’s own experience as a single mother of a 10 year-old daughter. As she herself struggled as a single mother, Deborah understands the difficulties that come with single parenting. “It wasn’t until when I became a single mother, I could sort of understand how difficult it might have been for her to have to raise many children as a single mother.” Having moved her out of her parents’ house at 18,

Deborah refused to get married, and successfully raised a bright, outgoing girl, who seems to charm anyone she meets. “I can’t imagine giving up my daughter to get a man! If a guy wants to live with me but not with her, I will say to the guy, ‘YOU get out! Not her! She stays here and you go,’” Deborah said in defiance, as she believed that was exactly what her birth mother did not do. Deborah’s self-reliance comes from her own experience of struggling through new culture, new language, and new family, when she got here at age 7. With clothes on her back and a few documents as her only material possessions, she came to learn very quickly that she had to stand on her own two feet.

To compound Deborah’s frustration, Mrs. Kim was not very forthcoming with information about Deborah’s birth father. Mrs. Kim’s reluctance to talk about her supposedly dead ex-husband made Deborah suspect the validity of the entire story Mrs. Kim told her. “He may still be alive. Who knows? I tried, you know? I may never know the truth, but I am now at peace with not knowing. I am okay.” In her case, the answer to “Why?,” one of the primary questions adoptees have about their relinquishment, was difficult to comprehend.¹¹⁶ Deborah’s difficulty in accepting her birth mother’s story at its face value brings out the crucial roles played by cultural beliefs, values, and class positions in constructing the “truth” of a story.

On another level, “stories” come with certain structural similarities despite particularities in twists and turns in plots, and many different characters that they may include. A story has a beginning and an end, usually organized by chronological progression of the storyline, with the focus on the subject that is most relevant to the speaker –and, in

¹¹⁶ This is often shared by those adoptees that are close to Deborah’s age or younger. The older generation does not share this ambiguousness as much with the younger one, as the former more or less knows the answer to “why?” See below for more on this.

the case of interviews, the listener. In her study of people whose lives were disrupted by political events, trauma, and chronic illnesses, Becker (1997) describes a “moral force of normalizing ideologies” that heavily burdens people who have to live with, and deal with disruptions in life that defy seamless reorganization. In an attempt to recover the semblance of life, people with experiences of disruptions try to organize their life experiences in an order that gives meaning and cultural legitimacy (Becker, *ibid.*; Davidman, 2000; Kleinman, 1988; Riessman, 1993; Rubin, 1996). Especially, in the context of open-ended interviews, the researcher often recedes into the background, witnessing the speaker’s presentation and restoration of self through a creative weaving of cultural discourses that are available. Several of my interviewees ended their interview by remarking, “I’ve never thought about this issue in this way before. I think it was a good exercise,” or some variation of this. Interviews and concurrent articulation thus provide meaningful occasions in which participants discursively construct selves and meanings from their own lives.

By framing interviewees’ narratives as a story about adoption in this context, I underscore the fact that their life stories are told here with adoption experience in their mind. Being asked to elaborate on questions that are related to adoption, they are constructing a story that has certain ends in mind.¹¹⁷ Conversely, adoption is one among many topical windows onto their rich and varied lives. In the words of Jocelyn, age 27, being an adoptee

is only a small fraction of who you really are as a person. It can be important and it’s important. But it shouldn’t take over other parts of you. Because there are so many [aspects] of who I am that’s not just about adopted. It definitely contributes to who I am, but like I have a family, I am a woman, I am a human being, I am a sister, I am a daughter, I was a student, I am working, like all those other things that kind of make me who I am. Oh, I

¹¹⁷ As Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 3) pointedly paraphrase Briggs (1986), “interviews fundamentally, not incidentally, shape the form and content of what is said.” In different situations, with another topic, my interviewees may construct a slightly different version of their lives. Knowledge is inherently a product of social interactions, and interview context provides one such interaction.

just never get why some have tendency to think that's the only thing that you can tell them about. It's sort of like, they live in a *category*, and forget about all these other aspects that you have (my emphasis).

Recognizing the various aspects of their lives which cannot be subsumed under the *category* of an "adoptee," I present their stories told in diverse voices, men and women, older and younger, mid-westerners and East/West-coasters.¹¹⁸ They interpret what being adopted means in poignant and individually unique ways. But it is also important to understand that their stories make sense in a larger cultural milieu. To that extent, their stories tell a "meta-story" that is inflected by dominant cultural discourses regarding family, race and ethnicity, and individual identity in the US.

Finally, in following the adoptees' terminology of "story," I read their attempts to reclaim their own agency in shaping their life courses. As an object of transaction, adoptees in transnational adoptions were denied any agentic power in one of the most important decisions that influenced their lives. Adoptees' "stories" thus reveal their attempts to mold their lives, defying the odds of being the "perpetual victim" to be rescued and pitied. The tension between social structure (ideological beliefs) and human agency, which is the stuff of academic theorizing, finds its materialization in the lives of the adoptees. Just like anyone else, adoptees are actors who author the direction of their life within the confines of history. Adoptees' life experiences, as predicated on structural premises as such, are lucid ways in which, the meanings and values of life depend on the way in which one attempts to create, and succeeds in, realizing the life courses that were presumed to be out of reach. For instance, the desire to combat the stereotypes of being a "third world orphan" which can be

¹¹⁸ Narrative analysts caution us about the inescapable problem of transparency in transcription and analysis of narratives. Despite all the precautions about researchers' role in shaping the stories given by the subjects, researchers are "presenting" a story of their subjects in ways that are theoretically meaningful to them (see for ex., Personal Narratives Group (1989), Riessman (1993)). Hence, my presentation of the adoptees' stories below is colored by my own preconceived notions and theoretical positions.

most strongly seen among adoptees whom I grouped as an older cohort,¹¹⁹ finds expression in their volunteer efforts and community activities that they make toward promoting the welfare of the “third world” children and children adopted from abroad. Several Korean adoptees are also currently proud parents of Asian adoptees. They often are either active organizers or participants of Culture camps among transnational adoptees and Asian American children, Culture Day celebrations, local and national workshops for adoptive parents and/or adoptees on various issues. Looking for ways in which their experiences can enrich the lives of others, especially other adoptees, these adoptees bring seasoned understandings and fresh perspectives into adoptive parenting.

Generations, Cultural Moments, and Korean Adoptee History

“Korean adoptee” consciousness has grown out of one’s life circumstances and socio-cultural contexts. It was a sense of awakening that the adoptees experienced but could not name. As mentioned earlier, the Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees (“The Gathering”) held in Washington, D.C. in September of 1999 marked a historical moment that congealed the organization efforts of many already existing local adoptee organizations.¹²⁰ This Gathering was at once the result of the desires and demands of the adoptees to see their organization effort to its fruition on a national level and the moment that legitimized and solidified Korean adoptee identities. *Seeds from a Silent Tree: an Anthology by Korean Adoptees* (edited by Bishoff and Rankin) published in 1997, offers one example of adoptee organizations’ efforts prior to The Gathering itself. The editors of the

¹¹⁹ Klein (2000, 2003) offers a historical description of political ideologies that pervade the relationships between Asian countries and the US from mid-1940s through late 1960s.

¹²⁰ In fact, KAAAN held its first annual conference earlier in the same year. So the year 1999 was a significant landmark year for adoptee organizing.

volume solicited auto-biographical short stories and artworks from approximately 30 adoptees in the mid-1990s, when most of these adoptees lived in isolation. Publication attempts like this, along with technological development such as internet communication and websites, created an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) of Korean adoptees who were in anticipation of The Gathering.

This does not mean that The Gathering did not have its own problems and conflicts. Held over a three-day weekend in September, this was a significant event where Korean adoptees came to experience almost visceral connections to someone like themselves, who knew what it was like to grow up as a Korean adoptee in this country (and elsewhere¹²¹), rendering their consciousness raising an emotionally meaningful one. On the other hand, it was also a place where they began to realize the complexity of their identities and witnessed the differences that existed among them. The experiences from this Gathering and subsequent organization efforts on a local level prodded their thoughts and attempts to constructively envision their identities anew. Attended by almost 400 adoptees, this Gathering is something that the adoptees, especially the older ones, continue to remember and talk about. The ways in which this Gathering is remembered by older and younger adoptees illuminate the important differences rooted in generational gaps. Whereas older adoptees were the primary actors and enthusiastic participants who drove this Gathering, younger adoptees were largely on the receiving end of information. Additionally, most of the younger adoptees whom I met or interviewed had not attended this Gathering, although a few had heard about it from their adoptee friends or learned about it through media such as

¹²¹ In fact, there were several adoptees that came to join The Gathering from various Western European countries, such as Sweden, France, etc. See Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (1999).

internet websites. All these point to the importance of looking at historical and cultural periods in which the adoptees grew up and made sense of their identities.

Consequently, “Listening to Adoptee Stories” below, is organized into three chapters, marking different cultural periods when these adoptees have grown up in the United States. These cultural periods are conceived as the times in which differing cultural discourses related to the adoptees’ ethnic minority status and the adoptive family dynamics in the US became available and culturally legitimized. It is important here to note that these different discourses often overlap in any given period, but the popular support and cultural consent given to specific discourses varied, depending on cultural periods. I try to portray historical overview of the periods through a lens offered by individual lives that reflect the general cultural ethos of these various times.

Clearly cultural milieu is a larger force that individuals have to contend with. But what needs to be emphasized is the fact that these individuals, by living through their own cultural milieus, make sense of, and find meaningful lessons from, the cultural discourses that dominate the era. In other words, individuals are the embodiments of a cultural milieu, illustrating the dialectical nature of the two entities: society/culture and individual. Needless to mention, individuals reject some of the practices and beliefs that are at odds with their own interests in any given milieu, but the ways in which they do so also reflect dominant cultural discourses, as these discourses provide discursive contexts even for conflictual understandings and opposing points of view. In the process, the adoptees become the carriers of that cultural milieu, embodying its values and actively shaping the generational gaps that exist among adoptees who grew up in different cultural periods.

As Terrell and Modell claim, “studying adoption will preserve the centrality of individual experiences in the composition of social worlds and cultural texts” (1994, 160); we

will clearly witness here the agency of Korean adoptees molding their lives and charting their life journeys in ways that were not in any way predetermined by their humble beginnings in this country. Their narratives as a whole point to the dialectic processes of social forces and human creativities, presenting their authorial power over their lives within the milieu that they inhabit. On the other hand, the cultural milieus and ideologies are embodied in individual stories and life trajectories, as these provide the historical and cultural context in which one's story is understood and made sense of. As a consequence, there are clear differences between older (aged 50 and above), middle-aged (aged 40 and above), and younger adoptees (in their 20s and 30s). These differences emanate from those of cultural milieus which provide slightly different discourses surrounding the construction of identities and historically shifting meanings of race/ethnicity, culture, and kinship. Therefore, the agentive moments and frames of reference audible in their narratives should be understood in the context of the cultural and historical milieu in which they form their values, meanings, and understandings of their own life courses. And in this way, their stories can be seen as stories of American cultural milieus, and vice versa.

The next section, "Where Did They Come From?" introduces the historical background of transnational adoption of Korean children in the US. Relying on a few recent works in this area of research, this section describes where these Korean children began to arrive from, and how these children figure in the larger sociopolitical representation of international adoption in relation to Korea and the US. In the beginning of adoption of Korean children, international adoption was a relatively new topic in sociocultural discourse either in Korea or in the US. The US political economic involvement with South Korea during the Korean War and its aftermath largely shaped and constructed international adoption as humanitarian and patriotic efforts on the part of American parents (Klein, 2000,

2003; Takaki, 1990(1979)). In sum, before listening to adoptees' stories, this section provides a brief overview of the historical backgrounds and cultural contexts in which transnational adoption of Korean children has taken place and how Korean adoptees' lives began in the US.

Where Did They Come From?: A Historical Background of Adoption of Korean Children in the US

The Korean War (1950-1953) between South and North Korea ravaged the Korean peninsula and left the country permanently separated into North and South (cf. Cummings, 1981, 1990; McWilliams and Piotrowski, 1993). Soon after gaining independence from Japanese colonization in 1945, the Korean government had not had enough time to stabilize itself before facing this atrocity. The Korean War was both a result and precipitator of Cold War confrontations in which United States military and political power was at stake against the Communist encroachment. The strategic location of the Korean peninsula in terms of geographical proximity to China and Japan has historically been the prime consideration in the United States' dealings with Korea since the Korean War (Cummings, *ibid.*; Moon, 1997).

Korean wartime contact between UN soldiers (especially US soldiers) and Korean women yielded a large number of interracial children. Katharine Moon (1997) locates the beginning of military prostitution at this period, although the scarcity of the sources on this military prostitution before 1953 when the War ended has been a stumbling block for pinpointing the existence of prostitution around 1945, when the US troops first arrived in Korea. The institution of military prostitution played a significant role in upholding American military morale, and it helped to keep the US military on South Korean soil despite many disagreements and occasional threats of withdrawals (Moon, 1997). In the

South Korean cultural sphere, it also contributed to the stigma associated with women in unions with foreign men, especially those of different races (H. Kim, 2007b; Moon 1997, 1998; Yuh, 2002).¹²²

One of the many problems that Koreans have not adequately addressed in their analyses of the Korean War was the existence of children, born via the relationships between Korean women and foreign soldiers.¹²³ Some of these Amerasian children popularly called as “tuki,” meaning “foreign devil,” or “honheol-a,” literally meaning “mixed-blood child” in Korea, were left wandering the streets for food and shelter. Although full-blooded Korean children, who were abandoned or orphaned, or who lost contact with their families, were also part of the street life, these Amerasian children and youth suffered from added discrimination for their physical difference and for their symbolic status in a country long characterized by ethnic homogeneity. Clement’s autobiography provides important material through which we can get a glimpse of children’s lives lived on the streets of Korea at the time:

We always kept a wary eye out for Korean police and soldiers. They sometimes conducted “sweeps” to catch street gangs and lock them up. Since I was biracial, I had to be particularly careful. People like me had a way of disappearing when caught, forever. This was no secret in Korea. We never led a settled existence while on the streets. Every night we searched for a safe place to sleep. We huddled into a tight pack to conserve body heat. Korea is not tropical and the nights can be extremely cold in winter. Freezing temperatures and snow are not uncommon so staying warm was not easy.

¹²² All these sources indicate that, since 1945, roughly a million Korean women have been engaged in military prostitution around US army bases. Interestingly enough, the offspring between Korean and Japanese partners are not stigmatized as long as the Japanese parent disguises his/her identity. It is not clear, however, that this was the case during and surrounding the Japanese Occupation era (1910-45). Soh’s (2009) study of comfort women’s reproductive history reveals the fact that many women had offspring right after the internment. Although she does not mention whether some of these children might have a Japanese father—as Japanese military at the time included a large number of Korean men as well—it is an interesting question to explore further. I thank Ethel Brooks for raising a question on this point.

¹²³ Not only children, but also women sexually involved with foreigners belonged to the stigmatized population in Korea. However, unlike the adopted children, Korean military brides, for instance, became the cultural icon full of stereotypes for Asian women in the US. See Yuh (2002) for a historically grounded work on Korean military brides.

We took shelter under bridges, inside culverts and in bombed buildings. Large rats were an ever-present menace and made some places unusable since the rat population was life-threatening even for five-year-olds. . . . We were literally black with dirt, dressed in rags, smelled badly and had a well-earned reputation for stealing. . . . The Korean people are not a cruel people, but in the 1950s most of them survived by only a narrow margin and family had to come first. Outsiders, particularly bastard children (or worse, biracial bastard children) were beyond the pale (1998:9).

The process of mutual engagement between the Korean government and international adoption agencies has accompanied the reconstruction of the modern Korean nation which has predicated itself upon the racial ideology of “Single Ethnicity” (*tanil minjok*,¹²⁴ cf. Kim and Choi, 1998; S. Moon, 1998).¹²⁵ Destroyed by Japan and subsequent wars, the South Korean government needed to produce disciplined and productive citizens to shoulder the burden of re-building the nation. It further created the reign of terror, wherein threats of impending attacks from the communist regime of the North were constantly deployed to suppress any dissident and/or critical perspectives.¹²⁶

On the other hand, the development of urban areas came at the expense of rural sustainability. People’s migration to urban industrial zones from rural areas, the use of cheap female labor in the development of the export-oriented economy (K. Park, 1993, 1995), the rearrangement of people’s registry and the family law with an attempt to politically discipline the populace, scarcity of reliable contraceptives during this hard time, and patriarchal beliefs on valuation of male offspring, were all conducive to the increase of a “floating, or surplus population” –to use Marxian parlance –of children and youth.

¹²⁴ 단일민족

¹²⁵ This phrase can be translated in many ways: Given the cultural meanings of the term, it can be termed, “Ethnic homogeneity,” “Oneness of Koreans,” “Unified Ethnicity,” etc. I use “Single Ethnicity,” as it is a literal translation.

¹²⁶ As Moon (1997) and others argue, the presence of the US military was symbolic of the always-present possibility of wars, and, as mentioned earlier, crucial to maintaining US military presence in Korea was the existence of military prostitution (Brock and Thistlethwaite, 1996; Enloe, 1990, 2000; Sturdevant and Stoltzfus, 1992).

International adoption of Korean children in this instance suited the newly re-built Korean government's need to project the ideology of "Single Ethnicity" (*tanil minjok*) and to regulate reproduction by restricting the growth of the population.¹²⁷ Those who grew up in Korea during the 1960s through the 1980s easily recall the state slogans related to the politically appropriate rate of reproduction: "let's raise our TWO kids well, regardless whether a boy or a girl."¹²⁸ In this atmosphere, there was little room for those who did not fit into an already existing scheme of who Koreans *should be*. One of the central ideological struggles that the Korean government waged at the time was to define what "Single Ethnicity" of Koreans should consist of, making the body politic to be the critical component of nation-building. "Single Ethnicity" (*tanil minjok*) has been achieved, if at all, largely by the systematic purging of perceived differences among Koreans either with physical force or with ideological education along with the creation and distribution of ideological discourses that purport to describe what "Single Ethnicity" entailed.¹²⁹

International adoption of Korean children¹³⁰ started in 1955,¹³¹ when a couple named Harry and Bertha Holt adopted 8 Amerasian children from Korea, adding them to their

¹²⁷ One can see a similar instance of a nation-state's attempt to reorganize the realm of reproduction that has contributed to the development of international adoption in Romania. Gail Kligman (1995) shows how the Romanian government created a pool of abandoned children by banning abortion. Although, at the outset, this legal ban of abortion was a measure to solidify the socialist regime of Ceausescu and to discipline and manage population deploying gender and familial ideologies, the increasing number of children in orphanages contributed to the development of international adoption of these children to the US and Western Europe.

¹²⁸ 아들, 딸, 구별 말고 둘만 낳아 잘 기르자. This slogan also represents slowly changing perceptions regarding gender differences, not only an attempt to curtail the rate of reproduction. The previous generation's preference for boys over girls was rooted in Confucian values, along with economic factors in which males would bring home incomes higher than females.

¹²⁹ Along with ethnic heritage, there were regional, urban-rural, class and gender differences that constitute the social hierarchy operating in Korea. However, the ideology of "Single Ethnicity" effectively stifled the meaningful political discussion about these other differences, as the South Korean government exploited the political tensions existing between South and North Korea to heighten the issue of national security over inner turmoil produced by different constituents. See Choi (1997, 1998), Kim and Choi (1998).

¹³⁰ I use the phrase, "Korean children," to connote largely South Korean children. The military alliance between South Korea and the US, and the subsequent development of diplomatic ties between these two

existing family of 6 biological children. With Baptist Christian missionary zeal, the Holts established a non-profit organization named “Holt International Children’s Services” (HICS) to promote the adoption of interracial children and war orphans, i.e., the products of Korean War¹³² as a temporary measure (Holt, 1986, 1991; D.S. Kim, 2007).¹³³

This institution, setting the important precedent for what would soon become a burgeoning industry, has become a major conduit for international adoption of Korean children.¹³⁴ Dong Soo Kim tells us “from 1955 to 1970, a total of 80,250 children¹³⁵ have

countries effectively curtailed any possibility of North Korean intrusion into the realm of international adoption. However, I here note the ambiguity of South/North Korean distinction in terms of unaccounted-for children in Korea, especially in the 1950s through the 1960s. The large number of “orphans” in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950-53) may indicate the possibility that some children might have been separated from their parents in the North. We may not be able to ascertain whether all the adoptees came from South Korea at this time. However, the adoptees in the 1970s and later are certainly South Korean children as the adoption agencies began to keep more detailed paperwork.

¹³¹ Some sources cite 1956 not 1955 as the starting point of Korean adoption. The difficulty in ascertaining the exact time can be traced to the bureaucratic inadequacy of Korean government at the time, and the unprecedented nature of international adoption in general. Bertha Holt (1986, 1991) details the events precipitating the adoption of Amerasian children in Korea. The Holts could adopt children in late 1955, but the majority of American families had to wait due to the bureaucratic obstacles placed by the US at the time. Nevertheless, as seen from Figure 2, private adoptions of Korean children happened before 1955 as well.

¹³² Currently, there are four main adoption agencies closely regulated by Korean government: the Holt International, Eastern Social Welfare Society, Inc. (a.k.a., Eastern Child Welfare Society), Korea Social Services, and Social Welfare Society. There have also been smaller organizations or private contractors that work for international adoptions in Korea. However, the influence of the Holt International in establishing visibility of international adoption in Korea has been magnanimous, to such an extent that the name “Holt” in daily parlance in South Korea became almost synonymous with orphanages that had ties to US international adoption industry, especially around 1960s and 70s. The symbolic power ascribed to Holt International depended upon its origination from the US as well as its early visible presence in the soon-to-be burgeoning industry and the large number of children it could send overseas. It is also reflected in Figure 1, which shows the fact that majority of these children were adopted by the US. Hübinette (2003: 255) estimates that more than half of children adopted abroad via Holt International as a whole were Korean. In that sense, Korean children indeed were (and are) “Cadillac of Holt International adoptions” as Molly Holt once termed it. On the power of American cultural hegemony in South Korea, see Choi (1997, 1998), H. Kim (2007b), K. Park (1997), N. Kim (2008).

¹³³ It is unclear how many children adopted were, in fact, interracial. It may be due to many reasons other than incomplete data compiled by the orphanages or immigration offices during early years of adoption when interracial children were the main targets of adoption. The rule of hypodescent operating in the US culture also dictated the identity of interracial children to be Korean. Clement (1998) points out not only the stigma of interracial children in Korea, but also experiences of discrimination that he went through once he was adopted in the US. His family had to move several times due to his racial identity. Most adoptees that I saw and met in adoptee meetings were full-blood Koreans with exception of a few interracial people. Not surprisingly, the number of them present in current adoptee organizing efforts is not very high.

¹³⁴ HICS is currently dealing with international adoption on a global scale, handling adoptions of children from other countries as well as Korea. These countries include Russia, Vietnam, China to name a few

been abandoned” (2007: 9), and states “what was originally started as a critical rescue mission in Korea has now become a permanent institution of child welfare services¹³⁶ on an international level” (*ibid.*: 7). Figure 1 illustrates the countries to which these children were moving. During the 50 years of international adoption (1953-2003), 66% of children were adopted by American parents. The US dominance in this industry is consistent, although other Western European countries such as France and Sweden were also the big recipients of Korean children.

Figures 2 and 3 show the number of children adopted out of Korea between the years 1953 and 2005. The continued and ever-increasing foreign adoption of Korean children into the late-1960s through the height of 1980s, despite Korea’s economic ascendance in the Pacific Rim capitalist development, attests to the fact that something more than the ideology of “Single Ethnicity” (*tanil minjok*) was at work here. Gender and familial ideologies were continuously used to evade the social structural problems that accompany the rising gap between classes and different social sectors.¹³⁷ Clearly Korean children were adopted in highest numbers in the 1970s and 1980s, and international adoption has continued to grow since its beginning (see Tables 1 & 3).

However, what happened during late 1980s marked a significant decrease in the number of Korean children sent out abroad. The year 1988 was an especially remarkable moment for Korea, being the year in which Korea hosted the 1988 Summer Olympics.

among many more. The point to remember is that HICS had its initial beginning in Korea, and expanded from there to other countries.

¹³⁵ Kim (*ibid.*) also mentions the number may have been underestimated, because of inadequacy in reporting and bureaucratic management, especially during this period.

¹³⁶ This is a poignant phrasing, as many parents of lower income –especially in rural areas and in impoverished places—utilized orphanages funded by these agencies as temporary childcare facilities (see esp. Borshay-Liem, 2000). In these instances, parents would drop off their child(ren) and signed forms regarded to relinquishment of their legal rights as parents, thinking that they could always come back after a while to reclaim their child(ren).

¹³⁷ Choi (1997) offers an incisive critique of “postcolonial” Korean subjectivity.

Amidst the increasing international focus on Korea, the tumultuous transition from a military government to democratic leadership took place, raising self-awareness of Koreans vis-à-vis its international peers. For journalistic sensationalism, Western journalists frequently directed attention to Korean cultural practices that could attract more audiences. Often their reports incited strong patriotic reactions among Koreans.¹³⁸ On the issue of international adoption, for instance, Matthew Rothschild's article, "Babies for Sale: South Koreans make them, Americans buy them" (1988) garnered attention as it portrayed Korea as the country built on the backs of its orphans. With the rising nationalism/self-awareness specific to this era, the Korean government was forced to adopt more stringent policies regarding the practice while promoting domestic adoptions (B. Lee, 2007). Currently, the Korean government is placing unofficial quotas on the number of children—usually around 2,000 children—that all the adoption agencies can send abroad each year.¹³⁹

D.S. Kim (2007) pinpoints the rapid economic and social changes as the precipitating cause of high rates of illegitimacy and child abandonment in Korea. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the circumstances of the children adopted, although this reflects only those recorded.

"Abandoned" children who dominated the early part of the history are increasingly replaced

¹³⁸ One example was the practice of "dog-eating" among Koreans. Animal activists in Western Europe, especially those in France, condemned the practice at the time, calling Koreans barbaric. They urged the Olympic Committee to reconsider its decisions regarding Korea as the host country. Koreans held a civil demonstration, asking for apologies from the newspapers and reporters involved.

¹³⁹ This drastic reduction of Korean children to be adopted abroad diminished Korean children's presence in the adoption market in recent years. In international adoption to the US, Chinese children came to dominate the market since 1992, when the international adoption of Chinese children was finally legalized. According to Volkman, "by the end of the 1990s, China had become the leading 'sending' country of children to the United States and elsewhere in the world" (2005b: 82). This shift from Korean adoptees to Chinese adoptees as the major group of adoptees prompted scholars to speculate that Korean adoption is potentially on the decline. However, one should consider Korea's rising economic status in the world and its rapidly falling birthrate in recent years, which puts annual birthrates in Korea well below some Western European countries. According to *The Korea Times*, published in Korea, Korean birth rate ranked 4th lowest in the world in 2007 and 2nd lowest over Hong Kong in 2008 (Bae, 2008; C. Park, 2007). It was not at all sudden, as a BBC correspondent in Seoul noted worries as early as 2003 (Gluck, 2003). Given this population shift, it requires some exploration as to why Korea still ranks 4th and 5th highest in terms of number of children sent to the US for adoption (see Table 3).

by children from single mothers. One can glean from this fact that although Korea might have grown economically, its gender inequality and cultural expectations regarding proper womanhood remained to be constrained by pre-existing Confucianism and misogyny. Lack of resources for single mothers, gender discrimination at work and job opportunities, and sexual ideologies that legitimize only marital sex and offspring, all contribute to this relative increase in children from single mothers.¹⁴⁰ Another factor to consider is that single mothers who gave up their children for adoption in recent years were in their teens (cf. H. Kim, 2007b: 138-39).

Lack of social resources for handicapped and disabled children added to the increasing number of children taken care of by orphanages. Figures 5 and 6 break down sex and disability status¹⁴¹ of the adopted children overseas. Interestingly, the gender ratio of adoptees abroad is largely even, with male adoptees slightly higher in numbers in the recent period. This can be another indication that, although economic reasons do figure in child abandonment,¹⁴² they cannot be the entire story any longer.

In Figure 6, disabled children comprise only 24% of all children adopted abroad. However, as Table 2 compares the disability status of adoptees in domestic and foreign

¹⁴⁰ Studies on birthmothers (Dorow, 1999; H. Kim, 2007a, 2007b) also reflect this reality that women are often responsible for children and that they continue to feel an immense sense of guilt over their decision. Birthfathers are relatively absent in this venture as Korean patrilineal and Confucian morals largely absolve social and legal responsibility of childcare from men, especially when it comes to children out of wedlock.

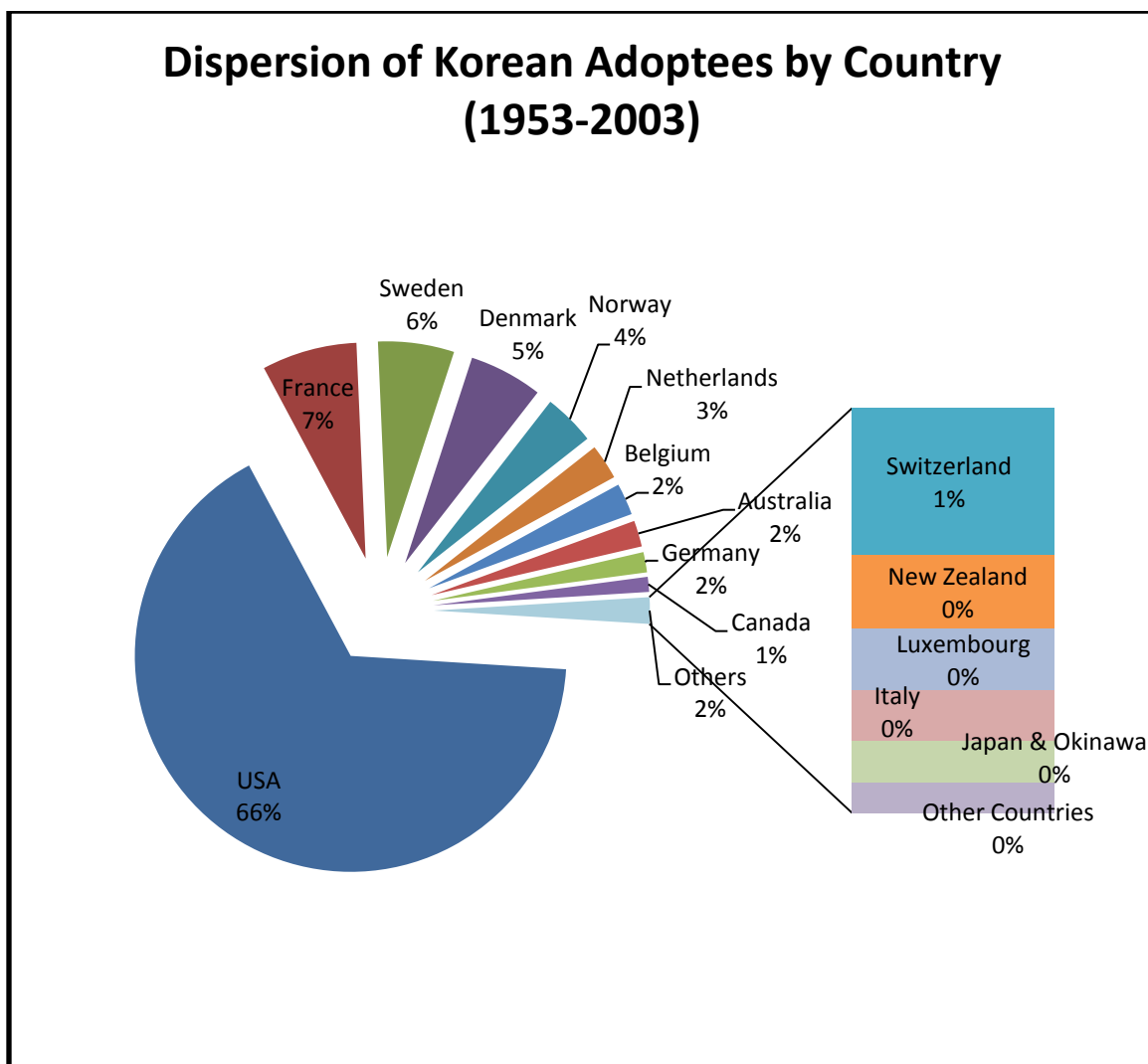
¹⁴¹ It has to be noted from the outset that it is unclear as to what constitutes “disability” in these data. Disability in adoptable children may include older ages (than customary for adoption), bodily scars and deformities, twin status, etc., as well as physical disabilities. With the increase in infant adoptions, it has been difficult to ascertain disability status of children so young. In that case, many physical tests may be performed, measuring weights, heights, skull sizes, breadth of chest of children to predict their health status. In one of my encounters with Korean social workers in Seoul in 2002, a social worker who solicited me to be an adoptive parent informed me that I would receive a healthy infant since I was a Korean American. “Koreans can always bring their children back and complain. We don’t want that to happen in *our* back yard.” She also explained that these estimates are used in the hospitals associated with her adoption agency to classify children into two categories of adoptable children: one for domestic and the other for foreign adoption.

¹⁴² B. Lee (2007) pinpoints the 1997 Asian economic crisis as the factor in the increase of children needing social services between 1997-2000.

adoptions, it is clear that the majority of disabled children were adopted overseas. Also Figure 7 shows the relative increase in Korean domestic adoptions over the years, although foreign adoptions still significantly outnumber domestic ones. The ratio of domestic adoption in Korea to that of foreign adoption continues to grow, however, picking up speed since the 1980s.

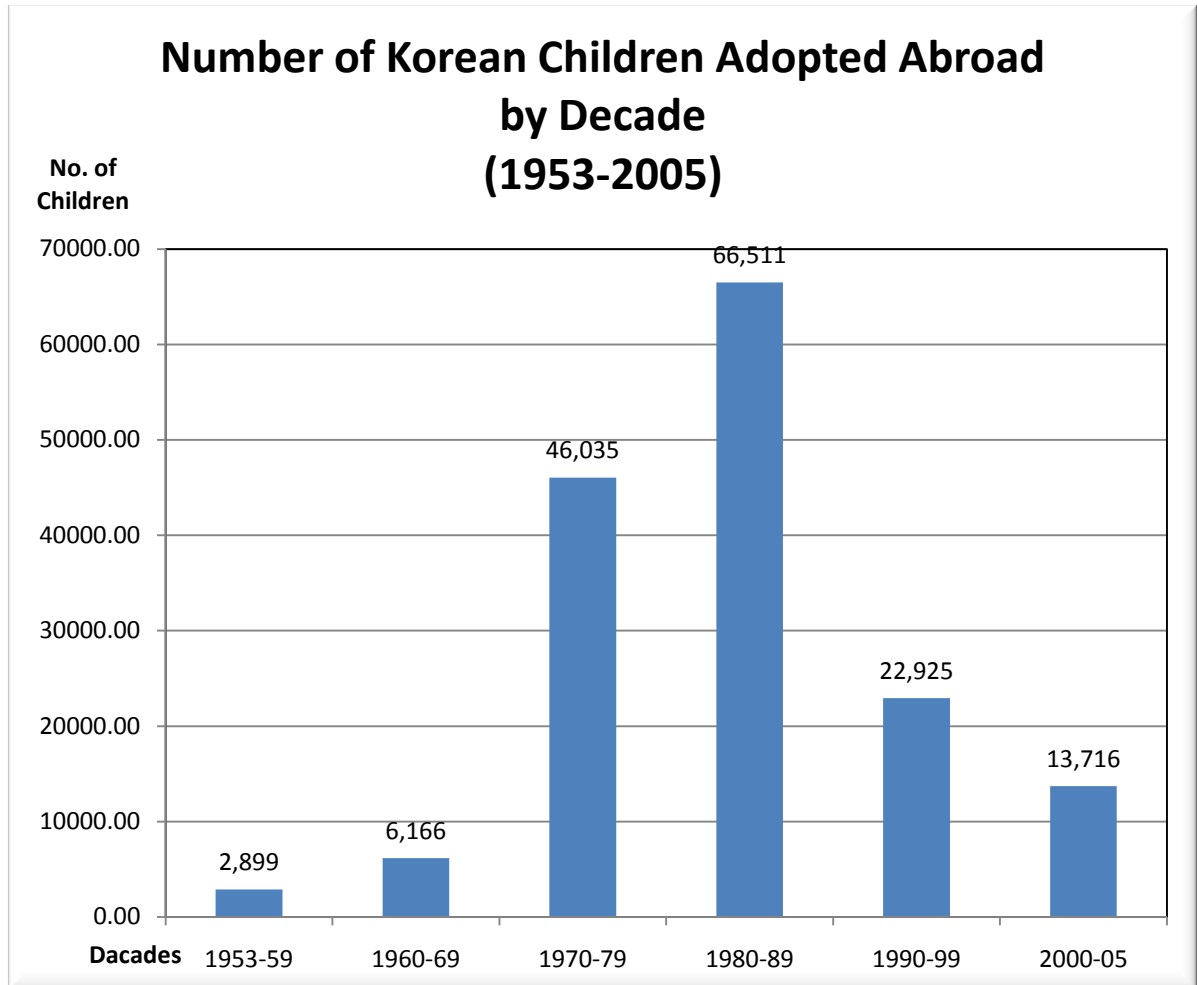
This is the socio-demographic and political economic context from which Korean adoptees came to the US. The early adoptees are now reaching their golden years, and Korean infants continue to be adopted in this country. What are their stories? What can they tell us about their experience? One adoptee felt all her life that she had been *shipwrecked* on this continent. Whatever the differences, most adoptees share similar beginnings: coming to this country, with nothing but clothes on their backs. “Shipwrecked” is a deeply poignant metaphor of the sentiment shared by transnational adoptees.

Figure 1: Korean Adoptees by Country (1953-2003)



Total Number of Adoptees: 154,981

Data: E. Kim (2007b); MOHW.

Figure 2: Number of Korean Children Adopted Abroad by Decade (1953-2005)

Graph chart is made with data provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Number of Korean Children Adopted Overseas by Year (1953-2005)

Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.
		1960	638	1970	1,932	1980	4,144	1990	2,962	2000	2,360
		1961	660	1971	2,725	1981	4,628	1991	2,197	2001	2,436
		1962	254	1972	3,490	1982	6,434	1992	2,045	2002	2,365
1953	4	1963	442	1973	4,688	1983	7,263	1993	2,290	2003	2,287
1954	8	1964	462	1974	5,302	1984	7,924	1994	2,262	2004	2,258
1955	59	1965	451	1975	5,077	1985	8,837	1995	2,180	2005	2,010
1956	671	1966	494	1976	6,597	1986	8,680	1996	2,080		
1957	486	1967	626	1977	6,159	1987	7,947	1997	2,057		
1958	930	1968	949	1978	5,917	1988	6,463	1998	2,443		
1959	741	1969	1,190	1979	4,148	1989	4,191	1999	2,409		
Total	2,899		6,166		46,035		66,511		22,925		13,716

Total Number of Children: 158,252

Revised from E. Kim (2007); MOHW

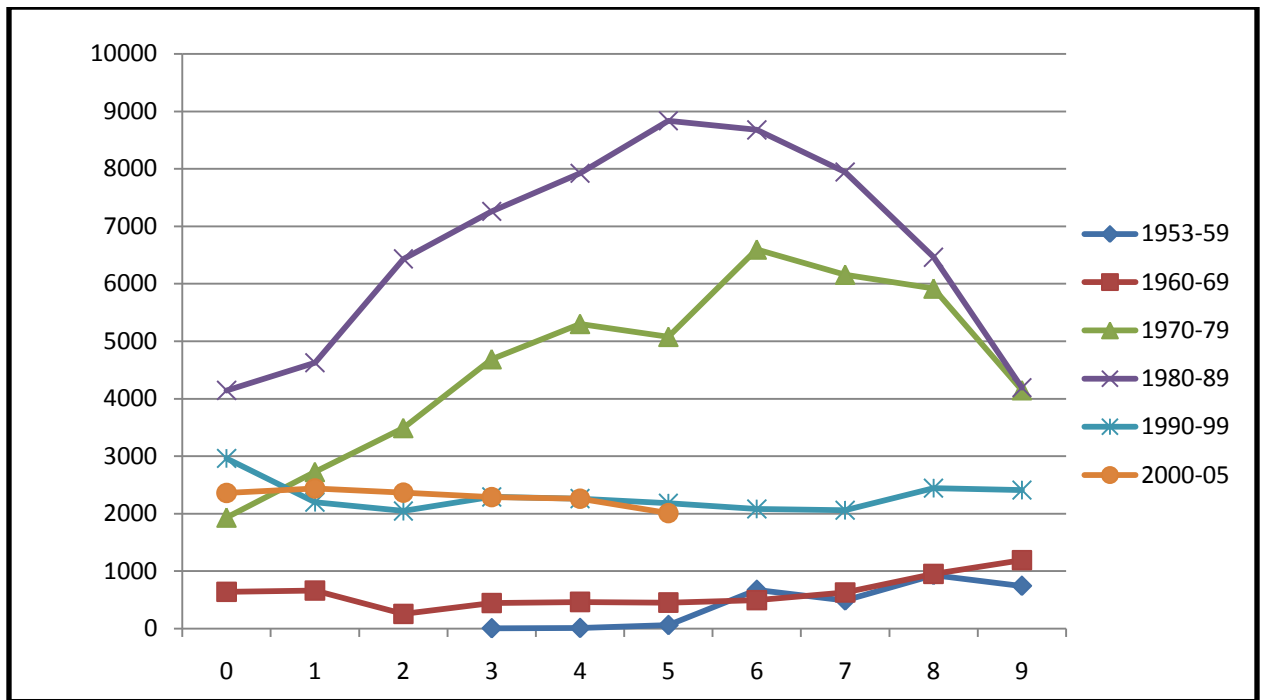
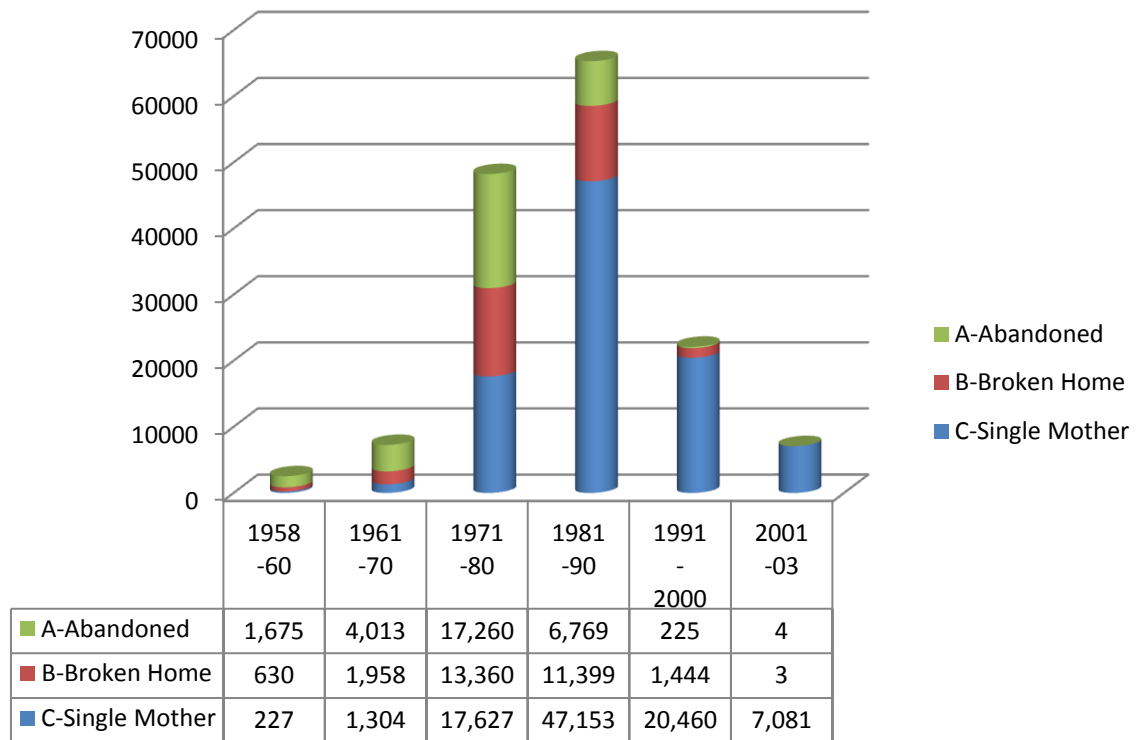
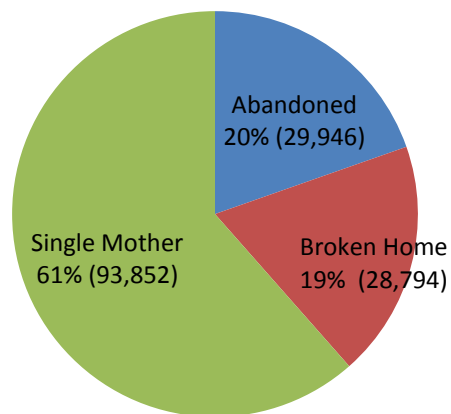
Figure 3: Overall Trend of Numbers of Adoptees Sent Out by Year

Figure 4: Circumstances of Adoption for Overseas Korean Adoptees, 1958-2003**Figure 4-1**

Overall Characteristics of Adoption Circumstances, 1958-2003



Total Number of Adoptees: 152,592
 Data for Figures 4 and 5: E. Kim (2007); MOHW

Figure 5: Overseas Adoptions by Sex (1958-2003)

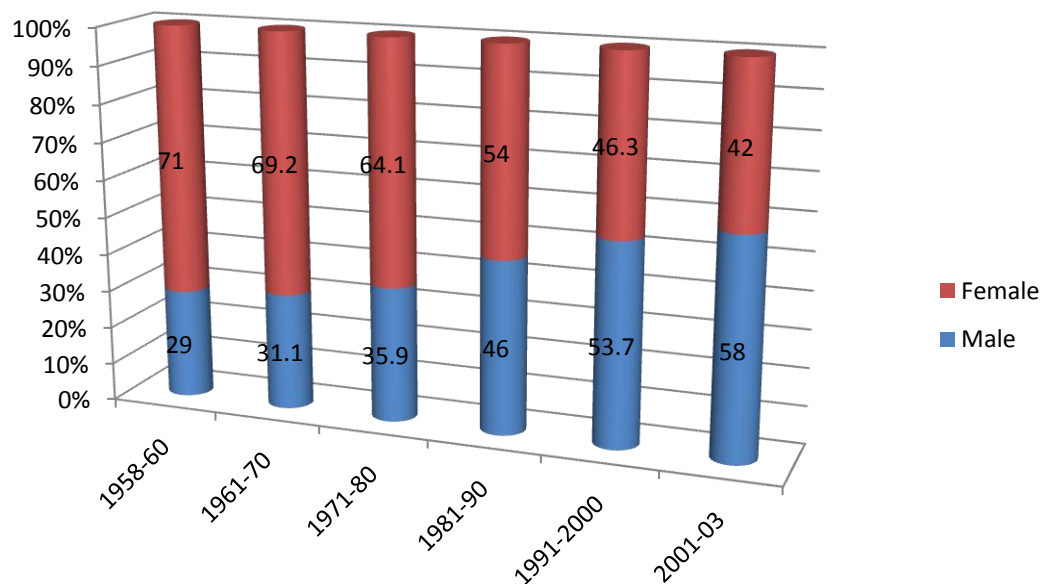
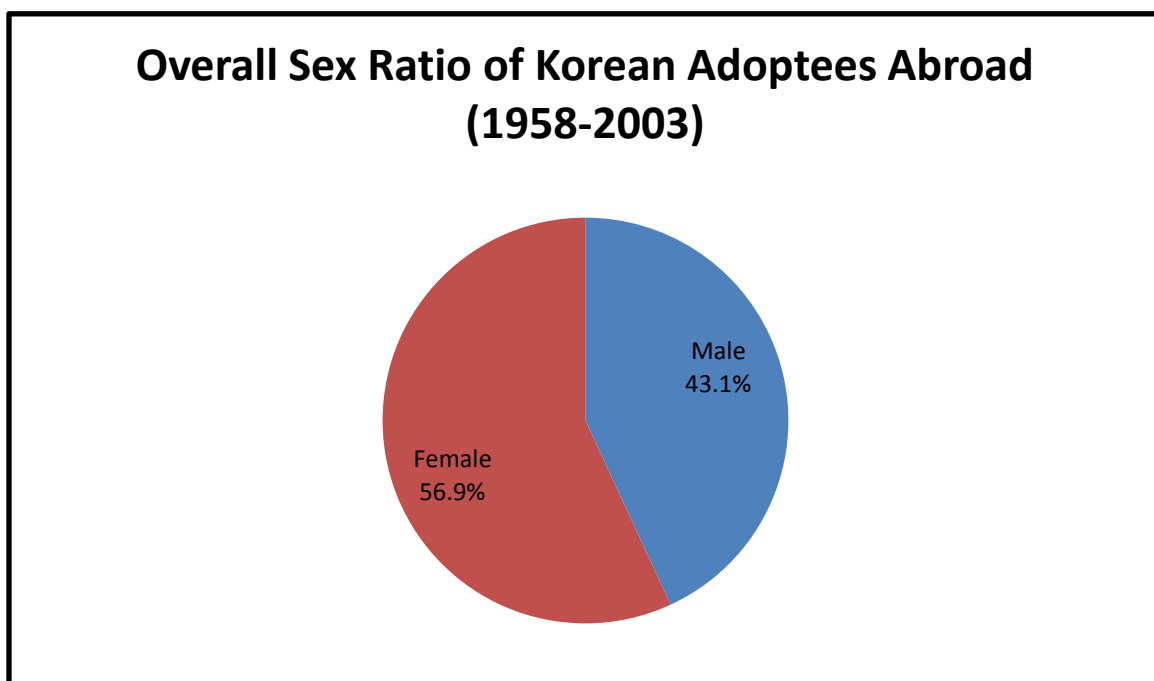
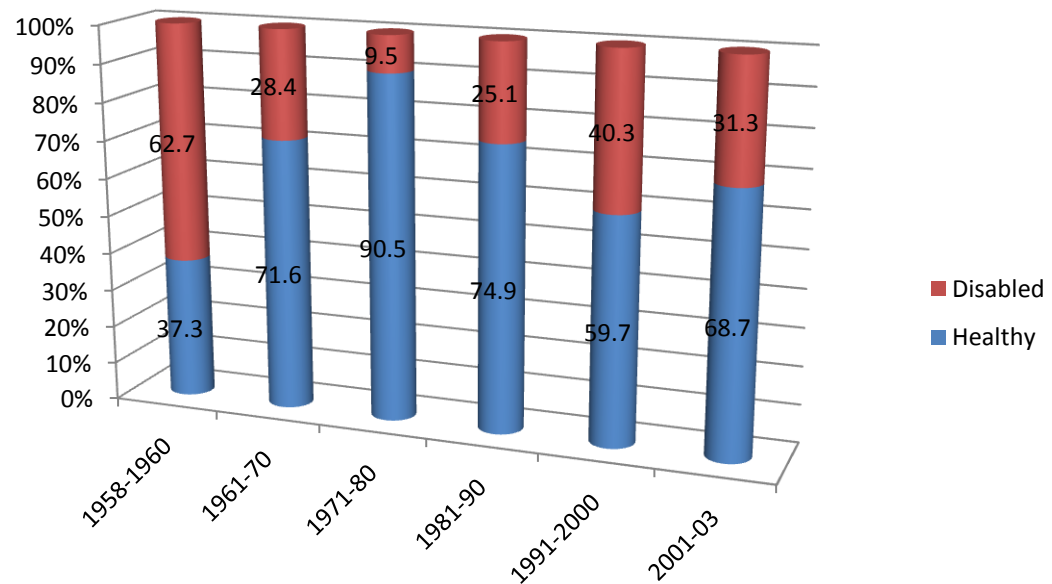
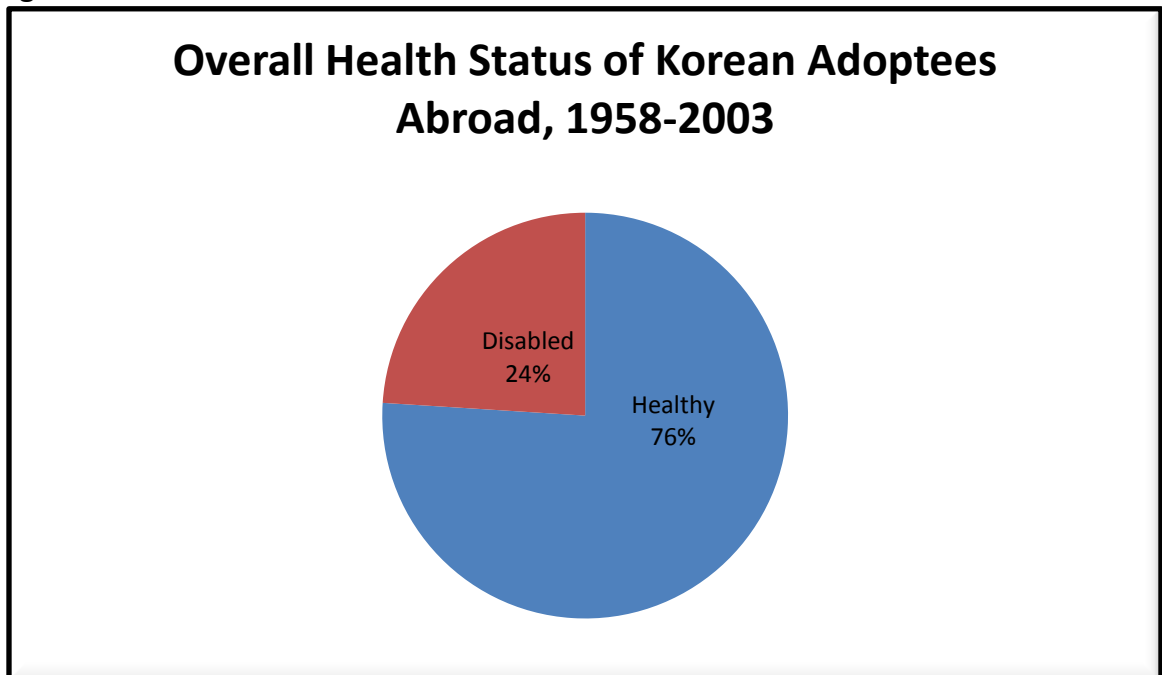


Figure 5-1



Data: D. S. Kim (2007); MOHW
Total Number of Adoptees: 152,592¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Original data included 1,216 adoptees (adopted between 1955 and 1957) whose sex and health status are unknown. I removed these from my figures.

Figure 6: Overseas Adoptees by Health Status (1958-2003)**Figure 6-1**

Data: D. S. Kim (2007); MOHW
 Total Number of Adoptees: 152,592¹⁴⁴

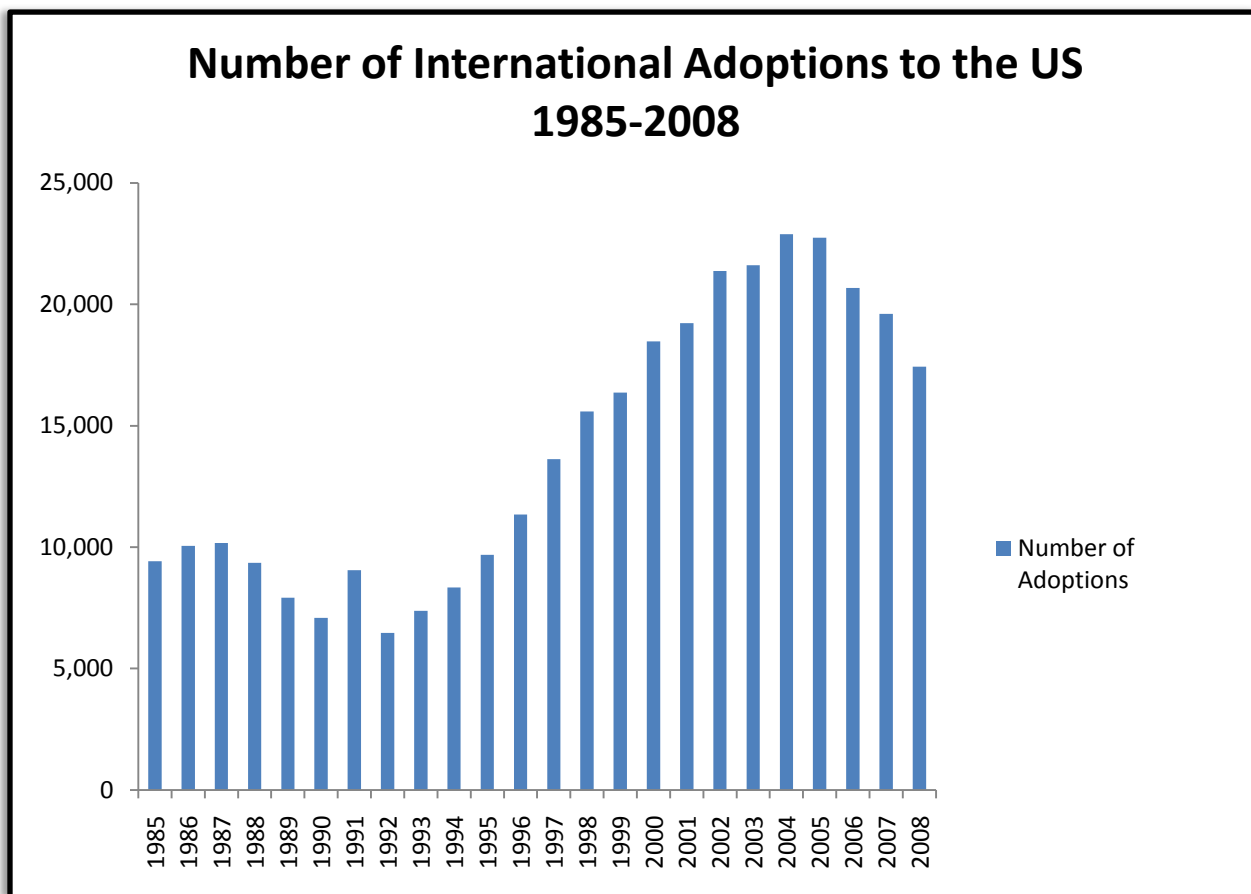
¹⁴⁴ Original data included 1,216 adoptees (adopted between 1955 and 1957) whose sex and health status are unknown. I removed these from my figures.

Table 2: Disability Status of Children Adopted Internationally & Domestically, 1958-2002

Year	Number of Children			
	Domestic adoptions		International adoptions	
	Total	Disabled	Total	Disabled
1958-1960	168	0	2,532	1,588
1961-1970	4,206	0	7,275	2,064
1971-1980	15,304	1	48,247	4,598
1981-1985	15,424	3	35,078	7,058
1986-1990	11,079	9	30,243	9,320
1991-1995	5,817	100	10,974	4,892
1996	1,229	17	2,080	935
1997	1,412	12	2,057	784
1998	1,426	6	2,249	846
1999	1,726	14	2,409	825
2000	1,686	18	2,436	634
2001	1,770	14	2,436	743
2002	1,694	16	2,365	827
Total	62,941	210 (0.3%)	150,381	35,114 (23.4%)

Source: Adapted from B. J. Lee (2007)

Figure 7: Number of International Adoptions in the US, 1985-2008



Data: Office of Children's Issues, U.S. Dept. of State (2001, 2009).¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ In cases where the numbers given in one document did not match another, I used the most recent report.

Table 3: Top 5 Sending Countries & Their Numbers for Adoption in the US, 1985-2008

Year	1 st	2nd	3rd	4 th	5 th
1985	S. Korea 5,734	Colombia 624	Philippines 516	India 496	El Salvador 309
1986	S. Korea 6,275	Philippines 631	India 599	Colombia 547	Costa Rica 285
1987	S. Korea 5,991	India 809	Colombia 728	Philippines 584	Guatemala 303
1988	S. Korea 5,077	India 736	Colombia 732	Philippines 503	Paraguay 312
1989	S. Korea 3,544	Colombia 736	India 648	Philippines 465	Chile 253
1990	S. Korea 2,620	Colombia 631	Peru 440	Philippines 421	India 348
1991	Romania 2,594	S. Korea 1,818	Peru 705	Colombia 521	India 445
1992	S. Korea 1,840	Guatemala 418	Colombia 404	Philippines 357	India 352
1993	S. Korea 1,775	Russia 746	Guatemala 512	Colombia 426	Paraguay 412
1994	S. Korea 1,795	Russia 1,530	China 787	Paraguay 483	Guatemala 436
1995	China 2,130	Russia 1,896	S. Korea 1,666	Guatemala 449	India 371
1996	China 3,333	Russia 2,454	S. Korea 1,516	Romania 555	Guatemala 427
1997	Russia 3,816	China 3,597	S. Korea 1,654	Guatemala 788	Romania 612
1998	Russia 4,491	China 4,206	S. Korea 1,829	Guatemala 969	Vietnam 603
1999	Russia 4,348	China 4,101	S. Korea 2,008	Guatemala 1,002	Romania 895
2000	China 5,053	Russia 4,269	S. Korea 1,794	Guatemala 1,518	Romania 1,122
2001	China 4,681	Russia 4,279	S. Korea 1,870	Guatemala 1,609	Ukraine 1,246
2002	China 6,119	Russia 4,939	Guatemala 2,419	S. Korea 1,779	Ukraine 1,106
2003	China 6,859	Russia 5,209	Guatemala 2,328	S. Korea 1,790	Kazakhstan 825
2004	China 7,044	Russia 5,865	Guatemala 3,264	S. Korea 1,716	Kazakhstan 826
2005	China 7,906	Russia 4,639	Guatemala 3,783	S. Korea 1,630	Ukraine 821
2006	China 6,493	Guatemala 4,135	Russia 3,706	S. Korea 1,376	Ethiopia 732
2007	China 5,453	Guatemala 4,728	Russia 2,310	Ethiopia 1,255	S. Korea 939
2008	Guatemala 4,123	China 3,909	Russia 1,861	Ethiopia 1,725	S. Korea 1,065

Data: Office of Children's Issues, U.S. Dept. of State (2001, 2009).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ In cases where the numbers given in one document did not match another, I used the most recent report.

Chapter SIX. What Are Your Stories?: Korean American Adoptees Come of Age

Locating Adoptees' Lives in an American Cultural Milieu

The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 brought war orphans from the countries affected by World War II to the US (D. Kim, 2007), but the concept of international adoption was still quite foreign to many people by the 1950s.¹⁴⁷ As John Aeby, in his preface to *The Seed from the East* (1991), Bertha Holt's autobiographical account of her adoption of 8 Korean children, aptly states, "though they [the Holts] weren't the first to adopt children from overseas, they were the first to bring it to the public." The Holts successfully made the issue of international adoption public, framing it as a humanitarian effort to save Korean orphans that otherwise would perish amidst deprivation and tragic circumstances. In some circles, this move to sponsor or adopt these children was seen as a patriotic effort to participate in US international affairs by well-meaning US citizens (cf. Klein, 2000, 2003; Takaki, 1990 (1979)).

Figure 7 shows the number of international adoptees entering the US each year from 1985 to 2000. Although specific statistics of early international adoption are unclear, the figure will sufficiently illustrate the extent to which this country was becoming, as Pertman calls it, "an adoption nation" (2000). Table 3 illustrates the place of Korean adoptees in this rapidly growing international adoptee population. Although its presence has diminished relative to other emerging countries, South Korea has remained one of the top five sending

¹⁴⁷ Certainly, adoption itself is not a new thing in the US. Adoption practices, especially those of kin adoptions, informal adoptions, or child-sharing arrangements, are as old as human history. In the United States, adoption, as we now know it, was first legalized in 1851 in Massachusetts.

countries since 1985.¹⁴⁸ As trail-blazers, older Korean adoptees laid the groundwork for future growth of international adoption in this country in many significant ways. Adoptive parents often indicate that seeing Korean adoptees in other homes and learning about how well-adjusted and healthy they looked as one of the motivators in directing their choice for international adoption. But what does this all mean to the individuals who were moved out of their home country and transplanted to a foreign land?

The adoptees' stories below illustrate the historical moments and cultural discourses through which they make sense of their positions, envision their identities, and come to reinterpret their lives based on the lessons learned from their experiences. Although not necessarily meant to be representative, these stories trace socio-cultural currents present across different geographical areas during the cultural milieu of the 1960s through the 1980s.

Although I strive to present balanced accounts in terms of the gender and age of the participants, this is not in any way a move toward generalization about Korean adoptee experiences. I selected individual stories based on the interviewees' ages, and their willingness to open themselves up to further queries, thus providing me with more information to utilize. In general, the following stories should be understood as several individuals' life histories, inflected and molded by their unique circumstances and broadly by the general cultural milieu in which s/he lived. This is not to say that their stories claim any generalizing statements about all adoptees in the same milieu. What is important is how these different individuals make sense of, and become agents of, values and practices of their own cultural milieu. To a certain extent, we make our own history, and the adoptees'

¹⁴⁸ A conservative estimate of Korean adoptees in the US alone reaches at least 150,000. In contrast, Korean adoptees in Western European countries, such as Sweden, Holland, and others, altogether number approximately 100,000. See Ch. 5 and fn. 139 for the factors that facilitated the decreasing importance of Korean adoptees in the US adoption industry in recent years.

accounts below amply testify to their agentive power and creativity in shaping their own life courses. I would concur with Rubin's (1996) argument¹⁴⁹ that individuals have the power to overcome unimaginable hardships, especially if the cultural discourses offer diverse options to put their experiences and aspirations into culturally acceptable perspectives.

In general, chapters 6, 7, and 8 present 7 individuals and their voices. In order to delineate the parameters of Korean adoptee experiences across different age groups, genders, geographical areas, class, and sexual orientations, I selected men and women of three different age groups: 2 male and 1 female adoptees from the older, 1 male and 1 female from the middle, and 2 females from the younger. Those adoptees who came to this country in the beginning of international adoption, and are now in their 50s and 60s, narrate their life journeys in the first part.

In this older adoptee category, the first story brings us to Jack Hamilton, a male adoptee, who grew up in the Midwest, where racial/ethnic diversity was relatively nonexistent. The second story is from Jean Kim Blum, a female adoptee, who grew up in the Midwest, but had different life trajectories from Jack Hamilton's, based on her educational experience and career choices. The last male adoptee, Timothy Klein, grew up on the East Coast, historically and culturally known as one of the most ethnically/racially diverse places in the United States. Of these three, two are interracial individuals, although this proportion is not in any way representative of adoptees in this generation.¹⁵⁰ By examining their lives, differentiated by geographic areas, I plan to show how the surrounding cultural atmosphere may have an impact on one's identity and life course. However, taken together, their stories reflect the issues and problems that individuals face growing up in American society during

¹⁴⁹ See her quote in the beginning of Ch. 5 in this dissertation.

¹⁵⁰ It is nearly impossible to ascertain the exact number of adoptees that were interracial. See fn. 133 in Ch. 5.

the late 1950s through roughly 1970s. As mentioned earlier, these older adoptees constructed meanings from the first National Adoptee Gathering (“The Gathering”) that are different from those for other generations of adoptees. This illustrates one of the ways in which generational gaps become the major difference characterizing the Korean adoptee community.

The Assimilation Era: Americans without Hyphens

According to Kottak and Kozaitis (2003: 48), assimilation as a model of “merging groups and their traditions within a society” was largely a part of US history around 1900 through World War II. Even then, this *e pluribus unum* was an ideal practically unattainable by white ethnics (in contrast to WASP Europeans). Kottak and Kozaitis state that “the idea of a melting pot assumes that immigrants want to emulate the dominant group and seek to melt into one people” (2003: 48). Rather than positing different groups of people on a level plane, ideology of assimilation assumes that there is one superior ideal —“a single cultural core” (*ibid.*: 49)—that lesser people should emulate and aspire to. One of the consequences of assimilation was poignantly described by Timothy Klein whose story we will be reading about soon.

[W]hen I was raised as an American, I developed American prejudices. I developed certain American prejudices because I can’t speak Asian and forgot [who I was]. “Hey, I am an Asian. I forgot about that!” (laughs)

“A single cultural core” does not respect cultural diversities, and locates human differences in socio-politically hierarchical terrain. Circa 2007, this tendency is viewed as prejudice and ignorance, and Klein’s remark reflects the historical shifts in cultural perspective. As Timothy Klein and other Korean adoptees in the period of the 1950s and

1960s were mostly adopted to White parents, they embraced this mandate to assimilate as a given fact. Their racial/ethnic difference did not, rather should not, matter to them nor anybody else.

Kottak and Kozaitis, in explicating the assimilation model, argue that this “model focuses on individuals not groups” (*ibid.*: 49). Groups may never be able to assimilate, as each group identity builds on its difference from the others. But individuals can assimilate and merge with one another, out of one’s own volition and willpower. Korean adoptees could be the prototype of the assimilation model, as these are people unfettered by obligations to kinship or group ties that often hold them back from effectively assimilating into the mainstream culture. Consequently, it is not surprising to see the affinity between the ideas of assimilation and the ideology of individualism central to American culture. In adoptees’ stories below, we can identify all these strands of thought.

Jack Hamilton’s Story: “Life is not fair. Get over it!”

Jack Hamilton is a man in his mid-50s, adopted at the age of 3 years and 9 months. He claims that he used to have very vivid memories of Korea and of his time in an orphanage, although the memories have faded after several decades. Adopted in the late 1950s, Jack grew up in a rural town in the Midwest, along with a non-biological brother, Paul, who was also adopted from Korea. I met Jack and his brother Paul in Korea while attending a conference. I accompanied them to the hospital where Jack was said to be found. From what little information Jack had, it was clear to me that it would be almost impossible for him to find any more of his trace in Korea. Paul, on the other hand, had many significant pieces of information, such as the address where he stayed before coming to the orphanage

and the names of the people involved in his case—from the person who brought him to the orphanage to the director of the orphanage. This is where stories of abandonment take individual twists and turns: that some were given a few starting points for potential future searches, whereas others were given next to nothing. Especially given the time of their adoption, Paul's case can be regarded as rather exceptional. Both Jack and Paul did not show any signs of excitement or anticipation of new information. It seemed they were just there, on their first trip to Korea, to retrace the steps that their young selves made more than four decades earlier. Neither could remember anything about the hospital, nor did they find the surroundings familiar.

Once back in the States, Jack responded to my request for an interview as *quid pro quo* for my previous assistance in Korea. “You didn’t expect any less, did you?” he said with his charismatic chuckle, which reminded me of the brief trip that we took in Seoul. He vividly described how he grew up in the States.

It was a very rural farming community. The closest town was about 9 miles away. So I went to a one-room school house for my first 6 years. And it was a one-room school house with a partition, (laughs) so there was, huh, one to three [grades] on one side with a teacher, four to six [grades] on the other side. That was my first 6 years of schooling. I didn’t attend any kindergartens, when I went to school there at that time.

Jack’s parents wanted Jack and Paul to maintain connections to Korea, making efforts to invite other families who adopted Korean children to their farms:

My parents made a real effort to stay connected to other kids that had been adopted. It just turned out that all the kids were the same age with Paul and I. In fact, I’ve got a picture on my screensaver here at work and I’ve had it for years. I mean, I say this kindly, but do you know the book, “Grapes of Wrath”? You know, in the movie, you see all these people. They’ve got the kind of clod-hopper boots, and overalls? This picture is hilarious. (laughs) I call it my “Grapes of Wrath.” It shows Paul and I, and we look like Oklahoma dirt farmers. There’s three other little Korean kids, two girls and a boy, and we were in the front yard of our place. My parents, to this day, do not remember the picture or the occasion or why, but obviously we all look

like five little adoptees. They were obviously Korean or Amerasian or whatever. We just are all on overalls and boots, and, I think, a couple of them are on tricycles and all. They really made an effort. I remember one girl's name was Kim. They lived over in Floma¹⁵¹, which is only maybe 10, 12, I guess it's more like 20 miles away from our house. We all got together, and I guess it is nice. I should say it *is* nice to try to make the effort. But for Paul and I, or at least for me, it really didn't mean a lot, because I don't have any connection. They are not my friends. At that age, you know, it's kind of like, "they are adopted, too. Big deal!" I had no relationship with these folks. We just kind of stayed there for a few hours, or they would be at our house for a few hours, and we'd go home and go return to normal. My best friends are the ones that I went to school with.

With positive outlook, he took his adoption status as a matter of fact. No more, no less. He was here to live, not to dwell on the past. For him, his parents' gesture proved that they cared, and that was that. What was important for him at the time as well as now is his life at present. Being adopted was a fact, not something to dwell on, but something to start your life from. "To me, it [being adopted] was just a non-issue. I wasn't just very interested. Okay, I'm adopted. I am just glad that I wasn't left in Korea. Because from what I read then and what I know now, the rate of survival wasn't really high." He remained uninterested in adoption issues or exploring his heritage for a long time. However, there were occasions that reminded him of his own ethnicity. These happened when the Hamiltons moved to a bigger city in Washington to accommodate Paul's learning disability. With the rural education system as it was back then, Paul was never able to attend any schools before they moved to Washington.

In the rural town where we lived, we were the only non-Caucasian kids. But it was funny. For real, I'd never experienced any kind of prejudice, or anything. We were just kids growing up. It wasn't until I moved to Washington. It was kind of funny. 'Cause we moved to Washington, and it wasn't a big secret I was Korean, or half-Korean. Right in the beginning of my freshman year that I had the opportunity to experience for the first time in my life, name-calling and that kind of stuff. In the rural town where we

¹⁵¹ Pseudonyms are also used for names of the towns and third parties discussed in interviews.

lived, here we were the only non-whites. Then we moved to Washington to a community in Puget Sound, which has a very large Asian population, very large African American population, Hispanic population. Here we moved into this integrated area, then I experienced the negative piece.

JP: Do you remember what names were used?

The Vietnam War was already going on, and I mean, it was winding down, but it was going on. So the comments were definitely about that kind of Asian society, ethnics and all that.

JP: How did it affect you?

I don't really remember a lot of that. I mean, I wasn't particularly pleased by it. The only piece that I was really kind of surprised at was, and this would maybe sound like silly to you, I don't know, but I remember so clearly that in my freshman year, they were having this dance thing or something. There was another Korean girl, there were like two of us [who were Koreans] in the whole school, me and her. I remember one of the kids, in fact, it was one of the girls, yeah, it was one of the girls, in just conversation, "Oh, of course you are going to invite her, because she is Korean." like it was a foregone conclusion. I remember thinking, "Why? I don't even know her." She wasn't in my circle of friends. I remember just thinking, "That's kind of strange!" and didn't worry about it anymore.

A few things require further elaboration here. First is the fact that urban areas, not rural areas, taught young Jack about the dark side of being a minority. This can be partially explained by one of the socio- psychological theories on prejudice and racism: realistic conflict theory. According to this theory, when times are tough, and competition between people for limited resources such as jobs and other advancing opportunities is high, out-groups tend to be strongly discriminated against (Aronson, et al., 1997: 504-508). Urban areas, being the magnet of many different ethnic groups competing for a limited number of resources, can be a site where prejudice and incidents of racial discrimination are rampant in contrast to rural areas. Further, the on-going Vietnam War and the national frustration with it became the lightning rod for discriminatory acts against Asians in many places during the period when Jack was learning through his own experience.

What is also intriguing about Jack's statement above is the way in which he dealt with these derogatory remarks. He was not bothered by a well-meaning but ignorant and confining understanding of what he should be, and whom he should be dating: "I remember just thinking 'That's kind of strange!' and didn't worry about it anymore." He took these incidents in stride with the spirit of optimism. One can also see the trope of assimilation in his rationalizations.

Jack told me that he would identify himself as Korean or Asian on a census form. The reason? He said, without the slightest compunction, "because I don't know what the other half is. See, unlike my brother who has pictures, names, and everything of his parents, I was turned in to a Presbyterian pastor who then took me to the hospital." Jack's identity as a Korean was reinvigorated in his mid-life, when his success as a police officer received statewide media attention. He was described as a Korean American, alerting the Korean American community of his existence. The Korean American community where he lived, small as it was, embraced him with much enthusiasm, and he became well-known among Koreans, especially those working in the restaurants in the area. Although Korean culture was something incomprehensible to him, Korean food was another matter. "I love the food. I always end up identifying with the food. I don't know why. I am so fortunate here. Because several of the restaurant owners, they are Koreans, so I get very spoiled," he said with a chuckle.

Jack and his wife Betty considered adopting a Korean child themselves, but his wife's accidental pregnancy in the middle of adoption proceedings put a halt to the process. Fortunately, Jack's close friend Tom was planning to adopt, and Jack talked him into adopting the child who was supposed to be adopted by Jack and Betty.

So Tom and Ana went ahead and did. So I've always told Carry that she could have been my daughter. So we've known Carry since she met us at the

airplane (laughs). She was only about 11 months old. She's always been in our lives. We think she is pretty special. . . . I am a big proponent of adoption, even though we ended up not adopting. We support adoption through a variety of venues. I think adoption is fabulous. I just look at all these kids that are in need.

Not surprisingly, Jack was taken aback when he heard other adoptees speaking out about negative experiences that they had with their adoptive families. Looking back on his own childhood, he said, "I mean, I sound like a movie, but I've had a wonderful life. And I didn't suffer all those things those other people apparently did." As a final word, he wanted to say to other adoptees the following:

I don't dwell on past or negative experiences. I've been so fortunate that negative things that have happened, you know I am a Christian, so there is that piece of it, all the different negative things that have happened, after all the years go by, you can look back on them, and realize how it actually helps guide you and what you learn from it. I am not saying that it always turns out to be positive. You know, I was in a pretty serious accident. My back was broken in two places when I was pretty young. And yet, truthfully looking back at that, and how that led me in a way from being a construction worker to a law enforcement career, and that was all positive, and the different things that came out of that. I guess that's the biggest thing that I would say. 'Cause I didn't realize how many adoptees were so kind of bitter. That's such a shame. The only person you are hurting is yourself. When you say bitter, it's like employees that have had, you know, that bitter and kind of cranky all the time. You know, life is so short, why would you want to go around being cranky, because of some perceived injustice?

He cautiously added, "you know, life is not fair. Get over it." Jack's characteristic optimism and spirit for individual accomplishment, which some may even call, "rugged individualism," can be seen in his work career.

The conceptual affinity between assimilation and individualism finds successful expression in his life, as he embraced his American identity without hesitation, rooting it in his will to succeed. He has been working either part-time or full-time since he was 14. Because of his injury, Jack was out of work for 3 weeks, and his family, including four young

children, almost qualified for a state-sponsored assistance program. He didn't care for that and managed to survive without the assistance. As soon as he recovered from the injury, he went right back to work, trying not to depend on anything or anyone else but himself. He says he often spoils his children now, because of that time of deprivation in which he couldn't provide them with as much as he would have liked. Betty and Jack were married right out of college and their family now includes four grown sons and several grandchildren. At the height of his career as a law enforcement officer and personal accomplishment as a beloved father and grandfather, Jack framed his life journey as a successful and fulfilling one.

Jean Kim Blum's Story: "In my book, Korean adoptees are not victims, but survivors."

Jack Hamilton's rugged individualism and optimism is nicely paralleled by Jean Kim's sheer strength in spirit. Jean Kim is also one of the older adoptees. When I first met Jean Kim, I was struck by her tireless spirit, despite her small stature, 5 ft. or less in all, and her physical disability caused by childhood polio. At the height of her professional career as a university administrator, she moved to wherever her expertise was needed. Just like Jack Hamilton, her life-story is representative of some of the early adoptees whose motivation and zeal led them to their successful careers. However, Jean Kim was more aware of and curious about her ethnic heritage, partially reflecting her life circumstances, such as career and local environment, in which she made sense of her identity. Adopted at age 3-4, she lived with a family located in the Midwest.

It was 1960, 1961, when we came. We were the first ones to come to the, uh, the, basically SD [place], and then, later on, certainly we were the first ones to our whole area to be given the publicity we were given. Uh, we grew up pretty much accepted by the community, 'cause my father, my adoptive father, was very well-known, and very well-received by the community. . . . I grew up in a predominantly white environment, Caucasian environment,

other than my sister who's also adopted. She is not a biologically related sister, who is half-Korean, half-White. . . . We were the only two adopted kids for a long time growing up in that area. And there were international students and ESL students. They added some diversity to the community, but other than that, it was [a] predominantly white area. We were the first ones adopted to the community, so we were like "minor celebrities."

As "minor celebrities," she and her sister's stories of adoption were reported in a local newspaper, which occurred often to adoptive families of Korean children at the time. Jean Kim's parents were Baptists, and they responded to the call for adopting or sponsoring Korean War orphans, posed by the Holts. They had a son by birth, but had a series of miscarriages after he was born. This was another reason that her parents considered adoption. Jean Kim's adopted sister, Brenda, who is four years older than Jean Kim, and was adopted at the same time as her, had an initial struggle learning the language and culture that was foreign to her, whereas Jean Kim battled numerous physical complications related to malnutrition during her early infancy. Due to her health conditions and quiet personality, she wasn't a very outgoing teenager. She talked about her childhood this way:

There were childhood taunts. There were other types of situations because I had polio. I walked a little differently. I also looked different because I was racially different as any Korean adoptees, and my sister as well. However, my sister not having the debility, being a little bit taller, and mixed race, I think, made her blend in better. So she became socially active in her high school as a pompom girl and in the band. I was not as much socially engaged. I was more involved with orchestra and less public type of thing. I would be much happier reading books and being involved with the student groups that meet and more library chess-related stuff (laughs). . . . I grew up playing the violin. I did some arts and crafts. And pretty much, I think I was a loner.

Jean Kim enjoyed being alone, and reading became her favorite activity while growing up. She became an avid reader, reading well above her grade level, which was surprising to many people including a librarian who found her behavior inappropriate.

The books I read were Russian novels. I liked any books with those tiny prints and with no pictures. (laughs) I read a lot. I liked all the books. The books in the library that I had access to had mostly classics. So I was able to

actually read, as a grade-schooler, books at more advanced level. I did remember reading “The Brothers Karamazov.” I do remember reading “Les Miserables” before I pronounce it right (laughs). I called it “Less Miserably” (laughs). . . . I remember reading that when in grade school. I told you earlier about the fact that the school librarian called up my adoptive mother on a rage because I was reaching for books and checking out books that were beyond my age level. I was supposed to be reading books at maybe third grade level, but I was reading at 6th grade level, and that was inappropriate! And my adoptive mother said, “Let her read whatever books that she wants to read.” So I was a big, big reader.

Not surprisingly, she was a self-proclaimed “nerd,” excelling in spelling bees, although she rather fondly recalls her struggles with math and statistics classes throughout her education up to graduate school. Perhaps her desire to learn and her love of books landed her on a path to a higher degree, and she successfully completed a Ph.D in Social Work in her 30’s.

Jean Kim met her husband, Matt Blum, during her undergraduate years, and they got married right after college. Matt, a man of few words and an unassuming presence, has fully supported Jean Kim’s academic studies and careers, being a patient and reliable partner for many years. “We agreed a long time ago that I would be the one that decides when and where to move. He understood that as one condition of our marriage,” says Jean Kim with a seasoned smile.

Jean Kim’s parents, just like Jack Hamilton’s parents, made efforts for her to maintain some, if tenuous, connections to her Korean heritage. Although her hometown was small, it was close to a college community. Jean Kim’s mother was a musician, and she often invited many visiting Korean musicians from the college for dinner. Her parents were also members of a local group which consisted of adoptive parents who had children from the East. The group would meet a few times a year, especially around holidays. But Jean Kim, not unlike Jack Hamilton, did not feel any connections to the other adopted children who were there at these gatherings. “Going to these events was just going for the toys and the

presents and the food,” she said, “for my parents, it may have been to bond with other adoptive parents, but I never felt anything special in a relationship with these kids. It wasn’t anything that I needed, or wanted or cared about or was aware of.” Being adopted was not a fact that bothered her much, either, as her parents did not mystify the subject of adoption by being secretive or evasive whenever the subject came up in conversation. Still, her sister Brenda was more cautious when broaching the topic and questions about her adoption lest her parents should feel disappointed or hurt by having to face the fact that they were not, after all, her biological parents.

Characterizing the period of her growing up as a time “when we were not supposed to be treated differently,” Jean Kim took in half-heartedly the bits and pieces of Korean culture that her parents provided her with. Her parents left up to her the choice of whether to ignore or to pursue her Korean heritage, and she felt comfortable having that choice to determine when and how much she would explore. As mentioned above, the cultural ethos of the 1960s in the US was a time of assimilation mode, what some would quip as a “melting-pot period.” In Jean Kim’s experience, it was translated this way: “We were supposed to be treated like any other child, and our difference was not to be made a big deal of. So they were not made a big deal of.” In contrast, she talked about her cousin, Joanna, who was also adopted from Korea when Jean Kim and Brenda were. Joanna and Brenda were of the same age, and the three of them shared childhood in many ways. Joanna’s parents, however, “pushed” Korean culture on her so much so that Joanna always felt different from other children in her house. Jean Kim suggested, “by pushing Korean heritage too much, I think you actually tell the child that they are indeed different. That’s not a good message. You can’t ignore it, but you can’t push it. There has to be a good balance.”

Jean Kim could not leave her Korean identity muted for a long time. At various institutions, prior to and after her graduate studies, her academic career has mostly centered on her work as a cultural liaison between Asian American students and the central administration of the university. Her line of work raised important questions about her Asian American identity, reflecting also the historical context in which she came to the university campus.

I was hired to be a specific liaison with Asian Pacific American students to help them to access academic programs, retention programs, to help them understand that resources are available through counseling, through tutoring that we should use, and could use. Up until that point in time, Asian American students are considered to be not in need of these resources which were obviously required and known to be needed by African Americans and other minorities. So my position was very historical at that institution. And the position was brand-new, created for someone to that role. And I was hired to be that person. I was very fortunate to be that person. But preparing for that image though was very peculiar because there is nothing written by Asian Americans to be about Asian Americans. Everything written about Asian Americans was addressed by non-Asians. So it wasn't until about a couple years later that Ron Takaki wrote the very first books related to *Strangers from a Different Shore* and *History of Asian Americans in America*. Those were very historic books, and when I first saw those books, it was such a cool sense of validation. Very, very exciting.

Being adopted and raised by a White family, Jean Kim was ambivalent about her authenticity as an Asian American. When asked whether she thought of herself as an Asian while growing up, she answered, “no. Growing up, my parents never really thought about, never reinforced to be what we were. In fact, my father, to this date, would talk about someone as an ‘Oriental.’ So he is very out of date.” Jean Kim’s parents are not unique in setting their children apart from other Asian/Americans, making unconscious remarks that may offend Asian sensibility.

Jean Kim often introduced me to others as a “real” Korean, downplaying herself as a fake one. I believe it was not necessarily a move to exoticize or “other” me as an authentic

Korean, if one can ever be that. Rather, it was her acknowledgement of, and her own insecurity about, the lack of Korean upbringing that she knew was missing from her early life. On another occasion, she used the term, “Banana,” rather than the more popular term among Korean Americans, “Twinkie,” to connote her subjectivity. According to her, “Banana” was more appropriate because bananas are *yellow* on the outside, but *white* on the inside.¹⁵² Consequently, she felt she was not an insider who knew how to be Korean enough. Becoming a Korean was a continuous learning process for her, aided by reading materials about and by Asian Americans and by consciously creating a community in which she could learn more about what it means to be not just a Korean American, but an Asian American. It was a struggle at once liberating and overwhelming.

I became their person, I became their spokesperson for the students to say “ . . . We are not Orientals. We are Asian Pacific Americans, and Asian Pacific American is the expression. It is the unified title of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Asian Americans are those who came from the mainland. Pacific Islanders are those who came from the Islands. Asian Pacific American is the merging of those two populations, which was defined by the communities themselves. We are not Orientals.” So I became that person that had to be saying to the community, to the university community, to the local community, and nationwide when I go on to speak to clarify who this population was. That was when my identity became much more rock solid and I began to be aware of who I was. At first I felt like an *incredible fraud*, because I thought, “who am I to know anything about Asian Americans? I was adopted.” But on the other hand, I started to realize that I also did represent a population that was very much a viable group within the whole population. *So there were some times when I feel like a fraud, that I am not a true Asian*, you know, because the true Asians are those that know the language thoroughly to listen to this other culture, you know, (laughs) or have been raised by people of that culture. So sometimes I do feel like I am really not one of them. On the other hand, I do know that I do represent a sizeable population percentage of the whole race in the United States (my emphasis).

¹⁵² One could argue that twinkies are just like that as well. Korean adoptees generally used the metaphor of “bananas” more so than that of “twinkies.” It could be read as a self-differentiating move on the part of the adoptees from Korean Americans.

Jean Kim's ruminations over her Asian identity reveal strong ambivalence and poignantly illustrate the way in which the concepts of race and culture are deeply embedded. By pointing to the slippage between culture and race, and further the paradoxical position of Korean adoptees in this terrain, Jean Kim emphasizes the fact that these two concepts are not interchangeable. At the same time, she posits the existence of a "true" Asian for whom cultural and racial identities are congruent. In contrast, she was a "fraud" that existed in the interstices of these identities. Her labeling of me as a "real" Korean can be read here as her conceptualization of a place where no problems and contradictions in identity exist. Her attempt to disentangle racial identity from cultural identity is compromised by her ambivalence to her own racial identity.

Besides her academic career that led her to explore her cultural heritage further, there was another incident that prepared her to be more open to Koreans. In her 30s, her biological maternal uncle tracked her down, contacting the adoption agency through which Jean Kim was adopted. The agency contacted her adoptive parents to find out how to locate her.

They [my adoptive parents] called me up to say to me, "if you are interested, call up Sunday. If you are not, you know, it's your choice." At the time, my mother was very concerned about my emotional state. She wanted to say, "I don't want you to feel hurt," or you know, she was thinking all these emotional things, but for me, there was none. I was just like, "oh, really? Someone is interested in finding me. Well, I wonder what they want." I was thinking to myself, "if I don't have any expectations, then, it won't be a problem." But if I'd never say, "sure, let's connect," I would never know anything at all. So I said, "well, you know, I am not gonna have any expectations, but I am interested in pursuing this," and they were aware of that. They were aware of that when I connected with my maternal uncle, and when I met my birthmother. . . . So, I think that there might have been some concerns about how this might affect me, but on the other hand, I was late 30s at that time, hardly a young teenager still in the throes of misidentification and ambiguity. I was pretty clear who I was. I had always known I was adopted. I just really didn't see anything emotionally why this should mess me up. The only thing that had me concerned was why these people were looking for me and what do they want, and what I want to do

with that. My parents were, of course, more concerned about emotional states that I would be all messed up and being angry or this or that. You know I was not.

Her first encounter with her birthmother took place in the States, not far from where she lived and worked at the time. She was astounded to discover that her maternal uncle was doing a business very near to where she was living. She was more than relieved to learn that her birth family did not want anything other than to know more about her and her well-being. Her first meeting with her birthmother ended up being a shopping trip to a nearby clothing store where her newly found birthmother became a crazed shopper looking for underwear and PJs. “Here I am,” Jean Kim said with laughter, “with a stranger, a total stranger, who is asking me what size panty I am wearing, what size bra I am wearing!” Her birthmother also brought her to a nearby hair salon to have her hair permed and curled. That reminded me of my own trip back to Korea, when my mother would bring me to stores to buy me “more suitable” clothes (including underwear) than the ones that I arrived from the States. She also brought me to her favorite hair salon where I should get the most recent hairstyle in fad. Prettying a daughter seems like a significant part of mothering in Korea.¹⁵³ We shared our stories about Korean mothers, and amusingly wondered what it was all about with Korean mothers and underwear.

Since then, Jean Kim has met her birthmother on a few occasions, each time lasting no longer than a few hours. Her birthmother tried to reach her by phone, but they could not communicate over the language barrier. They simply held on to the phone receivers in

¹⁵³ In late capitalist development, consumption practices seem to be an integral part of constituting a family. See Daniel Miller (2004) for exploration of how children and everyday shopping grow their mothers. For similar but culturally specific analyses, see Taylor, et al. (2004), Phillips (2008) among many others. To understand the specificity of Korean consumption, see Nelson (2000). In Ch. 2, one of the ethnographic moments relates to the cultural consumption practices of Korean adoptees. In the future, I will pick up on further discussion linking and distinguishing particularities of these practices of consumption.

silence with the Pacific Ocean between them. “I think we are similar that way, you know, to be able to be content with little contact. As long as I know she is okay, and as long as she knows that I am okay, we are just content not trying harder to connect or anything. We seem to be fine as things are,” pondered Jean Kim.

Her contact with her birthmother occurred before Korean adoptees as a group initiated the first “Gathering” of their own. The first national gathering of Korean adoptees took place in Washington, D.C., in 1999, and Jean Kim was able to attend it, although she was not particularly thrilled by “The Gathering” itself.

[W]hat really intrigued me about it is not so much that they were having this gathering or the adoptees. I was more interested in the fact that they were asking us to write stories for this series for an anthology. So I was more intrigued and more interested in writing a piece for the book that they wanted to get published. That’s what I decided to do then. Basically though, I’ve had connection with my biological mother by that time. So the idea of meeting other adoptees wasn’t what I needed, but it was something like, “I am in Virginia, so why not?” So I did agree to go, and decided to go, and it was very good to go, too, because I’ve met other people from the D.C. area that became very good friends.

Jean Kim interpreted this Gathering from her vantage point of getting her story published in an anthology. As she was working in D.C. area at the time, proximity to The Gathering and the possibility of meeting people there who might be in the same line of work as hers were appealing to her. But overall her reaction to The Gathering was far from positive. One of the things she did not like about The Gathering was the way each workshop was organized.

I got actually rather irritated and resentful of the fact that each of our group has a social worker assigned. I thought that that was absolutely disgusting. [JP: Why?] It was part of the original plan was to have a social worker in each room. You know, I am not a really emotional person. I usually think things in more logical manner. So while I was certainly aware that some people would be emotional, or some would be emotional at times, I certainly thought that we are not all a bunch of basket cases that need to have a social worker there. And I was also irritated and annoyed by the fact that one of the adoptees there was assigned as a moderator for the group, for our, um, each group, and she meant to identify herself as that, “I was assigned as a moderator for

the group, a facilitator because I am the voice of reason”, you know, basically implying that the rest of us or some of us are unreasonable, you know. That’s how you interpret it, when people say things like that. Like when people say, “who is the natural child?” that means the rest of us are not natural, you know. The terminology really is who is biological and nonbiological or adopted, but not natural as in natural vs. unnatural. You ARE natural. So that was one of the things that happened.

Given the fact that this was The First Gathering of its kind on a national scale, there were uncertain attempts to figure out what were the needs of these adoptees and what directions these meetings should take in order to meet the needs of their constituents. Consequently, there were some adoptees who were involved in the organization efforts from the beginning, and they often took the role of mentors to advise other adoptees who were new to these settings. From Jean Kim’s perspective, it was not productive to assume from the outset that adoptees should have problems that need professional treatment and oversight. The structure in which these meetings took place seemed to be paternalistic and overly sensitive to her. Further, she became impatient with the people who could not “get over” the fact that they were adopted.

I think that what I don’t like about adoptee meetings is the same thing that I don’t like about groups in general is when I hear people get together and endlessly yammer about the same issue. I think it is okay at different stages of life, you encounter difficulties or issues that you have to process. And then there is the time you got to get over it. There is the time that you have to demonstrate your ability to move on. What tires me out and what turns me away from getting more actively engaged in certain kinds of adoptee functions and gatherings would be the revisitation of the same old issues with some people.

According to Jean Kim, these people were “drama queens,” whose stories “never change, never waver. They were always the victims.” As my gender radar went up, I quickly asked her whether there were kings or princes. She curtly responded, “Yes, there is a king. You can call them princes or whatever. There are those males who, again, life has just dealt them just

a horrible deck of cards. They can't just get beyond the victim status." Mulling over one's traumatic past is to process the information so that one can move on with one's life, not to dwell on it too long to get out of it. Jean Kim describes herself as a logically-oriented person, rather than emotionally-oriented. It is more acceptable to her to use these gatherings and meetings to work out one's problems with a clearly defined goal of resolution. Witnessing many people who don't seem to be able to get out of one's own pain is draining for her. She goes on to say,

In my book, *Korean adoptees are not victims, but survivors*. You have to look at that as a survival mechanism. Whether or not you had a choice in staying, whether or not you should be adopted, the bottom line is you were adopted and you survived. You are who you are today and you need to go from there. You have to get away from being a victim. You can only be a victim for so long. After that, you have to be a survivor. But there are some people who are just constant victims. They constantly like to say, "I was adopted." Suddenly, you know, the music is supposed to play, the sad dirge, you know. You are supposed to be sad. In fact, it gets pathetic and really annoying for me when I talk to people, and say, "I am a Korean adoptee," they go, "ah..!" You know, they do this. I look at them, and say, "You don't have to do that! I am just saying this to you so that you don't have expectations, thinking that my parents would look like me, or that I would have any familiar knowledge or anything about the culture. I don't." But there are people up there who being adopted means you are a victim, "man, oh, my god," "how horrible," "what a tragedy." You know, it's not. It doesn't have to be (my emphasis).

Jean Kim employs the conceptual dichotomy of "victim and survivor" to reinterpret the adoption experience itself. What does it mean to use the terms such as "victims," and "survivors," in descriptions of adoptees? A popular representation of adoptees conjures up poor, helpless orphans whose fate will be decided upon without any of their own input. In other words, the adoptees have been cast as victims. Coming from poverty-stricken, Post-War Korea, especially her generation of adoptees has been the object of pity and sympathy.

Once in a gathering, I was within earshot of an adoptee who was about the same age as Jean Kim. "I used to be very picky when it came to food. My mother used to tell me

about these third-world children who would be happy to have what I had. Do you know what I said? I told her, ‘then why don’t you bring this food over there and shove it down their throats?’” she said with a startling rage barely hidden. This is not to identify Jean Kim’s sentiment with that of this adoptee. Rather, taken together, these are moments that shed light on the kind of subjective terrain these adoptees occupy.

Korea, despite its recent rise in economic development, was considered a third-world country when these adoptees came to the States. Constant pity toward them and the on-looker’s familiar assessment that they should be grateful to have been rescued situates them in a position of “victim.” Casting the adoptee status as one of survivors rather than victims is, thus, a symbolic attempt to reinterpret, re-organize, and re-work the adoptee experience. It also contradicts the many psychotherapeutic assumptions about adoptees’ traumatic beginnings in life, and the *predictably* trouble-ridden adult lives that they are presumed to lead. In the excerpt that began Ch. 5, Rubin points out the assumption of conventional psychiatric practice and knowledge that “the earliest experience of a child’s life in the family foretells the rest” (1996: 2). Jean Kim is trying to construct an alternative story that contradicts the negative predictions about adoptees’ life course, by imagining the other side of “victimhood”: survival. In her study of people who experienced social or physical disruptions, Becker (1997) finds people using metaphors to construct meanings out of their chaotic experiences. Her elucidation of the power and meaning of metaphors is worth mentioning here:

Metaphor lies at the intersection of what has been and what can be; the use of metaphor thus represents a critical moment in which the known field of reference is suspended and a new, more comprehensive picture is invented. This invention is twofold, *reflecting the discovery of what was implicit in the past, as well as creation of a new reality*. Metaphor thus represents an intrinsic synthesis of interpretation and creation in which previous interpretations yield to new, more complete ones (*ibid.*; 60, my emphasis).

Indeed, Jean Kim successfully utilizes the dichotomy of “victim and survivor,” by casting the adoptees as survivors who go on to lead successful, happy lives despite their traumatic humble beginnings. In doing so, Jean Kim deeply unsettles the hidden assumptions that people, both professionals and laypersons alike, make about adoptees. She puts adoptee experience and “normal” experience side-by-side, challenging the on-lookers that her experience is not something to pity, but to understand as one other form that a life takes. On the other hand, this dichotomous conception necessarily posits the existence of victims, and their existence here is dramatized in the form of “drama queens” and “princes,” who wallow in self-pity. Not surprisingly, she found them draining and depressing, as they are quite the opposite of what she understood herself to be. As she mentions above, one great thing that came out of this gathering was lasting friendship that she made with a few people she met there.

We [she and the adoptee friends she made] talk about being adopted, we talk about some of our mutual experiences. Some of the experiences we can relate to with each other, some with graphic details, some horrible memories or something like that. But it was not all about that, you know. There’s maybe one piece of the whole link that has forged our relationship, but that’s not what is composing our relationship. *There has to be other commonalities to also make us connect altogether* (my emphasis).

Here Jean Kim’s comment reveals the complexity of human connection, where one strand of commonality, in this case, the experience of being adopted, is often not enough of a foundation for building future relationships. The close friendships that she developed with these adoptees have lasted because these are individuals who share with her much more than adoptee status. Importantly, they are survivors just like her. Knowing all of them very well, I noticed that they all are in their late 40s and early 50s now. The common experience of being adopted makes more sense in their conversations with one another because of the cultural milieu they inhabited growing up.

Regardless of the geographical locations that they came from, they all went through the American school system, watched similar TV programs offered across the country around the same time. For instance, they know what it feels like watching a black-and-white TV set, whereas some younger adoptees cannot even imagine what a black-and-white TV looks like. Another commonality that they shared was their love of debates. All of them are very articulate and intelligent, their dinners together almost always ending up with heated debates over anything and everything. They are opinionated, which makes these debates and discussions more interesting and charged. However, none of them tend to get emotionally carried away. All these factors, not simply adoptee status, made them life-long friends. The adoptee status certainly made their first encounters more meaningful and provided the context, but in order for them to forge a valuable relationship that they could cherish, they needed something more than this status alone.

Being connected thus however, Jean Kim and her adoptee friends know they can count on anyone in this circle or all of them at once when they need something. The fact that they live far away from one another now did not matter much. In fact, one of Jean Kim's friends, Matt, has gotten married recently, and he held a small wedding ceremony, inviting them and their partners only. "I think she is a good influence," said Jean Kim about the young bride, "I've never seen him giddy before, but yeah, he is all giddy now!" Anyone who knows Matt will agree that he is always on edge, exhibiting a penchant for perfectionism. It is no wonder that he remained a bachelor for a long time. Finally in his later years, he met another adoptee with whom he could share his life, and his friends couldn't be happier.

Here I find the currently available idioms of human relationships quite lacking in describing the friendship of these adoptees. Could I frame their relationship as analogous to kinship? Schneider's by-now-famous phrase of "diffuse, enduring solidarity" (1977) for

describing American kinship is exactly what they share.¹⁵⁴ Jean Kim agreed that there was *something* about her relationship with these adoptee friends that made their relationship more kin-like. This something is a shared sentiment, informed by collective history and circumstances of being adopted. But, we also have to pay attention to the kind of differences that facilitate formation of cliques among adoptees in general.

The reason why ages of adoptees play a significant role in building close relationships can be discerned from Jean Kim's description of her contemporaries. Jean thinks that she and her peers share sociopolitical realities rooted in historical time: They had no choice at all in the determination of their fate when young. She describes this in the context of her visit to the Korean War Memorial in D.C., which was a part of the city tour organized by The Gathering.

I recall that my emotion at the time was anger and certain sense of grief. Anger because of the fact that because of the way the Korean social system was to define my adoption. There was really no choice for people like me who had physical disability, or for kids like my sister who was mixed race, or kids like my cousin who was a runaway orphan. *People like us, who are post-Korean war, it was understandable why we were adopted, why we were, in a sense, forced into a Diaspora.* On another hand, it angered me when I saw the Korean War Memorial to realize that we had been cheated of the ability to know our country, our birth. . . . although I knew that I'd lived a good life here, I certainly knew that my life had been better here than if I would have been in Korea, I also felt a sense of anger over the fact that *choice and the ability to really have tried to live a better life has not been presented to me* (My emphasis).

Korean adoptees who came to this country in the 1950s and the early 1960s share a certain sense of confidence that they know, or at least make an educated guess of why they had been given up: *it was understandable why we were adopted*. Poverty and social unrest, although the causes of these troubled transnational journeys in the first place, nonetheless proffer socio-

¹⁵⁴ The ambiguity of this phrase was critically reexamined by Schneider himself (1977) as to whether it would be only applicable to kinship or could be extended to other types of solidarities, such as race or nation.

historical answers as to the question of why, which is a big part of the existential questions with which the adoptees wrestle. With one important question about adoption answered more or less satisfactorily, the older adoptees could find kindred spirits in others, exploring other questions as to their identity racial and otherwise.

On the other hand, it is intriguing to see Jean Kim utilize a discourse of choice, germane to a cultural ideology of individualism and rights dominant in American culture to describe her sense of deprivation and frustration. The adoptees could never consent to their own abandonment and are the most vulnerable member of the adoption triad. The adoption arrangement profoundly impacts their lives, but they did not have a say in this most important matter. Then, her remark brings out the importance of recognizing this vulnerability of adoptees. Adults went into a contract that charted a life course for defenseless children.

Jean Kim's desire to learn more about Asian culture led her to explore the cultural diversities represented by the multicultural student body present on her own campus. She often invites international students, not only from Asia but also from Africa, as well as American minority students, to meals or holiday dinners. She is an excellent cook, occasionally experimenting with recipes and ingredients of Korean and other Asian food, and these occasions provide her with the opportunity to show off her knowledge of Asian cuisine.

One day, while talking about her brief stint in a catering business, she showed me how to manufacture fresh tofu in her home. That is a feat that I had never witnessed before. Joining in her effort to squeeze beans, which requires strong upper-body strength and hardened biceps, I knew my shoulder and arm would be sore the next morning. Her small kitchen is full of interesting gadgets; those used for tofu-making, a mochi machine that she

adores, a pappy, a rice cooker and so forth. As mochis are her favorite snacks, she occasionally sends me a box of mochis filled with chocolate and brandy. By filling in chocolates with brandy or rum rather than the beans commonly used in East Asia, Jean Kim is blending what she knows and what she has learned.

“Swedish and Norwegian cuisine is pretty bland, you know. I can’t stand it. I need spice!” said she, with a twinkle in her eyes, over hot cups of chamomile tea. She was referring to the diet common in her state. I suggested an Asian fusion restaurant as a potential retirement plan for her, and we shared our laughter. Just like her home-made mochis, the meals she cooked for me used many spices and recipes from different parts of the world, especially Asia. I was surprised to taste her delicious fungus salads, a recipe I later tried but failed miserably. Is it too far-fetched to look for some meaningful links between fungus used in some Chinese food, here soaked in olive oil and Balsamic vinegar, and Asians living in America?

Timothy Klein’s Story: “I am a product of an interracial/international adoption.”

Timothy (Tim) Klein is in his early 50s, sharing a similar cultural milieu with Jack Hamilton and Jean Kim Blum. But unlike Jack or Jean Kim, both of whom spent most of their lives in the Midwest, Tim grew up in New York City; a place where encounters with many different ethnic groups were a part of daily life. He started off our interview in a very detached manner, “My age is 54. I was given July 21st, 1953 as my birthdate. Male. Born in Korea. I think they put Inchon as my birthplace.” It was as if he was reading biographical information of someone whom he knew.

Korean adoptees, especially those in Tim's age group were not given much information about their lives prior to adoption. Typically one's birth document packet includes a photo of the adoptee, an official affidavit of abandonment, possibly a report from the orphanage or from the police station which briefly summarizes the conditions of abandonment, and/or a few correspondences from the adoptive parents if any. Some Korean adoptees who searched for their birthparents discovered that biographical data printed in their birth documents were simply an estimate. There is considerable doubt about the actual age of most adoptees, and some believe that their actual birth date may not match the one given by the orphanage or the adoption agency. We can understand Tim's style of self-description within this context of multiple levels of realities. Official documents can be interpreted here as half-hearted attempts to fill out the necessary forms on the part of the administrators to move the adoption process along, or even as intentional fabrication of what actually transpired in the child abandonment, or the reality as the orphanage personnel knew it. Or, these documents could very well tell the true stories given by the actual people involved in abandonment. Whatever the case may be, these are different levels of realities that the adoptees have to negotiate, when they attempt to find out more information about their adoptions.

Tim was adopted when he was close to 7, by an Irish Catholic mother and a non-observant Jewish father. They had a biological son, who was a few years younger than Tim. It was unclear what made his parents consider an adoption, especially an international adoption at that.

I came over, flew over on a flop plane. My point of entry was Anchorage, AK. It was interesting. I was originally intended to be a younger sister to a blood son. I don't know how they ended up with me. I am happy that I am here, but they originally intended to get a little girl for their son. . . . He is 5 years younger. Actually it's interesting. The family, they were only in their 20s when they had him. So I don't know what the rush was to build a family,

especially go international. They were young. They could have had more children well into, you know, they were in their 20s. I never found out what the motivation was to get an adopted child, especially from another country. And this was the 60s, where you don't even think about that. You'd adopt from your neighborhood, you'd adopt from the State, but to go, you know, 5,000 miles overseas, that was unheard of. And they were young couple. She was the youngest of a conservative Irish Catholic family. I mean, you just don't go doing these things, not in the 60s. But they managed to do it. And here I am.

Although he was a bit older than the usual age at which adoption usually took place, Tim did not have any adjustment issues. The only problem was the malnutrition and hunger he suffered from, due to poor living conditions at the orphanage. Given the historical context, the problem of childhood malnutrition and health issues brought on by the aftermath of Korean War, is not unique to Tim's case. In fact, many adoptees from the same period reported the similar problems. Jean Kim Blum's physical disability and health issues described earlier can be another example. He said, "although I was 5 years older than my brother, Josh, when I arrived at the airport, I was a head shorter than him, who was only 2 years old at the time." His parents could not believe he was in fact 7 years old. But when they saw how skinny and emaciated he was when he removed his clothing to change into the new ones put out for him, they realized their job was to feed him.

Well, when I was young, you know, sometimes adoptees when they are 7 to 10, they still have strong roots of their Korean upbringing. Especially if they are very conscious of being dropped into the orphanage by their family, so there's a level of abandonment and distrust that hardly goes away. As far as I know, I didn't have that issue. I vaguely remember my Mom, my birthmother taking care of me as long as she could, and then for illness or whatever, she couldn't take care of me, so I was left at the steps of a Korean orphanage. The orphanage, the only thing I remember, because this was in the late 50s and early 60s, you know, post-Korean War, the things I remember is hunger. There was never enough to eat. *When I came over here, my American family was amazed that I could eat as much. The other problem was it was American food, 'cause I was still Korean, it went right through me. It took a while for it to stay in the stomach.* You know, the funniest thing is, after all these years, when I am unemployed or there's no food in the house, when I am really hungry, my mind goes right back to the orphanage, because of my early impressions of hunger.

Interestingly, Tim elucidates the complex nexus of ethnic identity and food, and touches upon the psychological fear of starvation that has a long-lasting impact. His assimilation to American life was clearly an embodied experience, gradual and transforming the core of self-identity: Just as his body could hold down American food over time, he gradually lost his Korean speaking ability. Despite the worries that he would retain an accent, Tim quickly learned English without any problems. His cultural assimilation was thus complete and absolute.

He explains, “the reason that I had to do that [learn and speak English] was it was do-or-die situation. It was English. No one else spoke Korean. There’s no Chinese restaurant. There was a Chinese laundry five blocks away. In my immediate neighborhood, it was English. It was matter of immersion. Within six months, I learned English with a Brooklyn accent.” From his description, one gets a glimpse of the racial/ethnic landscape of New York City, in which an outlook of ethnic diversity and the coexistence of different cultures are structured by geographical mapping conducive to ethnic segregation and insulation. In Tim’s case, the proximity of his relatives and his move to a New Jersey suburb added to this sense of insulation.

It was largely an Italian, White, Catholic neighborhood. Working-class neighborhood. Lots of children. The working Italians, the Hispanic community, the White community, they had all these children. So there were a lot of kids to play with. My adoptive family, my mother was the youngest of the four sisters. Her older sisters, they were married. They had kids. So all these cousins, who were tall, blond and blue-eyed, were like second brothers and sisters. They all found me very curious because I was small and dark unlike these tall, blond, blue-eyed people. It was great to have all these cousins who were like brothers and sisters. So it was a very happy childhood. I did have a bout of Polio. My parents suffered through that to get me recovered. I had a good relationship with my younger brother, and um that’s it. While I was in the City, there was some chance that I might meet, close to the orphanage where there were other adopted Koreans. I could interface with them, and maybe continue to speak a little Korean. But when my Dad

transferred out to New Jersey for a job, I was really out in the Hicks. There was no culture, no street lights, no streets. In high school, I was the only Asian in *pretty much of an all-White neighborhood*. It still seems that way in New Jersey (my emphasis).

Frankenberg utilizes the concept of “racial social geography” in her analysis of the narratives given by white women to elucidate “the racial and ethnic mapping of environments in physical and social terms” (1993: 44). In these women’s narrative reconstructions of the neighborhoods where they grew up, Frankenberg realizes the importance of the contradiction when interviewees’ “apparently all-White” surroundings were betrayed by their off-handed comments about the kinds of encounters or relationships with an ethnic/racial other(s) that they mentioned. By pulling out these moments of contradictions between *real* and *conceptual* worlds that we inhabit, Frankenberg argues “*conceptually* rather than *physically* that people of color were distant” from white women (*ibid.*: 49, my emphasis).

In consideration of Frankenberg’s analysis, Tim’s contrasting descriptions of his neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the New Jersey suburbs become more illuminating. A Chinese-run laundromat five blocks from his home in Brooklyn, the knowledge that he could meet other Korean adoptees, and New York’s ethnic heterogeneity all provided the context in which his Korean self could be, however tenuously, negotiated and maintained. On the other hand, despite the presence of all of these factors, he reveals the urgency he felt toward adjustment and assimilation: “it was do-or-die situation. It was English.” This conceptual world, the world that matters to the person, is what makes up one’s habitus. In the midst of Brooklyn’s diversity, Tim’s world was made up of “these tall, blond, blue-eyed people,” who were his relatives. This sense of racial insulation increased when he moved to the New Jersey suburbs, where excursions to the City where he could meet others like him were not readily available options. The statement, “In high school, I was the only Asian in

pretty much of an all-White neighborhood,” is, in fact, very common, almost coming as a refrain of some sort, whenever I interviewed other adoptees as well. Not trivializing nor discrediting their statements, we should pay attention to *the kind of conceptual world* that one inhabits in thinking about childhoods and neighborhoods (cf. Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Frankenberg, 1993). The neighborhoods and childhoods narrated thus reveal the narrators’ conceptual mapping of self and others as much as the actual geography.

Acceptance is an important issue for adoptees: accepted into the adoptive family, accepted into the family’s broader network, accepted into the community, and so on. For transnational/ transracial adoptees such as Korean adoptees, the issue of acceptance parallels their gradual assimilation. Tim talks about how he was accepted into his family and relatives.

I have no issues about interracial adoption. Essentially, you know, I am a product of an interracial /international adoption. My family adopted an Asian. My Mother had no issues about adopting Black or Hispanic children, although she did tell the nuns in all seriousness, if she did adopt a Black child, her very conservative Irish family would disown her. But she had no issues about that. There was, well, some of the other members, I learned years later, did have some racist issues with me. Some of the older Irish uncles and aunts, “why are you adopting a Chink?” You know, so they had some issues about that. She told them to get that [the idea of adopting transracially]. Well, they did and they didn’t. They tolerated me, but not like other members, who said, “come home and sit at my table. You are member of our family.” Others tolerated me. They would certainly talk to my brother first, and then me. Those kinds of little innuendos. That hurts. There didn’t seem to be *the issue of complete acceptance*. But as I got older, I realized they were that way with other people, including sometimes their own children (laughs). (My emphasis)

Tim’s deep bond with his family and relatives withstood time, despite a few with prejudices, and he fondly recalls one of the birthday parties he happened to be late in attending. It was for Amy, one of his cousins. To his pleasant surprise, everyone was waiting for him, because Amy insisted that all should wait for Tim, because Cousin Tim had been an orphan and needed to have the first piece of cake. “You know, they constantly treated me first in line, made sure that I get something to eat. It was great.”

Through his experience with those who remained distant from him, he gained an understanding that there is no complete acceptance and that is a part of life, whether adopted or not. Another time his acceptance into the mainstream society was questioned was during his adolescence.

In my teen years, I had other injuries which prevented me from physical activity. So I hit the books, which meant I was a part of a geek crowd. I wore glasses. I was socially inept. And *here was my second wave of acceptance or non-acceptance by the larger crowd*, the high school crowd. I wasn't really accepted by the high school crowd, jocks, or the cheerleaders, you know. I felt more like an outsider, in high school, more than any other time. There was no social attitude, no invitations to parties or outings like that. I was definitely not part of that crowd. (My emphasis)

Adolescence is a difficult time for many people, adopted or not. Tim is attributing his outsider status to his physical condition. His presence in a high school in New Jersey in the late 1960's unmistakably elicited some curious stares, especially in his informal networks of people formed through his family. His humorous spirit is revealed in the following story:

I think I was socially awkward, I couldn't dance, I didn't have the manners. I don't know, maybe the perception of being Asian in a very White community, the look of being European or American, all fair-skinned, especially when that's the majority, and there you are, right in the middle, this shorter, darker, coarse-haired Asian person, so you stood out like a sore thumb. Or you are viewed as a curiosity. My jokes when I was in high school was that the famous show on TV was "Kung Fu," and the other guys would always come up and stupidly say, "you are Asian, you gotta know Karate." And I said, "No, I don't, but I can beat and I can gladly hit you on the knees with a baseball bat. But that's about it."

Nevertheless, Tim says he had never been physically insulted or attacked because of his racial difference. One incident in which he had a physical confrontation with others happened like this:

It was probably in high school. There was this young Black guy, and he and I were walking. There was a group from another high school. They were a little tanked up. And they saw an Asian and a Black. They started jeering at us. Unfortunately, I got mad, and I said, "is that all you've got?" Well, no. They

came out of the car and started beating up on us. So that was my mistake (laughs).

From his description, it seems that racial slurs and name-calling, or marking of racial others rather, are a part of the ways in which American boys grapple with their own sense of masculinity. I could detect the pleasure in his telling the story, not only from his laughter that followed his storytelling, but in the way this story clearly contradicts the American conceptualization of Asian masculinity as effeminate and docile. Eng depicts this phenomenon as a “racial castration” (2001) of Asian men, represented in popular and literary cultural works. Tim had problems with health and physical activities as he mentioned earlier, but even that did not stop him from defending himself with a bold retort, “is that all you’ve got?” This is a moment of interpellation (cf. Althusser, 1971), wherein he clearly showed his opponents that he could speak and understand English as well as they could, and accepted the opponents’ marking of him as an Asian. In a sense, Tim successfully produced culturally predictable responses in a cultural encounter which questions his place in the landscape. By interpreting this event as a culturally meaningful path of masculine contest, and accepting the invitation, he showed that he was an Asian, engaged also in the stage of constructing his American masculinity. Who won the contest does not matter so much as the fact that he understood the culturally acceptable rules and cues.

His parents wanted him to continue his education, hoping he would go to college, which he did eventually. But, right out of high school, out of thirst for independence and partially due to his family’s financial means, he decided to work and be on his own. Describing his identity as that of an “assimilated American,” he talked about his youth, spent working at a factory assembly line in Bronx.

I got to like it. I was good at it. I was making a lot of money. I had the independence. And I found something that I was good at, and I was friends

with a group of people who are older, different races. We were friends, they were comrades for hunting. They invited me home to dinner, these kinds of things. *So there was a new acceptance level as an adult.* But my parents were concerned that I was in there too long, that I was gonna continue with that, and not further my education. And I argued my folks on that. (My emphasis)

In the end, his father could see that his son was growing up, and learned to accept his decision, whereas his mother could never accept that his son would forgo a college education and take up blue-collar profession. However, for Tim, this was an opportunity that offered him a renewed sense of belonging, away from home. He was now accepted by the wider community as an ethnic man all on his own. His friendship, “comradeship” in his terms, gave him enough confidence in his quest for adulthood and independence as well. However, as he alluded to earlier, there could not be a complete acceptance in any community. There was always something that came between him and his co-workers as the following story exemplifies one such incident.

I was working in a factory and the Vietnam War came about. The working-class Americans tend to be a little conservative and more patriotic. You don’t say things against the war or other things, you know. I was telling them the Vietnamese culture is quite old. It’s like Korean culture or Chinese culture. It went right over their heads. The only thing they understood is that all Asians eat with chopsticks. And they didn’t realize that some of the older Vietnamese can speak French. “How can they speak French? They all speak Chinese!” “Yeah, right! Vietnam was a part of the great Indo-China Empire. So the older ones knew French. Ho Chi Minh spent time in Paris.”

The Vietnam War era was also a moment where having an Asian physiognomy became a liability on several occasions as we have seen from Jack’s experience of name-calling earlier. You had to be able to navigate your way around and being able to discern friendly places from potentially hostile environments became a skill that should be obtained for one’s survival.

During the Vietnam War, if I was by myself, in fact that when the war was going badly, the thing not to do is go to a bar by yourself. They didn’t beat

me up or anything, but I remember going to a bar, which happened to be a big, flag-waving, very patriotic, you know, “love America” kind of place, and I sat at the bar. And they refused to serve me. *They refused to serve me. Eventually I got the idea that they wouldn’t serve an Asian.* That’s just what [the problem was]. (My emphasis)

Tim could not believe the way he was refused at the bar, and his realization of his own Asian outlook came a little later. He also quickly added that he had often been rejected by Korean Americans as well. He went on, “there were times when I was in a Korean restaurant in earlier days, and they would snub me. They would serve the Whites before they served me, because I couldn’t pronounce the name of the food I wanted to order.” By paralleling discrimination against him from both Korean and American societies next to each other, Tim outlined the kind of subjective place Korean adoptees in general occupied. Now, he can at least read and write basic Korean, after putting years of hard work to relearning the language. This helped him to maneuver among Korean Americans more skillfully, and he used humor to gloss over some of the social awkwardness that was caused by mutual misrecognitions.

Tim’s quest for meeting other Korean adoptees began when he was well into his 40s. He said with amusement, “I was pretty much an assimilated American. I’ve never had a full consciousness-raising of my Korean heritage. I’ve never pursued learning Korean or had any Asian friends, or trying to learn Korean. So it was just the American way of my 20s and 30s. So, most of my friends were American.” The fateful moment came in 1999, when Korean adoptees organized their first national Gathering in Washington, D.C. Tim happened to work in the area, and joined The Gathering where he met hundreds of other Korean adoptees. He successfully networked with the people he met there, and since then, has been very active in terms of writing and publishing articles on numerous issues related to Korean adoptees, international adoption, and even Korea. He described The Gathering in this way:

I think because I came from a generation that had no other connection to many other Asians, much less Koreans, coming and facing them as adults, it's sort of like, eye-opening. We exchange stories that are very familiar. Being the only Asian in a large White community, dating problems, certain identity problems, and then, exchanging information, some of it is very similar, some of it is very distinct. For me, it's been glorious, because I finally connected with a group that, much like me, has similar identity issues, adoption issues, and we are a group onto ourselves. So I've more or less been active with that group for the last 10 years. Like I said, my Korean consciousness came up as an adult, well into my 40s. So any thoughts of birth search came in my 40s, or going back to Korea came in my late 40s. Prior to that, I couldn't care less.

JP: What changed?

I think it was simply meeting other adoptees.

Meeting other adoptees enabled him to locate his own story alongside many different trajectories that other adoptees have made. Learning about the different-yet-similar circumstances that the others encountered and lived through awakened in him a sense of belonging to a Korean adoptee diaspora, prompting him to explore his Korean identity anew. "Meeting with adoptees, well, it just gives you a kind of *kindred spirit* to be with others who have similar background as you are" (my emphasis). After years of feeling isolated, different, conflicted about one's identity, meeting with others who shared the same concerns as his offered an emotionally powerful connection.

Since then, he has been actively seeking companionships with other Korean adoptee women. He said with a big chuckle, "somehow, I always end up with women from southern part of Korea. I guess there is no risk of us being related, as I was from Incheon." Incheon is in the mid-western part of Korea, approximately half an hour's driving distance from the capital, Seoul. Lack of information that the adoptees have about their births meant that there might be adoptees out there who are related by blood. This possibility, rarely talked about, still provides a fodder for jokes and cynicism.

He had been married to an Irish Catholic woman who shared a culturally similar upbringing with him, and has two daughters who are now in their teens. He felt the need to explain. “When I was growing up, I was the only Asian in a predominantly White community. So I dated White girls, and I eventually married a White woman. I didn’t think that was particularly racism. It was availability, proximity, and compatibility. That’s what it is.” Even when you have compatibility, marriage takes work. He is divorced now and recounts that his marriage got into trouble partially due to a lack of communication between him and his wife. “It was not because I was a Korean adoptee and she was White. None of those issues. Simply lack of communication between so-called intelligent adults.”

Tim has been a good father to both of his daughters throughout all these years. We were supposed to meet in Korea in 2007 for the gathering, but he could not make the trip to Korea at the last minute, as his older daughter’s college tuition made his Korean trip financially unviable. As “typical American teenagers,” his daughters, however, could not be bothered with their father’s adoptee status, or his plea to explore their partial heritage. Tim understands them perfectly and does not ask them anymore.

After all these years, you know, turning 54, in terms of anything that’s Korean, it’s maintaining my connections with the other Korean adoptees. That’s important. I don’t stress the fact of my Korean heritage to my daughters. They will find their own identity in America. They are essentially American with Asian features. That’s what they are. They are American. They don’t have any interests in the great deal of my background. Not at this point anyway. But I have gained tremendous insights and found a great deal of comfort in connecting with other adult Korean adoptees.

Along with the expansion of his personal networks, Tim became very knowledgeable in adoptee issues and made efforts to learn about Korean culture and history he neglected in the past. Participating in several adoptee meetings allowed him to delineate the generational differences characterizing the gulf between younger and older adoptees.

It's interesting now, where as the first wave of adoptees, you go to meetings and talk to younger adoptees, you know, uh, how different their issues are. One of them, a California crowd, his adoptive parents gave him a ticket to go to Korea to see it, when he was 19. He went, and he said, it was weird. "They don't look like me and I don't understand them." So, he was in a rush to come back to America, because that's what he understood and that's where he felt most comfortable.

The opportunities and options given to the younger generation of adoptees were unthinkable for those from Tim's generation. Tim's only wish for his parents was that they made more serious efforts to sustain his Korean speaking ability. "Not necessarily because it is my heritage, but having a second language, a far-Eastern language, is a value in terms of jobs, business and career building," he added. That was the thing he missed the most from his childhood. Adopted in 1961, Tim and his contemporaries were in the midst of the assimilation era, where everyone was assumed to be, and should be an American without hyphens. The need or desire to travel back to the birth country was evacuated by the zeal to assimilate into the culture they came to. Now, those Korean adoptees in their 20s and early 30s have different issues and problems originating from changed understandings of what it means to be an American and what it means to be adopted from Korea when the Korean War is a faint memory. However, despite all these differences, there is a reason why these adoptee meetings and gatherings make sense to all Korean adoptees of various ages.

TK: One of the common threads of older adoptees and younger adoptees, they still have a kind of a, *a moment where they have to resolve their conflicts of identity*. Well, are you Korean? Are you half-Korean? Are you adopted, are you half-adopted, are you full American, what do you feel you are? So most of us don't feel, we feel more American, more country where we grew up, whether it's America, France, or Sweden, all of that, for the most of the adoptees that I talked to, rather than Korean. So, we say we are Korean American, or Korean French, rather than saying we are Korean. One of the things I think, the older one of us, there were times when we were snubbed by the real Koreans. So that was one of the other issues. If we can't be accepted, then, so you know, so there was that hard reality. (My emphasis)

JP: have you ever experienced one of those kinds of incidents yourself?

TK: Yes, I felt it. I'd go into a Korean place. They'd ask me, "you look Korean!" I didn't say I was Korean. I said, "I was born in Incheon." And then they started speaking Korean, and then, I said, "I've been in this country for a very long time. I don't understand Korean anymore." Then they'd just clam up. The wall goes up.

Cultural misunderstandings may be the reason why these incidents occur, but the fact of their rejection from their birth country adds to the painful feelings, as detailed in the Introduction. According to Tim then, living in-between-ness and conflicted identities are what tie together younger and older generation adoptees. Alienated by both Korean and American culture, but nonetheless assimilated into the mainstream America, Korean adoptees, both young and old, go through a similar process of identity construction. He had this to say before we concluded our interview.

If I adopted a Chinese girl as an infant, or a two-year-old from Korea, I would as a parent, try to introduce as much of our past heritage as possible, even if I have to try to re-learn the language to help my little Korean daughter learn it. 'Cause I think having similar cultures gives you a [sic] much more perspective. Because, *frankly, when I was raised as an American, I developed American prejudices. I developed certain American prejudices because I can't speak Asian and forgot. "Hey, I am Asian. I forgot about that!"* (laughs)(my emphasis)

Tim understands the times have changed from when he grew up. His parents did not know any better, although he wishes they had let him retain his Korean speaking ability. But as a parent in the 90s, he embraces the ethos of multiculturalism. Tim's comments also poignantly expose the "forever alien" status of Asians in American cultural discourses and practices. Being an American is thus to learn and share the culturally specific conceptualization of Asian differences prevalent in American cultural imaginary. Earlier we saw Jean Kim's ambivalence toward embracing her Asian self. Taken together, ambivalence toward Asian identity is significant among older adoptees.

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Regardless of where they grew up, the older generation adoptees utilize the ethos and discourse of assimilation when narrating their racial identity. As social agents molded in the assimilation era, they are “assimilated Americans” to borrow Timothy Klein’s term. Their story in relation to their transnational adoptee status is that of isolation. They never knew anyone like themselves while growing up. In an ethos of assimilation, this isolation did not matter much. Their parents’ attempts at connecting with other adoptive families and introducing Korean heritage to them were not considered significant at the time.

Jack Hamilton’s speculation that racial discrimination seemed to be more visible in urban areas where there were significant number of minorities attests to the fact that the adoptees growing up urban areas were not necessarily equipped with more nuanced understandings of racial identity. Timothy Klein’s childhood spent in New York City was largely shielded from interactions with other ethnicities and races. The presence of his relatives nearby provided the social context and informal network for his upbringing.

For these older adoptees, their racial identity as a Korean American is something that they have recently explored. The Gathering in 1999 provided the context and motivation for these adoptees to connect with others in their age cohort, and to rediscover the part of their biological history that they previously put aside. Their journey to find this forgotten dimension of self is taken with a seasoned eye toward reconciling their assimilated American self and the label, “Korean.” This journey is not an easy one, and it may never come to an end. They seem to find meanings from the journey and the company they keep meanwhile.

Chapter SEVEN. Shifting Terrain: Adoption of Korean children in the mid-1960s

In my initial research design, I divided the adoptees into two groups in terms of age/generation: Age Group 1 (born or adopted between 1956-1966) and Age Group 2 (born or adopted between 1967-1985). However, as I talked to more people and collected interviews, I realized that my analysis needed to make a room for a group that comes between these two quite different generations. This section is about those who are wedged between older and younger generation adoptees. They came of age in the midst of cultural changes that drastically alter the landscape of international adoption. These adoptees were clearly aware of that fact, and they wanted to be recognized as such. I could also see the differences between this group and the other two groups in terms of a few primary characteristics. Among many were age (and/or year of adoption), ethnoracial awareness, and the importance of birth country connection. Therefore, I insert this group as a kind of buffer that represents the period of changes and shifts between the younger and older generations of adoptees. It is also important to note that, in conceiving this group, I took the adoptees' sentiments and orientations as the primary grid, supplemented by their ages, to draw the analytical lines among adoptees.

To be specific, this section details the lives of those who came into this country in the 1960s, and are now in their 40s and early 50s. I term this group as “middle-aged” in distinction to older and younger generations. This is an era of transition in Korean adoption in two important respects. The first fact is that, during this period, it was increasingly Korean infants, rather than grown children, who came to be adopted in the US, portending the changing conceptualizations of international adoption from humanitarian efforts to a way to expand or build families. Although in earlier periods, some childless couples –and others—

did adopt Korean children in the hopes of expanding the family, the main cultural discourse framing Korean adoption at the time was that of salvation. The focus was more on humanitarianism and US patriotism,¹⁵⁵ rather than on parents' individual fulfillment via inclusion of new family members.

This change was due in part to American cultural shifts, in thinking about childhood and children, the meaning of families in an era where alternative life styles, diversity in families began to be, albeit reluctantly, recognized.¹⁵⁶ In addition, this was the time when the familial institution became intensely commodified, tying itself to consumption practices and habits.

By 1960, 60 percent of Americans owned homes, 75 percent possessed cars, and nearly 90 percent had television. The 6 percent of the world's people who lived in the United States consumed almost half of the world's manufactured goods (Mintz and Kellogg, 1993, cited in Illick, 2002: 117).¹⁵⁷

A cursory look at children-oriented enterprises, such as Chuck E. Cheese's and Toys "R" Us brings us to the finding that these children-oriented businesses came into existence in the late 1970s.¹⁵⁸ Regardless of the volume of clientele they served at that time, one can get a glimpse of the beginning of cultural changes, concomitant with the changing meanings and practices of familial institution. Adoptable babies and children around this time were

¹⁵⁵ Or US imperialism, as analyzed by Klein (2000, 2003), and Takaki (1990(1979)).

¹⁵⁶ The rise of feminist critiques on familial institutions around this period both affected, and were stimulated by, feminist anthropologists' works on this subject. For classical accounts, see Collier and Yanagisako (1987), Rapp (1979), Reiter (1975), Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974) among others. Stacey (1998) also provides an intelligent map of historical changes related to familial institutions.

¹⁵⁷ Illick (2002:117) goes on to mention another important dimension of the US economy during this period: "An economy whose watchword was "produce" had created an industrial plant and generated personal wealth that called for consumption." Illick is here explicating the cultural process wherein postwar wealth and the need for consumption inherent in this accumulation of wealth necessitated construction of children as future consumers. From the perspective of a parent during this period, having (and or adopting) a child could have been another activity that would contribute to consumption efforts touted as patriotic. See Rouse (1995) for an analysis of economic changes after the WW II.

¹⁵⁸ To be specific, Chuck E. Cheese's was founded in 1977 (<http://www.chuckcheese.com/company-info/> ; last accessed on Feb., 8, 2009). Toys "R" Us started its operation as a public company in 1978 (<http://www3.toysrus.com/about/> ; last accessed on Feb. 8, 2009).

gradually transformed into objects of *desire*, rather than objects of *pity*, although desire and pity in transnational adoption practices are deeply interrelated and often coexistent sentiments.¹⁵⁹

The other important factor that distinguishes this age group is that the overwhelming majority of children adopted in the US during this period were full-blooded Korean children, eclipsing the already dwindling number of interracial children. I introduce two adoptees who are acutely aware of their status in this transition. Both of them are full-blooded Koreans, and one was adopted in infancy. Both adoptees clearly articulate their differences from the older and younger adoptees, necessitating more detailed attention to this intermediate period. For instance, the institution of Culture Camps for transnational adoptees gradually changed its character, along with the maturation of this group. As there were a growing number of adoptees who could direct these camps and mentor younger adoptees, the leadership of Culture Camps gradually shifted from social workers and adoption professionals to the adoptees themselves. In this shift, the middle age-group actively directed, and participated in, the upper echelon of camp organizations. Also, adoption agency-sponsored birth country tours became more accessible after the early 1980s, and this generation, if they wanted to, could participate in them. Since most adoptees who took part in these birth country tours belonged to younger cohorts, these relatively older adoptees quickly realized that different issues and challenges faced different generations of adoptees. In these collective experiences that they have had, the middle aged-group adoptees found themselves to be in a somewhat unique position, vis-à-vis the older and younger adoptees, that enabled them to be the

¹⁵⁹ Cartwright's (2003, 2005) discussion of the uses of visual images of these children by adoption agency and adoptive parents illustrate the interrelations between pity/caring and desire/market. Dorow (2006) points to the dense relationship between care and market, brought into light by transnational adoption.

primary movers of Korean adoptee movements, organizing the local adoptee organizations, and networking with other adoptees living in faraway places.

As will be clear from the following two individual stories, this group as a whole reflects the cultural changes taking place in the United States during the late 1960s and 1970s. With American culture becoming more accepting of single mothers, along with the opposition of NABSW (National Association of Black Social Workers) to transracial adoption within the United States (Modell, 1994; Patton, 2000), prospective adoptive parents looked elsewhere for available children. The international adoption industry established in Korea in earlier decades proved to be a profitable business when more and more parents became interested in adoption of children unhampered by domestic political debates. Korea remained within the top five countries for adoptions into the US during this era (see Figure 2).

Scott Kinsey: “Unfortunately I have to identify myself when I speak as a Korean adoptee, but I am not, just as I don’t introduce my older sister as a forceps-delivered American.”

Scott has such a pleasant voice, and that’s probably why he was able to work as an announcer at a radio station in Utah for a while. “Everybody gets a surprise when they meet me in person. You know, you listen to my show on radio, and you don’t really imagine I would look like this,” he said with a chuckle that is a mix of sarcasm and boisterousness, which is one of the characteristics of Korean adoptees. Being named “Scott Kinsey,” and with his articulate and sharp tongue, Scott must have witnessed on numerous occasions the kind of initial shock that he seems to induce in strangers. At 47, he is unbelievably energetic

and has a charismatic smile that is contagious. His energy and openness lasted throughout our interview, and several later encounters that I had with him.

His experiences parallel those of other Korean adoptees who grew up in the Midwest, where they were the only Asians whom they knew where they lived. If you can ever draw a line for the spectrum of adoptee experience in relation to their awareness of the ethnically and culturally diverse world outside, Scott's story can be placed at a far end of the mark of "little awareness." In the small town in South Dakota where he grew up, the presence of non-Whites was so invisible that people did not know what to make of him.

You only know the existence that you had, especially as a child. You really don't look at it from outside, like an anthropologist would. First of all, we had a multiracial family. Obviously two Native Americans, myself and all these White people in the same house! It was also during the 60s, the Civil Rights Movement. Two things were in the news. The Civil Rights and the Vietnam War. So as a minority, it was probably tough for a lot of people. Growing up, my peers always teased me quite often, you know, on a daily basis. Fights, things like that. I am not a fighting guy. They didn't have nicknames. Today they have nicknames. They didn't have nicknames for Asians then. They would call me N-word, because that's the nickname they knew for a minority. There are no nicknames for Indians. So I was called the N-word a lot. People generally would say that to me. It is an interesting existence obviously, 'cause not a lot of Asians get called N-word all their lives.¹⁶⁰ One of the most vivid memories that I have, maybe 1st grade or so, or maybe a little later, [when] Martin Luther King Jr., had given his "I Have A Dream" speech, and then he was assassinated. That next day everybody was talking about it at school. Even all the kids knew what was happening. And all the kids decided that I would be the only one that would live through this because the Blacks would come and kill everybody, but they would spare me, because I was Black.

¹⁶⁰ Unfortunately, Scott's comments here are misleading. Asians, especially Chinese, had historically been equated with Blacks in many ways in the West coast. Based on his excavation of numerous newspaper articles and local papers, Takaki argues that with the growing population of Chinese workers in California around the turn of the 20th century, Chinese workers were discursively constructed and visually depicted as carrying roughly the same characteristics attributed to the Blacks during and after the slavery. "White workers made the identification even more explicit when they referred to the Chinese as 'nagurs'" (Takaki, 1990(1979): 219).

Scott's family was multiracial, with two of his sisters being Native Americans. His father was Canadian, and had to become an American citizen before he could adopt any children. His mother was of Swedish descent, and his parents had two biological daughters of their own. His father was quite interested in issues and policies related to Native Americans and his career was tied to the policy-making branch of the Native American community nearby. Due to his career and interests, he and his wife adopted two Native American girls, who came from different tribal groups. Then, they decided to adopt another Caucasian boy domestically, and Scott was adopted at the age of 3 months as the last child of the family. Scott's parents were deeply committed to the causes of the Civil Rights Movement as well, which added to Scott's and his family's awareness of racial tensions and prejudices that existed in his community.

My parents were involved in the Civil Rights Movement, going door to door, specifically with my sisters. They are in the 50s now (laughs), going door to door, you know, for integration with our neighbors. That didn't go very well. They told me stories. People would shut the door on them. They told them no. We've never had any verbal abuse on the family. Just a lot of stereotypes. Some people would come up to me, and ask my Mom if I was speaking English. I was 9 or 10 at the time. I did speak very well in English. We were the subject of articles on newspapers because of our, you know, all the different races. Again, it was pretty rare. People would make fun of me then.

Despite Scott's parents' efforts and social consciousness, the community surrounding Scott and his siblings seemed at first unperturbed by the social whirlwind sweeping the rest of the country. Scott was a constant object of curiosity, and getting stared at all the time was deeply unsettling for him. Although he was the favorite child of his mother and adored baby of the family, the social prejudice was severely affecting his sense of self-esteem. His remarks are worth quoting at length.

People thought that it was really nice for my parents to do this. You know, "Thank God, you are adopted." 'Cause I guess, otherwise, we would have been died [sic]. We would have starved to death." All the stuff we heard.

“People would spit on us in Korea.” All these things are going into that little kid’s mind. Very little positive things. All, you are just extremely passive in your thought. You can’t control this. . . . So growing up, it was really tough, being picked on or teased or called names. It wasn’t, uh, I’ve never had any physical abuse. I knew some tough people, and I knew Karate, so they wouldn’t beat me up after a while. They couldn’t have beaten me up if they tried. It was a matter of self-esteem to try to fight back. The creativity is pretending to do Karate (laughs). It was tough. I’ve never been close to anybody growing up. Even the closest friend growing up is adopted actually (laughs). But not really close. We’d ski or do a lot of other things together, because subconsciously. . . . *I was very conscious about being Korean, not a White person, because you’d feel that.* People would keep staring at you and you know. As you grow older, you’d get asked about things. You’re a little kid, you don’t want to be asked about stuff, you know, nose, or things like that. *With the guys, you know, a physical thing that happens, because you end up being different, ‘cause you don’t get tall as they are.* I didn’t know that. You know, a lot of guys tell their kids, “Oh, you have to be taller than me when you grow up.” And that didn’t happen. We’re actually Korean, and we never see any Korean. Until 10 years ago, I’ve never met Korean guys that are actually older than me, that didn’t speak any English. We were just at the restaurant or something. I was curious, because part of me was Korean. I’d always just wonder, what I would look like as a man. I had no idea. The only guy I ever saw was Bruce Lee. I knew I wasn’t gonna look like Bruce Lee, because I wasn’t Chinese. I never knew. And the pictures you see are those pictures of traditional Koreans with the hats and beard. (laughs) I didn’t look like that. “Oh, you look like President Park.”¹⁶¹ Oh, my God! I don’t look like him. He is not a bad looking guy, but I don’t look so Asian. I was just realizing that (my emphasis).

Eng (2001) claims that Asian masculinity was pathologized by an American cultural imaginary which was informed and colored by histories of Asian immigration. Lowe’s (1996, 1997) exposition on Asian immigration history reveals the fact that early Chinese migrants worked in capacities mostly designated for women; laundry, household caretaker, cooking, etc. In addition, Asian male physiognomy, which is, on average, slender and shorter than other Americans, can bring a serious blow to a boy who has never seen a grown Asian man. Scott’s consciousness of his own difference from the others surrounding him, along with the

¹⁶¹ Scott is here referring to President Chung Hee Park, who governed South Korea in the 1970s. His leadership bordering on dictatorship ended in 1979 with his assassination by one of his bodyguards. His period of reign was from 1961 to 1979, and due to his long time presidency, his pictures could have been readily available.

American perception of Asian males as diminutive and effeminate, became a burden that was invisible but all the same unbearable. The subtle changes that took place in relation to Asian masculinity are shown here, and were also seen in the narratives of the older generation.

Next series of people making fun of me was changed when TV show, *Kung Fu*, which was really big, came out. Not Bruce Lee, but actually had a White guy playing an Asian. *That was a milestone. Teasing did change a little bit, because people started to know what Asians were.* They started to get the Kung Fu, usually gestures they would do, all that. I made a fateful mistake of learning Tae Kwon Do, 'cause I wasn't good at it. And everybody wanted to fight me. That was tough. Kids will tease me on a daily basis. I mean, not everybody, but still. The thing is you feel extremely isolated, and there's literally nobody you can share this with.¹⁶²

As seen from Timothy Klein's narrative earlier, Scott also suffered from the stereotype of Asian men being a martial arts expert, largely due to the mainstream media portrayal of Asian males in martial arts. But, to a certain extent, the TV program *Kung Fu* fulfilled the desire of Asian men to be seen as masculine subjects. Hamamoto's (1994: 59) description of *Kung Fu* is helpful in understanding the changes regarding Asian men that the program provided.

The standard portrayal of the Asian American male as a non-heroic victim was modified ever so slightly with the appearance of the program *Kung Fu* (1972-1975). For the first time, an Asian American male was seen physically confronting prejudice and racially motivated attacks without fear. Although his training as a Shaolin priest restrained him from engaging in gratuitous acts of aggression, Kwai Chang Caine (David Carradine)¹⁶³ neither ran from trouble nor allowed himself to be brutalized.

¹⁶² This quote, as any others, is transcribed verbatim from the interview. I tried to convey here what and how he said, despite some grammatical inconsistencies.

¹⁶³ Bruce Lee actually auditioned for the role of Caine, but he was rejected in favor of David Carradine. The character Caine was transformed into one supposed to be of mixed heritage, White and Chinese to accommodate and heighten the popular appeal. See Hamamoto (1994).

Kung Fu thus shifted the tone of stereotypes related to Asian males, uplifting the hitherto emasculated Asian manhood in the American cultural imaginary, while controlling it within the confines of narrowly defined positions, such as martial arts practitioners or docile subjects to the ancient philosophy. Hence, you will encounter many Asian American men growing up in this time frame who can recall childhood taunts related to martial arts and Bruce Lee.¹⁶⁴

If Timothy Klein's account is peppered by the existence of ethnic others and cultural diversity in the proximity of his neighborhood, Scott's description reveals a sense of total abjection. He humorously told me that in one town where his family lived, there were a couple other Korean adoptees. His family and those of these adoptees used to get together for family picnics, and he recalls one time when he and these kids wondered aloud, asking adults, "when do we turn to White? How old should we be to turn White?" They had never seen any Koreans before, and they couldn't imagine what they would look like as an adult. The adoptees wondered whether people would turn White when they reached a certain age.

Scott has been living in South Dakota most of his life, and his sense of being different and alone never went away. But he became involved in adoptee organization efforts through his volunteer work at Culture Camps for Korean adoptees in the 1990s. This was a transformative event that changed his outlook.

That was the first time I'd been around other adoptees. They were a little younger. . . . That was like my epiphany when I realized this. As a result of these culture camps, and some of us older people working there, that's how this gathering began. It's something we didn't have. . . . It was very difficult in a White society. You see yourself as White. You don't think of yourself as something different. It's very common, all around. That's the wonder of the culture camps for children. They get a little glimpse of this, because you see yourself in your parents' faces. Simple as that. "Love your parents. They are

¹⁶⁴ See Ch. 4 for further discussion of mass media representations and Asian racial and gender/sexual identity.

the only parents you have. There's no such thing as real parents," I talked to the adoptees, "there's no such thing as American parents. They are your parents." It's really really really tough. Every time I get together with the adoptees, I used to get together a lot with the adoptees at the camps, people finally tell their stories. Usually we would never tell that to anybody but another adoptee. That was the focus of the camps. When I go to these mini-gatherings or camps, I focus on the boys, because the boys have literally no outlets. Because they are the boys, they don't get a lot emotional. So, they don't get to talk to other people, specifically get to see a 40-year old man that could be their father, or an older brother. I've had some incredible discussions and hearing stories and seeing 20-year old tough guys cry and tell me about what happened to them and what they feel. A lot of it has to do with sexuality, as well. I CAN'T TELL YOU MORE ABOUT THAT!
(laughs) (emphasis original)

Meeting with other adoptees at the culture camps was an eye-opening experience, a moment of epiphany in his words. Scott felt a sense of connection to other adoptees that he has never had before. He worked for younger Korean adoptees, especially boys at these camps, to discuss any issues that they had. Mostly the subjects revolved around racism and sexuality issues, which he knew required a cautious approach. He also worked with adoptive parents who were now mostly around his age. As an example of the kind of work he did with adoptive families, he told me about one camp experience he had. He was one of the camp counselors assigned to the boys, and he organized a two-part workshop for the boys and their adoptive parents respectively. For the first part, he created a space for kids only, apart from their parents.

I asked how many boys were teased. I had them raise their hands. All boys. The next day, I had another session with their parents. "How many of your kids have been teased?" Two hands go up. They were like the most liberal parents there are. "It's gotta be us!" you know? I told them, "I asked your sons last night. Every single one of them has been teased." Several of them started crying. I told them, "that's a pretty big disconnect. That's one of the issues that adoptees have with their parents. That's the issue that manifests itself later in life. You couldn't, you weren't able to nurture that. In the worst possible sense, you didn't do anything wrong, because you didn't even see it." But it's the hardest thing especially for the boys, 'cause I didn't talk to the girls, to go through and people that are supposed to nurture them didn't even notice it. . . . The adoptive parents don't have any idea that any of these exist.

They don't believe that there is racism. They don't believe that their kids are teased. I tell them, "you know, there is a big difference between teasing and racial slurs. If I am bold or clothed differently, I can change that somehow. I can't change my race." That's something that adoptive parents will never understand, because they are not a minority.

Many camps and culture events organized for adoptees and adoptive families now have slotted times for workshops on racism or cultural information about the adoptees' country of origin. Usually these workshops are led by older adoptees who may hold a degree in psychology or social work, or have had a lot of workshop experiences in the past. Scott's role as an effective arbiter between adoptees and their parents above is a good example of that, and it further reaffirms the need to incorporate the experiences and lessons of older adoptees in these venues. After 5 years of working in such a capacity, Scott, however, found himself disappointed and exhausted.

It was the most effective thing I ever did. And I just stopped doing it, because I was just physically tired of talking to the parents. 'Cause they'll ask the same thing, "what should I do?" I tell them right off the bat, "You know, as much as I am a fan for and support adoption, I've never adopted a child and have no idea what it's supposed to be. I tell you one thing as a parent, as my parent did. Number one goal is to love your children. I can't tell you how to do that. That's what you are going to learn by yourselves. What I'm going to tell you is what's inside of an adoptee. Can't tell you how to get it out. I can't tell you what to do except making you aware.

Another instance was the collective efforts to organize a national gathering for Korean adoptees. According to Scott, it seems like not many of the adoptees knew each other, or formed relationships with one another, before this Gathering took place in 1999. "I think it was amazing what happened in 1999 here is that we all had the exact same experience so much so, 'cause it was so deep you never talked about this. I still don't even talk about it." He thought of this Gathering as an extension from a culture camp experience: the sense of belonging, a feeling of connection to other adoptees who know exactly what

you went through. But adult adoptee gatherings as a whole had another important dimension for him.

It's really, I used to call it, it's like "magic at hand." . . . The first time an Asian finds another Asian attractive. They never did, because they never grew up with them, you know. You are kind of attracted to parents. It's the first time they've ever seen another male or another female in that kind of light, sexual light. You know, on TV until like recently, you never saw anybody, there was virtually no reflection of us. Even a few of those, they don't look like the stars in Korea. That seems to be like a catalyst. When I talk to people about the idea, they get upset about that sometimes (laughs). Not that they are finding anything in me that they find attractive. *My theory is that they are actually seeing it in themselves. One of the big self-acceptance kinds of thing.* In *First Person Plural*, "attractiveness" to them, is White, White, White. That's the way it's gonna be for men, too. But they see somebody, and this happens to guys as well, attractive and you actually begin to see in yourself. That's what's actually happening. Other people are simply catalysts. *That finally allows you to see yourself, the way you should, not the way White America sees you, your family sees you.* Because you get stared at, growing up constantly getting stared at, I had self-esteem issues, because of the people who stared. It never occurred to me, it probably never happened actually (laughs), I've never thought someone looks at me because they thought I was good-looking. I figured they stared at me, because I looked funny. That's the way I was always looked at in my mind. It was true growing up, you know, because they've never seen an Asian before. So that's what happens in the gatherings. A "Never-seen-an-Asian"-dynamic. They've never seen two Asians together, speaking in English like they are, communicating like normal people. They are not White. But they have White names, so we don't have a problem pronouncing the names. That's what happens in camps as well. That's the wonder of camps. It's just amazing (my emphasis).

Scott here illuminates the narcissistic dimensions of these adoptee meetings and gatherings, eloquently linking the sense of self-esteem and social validation. Before they met someone like themselves, they had an internalized conception of self as non-White, not attractive enough to be loved or to be sexually desired. Now, they can see their own reflections in others, feeling desired by them.

Scott's theorization is personified by those who are called SRs. Scott describes SRs as a label applied to a few individuals with specific characteristics.

They came up with the term called, we call these men, SRs. That stands for “social retards.” They have very difficult time with the opposite sex. I think, I am not a psychologist, but they were impacted so much growing up, teased so much, and told they looked different, they were smaller, and they saw these stereotypes on TV. They were, and still are, incapable of having any kind of relationship. So what they do is they seek out other Koreans and Asians, and Korean adoptees, a lot of them, to try to date. A lot of people become antagonistic toward White people, specifically White females. The other ones don’t even try. So that’s where they came up with this, SRs. I have to say, though, every adoptee I talked to about, they agree, “yeah, yeah, yeah.” They don’t even mind me calling them social retards. I am not a SR by any means, but that’s what they call it.

SRs, then, are those Korean adoptee men who have difficulty communicating effectively with women and/or men. In a way, they personify the victimhood of discrimination and prejudices waged against Asian men in this country, completing the self-fulfilling prophecy of what Asian men should be like. They are an embodiment of the cultural stereotypes about Asian men, especially in terms of American masculinity: diminutive stature, mumbling and socially awkward demeanor, etc.¹⁶⁵

Scott’s participation in The National Gathering in 1999 was purposeful. We have already seen him working in culture camps prior to this momentous gathering. “I especially wanted to work to develop The Gathering, and to find people specifically my age to go back to Seoul to search for our birthparents.” His determination to do a birthparent search turned out to be the lightning rod for collective efforts that prompted a series of meetings that became a regular meeting for a group of adoptees. As we saw previously with Jean Kim Blum’s description, there were many adoptees who were not satisfied with the way their first National Gathering was organized. Scott’s age group was not an exception in this regard, as many of them became disillusioned by the paternalizing efforts of social workers. Scott described the conflicts in The Gathering.

¹⁶⁵ Interestingly as well, SRs KNOW that they are SRs. This point is addressed in Ch. 4.

Social workers, they were actually not called moderators. They were called facilitators. I came up with the term, flagellators, and started to call them that, which wasn't nice. People started to just lash out at us. That led to people telling horrible stories, raped children, basically things that White people have done to them. That wasn't the purpose of the gathering. And then they started talking about how people are angry. Other people said they were not angry. They were proud to be White. They liked being White. We got into this heated debate. Brenda¹⁶⁶ can tell you more, as she was a bystander. I actually said, we should think about splitting up into angry adoptees and not-so-angry adoptees. We have issues with this. We have militant lesbian adoptees, right-wingers. Incredibly diverse group¹⁶⁷ we have. Was it about 50 or so? You name a category, we have it. Eventually through some humor that I did, we tried to move the conversation towards issues I thought we should talk about, which is race actually. You can talk about adoption in front of social workers, but we should talk about race. It led into everybody having so many arguments but they all kept talking. Women talked about how, this doesn't help SRs, they don't find Korean men attractive. They find Asian men horrible. They would never date an Asian guy. That didn't help. We eventually, oddly enough, got together. I would have thought everybody would just hate each other. In the end, what happened was we all became very good friends. I told them about the search trip. I selected the people my age. Everybody wanted to go. Then we decided since we only met at the gathering that weekend, that we would meet again a couple months before the trip. That is how mini-gathering began. None of the other groups existed. They all went their way. We developed our internet listserv and it still exists today. People found out about it. Anyway, so we all went to Chicago. That was a nice gathering, because it was still our age group. We all met in Chicago, had a planning session for people who were going to Korea. We started doing it and it has gotten pretty regular for the next five years. And then we kind of faded out.

Certainly, the first Gathering was the starting point where the adoptees realized their collective potential, providing contacts for future organizing efforts. Although, due to local variations, one cannot tell for certain that this is how mini-gatherings indeed began, what we see here is the way in which the first gathering of Korean adoptees provided the fertile

¹⁶⁶ Brenda is one of his close friends. I got to know her by name through him, then later, we met on a few occasions.

¹⁶⁷ The Gathering organized the participants into groups divided by ages. Here the "ages" The Gathering used were based on the years that the adoptees were adopted, not their actual ages. It created some confusion among adoptees as to where they specifically belonged. Scott is referring here to his own age group (Group 2) assigned at The Gathering. Group 1 was the oldest age category, which happens to coincide with my category of "old generation adoptees," discussed in this chapter.

ground, as a crucial catalyst, for future networking and organization efforts for at least some of the adoptees located in isolation. The insatiable energy and desire to connect with other adoptees which helped to maintain these gatherings for five years are almost palpable here. Whether they agreed with one another or not on many issues does not seem to have mattered. What mattered was that they finally found people who could understand them fully, having gone through similar experiences of being alone and different in their own world. This sense of belonging and connection that succeeded in building communities of adoptees despite their diversity in terms of political positions, class backgrounds, gender, sexual orientations, etc., defies any attempts to describe it in words. Perhaps, “magic at hand” comes close to that. Scott suggests that this shared feeling is hard to convey to others who do not know much about adoption, even to one’s own spouse:

You can’t talk about that with your spouse unless she is also adopted. It doesn’t work. That leads to lots of problems in relationships with the adoptees, virtually everybody that I know. Because it’s such an intimate thing, you can’t share with the person you are most intimate with. They cannot understand it as hard as they try. It’s impossible. It will be like a heart attack. My sister understood a little of this, when she had a stroke when she was only 39. She’s kind of understood all these things that I’ve been trying to tell my parents about how it was different for me growing up. “I can’t tell you about what it is like to have a stroke, but I can talk to the strangers who’ve had a stroke. I can talk to the strangers about this, and have *this emotional attachment instantly almost*. But I can’t tell people I love.” They don’t know because you gotta feel it, because it’s such a massive time we are talking about, your whole lifetime. It’s been compartmentalized by everybody. It’s all over the place. You can’t admit it to anybody other than fellow adoptees. Just weirdest thing in the world. Maybe if I went to Yale or Harvard, I’d have the same thing with other fellow Ivy Leaguers! (laughs) (my emphasis)

The “emotional attachment” comes from his congealed feelings of isolation, alienation, and being different from anyone around him. An adoptee feels that no one can understand what it is like to be you, feelings of despair and emotional angst that you carry around all your life. Then, you come to a place where there are others who seem to know

what you have been feeling all along. They speak the same language as you do, fight the same battles against racial stereotypes as you do, have the family dynamic similar to your own, and the list goes on.

Along with one's growing awareness as a transnational/transracial adoptee, the availability of technological innovations, such as websites and e-mails, definitely helped to see these organization efforts to fruition. Technology also paved the way for adoptees located in far-flung places to be able to communicate without having to come in face-to-face interactions. It helped people sustain the relationships that they formed at the first gathering beyond limitations posed by time and geographical locations. However, the organizations need sustained efforts and directions on the parts of the participants. It is hard to maintain the initial impetus for its existence, if a group fails to generate continuous enthusiasm for participants. It is unclear whether this was the case for Scott's mini-gatherings which faded out after five years. Scott at the time was more interested in conducting the birthparent search, and devoted his full attention to the project. With the mini-gatherings' future existence in doubt, Scott and seven others embarked on a birthparent search trip in 2000.

It's about my heritage and lineage. I am the kind of person who thinks it's also my birthright to know. At my age, I have every right to know. My God, they should have no issues about this, they are in their 70s. I am sorry. They don't. I have somebody else out there for my children. That trumps their privacy. You know, you have responsibility in your life from my viewpoint. If you have given up your child, you don't have to acknowledge that to anybody but one person. That's the child. Because, in the triad [adoption triad of adoptive parents, birthparents and the adoptee], we didn't have a say. We don't want money or something back. We want to know. We want to know why it happened. It's between parents and me, and stays there and my children. . . . My children will have no connection to Korea. I don't have much of a connection. And I have to make my connection. My wife is Caucasian. They don't know my story. Unless I can fulfill this, they'll have none of this. The next generation might not realize that they are Korean, you know. They just might defer that their grandfather was Korean, and it will be confusing. That's the reason why we went back, to give something to my kids. My kids ask me about my biological grandparents, I can't tell them anything.

It becomes more like an oddity that I am from Korea, which is the way it is all my life. “So you are not really Korean,” you know, but actually I am.

In her study of Chinese Americans’ birth country visits, Louie locates the Asian American desire to have a connection to birth country within the sociohistorical context of “state-sponsored politics of multiculturalism” (2004: 24). In my discussion with older generation adoptees, we do not see this yearning for connection, and the fact that the middle-aged adoptees described in this chapter search for certain kinds of connections to Korea partially proves Louie’s contention that those who grew into early adulthood during an era when multiculturalism began to impact people’s understandings and practices of identity might feel the cultural mandate to have a connection to their heritage (see also Cheng, 2004). Louie further states,

The contemporary discourses in circulation surrounding Asians in the United States construct all people of Asian descent as newcomers to U.S. society with sustained contact with the birth country and traditional cultural practices that make their investment in U.S. society questionable. . . . [T]he Chinese Americans in my study are on the one hand seen as perpetual foreigners or as too “Asian,” and on the other hand as not Asian enough in a U.S. society that celebrates symbolic diversity and parades ethnicity. Thus, *they feel compelled to demonstrate Chinese cultural competence and cultural authenticity, even in asserting their “Americanness.”* (2004: 25, my emphasis).

Though Scott’s assimilation to US culture seems complete, people’s remarks, such as “so, you are not really Korean,” are painful reminders to him of the lost connection to his own cultural heritage and biological ancestry. His yearning to know more about his cultural heritage, his past, and his birth family, can be understood in the context of Louie’s argument above. Finding someone related to him in Korea, learning more about Korean culture, would give him the kind of cultural authenticity required for him to assert his Korean American identity. In addition, Scott married and had children late in life. One of the reasons he wanted to do this search was to give something to his children in terms of his

legacy. It would give tangible evidence to the fact that they are indeed Korean as well.

Unfortunately, his trip, which was unsuccessful in many ways, left him bewildered and frustrated.

[I] Found absolutely, virtually nothing, found no existence of my anything. We all did except for two. Two of them found birthparents right away. One was a twin. The other one was actually younger. He had been placed within the family, so that was fairly easy. But the rest of us, all three of us born in 1960, others born in 1962 did not find anything, not even the existence of our abandonment. We went to the police station [where we were supposed to have been found]. *There's actually literally no existence of our ever, ever, being born.* All our birth certificates are pretty bogus. There's a website for our search. It was pretty emotional for everybody. It kind of impacted everybody quite a bit actually. It impacted even the ones who found their birthparents. They had a major impact on some people. It was something I feel I have a lot of feelings, emotions about (my emphasis).

There can be many reasons why adoption records are found so lacking. It may be partially due to the time passed since his adoption and socio-historical circumstances of South Korea when his adoption took place. Right after the Korean War and in the 1960s, birth records were not always kept accurately in South Korea.¹⁶⁸ In addition, the erasure of those adopted from South Korea may be deliberate, reflecting the deeply held ideology of family and blood and accompanying stigmatization of the children given up and of the birthparents who would dare abandon their blood-related offspring. In South Korea, the silence and erasure in relation to Korean adoptees and their birthparents are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and ideologies. In an emotional journey to search for birth parents, the cultural difference and inability to accomplish something that they set out to do may become overwhelming.

¹⁶⁸ It may be due in part to the lack of a coordinated institutional infrastructure between hospital administration and government bureaus. Although it has improved with the help of digital technologies in recent years, in the earlier periods that we are discussing here, birth records were filled out in a local government office, and people had to report the births, whether the birth took place in hospitals or at homes. Hospitals at the time did not have any obligation to the government to file any reports on births. In addition, there were considerable local variations depending on whether one lived in rural or urban areas.

For Scott and others, who were not necessarily equipped with cultural knowledge about Korean society, the fact that their existence was totally obliterated was a serious blow to their already tenuous ties to Korea. Several years have passed since his trip to Korea. Scott more or less made peace with the possibility that he might never meet his birthparents or birth family in his lifetime, although the search continues in his heart.

Scott's self-identification illustrates the difficulty, or impossibility rather, of condensing one's identity in manageable labels. When asked how he identifies himself, he seemed amused.

Oh, fart. South Dakotan. To Koreans or people from other countries, I have to explain. Korean American. Most Koreans who grew up here don't want to think of themselves other than American, nothing attached to it. Most people younger want to be Asian Americans. For people my age, we are okay with Korean American, because we never heard such things as, "Asian American" growing up and insist. (laughs) When I talk to the parents, I talk about the word, "adopted," and how unfortunately I have to identify myself when I speak as a Korean adoptee, but I am not. There actually is no such thing. What exists in that triad is there's a birthmother, and because everything is about the Mother (laughs, rolling his eyes), there is an adoptive mother. It's a passive thing. We were adopted. We aren't adopting. We aren't adoptees. We aren't involved in the adoption process. We don't know unless we adopted a child what it's like. We are actually Korean and American. That's just who we are. I hate, don't like, to be identified. The thing I'd say is, I don't introduce my older sister as a forceps-delivered American, because that would be defining her by the way she was brought into the family.

With humor, he critically questions the way adoptees have been always identified. One adoptee, in her interview, gave a similar answer: "I know that adoption is an important part of my life. But I don't want it to define me and my life. If I die, I want people to remember me by what I accomplished in life, not by, 'she was an adoptee.'" Having been

forced into a category, “Korean adoptee,” that only scratches the surface of who they are, Korean adoptees understand that identities are always flexible and situational.¹⁶⁹

Scott is currently making efforts to connect with other adoptees both of his generation and others to promote adoptee awareness and to raise public understanding about adoption issues. One of the reasons that he is seeking to partner with adoptees his age stems from the generational differences that characterize the adoptee subjectivity shaped by different cultural milieu of international adoption. He was particularly vocal about the differences between younger generations and his own.

Younger generation, who are in their 20s or 30s? First of all, they grow up at a much earlier age to identify as an Asian American, racially, politically, everything. They, a lot of them, also date Asians. Most every adoptee I know dates Asians. That’s all they date, not just social retards. Social retards want to date Asians. Social retards don’t date anybody. (laughs) So that’s one of the big differences. They had sexual relations and relationships with people of the same race. That makes the difference. They also in college get to join groups, those Asian groups that didn’t exist in the 70s and when I was in the 80s. They didn’t have Pacific Islanders in those days. They didn’t have these groups at all. Elliot [another adoptee] went to an Asian fraternity. They are more assimilated. Also they went through culture camps. They knew other adoptees somewhat. They grew up with different images in the media. There were actually people on TV that were Asians. A woman on *Today’s Show*, Connie Chung, well, Connie Chung is our generation, I guess, but you know, they grew up with Asians becoming more important. Just the term, “Asian American,” you remember, didn’t exist, whatsoever.

Scott points to an important difference between generations that is shaped by larger historical and political shifts in the US. As Scott argues, the racial formation of Asian Americans is relatively recent. Omi and Winant (1986) pinpoint the highly political climate of the 1960s as the period in which the label “Asian American” became legible to connote the emerging racial consciousness of diverse ethnic groups whose places of origin lay in Asia. This might have been in circles that were highly politicized. But it took a little longer for

¹⁶⁹ See also Jocelyn’s comments on Ch. 5.

average citizens to understand and adopt the term as their own, and even longer for this term to have an institutional impact in the form of, say, Asian American student organizations.

For Scott, dating other Asians was not only a rare opportunity in places like South Dakota, but also unthinkable due to self-internalized cultural stereotypes. Desiring and being desired by other Asian Americans is a terrain that he has not been quite familiar with. Earlier, he mentioned this as one of the reasons why he liked to participate in adoptee functions, such as gatherings, conferences, and culture camps. Unlike him though, younger adoptees seem to have more resources at their disposal, thanks to the changing political and cultural climate. There are more opportunities to meet and connect with Korean Americans and other Asian Americans. This is not the only difference that characterizes the generational gaps between younger generation and his.

The other difference that exists with my generation is that they are angrier at White people and at their parents. I don't know if it's because they are young. I think, it's because they are young, they'd love to yell about their parents or not. It seems in that generation a lot of more anger built up, which you wouldn't think, because of that. Maybe it does make sense why they only date Asians. You know, there seems to be a racial element. In our generation, we don't encounter too many angry people that way about race. It's probably because we were like the Asians off the planet. We just grew up accepted. In so much of our lives, *we didn't have the guts to have those feelings* (my emphasis).

In Scott's conceptualization, younger adoptees are more attuned to the issues of racial difference and racial discrimination than his own age group. The cultural shifts between the assimilation model and multiculturalism as a dominant mode of addressing racial/ethnic differences brought about a gamut of cultural discourses. With various perspectives at their disposal, younger adoptees are more vocal about the discrimination that they encounter. The downside of that is that they present the image of *an angry adoptee*. But, as will be seen next, YouMe Masters, although belonging to Scott's age group, shows

characteristics of a younger adoptee in Scott's conceptualization. As a group situated between two drastically different cultural paradigms, Scott's age group contains a wide array of people who share certain characteristics of either older or younger adoptees. In YouMe Masters' case, she is leaning toward the sentiments of younger adoptees.

Scott's priority lies with his children. His eyes twinkle as he labors to show me the pictures of his adorable children who are on the brink of pre-adolescence. They looked after him as he repeatedly stressed the fact, not being able to hide his pride and love for them. His wife, who is a South Dakotan, gets a lot of questions when she goes out with the kids: Were they adopted? No, they are mine. He smiles.

YouMe Masters: "We Korean adoptees are cultural dissidents."

So far, we have seen those adoptees who are largely satisfied with their adoptive families and the lives that they lead. Despite the social pressures and prejudices that they endured, the family experiences of those we have observed so far can be, if cursorily, described as satisfactory. YouMe Masters' story, however, reveals years of sibling abuse and the emotional pain of "difference" that can accompany adoptee experience. Another way in which her narrative differs from the previous ones can be seen in her political consciousness as a radical lesbian and an Asian American. As she came into this consciousness when she was in her late 20s, this moment certainly colored and reoriented experiences of adoption in her early years dramatically in her story. It seems her political awareness gave her voice and critical vantage points required to put her experience in perspective that made sense to her.

YouMe was adopted as the youngest of the Masters, who already had one son and two daughters. When YouMe was adopted at age 5-6, YouMe's sister, Heidi was only a year

younger. YouMe's other siblings were considerably older than YouMe and Heidi. According to YouMe, having lost the attention as the baby of the family, Heidi took her resentment out on YouMe, beating her on numerous occasions. The abuse lasted until YouMe put a stop to this when she was a late teen, by telling Heidi firmly, "if you touch me once more, I will kill you!" Although YouMe was only a year younger than Heidi, YouMe's small stature made her an easy target for Heidi's abuse. YouMe's parents seemed to have known about this, but did not intervene, regarding it as a normal sibling conflict that would eventually subside.

Sibling abuse¹⁷⁰ . . . That hasn't been addressed in anthropological or sociological studies or research. I believe that sibling abuse is very prevalent, rampant. My sister and I had only one year age gap, and that was the biggest problem. My sister is only a year older and she was very resentful of me. I understand everything she experienced and why she experienced what she experienced, why she feels the way she feels. She does not own up to it. She does not take responsibility for what she did. Still. She never will. The only way she will take ownership, and she won't even do it then, is when I cut her off emotionally. If I refuse to speak to her, she will never understand still, even if I explain it to her. Because, to this day, she blames me for all of her problems. I think I contributed to some of her problems, not all of them.

YouMe began to feel different from others very early in her adoption. Partially due to her precocity, partially due to being 6 years of age at adoption, she could realize how different she was from the beginning of her life in the States.

When I started speaking English, I knew I was different. That was two months after I arrived. My parents were White and I wasn't. It was a very difficult, painful childhood, emotionally in that I felt isolated, alienated, and very different. I felt like a freak, very much like an outsider. I was ridiculed and harassed in schools by peers. But my parents did work really hard at accepting me as one of their own, and said I was special and I had been chosen. *They made efforts to try to make me understand that I wasn't different. But I really was different.* It was obvious how different I was. It was very difficult

¹⁷⁰ Baca Zinn, et al. suggest that "sibling violence is the most common form of family violence in the United States" (2008: 385). However, the concepts of violence and abuse here should be carefully distinguished. See Wiehe (1997) for his criteria for identifying sibling abuse. Based on his criteria such as the constancy of abuse in which victim and perpetrator remain unchanged and perpetrator's negative attitude toward victim, etc., Heidi's violence against YouMe can be construed as sibling abuse.

growing up. But the way that I coped was by doing artwork and horseback riding (my emphasis).

YouMe's sense of feeling different and isolated is not a unique phenomenon, as we have seen from other adoptees' narratives. But her sense of resentment toward the kind of upbringing she had is quite unmatched by the others studied here. She seems to want an understanding from adoptive parents that recognizes an individual's difference as a positive element, something to nurture, not to stifle. Her parents' ruthless assimilative mode of thinking often turned a blind eye toward differences and human diversity. YouMe's anger toward her parents was emotionally very deep, but it often seemed as if they represented a larger society in which racial discrimination and insensitivity toward diversity was rampant. Our exchanges about her feelings towards her parents are presented at length below. Her narrative was too intense and emotionally driven for me to interject at times.

I was very angry at my parents in 1980, late 80s and early 90s. Because I believed that my parents, as I became more consciously aware of my own social issues and my own internalized oppression, self hatred, because I hated who I was, for many years, for being Korean, being Asian, being different, not being White. And my parents perpetuated that. *I only realized that in late 1980s and early 1990s how my parents contributed to my self-hatred and my internalized racism.* I realized they were racists themselves. Covertly and overtly, they were racists, not towards Koreans, but towards Japanese, towards Chinese, towards anybody who wasn't White, towards Black people, towards African Americans, towards Hispanics, Latinos, Native Americans, I mean, they perpetuated their ignorance in the things that they said to me, the comments that they made, the remarks that they made, their own politics, their own religious backgrounds, their own sense of entitlements, their own heterosexism, their homophobia, and their racism, ignorance, bigotry and prejudices, they would never admit to themselves that they had adhered to all their lives, because that's how they were raised. They are a product of their times. I think the most radical thing that they ever did in their lives was to adopt me. They don't see it as radical. They see it as religious awakening and altruistic, almost missionary mentality, to adopt me. I see it as a form of colonization and another form of White entitlement and White privilege. I have grown up with all the privileges of being White, without being White. I benefited from middle classism, and all the opportunities that were given to me. I have certainly reaped the rewards, but I paid a huge price. I continue to

pay a huge price and I will continue to pay a huge price for all the privileges that I have received in being adopted by a White American family.

JP: What price are you paying for?

Had I not been adopted, had I stayed in Korea, I don't know my fate. I can only suspect that maybe I would have stayed in Korea. I would not have been educated. I might have been educated, but unlikely. I might have gone to a factory and worked as a factory worker. I might have gone to the field, you know, and worked as a field hand. I might have continued to be working class, working poor, uneducated. I might have gone and married and had two kids, I might have been married to a man that I hated, and raising two kids that I might have loved but felt trapped. My life would have been mapped out for me without any of my input or control. I think that my life in Korea would have been extremely and exceedingly limited, because of my status as being an orphan. The privileges would not have been afforded to me in ways that I would have had them here in the US as an adopted person.

JP: But you are paying for the price? Can you elaborate?

I continue to pay for it in terms of having to explain who I am to people I meet, having to explain my name, having three birthdays [a birth date recorded in her adoption documents, the date of adoption/arrival in her adoptive family, and the real birth date], first names and last names, having to be considered as a foreigner, even though I am an American citizen, having to explain why I am adopted, how I got adopted. I have to explain who I am. I have to continue to explain. I will always be seen as a foreigner in this country, even though I am an American citizen.

JP: You know, Asian Americans have been doing that for a long time. For an example, Chinese Americans have been here for a long time, but they have to explain their status to other Americans as well. In what ways is your story different from them?

But I am not a Chinese American. I always have to explain that I am not a Chinese. I am substitute teaching now in the third largest city in Massachusetts. It's very integrated, it's very multicultural. But it's predominantly Portuguese, Hispanics, and African Americans with very few Asians. Asians that are there are South Asians from Cambodia and Vietnam. There are very few Chinese and even fewer Koreans, and I have to explain that I am a Korean. A lot of people don't even know where Korea is, much less they don't even know that Korea is a separate country than China. So these are the children that I have to educate. I don't mind educating them, but it's always through, as a response to being ridiculed, being made fun of, being mocked, being harassed. It's just a horrible perpetuation, reliving of my childhood in that I am always having to defend, to counterattack relentlessly on a daily basis.

YouMe moved rather swiftly from her description of her parents to experiences of racial discrimination and prejudices. It seems almost as if she was holding her parents responsible for all the miserable treatment she received from others and society in general. On the other hand, she was trained as a social worker. This comes from her belief that adoptive parents should be fully educated about the needs of adoptees, especially the transnational/transracial adoptees whose needs and issues are more complex. Even though parents may not be able to shield their adopted child from the discrimination extant in larger society, they should at least be open and knowledgeable about the social differences that exist in their family. As parents, they should be able to prepare their child for what exists in society that can be devastating to that child's self-esteem.

YouMe's elaboration on what might have happened to her if she had not been adopted demonstrates her sophisticated understanding of Korean society, distinguishing her criticism from immaturity or ignorance: "my life in Korea would have been extremely and exceedingly limited, because of my status as being an orphan. The privileges would not have been afforded to me in ways that I would have had them here in the US as an adopted person." Rather, it challenges the discourse of "chosen child"¹⁷¹ popularly used by adoptive parents to answer questions of adoption from their children. The adopted child, according to the "chosen child" rhetoric, is lucky and special due to the fact that s/he was chosen by the adoptive parents. YouMe's insistence that she is *paying the price* for her misplaced positioning, from that of a Korean orphan to that of an educated American who does not belong to the racial landscape of America, puts these two positions on an equal footing in her calculation.

¹⁷¹ See Modell for elaboration of "the chosen child" as "the origin myth that has guided adoption practice from the post-World War II era until the present" (1994: 115). This myth is based on a book called, *The Chosen Baby*, written by Valentina Wasson in 1939. This book has been edited and revised many times since then, but the main storyline suggests that the adoptee should feel very lucky and special because s/he was chosen by the adoptive parents. It effectively avoids the specter of abandonment that makes the adoption possible in the first place.

Although she may have had a hard life as an orphan, the life she was given is not necessarily without its own downfalls. Moreover, her unwillingness to put her experience in a perspective that is more attentive to the social discrimination suffered by other groups of people—such as Chinese Americans that I mention above—and her insistence on the uniqueness of the pain that she carries, all contributes to her heightened sense of loneliness and isolation.

YouMe continued, revealing her understanding that her parents did their best in a situation where they had few cultural tools to deal with the complex issues of race, sexuality, and cultural difference.

I would ask my mother, you know, what happened to my birthmother, why I was adopted. I mean, they gave me answers that they had. They gave me answers that were most comfortable for them to respond to, in ways that were more comforting for them, and more placating to me, without actually knowing the details or actual facts.

JP: Perhaps they couldn't know the details even though they tried?

They said that they had contacted the adoption agency, which was AAA,¹⁷² and asked for information. AAA gave them no information. Then, they assumed that my birthmother was a prostitute. She gave me up because she got married. I'd have grown up to be a prostitute, if I had stayed in Korea. All the worst stereotypes, worst possible punitive, sexist, misogynous forms of describing a woman who stayed in Korea when she was adopted. You know, there's no attachment to reality, but yet it was most common statement to make. I mean, it was just common response, most popular response, based entirely on ignorance and lack of information.

JP: Were they comfortable answering this way?

No, I don't think they were comfortable at all. I think that they would avoid it. Whatever they said, they said to get it over with, you know, the conversation or the topic over with. You know, my Mother is very proud of the fact that she believes that she treated me equally as everyone else. She said, "I've treated you all equally." Yes and no. Yes in that I was no more special or no less special than anybody in the family. *No, because they should have treated me differently because I was different.* Where they should have treated

¹⁷² American Adoption Agency. A Pseudonym.

me differently, they failed miserably but it was all unintentional. They were all very well-intentioned. They had very good intentions, but they were very very ignorant, and very very unaware and unconscious and uneducated, and totally not interested in learning more about Korea, or learning more about my situation or my life, or how I felt. I mean, they didn't even want to know why I felt the way I felt or why I hated myself. They never understood that or never knew that. And they would say, "you should consider yourself very lucky! You should feel very lucky!" That's all I heard every single day, "you are very lucky to have been adopted. You should be grateful." I rebelled against that, when I was in my adolescence. That's the last thing I felt, being grateful, I mean. I felt far from grateful. I felt very resentful. I was very angry. I was very depressed, because I couldn't express my sadness. *I could never express any pain, or emotional pain, or sadness, or loss, or regret, or remorse, or mourning or grieving for what I didn't have.* I mean, all I could show was my appreciation for them to adopt me and I hated them for that. I really did. For many years, I hated my parents for that (my emphasis).

For older adoptees, especially for those of mixed heritage, the illicit liaisons between US soldiers and native Korean women is a loaded, well-trodden storyline of how they came into this world, and why they had to be given up.¹⁷³ In fact, many adoptees mention this storyline as the one given to them as well. As Honig succinctly sums up, "the 'what if's' that adoptive parents themselves entertain are carefully delimited to justify their participation in transnational adoption" (2005: 217). YouMe's realization that this story does not apply to her, especially after she found her birthmother and learned about the actual story behind her adoption, made her extremely angry and bitter. What troubled her more was the mandate to forget about her past and to move on with the gratitude that she did not feel.

YouMe's resentment is deeply rooted in her early experience before she came into consciousness as a Korean American adoptee. For instance, she admitted that she thought of herself as White, refusing to look at herself in the mirror for more than a decade. As long as she did not see her own reflection, her world was surrounded by Whiteness, represented by her friends and family. When I visited her home one day, she showed me a picture that she

¹⁷³ The popular stereotype of Asian women being sexually promiscuous is analyzed more fully in Ch. 4.

took with her friends. It was taken while she was in high school. There were six girls in the picture sitting on steps of a staircase leading to the entrance of a two-story building. She was the only non-White person in the photo. “Do you still talk to these friends?” “No,” she said, without any further elaboration. “How come you didn’t have any Asian friends?” She looked at me as if she could not believe what she heard. “Don’t you know?” she said, with her eyes wide and puzzled, “I never hung out with Asians back then. I thought I was White then!”

Whiteness is a state of consciousness that was difficult for her to maintain, as her membership was challenged on numerous occasions. Her precarious belonging to Whiteness resulted in her feeling “morbidly depressed.” She recalled being called names for her difference.

It wasn’t related to my ethnicity, because they didn’t know who or what I was. They didn’t know that I was Korean. They just thought that I was different. That’s what they were relating to. My being different and not white. I learned the difference between non-White and being Asian. There’s a huge difference. Non-White is coming from a very White colonized position, and perspective. Anything that is non-White is not belonging, not fitting in, not being a part of the larger population of the people that are being represented as being the most powerful group of the US society. Globally speaking, Asians are majority, but I have always been considered a minority. I hate that word and terminology. It’s insulting, dehumanizing, debasing way of describing a person who is not White.

YouMe’s recounting of her experience tells the story of a person whose existence is paradoxical and liminal. The following statement helps to put her experience in context.

Anti-Asian sentiment in the United States depends upon its necessary correlative—the assumption that true cultural franchise and full citizenship requires a white identity. This violence against Asian Americans stems from the kinds of whiteness created within U.S. culture and mobilized in the nation’s political, economic, and social life. The “white” identity conditioned to fear the Asian “menace” owes its origins to the history of anti-Indian, antiblack, and anti-Mexican racism at home as well as to anti-Arab and anti-Latino racisms shaped by military struggles overseas and by condescending cultural stereotypes at home. White racism is a pathology looking for a place to land, sadism in search of a story (Lipsitz, 2006: 72).

YouMe's story demonstrates Lipsitz's exposition in context. Her sense of belonging was always questioned due to her racial difference that challenges the implicit, but powerful, criterion of American citizenship. This answer, I believe, comes from a person who is different from the one in the photo that I was holding. I asked her perhaps an obvious question, "have you ever passed as White?"

Never. No. I've avoided mirrors for 14 years. I hated the way I looked. Some of my friends are saying, "I don't even consider you as Asian." That's well-intentioned, and supposed to be a compliment from them, but I see it as an insult. It's their way of saying, "we accept you as one of our own." Well, yeah, no. Thanks, but no thanks, you know. Pre-1984, I would have embraced that and felt complimented. But after 1984, it's like a slap in the face, being considered not as an Asian. It means that I don't speak with an accent. I am so Americanized that they don't see me as anything else. But to me, that's just a response, their speaking out of ignorance, really, more than anything or lack of awareness. It's well-intentioned, though. It's not malicious. But I don't think a lot of ignorance is malicious. I think ignorance comes from the place of not knowing, not understanding.

Then, how could she transform herself from being White who abhors her own reflection in the mirror to an Asian American who is vociferous about racial discrimination and internalized racism? YouMe's epiphany came when she visited Korea for the first time in 1984. It was a Motherland Tour sponsored by her adoption agency. Interestingly, her description about the trip below is not about the trip or her feelings about it *per se*, but about the behaviors of other adoptees who were mostly younger than her.

I went back to Korea in 1984 for the first time, in AAA Motherland Tour. I was there for 2 weeks. There were about 20 to 30 adoptees in my group. But they were all younger. I was 24. Everybody else was 18, 19, right out of high school. They got this trip as a graduation present. Their parents paid for it and I consider them spoiled, rotten brats. They saw going on a motherland tour, in my perspective, what I saw them doing was that they were using this motherland tour as an extended shopping trip, and the first time away from mommy and daddy. So they were not at all respectful of Korean culture, or mindful of how they looked to Koreans, or how they acted in front of Koreans. I think they were extremely disrespectful and rude. They were what I consider American tourists. Loud, chewing gums, wearing very short

sleeves, shirts, tank tops, shorts, sandals without socks. I think the Koreans were shocked by seeing so many Korean adoptees dressed the way that they did, and acted the way they did. They didn't want to eat Korean food. They wanted to eat at McDonald's. I mean, *I just thought that they didn't really understand how important going back to their motherland was.* For me, I consider the motherland tour sponsored by AAA as a propaganda tour. But I am glad that I went, because it was an opportunity for me to understand why I wanted to go back. *It planted seed for me to want to go back again, later on, on my own terms* (my emphasis).

Given the trip took place in 1984, when the birth country tours were beginning to take shape, the contents and itinerary of the tours might not have been as well-organized as those of later ones. For instance, there was no agenda about teaching and learning of local Korean culture or language. YouMe's trip was geared more toward consumption activities, such as visiting tourist places and shopping. In that context, the behaviors of some younger adoptees were starkly contrasted with those of Koreans that YouMe observed. YouMe was more self-consciously aware of her own difference from Koreans there than her younger travel companions, and it might have been unbearable for her to see how "disrespectfully and rudely" those unaware of cultural differences could behave.

Regardless, this trip became a moment in YouMe's life that was transformative in many ways. Not only did she realize the difference between younger adoptees and herself, she also gained support in her claim to be a Korean American. Her account here is poignant in illustrating one of the main differences that divide younger and older generation of adoptees. *"I just thought that they didn't really understand how important going back to their motherland was. . . . It planted seed for me to want to go back again, later on, on my own terms."* For older generation adoptees who have not had many chances to learn about their heritage, nor to meet Koreans, visiting their birth country is a remarkable moment. Given this context, it is not surprising that YouMe's generation of adoptees are the active organizing forces for culture camps and other related activities geared to enhance younger adoptees' experiences.

This is a generation that saw the newly emerging practices such as birth country tours and culture camps as important sites where adoptees could meet, discuss, and learn about what was not usually spoken about in relation to adoption and racial identity.

For younger adoptees who grew up with culture camps and cultural activities programmed for promoting understanding of cultural heritage, “homeland” or “birth country” means something quite different. As older adoptees suggested, a birth country tour as a high school graduation present was unthinkable in their generation. Not only was there little institutional support to enlighten adoptive families with cultural tools such as birth country tours in this case, but also it was thought to be inconceivable that one wanted to go back to their birth country in the assimilation model. It also betrays the different class locations of adoptive parents for older and younger adoptees as well.

When the older adoptees came to this country, the adoption agencies were mostly church-based with an orientation toward social activism. In many ways, these agencies were glad to have any volunteers to help third-world orphans whose lives were on the line. Recall also the fact that international adoption was just in its initial stage of establishment. The kinds of infrastructure—background checks of the prospective parents, criteria for matching, etc.—that are available and taken for granted now, were in their infancy. Those people who were eligible to adopt in that era may not pass muster in terms of educational background, age requirements, and income levels in the current international adoption industry. Of course, these objective criteria do not mean that one group of parents is better than another. But it means that adoptive parents of younger adoptees can provide more material and cultural means with which the adoptees can navigate the issues of identity and adoption. Especially in a rapidly changing economy in which consumption has come to the fore as one

of the crucial practices of constituting families, giving a gift such as birth country tours can be conceivable and even desired.

YouMe's growing self-awareness and consciousness of her own heritage led her to explore her Korean American identity even back at home. Right after returning from the trip, she moved to Brooklyn, and immersed herself in Asian American community activism. Her adopted parents had named her "Annie," borrowing it from the then-famous and popular children's musical of the same name. As most people know, Annie in the musical is an orphan who, despite the schemes and tricks played by a couple posing as her birthparents, finally finds the love and comfort in her adoptive home. Annie Masters legally changed her name to YouMe, her Korean name written on her adoption document in 1990. This signified the drastic impacts that her trip to Korea had on her life, awakening her sense of self that was stifled for too long.

I got very involved and active in the Asian American community, Asian Women's community, and people of color. I became a feminist. I read books religiously. I came out as a Lesbian, eventually. Everything turned around. My whole world was turned around, and I became very angry at my adoptive parents. I became politicized and socially conscious for the first time. I started doing speaking engagements on international adoption issues, first at adoption agencies, and then at conferences, then at workshops, and seminars. I started writing poetry in 1989. I started getting published in 1990. I started doing poetry readings and continued doing speaking engagements. I became an activist in international adoption reform movement. So for all those connection I got, I became very hooked up and very connected with other Korean adult adoptive people who were younger than me or my age. I met Judith [her close adoptee friend] in 1988, 1986 rather. She was a very significant part of my life, in terms of meeting other Korean adoptive people. We started a support group for other Korean adoptive people. We were probably one of the first grassroots organizations, way before 1990s when everything kind of exploded in terms of all the consciousness-raising, and understanding, and the return back to Korea. *I consider going back to Korea pilgrimage, which I think a lot of Korean adult adoptees have participated since the beginning of 1990s* (my emphasis).

Truly, YouMe's trip to Korea was a "pilgrimage," shaping and reorienting her perspective on adoption, ethnic identity, sexual identity, and even her own childhood experience. With a strong sense of awakening, she enrolled in the graduate program to be trained as a social worker, a profession to which she felt she could contribute in meaningful ways, based on her adoption experience. Meeting other Asian American students, as well as Judith, who became her best friend, was an enlightening experience for YouMe, who was ready to explore her Asian American identity.

Meeting them was hugely profound and very meaningful. I mean, I didn't even know what Asian American meant. I didn't have any idea what that identity meant. So I learned about it. Yes, I am an American, and I am an Asian, yes, I am an Asian American. But to me, I didn't understand what that identity was. I didn't have a word for it until I went up to Brooklyn. So yeah, it was very significant, very profound, very meaningful, very empowering, very reaffirming, and really important. That's what I needed to do, in order to be able to get beyond self-hatred, self-internalized racism and the anger. I was very angry and very depressed.

By learning about other Asians and connecting with them in ways inconceivable in previous years, YouMe molded her identity as an Asian American woman. The fact that identities are constructed and make sense in social interactions is extremely clear in her account. Feeling proud of one's identity, gaining knowledge of Asian American history and belonging to that community, all were empowering moments for her. It also means that she obtained an alternative perspective to difference, learning its attendant discourses. Her statement, "I didn't have a word for it [Asian American] until I went up to Brooklyn," exposes her previous position termed as White which does not recognize, or which willfully erases, the existence of alternative perspectives and discourses to ethnic make-up of American citizenship.

After gaining her degree, however, she did not go into social work circles. Instead, she headed for Korea, as she alluded to earlier. She felt this was a trip that she had to make

on her own terms. So, when the opportunities came, she grabbed it. She took a job as an English instructor at a university in a town outside of Seoul. The purposes of her trip were multiple.

I went back in 1996 to Korea and searched for my birthmother for 3 months, and found her in January of 1997. And then subsequently, I stayed in Korea for 2 years teaching at a university in Korea, reconnecting with my birthmother, learning what it meant to be a Korean American in Korea. So I understood, I learned a lot about Korean culture, what it meant to be a Korean in Korea. So, it's been an amazing, you know, 10 years, since I started really getting involved, really 20 years, since I started getting involved with Korean, understanding my identity, Korean American identity, Korean adopted culture, and what that meant to me.

YouMe's reunion with her birthmother was not without complications. It took tremendous efforts on her part to excavate the information buried deep in bureaucracy and secrecy of her adoption agency, AAA. In the process of gathering information about her adoption, she learned more than she ever imagined:

I had no information. Some of the parts were blackened out and you know what else. When I went back to Korea in 1996, I went to the AAA office in Seoul. They told me that my birthparents had died in a car accident, so they had no information. I said how they could know that then, if there's no information. Then they told other Korean adoptees, I found out that they had told them that, that their birthparents died in car accident. Either these birthparents are really bad drivers in Korea or they were lying. They were lying, because my birthmother did not die in a car accident. She was alive and well when I found her. So I felt like, you know, Seoul, Korea AAA rather, as an adoption agency, was covering up information. They were covering up and lying. They were, you know, misinforming everybody. I believe the reason was that they didn't want us to find out anything. I'd not been given up. I was not a relinquished child. I found that out. I don't think AAA wanted me to find that out. A lot of Korean adoptees are not relinquished willingly. You know, a lot of them are stolen, kidnapped or abducted, disappeared, missing, you know, coerced relinquishments.

JP: what was your case?

Sold. I believe they were outright sold, all these children. I believe that AAA, surely less degree than anybody else had, participated in baby-selling and black marketing of children. But I also believe that AAA is one of the least corrupt adoption agencies. Yet I also believe that all adoption agencies are

corrupt to a point. When you are dealing with humans, the transactions of humans, the exchanges of human lives for money, there's some level of corruption. Children become commodities. They become human cargo, products. So when there's a demand, there's going to be a supply. That's what AAA responded to, demand for very cute Korean children. Korean government made it very easy for children to be adopted. They made Korean children very available to be adopted through immigration and naturalization process, and through adoption agencies, adoption process, and the availability of pre-adoptive parents. The whole regulation and screening of pre-adoptive parents was minimal at best, to non-existent at worst. So subsequently, many adult Korean adoptees were adopted from Korea to families that were abusive, right-wing religious zealots, missionary families, families, you know, where the father was minister, and predominantly infertile White adoptive couples. With infertility, there's a huge discrepancy in understanding what it means to parent adopted children from another country. These adoptive parents did not get a manual, or a handbook, or instructions or directions. They didn't take courses or classes. They were not prepared to adopt children, and yet they did. The result has been disastrous. Not entirely. Not every adoptive parent or family. But for a lot of them. I have seen a lot of Korean adult adoptees who were horribly abused as children in their adoptive families. I am fortunate to say that I wasn't one of them. I was not abused. I was neglected emotionally. I was not physically abused.

YouMe's elucidation here seems to be informed by both her knowledge of other adoptees' experiences and critical sociological literature available on adoption and reproduction. Her positioning as a critical feminist adoptee solidified her criticism of international adoption practices. As mentioned earlier, it would take a long time to build the infrastructure of an international adoption industry. The primary problem was that there were so many Korean children needing homes and childcare in orphanages. Not surprisingly, contingencies and circumstances won out against careful deliberation as to where and how these children ended up in orphanages.

When she finally located her birthmother, YouMe's first meeting with her turned out to be disastrous. YouMe's birthmother said to her, "I am so disappointed that you weren't yet married. You are nearing 40, and had no desire to marry someone." YouMe could not believe what she was hearing through the translator's mouth. Additionally, the cultural

differences added to an already charged situation. “She [the translator] tells me to take a bow to my mother, and I am thinking, that can’t be what my mother is asking. Why do I have to? Is this what my mother asks? Or is this a cultural belief?”

YouMe decided to hire her own translator and brought the new translator to the second meeting with her birthmother. Difficulties in translating cultural nuances and culturally-rooted practices brought the two translators, one hired by YouMe, and the other provided by AAA, into arguments and confrontations. “It was horrible, Jane,” said YouMe, blowing out a cigarette smoke. Gradually she got to know her birthmother a little more, as she was introduced to her brothers, one older, the other younger. She smiled, “I don’t usually find Korean men attractive, but my younger brother is very handsome.” YouMe is currently not in contact with anyone from her birth family, but she seems content knowing that they are okay.

I don’t understand. Here we are, at this coffee shop in a very expensive hotel lobby. My Mother, who wore a mink coat and leather gloves, accuses me of not helping out more with my brothers. I am in rags, and barely making a living there. But, teaching at a university seems so great to her so she thinks I have something to offer my brother. Can you believe it?

“America” is a place about which Koreans hold many fantasies and myths. YouMe’s status as an American means that her birth family can utilize the kin tie to further enhance their social status in Korea and material support if they ever decide to migrate to the States. Interestingly enough, the desire for America, and by extension, anything related to America, survived in Korean popular imaginary throughout the economic ascendance of Korea in the international political economy since 1970s.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ See Ch. 5 for further details on the ascendance of Korean economy in the international arena and how it has not made any significant impact on international adoption of Korean children.

YouMe never attended adoptee conferences. It is surprising given her activist tendencies and awareness. But due to her life circumstances, in which she had experienced all the issues dealt with by adoption conferences long before her contemporaries did, put her beyond the need for these types of outlets.

I never went to KAAN meetings. I went to gatherings. I became very impatient with them because I felt like I'd gone through all of my Korean cultural identity issues, and resolved them years before all these meetings started up. I am 10 years ahead of everybody else. I mean, in terms of age, consciousness, understanding, experience. I think it's great. I think the fact that Korean adoptees are organized is a wonderful, wonderful thing and empowering, reaffirming process and experience for people who are Korean and adopted. But I found myself extremely frustrated with the younger generation of Korean adoptees who are figuring things out and I have already done it. I am passed it. I am not interested in being a mentor, or being a role model, or being a leader, or being any kind of influence to adult adopted people who are younger than me at this point.

YouMe's meetings with younger adoptees in gatherings frustrated her immensely, as she was too impatient to see through their transitions. In addition, she realized, "we share a very common bond, and the common similarity is that we are Korean and adoptees. That's it. That's where all these similarities end. Beyond that we are all very, very different." YouMe's sensitivity toward the sentiments of pity and forced compliance and obligated gratitude indicates the high level of anger and resentment she felt toward the adoption issues in general. Of the adoptees I interviewed, she is one of the few who publicly condemned international adoption.

I think the most prevalent problem with adoption is secrecy and lying. Withholding information or telling stories. Fabrication of what it is, not the truth. Lack of truth. Absence of truth. I lived with absence of truth and not knowing for 36 years. The number one reason I went back to Korea is to find out what truth was. I found out the truth. It wasn't easy. It wasn't joyous. It was painful, but I learned it. That was more important than not knowing. Because adoptees are going through their lives, not knowing, never knowing, you know, how they became adopted, why they were adopted. We grieve somebody we don't know. We grieve our birthparents we don't know. We grieve our birth culture we don't know. We grieve the language we never

learned. I mean, it's all a series of losses that you know the adoptive parents don't see as losses. They see it as only gains for the adopted child and them. They see it as these children don't have homes and families. That's not true. They had a family. They had a mother. "Well, these children are orphans." Not necessarily. So it's all the misconceptions, myths, lies, the propaganda, you know, the lack of information, and the fact that the adopted child being told that their mother didn't want him or her, it's the biggest lie you could possibly tell a child. It shapes and formulates that child for the rest of his or her life from then on, when you say that to a child, that child is going to be irrevocably affected in a way that that child is never ever going to trust again. Growing up feeling you are unwanted is the most profound emotional damage you can inflict on someone. And that's what adoptive parents do to their children everyday. "Your mother didn't want you. We wanted you, so we took you." It's like, "what?" You don't say that to an adopted child. My adoptive mother said, "your birthmother was too poor to keep you." How did she know? She knew nothing of my mother's economic background, and my birthfather's bank account. She knew nothing and had no information. You do not tell an adopted child that your birthmother was too poor to keep you. "I will do everything in my power to help you find out, if you want to, only when you want to. If you want to go back to Korea, I will pay for that." My parents adopted me, but they didn't care about my education.

Her outspokenness coupled with what one of her friends framed as a "New York City attitude," reminding me of YouMe's short-term sojourn in New York City, has not earned her any popularity in adoptee circles and organizations. Another adoptee confided that she was scared of YouMe, depicting her as "militant." To be sure, she is not a "victim" that Jean Kim Blum earlier described. Rather, she is an "angry" adoptee, refusing to be pitied, with both critical insights and blindness toward resolving her complex personal issues.

Anger is an emotion that Americans try to avoid expressing in public at all costs.¹⁷⁵ Especially the secrecy surrounding adoption issues and the privacy reserved for a middle-class family dynamics renders the adoptees' anger invisible and concealed. There seems to be

¹⁷⁵ Stearns and Stearns (1986) explore the linkages between suppression of anger and control of labor around the turn of 20th century US. Exhibition and expression of anger was strongly discouraged by the economic reorganization of labor.

a cultural belief in America that anger is dangerous and inappropriate in social settings.¹⁷⁶

YouMe's anger and her unwillingness to cloak it under the middle-class conventions translate into her dissatisfaction with the conventional way of life. In spite of her advanced degree and impeccable training as a social worker, she does not want to enter the profession. Rather she would pursue her career as an artist, surviving on welfare checks and the minimum wage her occasional employment brings.

Anger is a sentiment that defies the sense of sadness and powerlessness. It is an attempt to restore agency when years of victimization leave one paralyzed. An "angry adoptee" does not fit nicely into Jean Kim Blum's dual metaphor of victims and survivors. In a way, YouMe Masters finds her home in-between these two opposing poles. Highly articulate and intelligent as she is, I think her last statement can wrap up her story on its own.

We, adopted people, are what I considered to be, we are immigrants. We are *cultural dissidents*. We are a population of people that is uniquely our own, because we straddle two cultures. We straddle American culture and culture of our birth, without being accepted in either. So, being dissident, we are not accepted in either cultures, either societies. Yet we are forced to live in one, or the other, or both. Being a cultural dissident, it's one of the prices that we pay in being colonized in the way we were. You know, international adoption is a form of colonization. I believe it's also a form of cultural genocide. I believe that it is better than it was, in terms of learning how to embrace the birth culture. It's not going to be problem-free, or conflict-free. It will never be organic. It will always be contrived, forced, placated. I don't believe it's ever easy. There are no happy ending, no happy reunions, no joyous resolutions. I believe that it's an ongoing process of learning and understanding, and acceptance and willingness to struggle. It's a struggle. It will always be a struggle. International adoption is a social construct, is the perpetuation of White, anti-ethnic, oppression. It's a form of oppression.

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¹⁷⁶ Solomon (2007: 203) mentions that there exists "the sense that anger is dangerous and can even destroy a society" in the US (Lutz, 1998; Rosaldo, 1989; Solomon, 1984; Stearns and Stearns, 1986). Cross-culturally, this belief is not quite unique, as Tahiti or Filipino societies seem to share the view.

The middle-age adoptees grew up in an era of transition. They have witnessed and come of age in the midst of cultural changes regarding adoptive practices and other social movements. Scott saw how civil rights movement has shaped people's perceptions about races, and YouMe actively sought the knowledge of feminism and antiracism. From Scott's account, we see many adoptees in this age group actively establishing adoptee organizations and networks. This is a generation that gives material support to adoptee-centered communities created in gatherings, culture camps and conferences.

YouMe's account illustrates how an adoptee in this age group could have perceived their adoptee experiences in light of their education, utilization of available resources to connect to Korea (birth country tours, job opportunities in Korea, etc.), and sensitivity toward other socially challenging issues (feminism, anti-racism, poverty, etc.).

In these two adoptees' accounts, their adoption experience is a political as well as personal one. This is shown in Scott's participation in culture camps and his efforts to mentor younger adoptees as well as YouMe's diatribe on international adoption issues. They are also sensitive to the differences among adoptees of different age groups. For them, the differences among them are not paralyzing, but central to, the construction of adoptee-centered communities. Just like others in society, adoptees are constantly evolving through life stages. By being mentors to adoptees and organizers of adoptee-related events, those like Scott envision the conversations and engagements across different age groups. By doing so, the middle-age group as a whole seems to bring out the sense of collectivity among Korean adoptees by pointing to the issues that are relevant to Korean adoptee identity and demands.

Chapter EIGHT. Children of the Multiculturalism Era

This section deals with younger adoptees who are in their early to mid-30s. Two female adoptees talk about their adoption experiences here, clearly illuminating the cultural milieu that is quite different from the ones we have seen so far. YouMe Masters whose account we read above depicted the younger generation in the following way:

You know, the younger ones, you know, they have Korean culture camps, Korean motherland tours with their families, much more than we ever had in terms of resources or understanding, you know, books, movies, films, you know, there's so much more out there than we had. We didn't have it. We blazed the trails for other people for following and understanding. We went through it not knowing anything.

Along with the increasing opportunities available, the availability and accessibility of technology such as internet websites also facilitated this generation's familiarity with adoptee organizations and issues. Culture camps, birth country tours, and other transnational adoptee-oriented activities were more readily available to this generation than in previous eras, and they often met other older adoptees along with their peers in these venues. Increasing numbers of Asian immigrants in recent years, especially since the 1965 immigration acts (Lowe, 1996), along with the rapid growth of Hispanic and other populations in this country has also helped these adoptees to navigate the issue of their ethnic heritage with relative ease.

When you grow up in Americanized way, with lots of Caucasians, *they are not open-minded* (in whisper). I think in our society's assumption at the time when I came, it was very different. Today, it's more open-minded, because there are more Asian Americans (Nicole, 37)(emphasis original).

One adoptee from southern California also said, pointing to her olive skin, "I didn't know what I was. But coming from where I am, I could blend in with Latinos, and people

would mistake me for one of them. *That was fine, as long as I could blend in*" (my emphasis).

Being misrecognized is better than not being recognized at all. There are now many Korean language programs throughout the country that provide adoptees with valuable resources such as language instruction, cultural knowledge, Korean history, and so forth.

Then, meeting and networking with other like-minded adoptees, made possible by already-existing local adoptee organizations, the growing presence of ethnic/racial diversity in the US, and the availability of communication technology and resources, all helped this group to be more knowledgeable and more ethnically conscious about their Korean identity. This clearly does not mean that these adoptees fully embrace their Korean identity, unlike the older adoptees. Dealing with ethnic identity is an overlapping concern for all adoptees. Rather, this new era of American multiculturalism brings the adoptees a previously unavailable position where one's ethnic identity is to be talked about and dealt with in many meaningful ways.

Another important element in this era is a change in parental attitudes that signal "how parenting has become a newly intensified domain for the production of middle-class subjectivity for the adult" (Anagnost, 2000: 391). This has been a gradual change, whose beginning we witnessed in the discussion of the middle-age group in Ch. 6. With the growing ability to consume things on an unprecedented scale, American parents indulged their children with consumption objects and activities (Cross, 1999, 2000). It also reflected the changing perspectives on children and childhood in which children came to be objects to be adored and indulged. By extension, parenting came to entail different kinds of surveillance, heretofore unknown and yet touted as more modern and scientific, and familial care has increasingly revolved around consumption activities.

In adoptive families, this tendency fueled their consumption of cultural objects/activities related to their children's heritage. Their increasing utilization of existing culture camps and birth country tours has brought about the development of these activities by many different organizers which are increasingly adoptees from the middle-age group. Both parents and adoptees are now quite skillful at finding local venues where adoptive families meet and gather to exchange information and to attend workshops related to adoption issues. Especially the services and information that they can obtain are more varied and sophisticated in urban areas with high concentrations of Asian/Americans, including private language lessons or translation services. This is largely unheard of among earlier generations of adoptees, as the adoptees in earlier chapters noted.

Stephanie Carson: "No matter how influential my parents are to me about my American culture, and how American I am, you can't still take away my Koreanness."

Stephanie Carson was adopted when she was four. At age 36, she recently married another Korean adoptee. Having experienced a deep depression that almost led her to attempt suicide several years before, she seems to have reached a point in life where she can make peace with the painful experiences in her past. Her marriage to Christian, to whom she had been engaged for a long time, was one big step she took with confidence in her spiritual transition to mid-life.

Stephanie's parents were, in her words, "typical Caucasian small-town folks," who provided a loving home for her. But as she recalled her childhood memories, she became very agitated. Growing up in a small town in the Midwest where not many minorities resided, she encountered numerous insults.

Well, my childhood wasn't too pleasant. I basically grew up in an all-white community, where I was the only minority. I was almost four years old. I was the only Asian there. Not even an African American. I was the only minority in that town. There was a lot of name-calling. Actually a lot of kids called me "chink." A lot of kids told me to go back. The older kids especially told me to go back to my country, 'cause I don't belong here. I remember the kids spitting up on me, spitting at me, throwing rocks at me. I remember, when I was like six years old, I begged my parents. I was crying, and I was in tears, and I begged my parents to send me back to Korea.

JP: What did they say?

My mom just said, "where would you go, honey? You know that you don't have no family there. We are your new family now. We are your family." I told her that I didn't care. At least I would be around other Korean people. I love my parents, don't get me wrong, I do. And I am very grateful. I have the most wonderful parents ever. Compared to some of my Korean adoptee friends, and stories that I have heard and stuff, I consider myself pretty lucky. My parents never adopted me for any of their selfish reasons. They just wanted to help another unfortunate child, and that's it. They didn't adopt me to be, you know like a big name in the town that I lived in. They didn't adopt me to put me on the farm and work me to death and stuff or anything. My parents never laid a hand on me. I grew up with a very, very, loving family. I just think my Mom and Dad are *typical Caucasian small-town folks. They all grew up thinking White*. They don't really act like doing a discrimination kind of stuff. Even though they tried to understand the racism there, they really couldn't. When I got older, my mom always told me, "why is it such a big deal? You are an American!" "You know, mom, I know I am an American. My culture is American. But look at me, I am not an American. I have different color of skin, different shape of eye, different color of hair, I am not an American! My culture? I agree with you it's American." She is just like, "I just don't understand it. You are just my daughter. You are just an American to me." It's the same thing with my nephews, you know. I have two adopted nephews. They are Afro-Americans. She does the same thing about my nephews. She doesn't see them as being Afro-American, she just sees them as being White.

Stephanie's parents' unwillingness to recognize the difference between the adoptee and themselves, a form of "color blindness," is quite common and pervasive among adoptive families and their informal network (cf. E. Lee, 2008). One of the moderators for a panel at KAAN Conference in 2003, lamented the fact that her father could not understand why she kept using the term "woman of color" to describe herself. Her father kept

reminding her that she was not a woman of color, and that she was HIS daughter. Color-blindness builds directly on an assimilationist ideology: *We don't talk about the difference. You just have to assimilate, and you will soon be one of us.*

As color-blind as her adoptive parents were, there are moments when their belief is challenged. The episode described by Stephanie is highly enlightening.

The first time when I truly realized that I was different was when we went to Texas. I was about 6 or 7 years old. We went to my Grandma and Grandpa's, and crossed the Mexican border. I was kept at the Mexican border, because the policeman at the border saw that I was walking ahead of my mom and dad and my family. The policeman thought that I was a Mexican and my family was taking me to escape. At that time, they didn't have any proofs that said I was their daughter. No papers with them or anything. So they had to leave me there. The police would not let me go. My parents had called Omaha, the closest thing was Omaha, to have their papers faxed or something. We didn't know, and at that time, I don't think there was fax machine. We could get to Omaha like in a day or two. They said, "she had to stay in our custody until you prove that this is your daughter." My mom and dad begged the policeman that they would come back again, but could leave with me. Basically the policeman was nice enough to realize that I was really their daughter, because I was like traumatized, crying and yelling, "I want my mommy and daddy? Why are you taking me away from my mommy and daddy? Where's my mommy and daddy? You are a mean man. I thought the policemen are supposed to be nice and here to help people. You are not here to help. You are a mean policeman. You took my mommy and daddy away," and all that stuff. That's the first time when I realized that I was different.

It is almost incredible that Stephanie's parents did not think to bring any legal papers that would confirm Stephanie's identity as their daughter, when crossing national borders. To the border patrol, Stephanie did not look like she belonged to her family; she rather looked more like a migrant from Mexico. However, this episode, while strengthening Stephanie's sense of difference, did not change her parents' perception much. Despite her parents' blindness toward her racial identity, Stephanie's story is narrated from a position that shows she is deeply aware of her own minority status.

The most I remember about my childhood is basically awful. I was the only minority. When I was little, I didn't get it so much from my own classmates,

or kids younger than me. Some I did from kids younger than me, but mostly I got it from kids that are older. Then, when I was in elementary through junior high, the older I got, the older kids stopped teasing me, and the younger kids would tease me. I just remember that I chose the longest time that I wouldn't deal with my childhood. My mom and dad would tell me, "Why don't you come home? Why don't you go visit Greene? It's your hometown, bla-bla-bla" I couldn't care less if I ever go back there and visit. For the longest time, I chose not to deal with that. Not to deal with all that hurt, discrimination. Lots of times, I came to the point, yes, when it is the first time, I told my mom and dad, and I would get the response. "You know, honey, they're just kids. They don't know any better. Kids can be cruel." I was like, "Yes, kids can be cruel." Where do you think that they learn?

Although Stephanie was often picked on by school bullies, she was not always a helpless victim. One day, she defied the gendered norms and cultural stereotypes by asserting herself albeit in violent ways.

I'll share with you a story. I don't remember how old I was. I might have been in junior high, I honestly don't remember how old I was. There was this boy who was about 2, 3 years younger than me. He kept picking on me. He'd always call me names, "you are chink, you are chink," making, you know, Chinese sounding sounds and stuff like that. He was going around saying stuff like, "Stephanie eats dog, she eats dogs." I don't know. My mom always says, older that I got, "honey, sometimes you should just buck it up, and stand up for yourself." There's a lot of stories that I could never tell my parents. It took me a really long time to really open up to my parents, and tell them all that was going on. My dad was saying, "you just need to learn to stick up for yourself. Stick up for your life." One day this kid annoyed me all the way home, picking on me. I know something just happened. I told him, "shut up, just shut up! I've had it, I've had it! If you open up your stinky mouth again, I am going to turn around and punch you one!" He was like, "yeah, right!" Although this kid was younger than me, he was bigger than me. Here I am, you know, a skinny little thing. He just kept on picking on me. I don't know, I just snapped. I turned around and I beat the shit out of that kid. I flipped him over my back, and flipped him on the sidewalk. And I told him, "I told you to shut up!" I kept kicking him. I guess all that anger, repressed anger of all of the kids picking on me, just came out. I literally beat the crap out of that kid. If I didn't snap out of it, I honestly could have killed him. I seriously gave him a broken nose, black and blue eyes, and broken ribs. He was definitely beaten up. We lived above a variety store. So I would go into the store, and then go up to stay hi to my mom. They knew that something was wrong. When I came in, I closed the door. I said, "I have got to tell you something" and I told them what happened. My mom was like, "honey, what have you done? Oh, gosh, I can't believe you did that!" Here was my dad, "that's my girl, finally learning how to stick up for herself!" My

mom was like, “oh, I just cannot believe it!” “Mom, that kid picked on me, mom.” “I don’t care how much a kid picks on you. A girl doesn’t go around beating up boys. That’s unladylike. I taught you better than that.” I’ve gotten in trouble. Soon people called. You know, my mom would have totally agreed with them. My dad just blew up. My dad was like, “You know what? Did your son tell you why Stephanie beat the daylight out of him? We’ll pay for the medical bills and that’s fine. You just need to understand why he’s beaten up. Did your son tell you he was calling my daughter “chink,” and saying that she was eating dogs all the way home, tormenting her? I am sorry but your son deserved to be beaten up. It will teach him a lesson. Granted, my daughter has severely beaten him up as much as she did. But he needs to have this lesson taught to him.” My mom was like, “first thing Monday morning when you go to school, you apologize to that kid.” I didn’t want to apologize. My dad said I didn’t have to go and apologize. My mom said, “You will go and apologize.” I tried to go and apologize, but he was like, going around and telling everybody what I did and saying that he was scared of me. He never picked on me again. I don’t know what, but I snapped. I honestly think that it was all that repressed anger that I kept inside me without talking about it just blew up. There was blood all over the sidewalk, blood all over my shoes and shirts.

Stephanie laughed heartily telling this story, seeming to savor the memory of when she stood up for herself. As she frames it, her repressed anger against verbal taunts and goading found its expression in this beating. Her account vividly represents anger as a bottled-up emotion which requires an outlet. Although she had a good relationship with her parents, she went through years of rebellion as a teenager just like many others.

When I was 17 or 18, I started to rebel. If I could take it back, I would. By the time I graduated from high school, I hated my parents. I even ran away from home. There was a time when I didn’t want to be home. I talked to my brother saying whether I could get cosmetic surgery. “I want to have the shape of my eyes fixed so that they would be just like yours. I want my skin to be just your color.” My brother said, “Gee, Steph, why would you want to do something like that? I think you are growing up to be a pretty young lady.” At the time, all I wanted to do was just to look and act more like them. I didn’t smoke or do drugs or anything like that before. But there were many nights when I would come home so drunk. It was to the point where one time I was so drunk at a party, they had drugs there. At that time, I didn’t know that it was drugs. I thought honestly it was sugar, but it was coke actually. I picked it up and tried to put it in my drinks, and they were like, “no, you are supposed to snort through your nose.” I am like, “why would you want to snort sugar through your nose?” (laughs) That was the first time I did drugs. Until then, I was goody two shoes. But I started smoking around

then. That caused a lot of headache for my mom and dad. This was before my college period. . . . I almost got kicked out of high school. I skipped school a lot, and was not doing anything much for it. I woke up late and came to school late.

Stephanie's teen-age rebellion entailed a little more than the usual adolescent angst. She wanted to be White, contemplating cosmetic surgery to enhance her looks. Her drinking and drug use stemmed from her own insecurity and split sense of self, White and Other, she had to maintain simultaneously. Meeting younger adoptees, I realized adolescent rebellion such as Stephanie's was not unusual. One adoptee in this age group, for instance, confided, "I had the usual adolescence," blinking her eyes at my tilted head, and adding quickly, "you know, drugs and drinking."¹⁷⁷

There came a time when Stephanie had to move away from home for the first time. A university life in a big city brought her new understanding of who she was. "I never saw so many Asians, so many Mexicans, so many Afro-Americans before," she said.

I felt like, here is my chance to finally fit in. But I found out that that wasn't true. When I was with Koreans, I wasn't Korean enough. My Korean friends were saying, "oh, you are adopted? You are not true Korean." But I wasn't Caucasian. So it's like I was in limbo. I was still going through my rebellious stage, and having this culture shock on top of it threw me into an identity crisis and all this stuff. It was just overwhelming. I went to this college and I hated it there. I did not like it there. Mostly because I was not ready and all these issues I'd been having, coming out of all the discrimination I went through, getting adjusted to college, here I am among other Asians, 300 brothers and sisters, here I thought I would be able to fit in, and I am back to square one.

Meeting other Koreans and Korean Americans taught her an important lesson about who she was. Stephanie realized belonging was not as simple as she had envisioned. "Being in limbo" appears to be a mark of Korean adoptees, as they were not "true" Korean, nor

¹⁷⁷ This may reflect not only the adoptees but the larger population growing up in this era, which in turn illustrates the generationally specific ways in which the youth represent and express their identities in relation to the elders.

“true” Caucasian. However, she socialized well with other Korean Americans and Asian Americans, and even dated a “traditional Korean guy.”

I was even engaged to this traditional Korean guy. When his mom and family found out that I was adopted, they said to him, “oh, she is not *true* Korean. You need to dump her.” He said, “it doesn’t matter. I love you,” and all this stuff. When he went back to Korea for a visit, that’s when everything changed. I was supposed to have gone there together. But he started earlier, and I was going to follow a few months later. That’s when we were going to get married. When he was around his family, his family influenced him. When we’re dating, there were certain things that bothered me. He expected too much. There were lots of times I cooked dinner for him and his friends. He would make a mess in the house with his friends, and go out to movies or something, I was not supposed to follow them. He said, “you can’t go. You need to stay home and practice being a good Korean wife.” I was just.... Well, that did not fly with me. Fortunately there was another Korean girl there, so she helped me. She knew I was pissed. She was trying to explain about Korean culture, and traditional bla-blah-blah. I told her, “I understand all that, but I am not that way. He needs to realize I am American. My culture is American.” She understood it totally. Her American name was Anna. I can’t remember what her Korean name was. I asked her, “do you think I am Korean? Yes, I am. In a way, I am not. Outside of me is this Korean, but inside of me is totally American. I am like a banana, yellow outside, white inside.” She was like, “excuse me?” She didn’t get it. I had to show the banana to her literally while explaining. We lost track, but she was such a good friend.

Korean adoptees are not easily accepted by Koreans as marriage partners. Many stories that I heard from the adoptees confirm this.¹⁷⁸ For Koreans, marriage is a political and economic transaction between in-laws, which requires meticulous consideration on almost every aspect of the couple (Kendall, 1996). Adoptees whose birthparents are absent present unique challenges in this ritual.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ There are always exceptions to the rule. There are several adoptees that I know married Korean partners. But clearly the rejections are much more common than not. However, as Korean adoptees from abroad are getting more and more visible in mainstream Korean culture, and the society begins to show more signs of acceptance towards diverse social status of Koreans, it is a safe guess that younger generation adoptees will have an easier time with this issue.

¹⁷⁹ There is always the specter of incest, albeit unintentional. They also lack parents who should be accountable for their children’s behaviors and actions.

Stephanie's story above is intriguing as it turns from her pain of being rejected as an "untrue" Korean to her assertion that she was indeed a "banana," the term we encountered in Jean Kim Blum's story earlier. It signals her acceptance of her own identity as being in limbo. As this interview was conducted right after her marriage to another adoptee, she might have been able to resolve her pain of rejection in this narration. Stephanie was not in any way comfortable with her sense of self. Her move to Minneapolis, where she could meet large numbers of adoptees, pushed her to the brink of self-destruction.

It wasn't until I moved to Minneapolis that I was introduced to other Korean adoptees. That was another identity crisis. Even though I knew Des Moines, and adjusted to cultures there and opened up to a whole new world, but I never got to see any fellow adoptees. It threw me into a deep, deep depression. All of my unresolved issues, about my identity and about childhood growing up came out. I bottled all that anger and hurt. I just didn't want to deal with it. When I was introduced to other adoptees, that's when all of that started coming to the surface. Slowly I started to deal with it. I fell into a deep depression. I tried to commit suicide. I was admitted into the hospital, a psych ward for almost two months. It was almost too much. Even when I was in hospital, they tried carefully not to leave anything dangerous. They think that somebody could hurt themselves with a pencil, while pretending to write letters. I did that, cutting my wrist with it. It was bleeding, and I tried to cover it up. That kept me there a little longer for that. I hid it for a while, so it almost got infected. I was hoping that I would get lead-poisoning.

Stephanie shielded her parents from knowing about this phase of her life. She worked through her pain and suffering with the help of her religious beliefs. Although raised as a Christian, she strayed from the church in her early years. "You do not think that God is there for you when you are going through extremely painful experience. But actually he is always by your side." She found her purpose in life: helping other adoptees.

I started getting involved with other Korean adoptees. I dealt with all that anger. To this day, there are still some Korean adoptees that are awfully angry. It is not that just towards themselves, it's to the adoptive parents, birthparents, other Korean adoptees, social workers. They are just angry at everybody. They don't take the blame. They are saying, it's like, "it's my birthparents' fault, my adoptive parents' fault, it's your fault, it's everybody's fault that becomes my fault." Boohoo, feel sorry for me. I wasn't like that.

This became Stephanie's mission in life: to create a place or space for connecting with other adoptees. Her particular vision was to build an adoptee ministry. With the help of internet technology, she could envisage a community that is not tied to geographical locations. Her vision did not stop there. She wanted the organization to be more broadly-based, recruiting its members from any adoptees, not just Korean adoptees. "In God's eyes, we are all adoptees," she said.

As she was recovering from her mental breakdown, Stephanie realized she needed to visit Korea. She embarked on a birth country tour in 2000.

I went there in 2000, almost 8 years ago. In June, I was there for almost 2 months. I loved it. If I didn't have any obligations, I honestly think that I would still be there to this day. Probably there but I would at least be there until I learn how to speak Korean fluently. I totally loved it. My mom and dad were totally afraid that I would love it, and that they would never see me again. They wanted me go, yet they didn't want me to go. They were honestly afraid that I would love it.

While in Korea, she had an important mission to accomplish; fighting bureaucracy and secrecy related to adoption. It was a disheartening experience.

I tried to get my papers from AAA. They said that they were sorry that they didn't have any of your papers. I said you've gotta be kidding me. They said that your records are sealed. I said why are my records sealed. I said "I am such and such number, giving my case number. Why would I know that if I am not that person? Don't tell me that they are sealed. Don't give me that bunch of bull crap." They wouldn't tell me anything. No one gave me any information. Nothing. All the information is what I had from my parents. . . . We didn't know what orphanage we were going to visit. We found that day that we were gonna visit the AAA. They arranged it and we didn't know. They arranged all the people adopted through Holt could have the chance to look at their records. Those who didn't want all these could just go on a tour. I was so disappointed. They had no information on me. Holt didn't have any information there. I had more information than they did. All they had was the paper that Korean government signed, that I was eligible for adoption. That was all that was in my file. They told me that my file was in Oregon, in the main office. Oh, the main office told me my files are sealed. She told me, "They do, they are lying. It might be the same paper or it might not be. They

may have more papers than you do.” I found out that my orphanage still existed. A social worker from there confirmed that. She arranged for me to visit there. I had a few friends coming with me, one of whom was fluent in Korean, being an adoptee living in Korea. The social worker met us at a train station and drove us there. Basically she wanted to be a translator, but I already had a translator. (laughs) I got to see my files. They made copies. I didn’t get to see my actual file. “Why do you want to see that? It’s exactly the same thing that you have.” If it was, what is the use of looking at the actual file? I found out my mom and dad were told that I was 7 months old, and that I was just abandoned on the street. I was in Seoul. That’s what my parents were told. I was actually 9 months old. I wasn’t abandoned on the street in Seoul. I was dropped off at a local police box in Kumsan, and they tried to look for my real mom and couldn’t. They transferred me over to Baby Moses [an orphanage]. I was one of those ugly babies. I got to see my picture. Damn, was I an ugly baby! I got a copy of it! I wanted to take the actual picture, you know, an actual copy of it. But they made a photocopy on a piece of paper. It didn’t come out good, and I wanted the actual picture. But they didn’t give it to me. I told my girlfriend, “Damn, an ugly baby. I would want a baby as ugly as I was.” ‘Cause I had no hair. They said that they didn’t know why but my hair would fall out. They could not figure out why. Maybe malnutrition. When I went to the orphanage, there was this path that you have to go around to get to the front. I walked and remembered walking down that path. And there was this room. I asked, “is this where you eat?” They said yes. I totally remembered that. I got to the director of the orphanage who was there when I was. She was 90-something but was still alive. I don’t know whether she is still alive or not. The minute I saw her, I remembered her. Of course, I remembered her being a lot younger. She was so cute! A ninety year old lady, still wanting to sit on my lap!

Although her birthparent search was not as successful as she hoped, she affirmed her sense of belonging, reliving her memories. Recounting memories and feeling confidence, Stephanie could reconnect herself to the place which she could only keep in her memory in the past. According to Stephanie, the reunion with the director of her orphanage brought her immense joy that was hard to describe in words. In a way, the director stood in for her kin, as their mutual recognition restored Stephanie’s identity as a Korean. It was not an easy decision for her to launch a search, but her desire to search for birthparents came from years of not knowing.

For the longest time, I went back and forth of whether I wanted to find my birthmom. I do and I don’t. Up to the point where I do find something, have the chance to meet my birthmom, all I want to do is just to thank her to

make the best decision for her life. I wanted to tell her I am all right, and that I had a good life. All these years, my mom and I have an awesome relationship now. They want to forgive me, and I want to forgive them. My mom and I have an awesome relationship. Before we never could, all through my high school growing up, and high school and college years. It wasn't until I moved to Minneapolis, and went to Korea, I was like 29 when I went to Korea, so it took me that many years to have a courteous relationship with mom. Because I had these unresolved issues that I had with my birthmom, because all this time, I was angry with my birthmom. My mom doesn't remember this, but my mom, for the longest time when I was growing up, she told me that my birthmom was a prostitute. You know, at that time I didn't know what a prostitute was. When I got older and realized what a prostitute was, I was so angry with my birthmom. How could my birthmom be a prostitute? Someone told her that I was mixed, that I wasn't full Korean, that I was half-Korean and half-American, because I have full hair on my arms. They said that full Koreans don't have hair on their arms. Well, when I went to college, I met Koreans that had more hairs on their arms than I did. (laughs). I saw some guy in Minneapolis who was 100% Korean, 'cause his mom and dad were Korean. He had the most hairy legs ever! Oh, my goodness! After church, we would sometimes have activities where we'd go out and have lunch together, play volleyball, or do something fun afterwards. One time we went to a church member's house, and we would barbecue. I was like, slobbering over him, "you're good looking!" He was so hairy!

As seen earlier with YouMe Masters' parents' explanation in the middle age group,

Stephanie's parents used the similar storyline to explain her adoption. In what follows, we see the familiar resentment at having been deceived.

I grew up, for the longest time, thinking that my birthmom was a prostitute, and that I was mixed. We are not in contact any more, this Korean girl [a woman she befriended briefly during her college years]. She brought me to the mirror, said, "look at you! You've got same shape of eyes as I do, same color of skin that I do. You are the most beautiful!" and stuff. I wish we could have been in contact. She showed me some TV program, about an adoptee who was going through some problems. It showed the problems she was going through and everything, how she grew up thinking one way, and that she was actually the other way, and stuff. It just woke me up. It wasn't until I had to go to college to actually meet her and realize that. Since I was three years old up till I was 19, in my early twenties, when I finally realized I wasn't mixed. All the time I grew up, I thought I was mixed. . . . The friend told me, "that's a lie. Your mother wasn't a prostitute" and all this stuff. And it took her to make me to realize the situation in Korea. She said, "you were probably a baby out of wedlock. Your mom and dad should realize that in Korean culture, that is a big, huge no-no. You will be thought of as the

lowest. If your mom kept you, she wouldn't have been able to survive, 'cause she would be just low of the society." She explained it to me, and that's when I started to realize. Then I was angry with Mom for saying that. How could you tell your daughter her birthmother was a prostitute when you don't know the whole situation?

The stereotypical plotline of Western soldiers and local Korean prostitutes is very popular among Americans in general as seen in Ch. 4. This theme continues to the present day, as an adoptee complained at one of our gatherings, "People tend to ask me whether my husband is in the army. Because he is White, and I am Korean, people just assume that I am one of those couples."

In the small town where Stephanie grew up, there were few Koreans, and interracial encounters were few and far between. Having little knowledge of what Koreans were like, Stephanie relied on stereotypes to understand Korean physical differences. Perhaps a large number of Koreans, whether men or women, have relatively little body hair, but picking up on one characteristic of a group of people to extrapolate it into a defining characteristic of that group is a seed of racism. It is not to say that Stephanie is a racist. Rather this illustrates how easy it is to slip into racial thinking when you do not know much about the Other. Little did she know, Stephanie was full Korean. With this realization, facilitated by other Koreans, she felt betrayed by her mother's ignorant remarks.

I have identified myself as Korean American. For the longest time, I would only say to people that I am a Korean adoptee, telling them I am not Korean American. Before, I was ashamed of being adopted, now I am not. I still consider myself Korean American. I'll always be Korean. I am also totally American. 'Cause I have the appreciation and openness to learning my culture, Korean culture, Korean roots, I would want our children to know their Korean roots, and want them to be someday bilingual. . . . You know, our kids are going to be so confused. That's like, "here's my Mom and Dad who are Korean. And my grandparents, my uncles and aunts are all Americans. What's wrong with this picture?" My Mom and Dad don't like the idea, but I want to raise our kids to be bilingual. My Mom and Dad don't like the idea that I want to learn Korean fluently. As adoptive parents, they just, no matter how old you are, they still want to hang onto you. They still

have their own insecurity. I keep telling them when I have the money, I will go to Korea. They honestly think that I am going back to Korea for good. Come on, I have a life here! No matter how influential my parents are to me about my American culture, and how American I am, you can't still take away my Koreanness.

In an attempt to know more about Korean culture, Stephanie often calls me to ask about Korean culture, Korean food, or language. Stephanie's husband, Christian, is also an adoptee. Both of them tried to enroll in Korean language classes offered by a local church. I was very surprised by her Korean language use in our conversation. Her pronunciation was superb, but she admitted Christian read and spoke Korean better than she did. They were open to experimenting with Korean food as well, but Christian cannot hold down spicy food, and this frustrates her a little bit.

I asked him, "Christian, are you really a true Korean?" Kimchi is too spicy for him. I have to wash Kimchi off for him. (laughs) I love Korean food. In college, I worked at a Korean restaurant. That's when I started to really like Korean food. And I worked at a Japanese restaurant. That's when I acquired the taste of sushi. I love Sashimi. I love tuna, yum. Gochoojang!¹⁸⁰

Stephanie's use of the term, "true Korean," here illuminates her growing sense of identity as Korean American, feeling comfortable with the label and what that entails. By incorporating Korean culture in the form of Korean food and Korean language, they nurture their Korean identity in their everyday life. The last time I spoke with her, she let me know she was expecting a baby-girl. She is planning to name her Eun Hye (meaning grace, or blessing), despite her parents' objections. Giving her daughter a Korean name is a way in which she could give something that she never had when young: cultural authenticity. Indeed, you can take Stephanie out of Korea, but no one can take the Koreanness out of her.

¹⁸⁰ Kimchi is a well-known vegetable side dish. It is fermented and seasoned with spicy peppers and anchovies. Gochoojang is a spicy pepper paste that Koreans frequently use to season meat and vegetables. Korean food is not always spicy, but it is true that Koreans love spicy dishes.

Claire Bray: “I love the East Coast, I love the West Coast. But I am definitely a Midwest girl!”

The following story makes clear that adoption experiences are indeed varied and complex. It presents a well-adjusted and intelligent adoptee who has a close and satisfactory relationship with her family, departing from the older generations’ perceptions of the younger one. Unlike Stephanie, Claire Bray does not feel being Korean is as an important dimension of her identity. But clearly, as a younger adoptee, Claire has benefited from the historical and cultural changes that are more responsive to cultural and racial differences.

A woman with a very pleasant personality, Claire Bray, age 30, talked about her loving and warm family experience. Her mother could not have children biologically due to early hysterectomy, so Claire’s parents adopted her and her older brother, James, from Korea. Claire and James, not related by blood, have a great caring relationship. Claire grew up in a mid-sized city in Michigan. Adopted at 6 months, her parents always reinforced the fact that she was adopted.

My childhood in terms of, like, growing up with family, was just absolutely wonderful. I couldn’t be closer now with my parents, and my brother, although my brother lives abroad. So childhood was good. I mean definitely I had emotional, kind of attachment issues. I was so attached to my Mom. She was a stay-at-home Mom, and she is a stay-at-home Mom. And I was so attached. I definitely had attachment issues. I’ve kind of gone over this in my mind quite a bit and tried to (makes sense of this), you know. There is no reason why I should have other than, I definitely think that it stems from the fact that I was adopted. One of the things that I actually don’t have a memory of, is when I was in my kindergarten, I think it was, no, I do have some memories of not wanting to go to school. My brother and I would be walking to the bus stop together, ‘cause he was 2 years older in school. I would be so upset that I was leaving my house, and leaving my Mom more than anything. I would make myself sick, like I would, kind of almost like a, I guess, a panic attack or something. I can describe it now. In fact, I don’t think it was technically a panic attack. I was just crying so much and coughing. And then I’d just end up getting sick on our way. You know, I’d have to go back home. . . . I guess my parents took me at one point in kindergarten to a child psychologist. I guess she had talked with me. I have no memory of it. It’s all my parents’ information. (Laughs)

Fortunately, Claire grew out of the problem. Since she was an infant at adoption, this separation anxiety did not stem from her memories of being in an orphanage, or something related to her memories in general, which might be the case with older-child adoption.

Rather, Claire seems to attribute her experience to her adoptee status. However, her brother James was 5 years old when he arrived in the States, and adjusted very well. He did not have the same problems.

Both of us [Claire and her brother] are adopted, but we are not blood related. He is also Korean. Actually, here is the interesting one. Well, I always thought interesting, in terms of birth order personality studies. He is the oldest but I was the first adopted. He was adopted a month before I turned 3. It was actually my first memory ever. It was going to the airport with my parents. We were in this area. My parents were talking with the woman who flew over with him from Korea. And he and I were kind of jabbering to each other, even though he spoke Korean and I spoke English. So yeah, I always found that interesting. Something a little unique. When I was undergraduate and graduate school studying this whole birth order personality study and reading about them, and thinking, “oh, wait a minute, I really don’t fit into any of this,” you know. (laughs) . . . They [my parents] were a little bit older, I think, than other parents that usually adopt. That’s why in their second time around, they had to adopt a child that was older, because I was supposed to have a younger brother or sister, but because of my mom’s age.¹⁸¹

James’ arrival at the airport remains the primary memory of Claire’s childhood. Claire and James have been always as close as siblings. There were subtle differences in their choices of friends, but it did not matter much to them. Claire explains,

I took the route, I feel like, knowing that I was different, but taking the route of total assimilation. Of course I was 6 months old when I was adopted. But also like in middle school and in high school, I really had mostly Caucasian and Black friends. My brother definitely tended to gravitate more toward Asians. He had a quite a few Asian friends. It wasn’t so much like a choice, as if like, “oh, I am not gonna be friends with them.” It was my interest and my

¹⁸¹ This reflects the age restrictions imposed on adoptive parents in cases of Korean adoption in the 1970s.

background. Maybe because James was older when he was adopted, he still had that kind of affinity for other Koreans and other Asians.

Here, Claire explains her choice of friends who were mostly not Asians as a result of her total assimilation to American culture, whereas her brother's choice of Asian friends is viewed in terms of his relatively late arrival and concomitant affinity for Asians. Clearly, Asians—including Asian Americans, as the distinction is uncertain here—mark something outside of cultural assimilation in the US. Certainly childhood taunts related to her racial difference were familiar to Claire. But she puts the experience in perspective.

That [childhood taunts] was definitely something growing up in my childhood. There were days that I would come home crying. Or that my brother and I would be out playing with neighbor kids, and suddenly they would be calling us a “chink.” And we were like, “well, what’s a chink?” I remember the first time that happened. We went home, and like, “what’s a chink?” and our parents explained it, and we were like, “we are not even Chinese” (laughs). And also just physically. You know, they would make fun of, like, our physical appearances, because we were so new to them. But knowing what I know now about child development and the way that kids are, it’s more that they are learning about things, not necessarily trying to be mean. Sure, once they saw you crying and they kept doing it, that’s being mean (laughs). You know, for kids, that’s how they learn about their differences. When I worked in, you know, early childhood [classes], and a lot of kids point out things. I was embarrassed at one point when they pointed out a big zit on my face, but that’s how they are learning about the world, not trying to be mean (laughs).

As a social worker trained in early childhood development programs, Claire frames the racial remarks as a child's innocent way of learning about the differences among people. By equating phenotypic differences with “a big zit” on the face, her assimilated self can translate in more innocuous terms racial differences and discrimination that have grave socio-political consequences. She grew up in the 1980s, and still the presence of Asians in Midwest suburban America was largely invisible. Claire and James were the new—or different—faces in town, and their rarity brought some attention.

I don't know if it's my own, kind of, skewed sense of at that time, but I believe my brother and I, in that particular elementary school, were the only Asian children. So it's kind of a big thing. So I remember moving into this new 1st grade classroom, 'cause they wanted me to introduce myself, and maybe talk a little bit about, like I remember having to do things like talk about Korea. I have no memory of Korea. I don't know what Korea is like. But I had this nice sort of booklet. Actually I think my parents might still have it, and filed away with my adoption papers. It's a book that, I believe, AAA had given to my parents. And it was about Korea. That was a very basic thing. I remember it was like, black-and-white, stapled together like booklet about Korea. I might have to go home and look for that (laughs).

The fact that Claire and James came from Korea was made into a learning opportunity for other children in class. This is an example of the multiculturalistic ethos of the changing times. Racial/ cultural difference was acknowledged, but in manageable chunks, here in the form of learning about other places and cultures. The conflation of culture and race adds to the problems associated with multiculturalism. A predicament of this exercise is acknowledged here, as Claire has to perform the role of knowledgeable insider of Korea and Korean culture when the only knowledge she had about Korea came in the form of a booklet distributed by her American adoption agency. This is something akin to Chinese Americans who, in the climate of multiculturalism, “feel compelled to demonstrate Chinese cultural competence and cultural authenticity, even in asserting their “Americanness” (Louie, 2004: 25). This “color awareness” that accompanies multiculturalism can be highly problematic, as it

portrays a fair society that is no longer ‘color-blind’ but conscious of the impact of ‘race’ in the everyday life of America. This ‘color awareness’ is problematic less in its attempt to register the cultural politics of difference vis-à-vis the historical construction of skin color as a signifier that condenses prior systems of marks into new categories, but rather in *the comfortable ‘racialism’* that accepts the ideological assumption that race is antecedent to racial differences (Moallem and Boal, 1999: 253, my emphasis).¹⁸²

¹⁸² I read Moallem and Boal’s “racial differences” here to mean “cultural differences.” The problem of multiculturalism and its attendant ideologies is further explored in earlier chapters.

In the case of Claire and James, their race was a mark that needed explanation. By requiring them to present their difference in the way of introducing their place of origin to the classmates, “racialism” secures its ideological assumption.

Claire had a typical adolescence in which she would often get so “emotional.” Although she called it “typical,” her adolescent behaviors were relatively benign in contrast to those of Stephanie Carson. She rationalized her rebellious behaviors as due to “the triple whammy” that she was under.

Definitely I had conflicts with my parents (laughs). The way I describe it is I was the emotional child, and my brother was the one that acted out. In that way, we, kind of, in some senses, switched, because usually the younger child is the one that acts out, more rebellious physically, I guess. But mine was always contained in the house. I was very good in some ways. In other instances, the whole emotional aspect. I was a very model child. I was very polite out in public. I never really got in trouble. Outside of the house, very good at school. My brother, actually really excelled at school. You know, good balance between the social aspects as well as the academic aspects. For me, ugh, emotionally, Mom and I, we got in screaming fights, I mean, just emotional things. Definitely there were times when I’m like, “you don’t want me!” That was always what I fall back on. It was like the one thing that I knew would really like stick a knife in her heart. It would have hurt them so much for me to say, “you never wanted me. I just want to go back to Korea.” Even though at that time, I had no interest whatsoever to go back to Korea (laughs). But I knew that would get them. I always called it “the triple whammy.” Looking back, I still call it this, because there were three things that were going for me and kind of going against me. I was the first adopted, I was the youngest, and I was the girl. So a lot of the arguments we had, I’ve always been saying the issue of equality and fairness. Even generally social justice, now it’s my term for it. But, you know back then it was fairness. Everything seemed to be unfair, that my brother at a certain age was able to do things that I was not at that same age. Curfew-wise, or just socially-wise, he was able to go and do stuff, and it was because of what I called “the triple whammy.”

Claire’s hurtful remarks toward her mother reveal the fact that adoptees understand the insecurity of their parents. As a rite of passage, adolescence seems to mark a period when youth can transgress certain boundaries and experiment with the consequences of their

actions and words. Subjects that were taboo become the fodder for verbal exchanges and contests and parental insecurity becomes one of the youth's favorite targets.

Claire went to college about 40-minutes from home, but she said she rarely visited home during the college years, unlike her friends who commuted from her hometown. Claire certainly recovered from childhood separation anxiety. She even took up the challenge of the Study Abroad Program and spent a semester in Spain. After college, she moved to St. Louis for graduate school. I asked her what it was like to live in St. Louis.

You can take it into so many different directions. It was an interesting time. Overall, I thought the graduate school was very easy. But living experience-wise, I was very excited once the school was over, so I could move away. I definitely did not plan on staying in St. Louis. It wasn't a good fit for me. St. Louis, I feel like, has a kind of identity sort of crisis feel to it. You know, they are very much a part of the Midwest, but really a lot of people feel like they are a part of the South and there's kind of like, southern mentality. So I was a person who is not a Caucasian, not African American or Black. I didn't really fit in, because really it's a city of White and Black, not only literally, but figuratively as well. If you didn't really fit into what they thought, it wasn't the best experience. It's a kind of small town mentality, also. They would ask things like, you know, if you meet someone at a bar, or whatever function floor, and some people that are local to St. Louis would say, "so, where did you go to high school?" And I would say, "well, you probably wouldn't know because I didn't grow up here," and then we'd go into this discussion, where they'd say, "where are you from?" and I would say, "I am from Michigan," then they'd say, "no, where are you *really* from?" (laughs) Yeah. So, it was an interesting experience. I think it is a great city to visit. But for long-term living there, it wasn't good for me.

Claire's assessment of St. Louis as experiencing an identity crisis is quite intriguing. By differentiating the Midwest (Michigan) from "southern mentality," she regards the Midwest as more inclusive and sophisticated about US racial diversity. "Southern mentality," on the other hand, believes in a biracial world, in which people, not White nor Black, cannot be envisioned as American. Therefore, St. Louis would not be a good fit for her long-term sojourn. Not only in downtown St. Louis, but also on the school campus, she encountered this "southern mentality" which became the source of jokes for her and her friends.

You know, a friend of mine, whose name was, you know, very ethnic, or Indian, and it was Indian. She was born, raised, and grew up in Chicago. It's not like, she had any, I mean, she had no accent, nothing, nothing to indicate otherwise. Every time she'd go to pick up her work-study check, they would ask her if she was an international student, because of her name and because the staff working at that office where she was picking up her check were all from, you know, St. Louis. So, she and I would always have these long-running discussions and we would laugh about that all the time (laughs).

Not surprisingly, Claire moved to Chicago right after getting her Master's degree. She considered other big cities such as Boston, or New York City, but her family was within driving distance of Chicago, and to her, family was most the important thing. She added with a cackle, "I am definitely a Midwest girl. I mean, I love the East Coast, I love the West Coast. But I am definitely a Midwest girl."

Chicago presented Claire with new opportunities for connecting with diverse groups of people. She could get more involved in cultural events, such as going to the theatres including Asian ones, attending Seoul Symphony Orchestra events, and volunteer activities. She was actually planning to go to the "Chicago Rally for Obama" right after our interview, and that made her very excited. "Did you hear? He announced recently that he would run for President. Isn't that great? I get to do political type of things here."

Claire also found other Korean adoptees in Chicago and created a small network. "It was kind of an evolution," she said, "there were a few different groups that I had been in, but because of the drama, I tend to back away." There had been a few adoptee groups when Claire settled in Chicago. It seems that these groups keep splitting off, or branching into one another.

There was a group before, but it was turning more into two different groups, because one group wanted to be more political with the issue of Korean adoptees, and actually it was before they were going to a gathering in Seoul, and they wanted to meet with the government there. They really believed that the adoption from Korea was wrong, and that Korea did wrong by sending so many children abroad. And there were another group of us that really

didn't feel that way. To me, if I felt that way, it would mean that my family is not right. I don't believe that at all. I am so close to my family. Because there was this division, and it was very much a strong division, because there were a lot of people coming to that group just wanted to be social and that was me and other people. So one of the girls took it upon her and she created another kind of social group. . . . You know, there are still other adoptees out there that still like to have some sort of connection with other Korean adoptees, but more on a social level, and if there is a way to leave all that drama behind.

There are different motivations as to why Korean adoptees want to meet other adoptees, and it must have been difficult for organizers to satisfy diverging viewpoints and to address the diversity of adoptee experience. There are adoptees whose experience was more than ordinary. Some of the adoptees had to endure many forms of abuse at the hands of family members or by other people whom they knew. Their experiences should be taken into consideration when establishing criteria for prospective adoptive/foster parents and devising programs to educate and prepare parents for adoption or foster care. However, in the process of learning about one another's experience, some of the adoptee meetings become a place where grievances were aired. Claire's "all that drama" or Stephanie Carson's "angry adoptees" can be understood in this context. As Claire stated, there are adoptees who come to the meetings to meet and network with other adoptees. These adoptees are taken aback by others who dwell on their negative experiences in public settings such as adoptee meetings.

Then, how can one belittle others' tragic life-stories as "a drama"? Could the following be construed as one such drama that Claire is referring to? In one of the gatherings I attended, I saw a Korean adoptee who carried a frame of 10 x 13 photo of a White woman who appeared to be in her early 30s. She was standing in a corner of the hotel lobby, watching people go in and out. Her name was Melinda, and she told me and others who were curious as to who the woman in the photo was, "she is my sister. Unfortunately, she

died in a horse riding accident last summer. She was 34.” According to her story, Melinda was adopted at the age of 13 to an adoptive father with a criminal record for child abuse. Soon after her adoption, she was moved to a foster home, as her adoptive father beat and raped her. The police were called in a 9-1-1 call, and since then, she was moved from foster home to foster home until she aged out of the system.¹⁸³

Melinda’s sister in the framed photo was a biological daughter of her last foster parents. Her foster parents did not have any children other than the one who just passed, and Melinda wanted to comfort them by keeping in touch with them more often. “She wasn’t married. She didn’t have any children, so I am all they’ve got right now.” It was quite a shocking story for me and other adoptees, standing in the lobby of an extravagant hotel, and waiting for an answer to the brief question that we asked, “who is she?” To that simple question, Melinda opened her story without any seeming hesitation. Dumbfounded, we did not know how to respond to her tragic story.

After returning to our room, Leanne, 32, an adoptee and my roommate for the night, commented on Melinda’s behavior, rather than her story. “I can’t believe what she went

¹⁸³ The situation wherein adoptive arrangements disintegrate is called “adoption disruption.” As it was previously referred to as “adoption failure” or “adoption breakdown,” this is a recent label, taking into consideration the negative connotations that previous references implied. The rates of adoption disruption are quite vague, even for domestic adoptions (Festinger, 1990). It is hard to aggregate the adoption agencies and governmental sources, as they might have used different criteria for counting these children. It is even harder to find any records on adoption disruption rates for transnational adoptees. Festinger (1990), despite the lack of consistent data across various agencies and periods, finds more or less consistent rates of disruptions, between 10-13%, over the years. In my study, I met and know a few adoptees whose initial adoption arrangements were disrupted. In the case of early adoptees, once they arrived at US airports, they seemed to have been considered semi-American citizens. When adoptive families decide not to adopt them, they then were transferred to the adoption agencies as wards of the State. As there were no clear precedents about transnational adoptees’ adoption disruption cases, the staff handled their cases as they would with domestic adoptees. In the process, important differences in record-keeping (transnational adoptees carried documents written in English and the languages of their native countries, and other ID credentials that domestic adoptees did not have) were ignored. Early adoptees in these cases lost much of important information that could have been helpful in their birthparent searches or in knowing about their own history prior to coming to the US. Festinger (1990) finds higher rates of adoption disruption for older-child adoptions (11 or older) than that for younger ones. Given all these, Melinda’s case is not necessarily unique in terms of adoption disruption, although painful experiences that she experienced represent somewhat of an extreme case.

through! But, this is not a place or time to talk about that kind of heavy stuff. I don't know her at all, and this is just too much to handle on a first meeting. You know, being adopted at 13 is strange in and of itself!" Although I met Melinda at a few other meetings and gatherings, I met Leanne only once more after that during another gathering in Korea. Leanne said to me, "I don't go to these meetings anymore, because my story is not like theirs [some adoptees' tragic experiences], you know." She attended this gathering in Korea because she wanted to sightsee, and this event offered a safe opportunity for her to do so.

Melinda's case is unique, and I am not sure whether Claire ever witnessed a scene like this one. But, some adoptees have told me over and over that they do not like to go to these meetings, because of the "drama," or "drama queens/kings," and they meant something quite similar to Melinda's behavior. Talking about negative experiences is one thing; doing it over so often to remind everyone else about how they are victimized is quite another.

Adoptee groups can be also split over differing political positions. Especially those who are against the practice of international adoption face strong opposition among their group members. Claire muses, "if I felt that way, it would mean that my family is not right," assuming the association between negative adoption experiences and political position of anti-international adoption. This association is misleading, as I met many adoptees on either side of the fence that had very satisfactory or dysfunctional relationships with their adoptive families. But surely some of the adoptees may make the same associations, and shun the political tone of the meetings.

Despite "all that drama," Claire still felt that she benefitted from these meetings.

Well, I guess, there is a certain level of comfort, and it comes from just knowing other Korean adoptees. I guess, you know, for, it was not so much, maybe it was something I never really put my finger on, but maybe, you know, maybe knowing that I was adopted and from Korea, it just made me

feel different, not really knowing anyone else that was like that. I had met people that were Koreans, but they had Korean parents. Or, you know, in graduate school, we had international students from Korea. So having been exposed to difference, other Koreans, that wasn't really it. But it was meeting people, once I moved to Chicago, that were also Korean adoptees. You know, we didn't even talk about being Korean adoptees. I would always acknowledge it. There's this comfort level knowing that there's someone out there, too, that may have had similar experiences and really finally finding people that, you know, 'cause, I think so many people have that, . . . *but it was that one, just that connection that I guess I never realized was not so much missing, but just hasn't happened until I met people here in Chicago.* It was definitely this kind of comfort, kind of like, calming comfort. Maybe it's just knowing that there are other people out there with similar experiences and that kind of background. Even though our experiences vary so much, you know, 'cause there were people that hated their parents, you know, didn't really like being adopted, and resented growing up in suburbia. And there are others that, probably one of my best friends here, her parents are just in general not good parents, but she loves them to death, you know (laughs) (my emphasis).

Claire gained a certain level of emotional comfort, learning about the existence of others who share Korean adoptee status. Growing up with a brother from Korea, she was never conscious of that connection with other Korean adoptees “was not so much missing, but just hasn't happened until I met people here in Chicago.” This is one social bond among many, which can be equated with coming from the same town, state, socioeconomic class, etc.

Then how does she identify herself?

Oh, my gosh, it's a very tough question (laughs). Well, I guess, in terms of, you know, ethnicity, more often than not, to describe yourself, that's always the category to see where you check off things, but I really do consider myself Asian American. This is something that I learned when I was in Spain. We went to a lot of cultural events and things like that where you could meet people from all over, because there are so many international students studying in Madrid. And, you know, our common language is always Spanish, because that's what we spoke when we were there, because all our classes are in Spanish and everything. But, you know, I'd meet people and talk with them, and it was interesting. Quite a few people had that observation. They knew immediately upon talking to me that I was from the United States. That was almost ten years ago now. That's one of the things that really solidified for me in my mind that I am from the United States. That's really my upbringing, and that's really who I have become, not so much the Asian

element. The Asian element is on the outside. In terms of Korea and being Korean, it just wasn't something. For a long time, in all honesty, Korea was not on my, like, top ten places to travel. Now, since, you know, recent years, for the past five years, it definitely is on my top ten places that I'd like to travel internationally. I've never been back to Korea, and it's something I'd like to do.

Here, you can see how Claire makes sense of her Asian American identity. Traveling abroad helps one to explore one's national identity, as it gives a perspective to compare and think about one's self. Being recognized as an American by others, she felt legitimate to claim her American identity. If her claim as such was insecure previously, the trip to Spain definitely strengthened it. By contrast, on the "Asian" side of her identity, she has only this to say: "The Asian element is on the outside." We can recall other adoptees' analogy to "Banana" here. As she is truly assimilated, she is a living contradiction, as the ideology of assimilation does not recognize the Asian side of the label, "Asian American." But multiculturalism and its impact on sociocultural changes provided a context in which she could talk about her being Asian and American at the same time, but with a strong emphasis on "American." Hence Lowe states, "the terrain of multiculturalism is both a mode of pluralist containment and a vehicle for intervention in that containment" (1996: 85). As such,

multiculturalism is central to the maintenance of a consensus that permits the present hegemony, a hegemony that relies on a premature reconciliation of contradiction and persistent distraction away from the historically established incommensurability of the economic, political, and cultural spheres (*ibid.*: 86).

For Claire, being Korean does not necessarily induce a natural desire to visit the country: "Korea was not on my, like, top ten places to travel." Although she visited China twice to meet her brother, neither of them made an effort to travel further to Korea. This is not because Korea was really not important to them. Rather, their feelings toward Korea are colored by their abandonment which they perceive as Korea's rejection of them. Because this is going to be an emotionally challenging journey, they need some time to plan and mull

over it. As Claire's words show below, Korean adoptees do wonder about Korea, where they supposedly came from, and their birthparents.

You know, I've always wondered. I used to, definitely. Oh, the other movie that really impacted me when I was a child was *Annie* (laughs). I love *Annie*. 'Cause my parents actually took me to see that play at a local high school when I was really little. I think that kind of triggered daydreaming about parents. But, in all honesty, I have no desire to do the search. The only thing I might be interested in is medical history. But at this point (laughs), you know, I am one of those people who are very conscious of things and aware of like when certain tests should happen. And I have that. My doctor's like, "well, I don't know if there's a history of breast cancer. Just wait until you are 40. You will be fine" (laughs).

Claire's daydreaming is just that, daydreaming. She seems to be pretty sure where she belongs. She put her opinions in a perspective that was quite familiar to anthropologists like myself.

There's always that debate between nature vs. nurture. I don't know so much about the nature part. But nurture part, there are so many things that I am very similar with my parents. I mean, it's product of the environment. I don't think it is the nature thing. You know, sometimes I wonder if it's the attachment level that the person also has with their adoptive parents. I think, if they don't have the positive experience with their parents, very much so they may not have similar personality traits. If they are really attached, and, for the lack of a better word, very into their parents and into their family, maybe they will take on some of the personality traits. It will be like subconscious type of things. I like these people and how they are, I'd like to feel like that, you know.

Claire understands her affinity with her parents in terms of social environment, and wonders whether "nature" really is all that powerful. Claire's life experience at 30 reveals the sophistication and thoughtfulness with which she moves forward. She is adept at adjusting to diverse environments, the Midwest of Michigan, Madrid in Spain, the "southern mentality" in St. Louis, and cosmopolitan Chicago. Her claim, "I am definitely a Midwest girl!" is not from someone who is too timid to explore new surroundings. Her claim rings true, as it comes from an experienced person, who is well-travelled and well-learned.

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Earlier, I stated that the younger generation adoptees benefited from the new era of multiculturalism which brings a previously unavailable position where one's racial/ethnic identity is dealt with in meaningful ways. These two younger adoptees' very different attitudes toward their own racial identities reflect creative weavings of the available discourses on racial differences and identities. Stephanie actively seeks a connection to her Korean identity, partially motivated by her deep awareness of racial difference between Koreans and other Americans. Trying to learn Korean and participate in Korean cultural activities, Stephanie carves out an in-between position that is comfortable and meaningful to her. Claire, on the other hand, invests in her American identity, conceiving her Korean identity to be an additional element to multi-ethnic America.

Despite their seeming differences here, their experiences reflect the historical context which younger adoptees inhabit. In both of their accounts, we see an ease of movement from hometown to other areas of the country and beyond, the availability of existing adoptee networks, and the presence of other Asians. Especially, the fact that Stephanie, living in a small town in the Midwest, could attend local Korean language classes betrays the extent of availability for culturally specific types of services.

The issue of adoption among these adoptees was also more important as a personal quest rather than a political one. How to broach the topic of adoption and racial difference with their adoptive parents was an important concern to Stephanie. For Claire, adoption was the topic that she could share with her adopted brother. In describing their adoption experiences, their stories revealed strong emotional bonds between them and their adoptive families.

Taken together, the younger generation adoptees' stories illuminate significant changes that this society has undergone from earlier generations: Increasing accessibility and availability of transnational movements and connections, the rise in transnational economy, and multicultural discourses. In addition, this generation does not feel an intense need to attend any adoptee groups as they increasingly utilize alternative means of communication, such as websites and e-mails. Benefitting from the earlier generation adoptees' efforts, younger adoptees navigate the questions of identity and cultural heritage with much greater ease.

Conclusion. Korean Adoptee Identity in-the-Making

Being adopted is an important part of your life, but not the defining part. It doesn't define me in and of itself. When it comes to my time to die, I don't want people to go like, "oh, well, she was adopted!" you know (Laughs) (Sandra, 24).

[O]ur otherness was not an effable essence, but rather the sum of different historical experiences. Different webs of signification separated us, but these webs were now at least partially intertwined. But a dialogue was only possible when we recognized our differences, when we remained critically loyal to the symbols which our traditions had given us. By so doing, we began a process of change (Rabinow, 1977: 162).

I had a few questions going into the field. I wanted to know how Korean American adoptees made sense of who they are, given the history of cultural transplantation and the trauma of being adopted. Secondly, Stock (1999) claimed that Korean American adoptees inhabit "fourth culture" in relation to Korean, American, and Korean American culture. I planned to find out what this "fourth culture" entailed. Lastly, I was intrigued by Korean adoptees' simultaneous insider/outsider status in the US. The way they learned American culture by cultural immersion parallels that of anthropologists who immerse in an alien culture to learn the new ways of being in that culture. I wanted to comprehend what their experiences could teach me. In order to answer these questions, I spent several years, attending and observing many different sites where Korean adoptees got together: culture camps, cultural activities, conferences, mini-gatherings and so forth. I also interviewed 27 Korean American adoptees at least once, some more, to ask them to teach me something about their experience.

My research uncovered three important findings about Korean American adoptees. Firstly, Korean American adoptee identities are anchored in what I call “out-of-place subjectivity.” By “out-of-place subjectivity,” I mean the important momentary consciousness in which Korean adoptees articulate their desire to be recognized as a Korean adoptee. In distinction to the concept of identity, subjectivity entails a subject’s complicity in rendering the identity acceptable to the self. In order to understand this subjectivity, I realize the significance of mundane social interactions. Borrowing the concept of Willis’ “ethnographic imagination” (2000), I explicate “out-of-place subjectivity” in Chapter 2.

Secondly, shared experiences of alienation and out-of-place subjectivity facilitate the formation of strong emotional bonds among Korean adoptees. The relationships they form based on these emotional bonds last a long time, creating a bond akin to kinship. I found that the physical sites where these adoptees come together play an important role in materializing this bond. My participation at the gatherings, conferences, culture camps and culture activities showed that these are the sites where “out-of-place subjectivity” finds its community. I describe these physical sites in Chapter 3, and discuss the sociocultural factors that give force to the emotional bonds among Korean adoptees in Chapter 4.

Lastly, despite these commonalities, the conditions that produced them were largely colored by cultural milieus in which Korean adoptees grew up. Thus they articulated their experiences in strikingly patterned ways. In fact, there were three distinct age groups, each with its own unique experience. In Part Two (Chapters 6~8), I organize and present the adoptees’ stories by age group.

Korean American Adoptee Identity & Life Stages

As illustrated in Part Two, the age of an adoptee is important in two respects. At first, Korean American adoptee identities are largely articulated within the cultural framework of the generations in which they grew up. I compared two different modes of cultural framework to which three different age groups were accustomed. Older generation Korean adoptees had been socialized in the assimilation mode, reflecting the cultural milieu of 1950-60s. Younger generation adoptees face more diverse options, offered by cultural shifts toward multiculturalism mode, to articulate their racial/ethnic identity. Middle-age group adoptees' articulations of their identities show the process of American cultural transition in terms of racial/ethnic identities. They confront the contradictory gaps among different modes as they make sense of seemingly opposing viewpoints proffered by old and new cultural frameworks. It is not surprising to see many adoptees in this group to be active in adoptee organization efforts.

Secondly, the age of an adoptee is an indicator of the life stages of adoptee individuals. Korean adoptees continuously negotiate their adoptee identity as they transition into different life stages. Meier puts it nicely:

From childhood to adulthood many Korean adoptees follow a *similar developmental trajectory of denial, self-awareness, and emerging cultural consciousness* about their Korean heritage. These journeys are mediated and nuanced by environmental factors including, but not limited to, places adoptees lived or visited in Korea, the US or elsewhere abroad (1999: 16, my emphasis).

Something akin to Van Gennep's (1960) rite of passage —entailing separation, transition and aggregation—, Korean adoptees advance from a stage of denial to increasing self-awareness and further to the productive engagement of different aspects of self. In Part Two, Korean adoptees described their childhood as largely devoid of Asian influence. It might have been both intentional and unintentional. Ruth states, “[l]ike many other adoptees, I was usually the only Asian, the only minority, in my class at school. I did attend high school with about

eight other adopted Koreans like myself, but I was only friends with one. The rest of us usually tried not to associate with one another. That Asian-phobia thing. It was like looking in a mirror” (1999: 77). Denial of adoptee status and denial of one’s physical identity in childhood is a recurring theme in adoptee interviews.

Middle-aged adoptees struggle with a growing sense of awareness of their unique predicaments, trying to find constructive ways to deal with the “common sense” (Gramsci, 1999(1971)) world that constantly eclipses their subjectivity. Stories told by YouMe Masters and Scott Kinsey partially illuminate diverse ways in which this group of middle-aged adoptees attempt to make positive social changes. Adoptees in this group were asked what they want to tell other adoptees about their struggle.

It’s all a process. It’s an ongoing process that never ends. You learn to accept things that you didn’t accept when you were younger. And you learn to work on things that you didn’t want to work on before. You learn to like yourself hopefully, and to accept who you are. Find your passion and go after it. Don’t listen to anybody else. (YouMe)

It gets better. (laughs) It gets better with age. I think that it would have been very hard for me if I was 18 or 20. Doing what I had done this last year, I think that probably would have sent me over the edge, you know. I think, searching and understanding everything, accepting and forgiving takes maturity. I don’t know very many 20-year olds that can do this and as [are] understanding and forgiving as I am now. There are a lot of angry adoptees. I get slaughtered sometimes online for saying, “don’t be angry. Let go.” I get that all the time. The thing is, that you are adopted is not what you are. It’s just something that happened (Sandy, 42).

Older adoptees bring maturity and seasoned understanding of adoptee identity to the Korean adoptee community. Building their lives and careers, they also put together secure and satisfying identities. They put their experiences in a perspective that does not rely on others’ acceptance. They know who they are. From this emotionally secure position, older adoptees explore the aspects of self that they have overlooked in their early years. They actively seek out Korean cultural heritage that they are entitled to. Kobus writes, “I no

longer live in limbo between two cultures but feel the privilege instead to reap the benefits of the best of both worlds” (1999: 49). In Chapter 6, Jean Kim Blum’s foray into Korean cuisine (along with her involvement with Korean American/Asian student organizations), Jack Hamilton’s excursions to Korean American community in his hometown, and Timothy Klein’s study of Korean history reflect “the emerging cultural consciousness” (*ibid.*) of this generation of adoptees.

Taking adoptees’ life course as an important dimension in articulation of their identities brings us to comment on the difficulties people experience when they meet adult adoptees. As mentioned in Chapter 5, adoptive families and others have often expressed difficulty of imagining an adoptee as a grown-up, adult. Partially due to dominant discussion surrounding adoption as finding homes for children, partially due to parental desire to find a child for a family, adoptees are prevalently imagined as children. This tendency is further reinforced by largely invisible Asian presence in their lives. As recently as in 2006, Dorow writes,

The experiences of Asian American adoptive parents in both San Francisco and the Twin Cities demonstrate that “race matching” between parents and children, as well as assumptions about Asians as foreigners, can make not just adoption but citizenship status invisible. At a small FCC meeting in Minnesota in which there was discussion of the need to reach out to the Chinese American community, I suggested starting with Chinese American adoptive parents. “There are some?” was the response from the group of white women. One woman offered, “Oh, yeah, when we went in for our citizenship, there was this Chinese couple with a child and *we assumed all three of them were there to get their citizenship*, but no, their daughter was adopted and just she was getting citizenship” (2006: 211, my emphasis).

Scott Kinsey’s description of children asking the adults, “when do we turn White?” (in Chapter 7) is a poignant remark that captures the dominant imaginary that is devoid of Asians. So when it comes to Asians/Americans, what the adoptees know and see comes from the mass media. Media representations of Asians leave the adoptees confused and

ashamed for their foreignness. As this partially contributes to the denial stage of adoptee life trajectories that Meier suggests above, it is not surprising to witness Kinsey's frustration that he did not know what he would look like when he grows old.

However, when Korean adoptees grow older, they face different challenges as in the story told by Bergquist who escorted a group of adoptees and their families on a birth country tour as a social worker.

As much as adoptive parents try to discount it, I realized during the trip just how much race is a factor in adoption. One experience that emphasized this was when I was with the adoptive parents and their families on the beach. I don't remember where it was, but there was this woman who was trying to sell her wares, and she was being very insistent. I was sort of telling the kids to tell her no, and even though the parents knew I'm an adoptee and they knew I was raised in the States, and they knew I don't speak Korean, they said, "Kathleen, can you tell her...." They wanted me to translate. It was just so funny because as supposedly aware and sensitive of the position that their children are in as adoptees, that sort of visceral response... any Korean face would do... just come here and translate for us. It was so interesting (2008: 154).

In one of the culture camps that I attended in 2007, there was a workshop for adoptive parents where adult adoptees were invited to discuss the issues of race and racism. The majority of the parents had children from China with a few parents with children from Korea, Cambodia, and other Asian countries. The adult adoptees who came to talk were all Korean adoptees in their early to late 20s, and they eloquently described their growing-up experience of being an ethnic minority. During the lunch after their talk, the parents who attended the workshop could not stop talking about how *articulate* these adult adoptees were. Significantly missing in the conversations among the parents was the topic of "how to talk about race with parents" that was introduced by these articulate adult adoptees.

Korean adoptees' struggle for recognition is not only about their adoptee identity, but also about their place in the American racial landscape. Looking at adoptee identity

construction and adoption as a continuous process enlightens us about the existing social inequalities and ideologies that confine experiences of Asian Americans. Moreover, Korean adoptee experiences illustrate the multiplicity and heterogeneity (Espiritu, 1992) that characterize Asian American experience.

Minutiae of Life: Food for *Ethnographical Imagination*

In studying Korean adoption and adoptees and what these mean in American culture, I had to deal with multiple levels of cultural assumptions. As introduced in introductory cultural anthropology classes, culture is made up of tacit and explicit dimensions. The institution of family is deeply fundamental in shaping one's identity and worldview, and as such, most people take for granted that family is a self-evident entity that needs little elaboration. Due to the tacit cultural dimension related to familial institution, people resort to culturally dominant beliefs in biological connections to describe what family is, even when their own actual practices seem to suggest otherwise.

Adoptive families face challenges produced by tacit culture that seems to be at odds with their reality. As an adoptive parent, Adam Pertman, the author of "Adoption Nation (2000)," offers an enlightening analogy:

A father and his 5 year old son were coming back from the football game that they just watched. Father says to the child, "Wow, wasn't that a great game? Did you have fun?" "Yep, especially when they did that touch-down at the last minute," the child answered with excitement, but quietly added, "but I don't understand what's all the fuss about 25 cents." "What do you mean?" Father asked puzzled. The child goes, "they were yelling throughout the whole game to go get the quarter back."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Keynote address, "Twelve Things the World Needs to Know About Adoption," in New Jersey's 27th Annual "Let's Talk Adoption" Conference, Rutgers University. November 1, 2008.

Pertman's intention behind this story is to illustrate the difficulty that outsiders experience when trying to comprehend the adoptive family dynamics. You have to know the game and its rules to understand how everything is played. As Korean adoptees grow older, some of them share the cultural epochs with the generation now becoming adoptive parents. Scott Kinsey utilizes this as a vantage point to educate these parents about what adoptee experiences can teach us. His elaboration is informative of the complex dynamic of adoptive families.

When I speak, primarily before the gathering up until my Mother died, I spoke primarily to parents, adoptive parents, 'cause that is where I felt I had the most impact. I would be an exact same age as an adoptive parent, so I could talk to them as a peer. They were growing up in the US, so they had same cultural references that I had. The reason I spoke to parents, I said, "I may not look it, but I grew up as exactly as you did, but I just look different." . . . I usually tell them, "there is this thing called, the adoption triad. Adoptive parents, biological parents, and us. Look at the triad. There's only one passive variable in that triad and that's us. We've got no say in this triad. So it's up to us to go both ways, if we choose." Very few people choose to go both ways. Some people, you might have met them, choose to go the opposite way, and you know, try to become Koreans. That's the whole different issue. But that triad kind of explains to them, how when we're growing up, we were all told, we were abandoned, we weren't wanted. But out of love, we were given up to come to this country to become a good Christian and families and things. You know, that's really nice and noble, but it takes away the fact that you were born. Once you have your own children, you realize somebody really did carry you for 9 months. It's not abandoned, and gone to somebody for love. Well, somebody did nurture you for 9 months and they did a good job for ones that are healthy. There was a whole history, because that person had parents, and they had parents. And there's the whole big history of that. That was a little reason for the search. I am telling people that it does exist, and for people, adult Korean adoptees in the 20s and 30s, it becomes really big. And it's probably one of the causes for most of the personal problems, 'cause these are the issue you haven't dealt with. In your 30s, you realize these things inside. It's pretty hard.

The difficulty of comprehending the dynamic of adoptive families is particularly acute because the adoption presents a reality that is at odds with the "common sense" world

described in Chapter 2. Adoption is a difficult practice as it challenges the institution of family and core beliefs that constitute American tacit culture.

Transracial/transnational adoptions confront American familial institutions in ways that cannot easily escape public scrutiny. As Korean adoptees constantly confront the “moral force of normalizing ideologies” (Becker, 1997), their seemingly mundane experiences bring important insights into the workings of the “common sense world” and normality, as these forcefully bifurcate social experiences into legible and illegible registers. Korean adoptee subjectivity is constructed by the complex local interactions that are the feature of our everyday world. As Korean adoptees face the social stigma of being adopted, the sense of alienation and racial discrimination, they mold their own subjectivity utilizing culturally available discourses. Biehl, et al. (2007) states,

The need for developing more complex theories of the subject that are ethnographically grounded and that contemplate how individual singularity is retained and remade in local interactions has become ever more apparent. The subject is at once a product and agent of history; the site of experience, memory, storytelling and aesthetic judgment; an agent of knowing as much as of action; and the conflicted site for moral acts and gestures amid impossibly immoral societies and institutions (2007: 14).

The power of ethnography lies in its ability to get at the mundane social experiences that constitute our normal world. “Ethnographical imagination,” espoused by Willis (2000), points to the crucial process through which the ethnographer brings to light the intersections of individual subjectivities and society. This is how anthropology as “a discipline that focuses on ‘experience-near’ analyses” (Biehl, et al., 2007: 14) can contribute to deeper understanding of power and subjectivity. Biehl, et al. call for “a more substantial conceptualization of cultural experience, one in which the collective and the individual are intertwined and run together” (2007:14) to recognize the sociocultural processes that produce subjectivities. The project of examining the minutiae of life is an important, but

often overlooked, endeavor, as researchers fear the loss of objectivity. However, neglecting to see the workings of life in its tacit dimensions is to forgo vital opportunities to make changes that need to start from the ground.

Emotion, Kinship & Race/Immigration

This dissertation expands on the extant literature about “emotion,” contributing to understandings of the work that “emotion” does in building human relationships and sustaining familial relationships (Carsten, 1997; Chodorow, 1971; Collier, 1997; Trawick, 1990). For the case at hand, Korean adoptees experience emotional identifications with one another, and this emotion provides the basis for building and sustaining relationships with other adoptees and those who care for them, creating a community and sense of belonging. Can emotion be a basis for organizing identities and communities? Many scholars have already examined race, gender, sexual orientation and/or other social factors as the epistemological ground upon which to build solidarities and identities. The case of Korean adoptees shows us that emotion can be another social axis through which people organize their community and solidarities.

On another level, this research adds to the extant work on emotion by taking a strictly social constructionist view on emotion (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Ahmed, 2004; Lutz, 1998; Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990; Lutz and White, 1986). From the outset, it takes for granted that emotion is socio-culturally constructed and always instantiated in social contexts. By asking what social factors are at work to produce a “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977) among Korean adoptees, rather than focusing on physiological dimension of emotion, my

research points to the importance of examining concrete sites and locations that facilitate the production of emotion.

Further, there are at least three aspects of American kinship that are highlighted by studying Korean American adoptees. First, by illustrating the permeable boundary of kinship exposed by adoption practices, Korean American adoptees push further the conceptual limits of anthropology of kinship. What do we mean by kinship in 21st century America? Is the biological tie still the supreme basis of kinship? By creating a community of their own where adoptees and non-adoptees can come together with openness and understanding, Korean American adoptees lead us to appreciate the flexibility of kinship boundaries which may be traversed by other affiliational ties such as those previously characterized as friendships.

Secondly, in showing their creativities in forming expanded familial networks through incorporation of both birthparents and adoptive parents into their lives, Korean American adoptees point to the emergence of global familial networks (cf. Borshay Liem, 2000), which require further investigation. In what ways the adoptees' simultaneous incorporation of birth and adoptive families into their lives will inform the ethnographical analysis of kinship and family is an intriguing question for which more in-depth research is necessary.

Lastly, my study raises questions for the conventional uses of kinship/generations in understanding of immigration experience in the United States. Literatures on immigrants and immigration along with diaspora studies have been mostly modeled upon the assumption of cultural assimilation processes over several generations as representative of synchronic development or, rather, *progress* in the degrees of assimilation (cf. Mangiafico, 1988; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996 to name a few). These assumptions of unilineal progress of immigrants

from an alien to an acculturated citizen require serious rethinking, in light of Korean adoptee experiences (cf. Eng, 2001; Eng and Han, 2000; Lowe, 1996). Korean adoptees hold complex ties to their country of origin, which cannot be adequately dealt with within the conventional framework of immigration and assimilation. As subjects who defy the conventional category of immigrants,¹⁸⁵ Korean adoptees represent the multiplicity of experiences that characterizes cultural assimilation in the US. Korean adoptees are mostly adopted into White families in the US and are not able to participate within the political economy of reproduction within immigrant communities, at least until they reach their adulthood. Further, their belonging, if temporary, to “White habitus” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) engenders a subject who takes for granted a sense of entitlement to American cultural citizenship, unlike other recent immigrants whose road to cultural citizenship is not at all straightforward. Although their experiences and lives parallel those of other immigrants to a certain extent, the gap between these two groups of immigrants is productive grounds for challenging the conventional notions of kinship and the process of assimilation conceived by extant immigration studies.

Concluding Remarks

In 2001, the Child Citizenship Act was established to facilitate the transnational adoptees’ transition into their new home in the United States. The installation of tax breaks given to adoptive parents, which rejects the traditional secrecy and silences on the subject of adoption, reflects the changes taking place in American culture in relation to family

¹⁸⁵ This is reflected in the paucity of representations of Korean adoptees in both immigration and diaspora literature.

relationships. Due to these recent developments and cultural changes, some consider adoption practices largely unremarkable and normalized (cf. Cheng, 2004: 62).¹⁸⁶ My current study suggests otherwise for the reasons described in this dissertation. Paying attention to the popularity and sheer amount of international adoption taking place in this country overlooks the power of normalizing ideologies and practices that continuously relegate the adoption experiences —of adoptees and their families— to a zone outside the realm of “normality.”

What we need to recognize is that these adoptees are individuals whose life-stage transitions have been affected by rejection from their birthparents. The trauma they endured requires thoughtful attention, because of emotional pains that have repercussions throughout their lives. By believing in the “common sense” world as a reality, we as social actors sometimes contribute to circumscribing Korean adoptee experiences in ways that I delineate in Chapter 2.

Taken as a whole, stories told in adoptee interviews bring to light the simple fact that Korean adoptees go through life stages just like their contemporaries in the US. From their out-of-place positioning, they make sense of and renegotiate the terms of their identities at any given moment. Korean adoptees, as one of the oldest and largest transnational adoptee groups in the US, illuminate the cultural terrains transnational/transracial adoptees travel in the future. More than half-a-century history behind, Korean adoptee life experiences show their courage and creativeness, as well as their heartaches and psychical pains.

¹⁸⁶ I CARE legislation “grants automatic and immediate citizenship to most adopted children born abroad, provided that they are under eighteen and at least one parent or legal guardian is a U.S. citizen” (Cheng, 2004: 63).

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