Who am I and where do I belong? How South Korean American adoptees understand their racialised identity and their sense of self

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Author's declaration:

The work presented in this dissertation was carried out in the Department of Geography, Birkbeck, University of London and is entirely my own except where other authors have been referred to and acknowledged in the text. It has not previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other University. The views expressed in this dissertation are my own, and not those of the University.

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Contents

Dedication

For my mother Badia, you have always supported me and felt my challenges as though they were your own; so too should my achievements be felt as though they are yours.

For my niece Noor and nephew Zaid, who will only be little once and with whom I could have spent far more time over the past two years; my biggest hopes for you both is that you achieve whatever your heart seeks.

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Finally, I would like to sincerely thank Glenn Morey, the creator and co-director of Side by Side, an online video project on South Korean individuals adopted overseas, for granting me permission for use of the project's data to produce this dissertation.

Abstract

This dissertation examines how South Korean American adoptees form their subjectivity in the context of transnational adoption and the relationship they have to families and place, how they negotiate and resist discourses surrounding transnational adoption, and how they take ownership of their sense of self and racialised identities. This study focuses on 51 in-depth qualitative life narrative accounts from adult South Korean American adoptees, captured through an independent documentary project called ‘Side by Side’, released in 2018. Using thematic analysis and theories of subjectivity, this project highlights the importance of relationships with family and others in determining and influencing sense of self and the significance of place in relation to belonging. The findings demonstrate how adoptees are in a constant flux of understanding and negotiating their sense of self, as a result of their internal convictions in who they are, external subjects projecting perceptions onto adoptees and the role of socio-economic fields and the political economy in creating transnational adoption that has facilitated adoptees’ present location.

Key words: transnational adoption; subjectivity; South Korean American adoptees

Chapter 1: Introduction

Historical background

Overseas adoption by families living in America and Europe became prominent as a response to the increased numbers of orphans after World War II, particularly in Germany (Carp, 1998). The largest wave of transnational adoption, however was in connection to the Korean War in the 1950s and was a response to the growing number of mixed heritage South Korean children or 'GI babies', with South Korean mothers and American military fathers. Oversea adoptions became an important and deliberate South Korean social policy due to the stigma faced by children in relation to their bloodline and their 'illegitimacy' (Sarri et al, 1998; Choy, 2009). One key founding organisation that facilitated these adoptions was the Holt Organisation, established by the Holt family who saw placing children in Christian households as a religious duty. Adoption placements were for a long time based on how much families abided by the Christian faith over matching in accordance with appropriate criteria (Winslow, 2012). The United States became the world's highest receiving country of Asian adoptees in the 1950's and adoption from South Korea continued over several waves (Choy, 2009). While the first wave related predominantly to mixed heritage children, the ongoing relationship between South Korea and the West remained, due to increased demand for new-born babies, the lack of interest in adopting domestically both in the United States and South Korea, and South Korea's unstable economic situation (Sarri et al., 1998). Unwed mothers also continued to be a stigma in Korean society, which also meant that children were still available for adoption (Högbacka, 2016). Between 1953 and 2012, American

families adopted over 100,000 non-mixed race Korean children (Hübinette, 2004) and just under 2,400 South Korean children were adopted in the United States between 2012 and 2019 (US Department of State, 2019).

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to centre the experiences and realities of transnational adoptees; the individuals who are most impacted by the existence of transnational adoption, with a focus on how they come to understand who they are and their racialised sense of self.

This dissertation adds to the substantial literature around South Korean American adoptees, as America and South Korea have enjoyed the longest relationship between a sending and receiving country in relation to transnational adoptions. I aim to add to this literature by focusing on how adult South Korean American adoptees feel in relation to their birth families, adoptive families, childhood and where they were brought up, and how this has shaped their sense of self and racialised identity. I also want to examine how, for adoptees, there is a unique discourse that unsettles the notion that the construction of family is a private matter, and that socio-economic fields and the political economy actually play a key part in determining (and disrupting) family. How adoptees respond to this, in relation to how they make sense of who they are and where they are from, forms this dissertation. My research question therefore, is:

Who am I and where do I belong? How South Korean American adoptees understand their racialised identity and their sense of self.

Through analysis of the data, I decided to look at three areas as part of the triad of adoption experience but all focusing on the adoptee perspective: the role of childhood within a white adoptive household, the role of the birth family, and the role of place and belonging - how do adoptees feel about both America and South Korea, and where is home ?

Definition of terms

This dissertation uses the term 'transnational adoption' to refer to South Korean or mixed Korean heritage children being adopted from South Korea by white adoptive parents in the United States. I decide to use the word 'transnational' instead of international as 'it emphasises the ways that the phenomenon creates a significant social field between two or more specific nation-states' (Choy, 2013; 117), recognising the long standing and specific relationship between South Korea and the United States, and how both countries are racially and culturally different.

Outline of dissertation

I will first provide a literature review of the common discourses pertaining to transnational adoption, including the political and socio-economic factors and state actors involved that facilitate this type of adoption, the subject of choice in relation to birth and adoptive parents, formation of families and kinship, the formation of identity especially in relation to migration, and the limitations in research. Chapter two will then focus on my methodology, the approach I have taken in sampling, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations and limitations encountered. My next three chapters constitute analysis of the data

and focus on three specific sites that shape identity formation; childhood within a white American context, the role of the birth family and how important place is to belonging and understanding sense of self. I provide some final thoughts by way of conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a summary of the broad discourses surrounding transnational adoption and the scholarly response to this.

State motivations for transnational adoption

The phenomenon of transnational adoption is explained through two contexts in relation to receiving countries; initially as a humanitarian response and form of child rescue and then driven by falling fertility rates (Kane, 1993; Lovelock, 2000; McGinnis, 2005). Adopting overseas in the 1960s and early 1970s was seen as both a religious duty (Winslow, 2012) as well as a moral responsibility (Yngvesson, 2003). There was also demand for transnational adoption in a manner that was not the same for domestic adoption in America. Part of the reason was because children available for adoption domestically were predominantly removed from their birth families by state agencies and perceived to be more troubled and older (Dickens, 2009 in Gibbons and Rotabi, 2012). There was a temporary drop in both international adoptions and transracial domestic adoptions in 1975, when the National Association of Black Social Workers in the United States opposed these adoptions as ‘cultural suicide’ that prevented children from their heritage (Yngvesson, 1997). The sending state’s role in creating adoptable children is also highlighted throughout the literature.

Sales (2012) states that sending countries utilised transnational adoption in order to deal with problems of illegitimacy, and Kim (2016) and Johnson (2004) further this, arguing that not only do governments use the role of adoption to manage population growth but also to regulate women's reproduction, with both policies constituting a form of bio-political technology. Yngvesson also argues that the theory of bio-politics is a strong framework within which to look at transnational adoption, whereby some adults can raise children while others are 'discouraged or prohibited from doing so' (2010:196). This dissertation will touch upon the role of the political economy and socio-economic fields in creating and sustaining the phenomenon of transnational adoption in chapter four and chapter six, particularly in relation to the decisions that birth parents had to make to relinquish their children to adoption.

What constitutes kinship

The literature around transnational adoption is heavily focused around the formation and understanding of family structure as adoptees 'disrupt cultural imaginaries' (Shackleton, 2017: 162) and trigger thinking around what a family is, beyond the normative form and rules of kinship (Callahan, 2010; Homans, 2013). This disrupts normative understanding of parental caregiving as only possible through a biological parent, producing competing paradigms as 'biogenetic and adoptive models of kinship' (McLeod, 2015: 27). This competing struggle of what constitutes kinship can be seen from the perspective of adoptive parents themselves. Research has shown adoptive parents employing self-deception to convince themselves that their adoptive child resembles them, or re-writing the background history of an adoptive child to fit in with the family, as a means of

convincing themselves that their child was really ‘theirs’ or destined and meant to be ‘theirs’ (Kornitzer, 1968; Sales, 2012; Goodacre, 1966). According to Coontz (1992 in Yngvesson, 1997), the parental role was seen as central to identity and to the foundation of family life. This way of thinking is argued to have been a strong factor in Western families looking abroad to complete families when they could not have them biologically (Solinger, 1992:154). In the 1960s and 1970s, adoption practices in the West encouraged families to bring up their adopted children as though they were their biological children, with no regard for their ethnic background and culture (Andersson, 1991; Modell, 1994). The literature has been quite vocal on the prioritisation given to adoptive mothers over birth mothers, arguing that many children who are available for adoption are not freestanding orphans but that, in many cases, already have living mothers or other kin (Briggs and Marre, 2009: 12; Fonseca, 2004: 178; Johnson, 2012; Högbacka, 2016; Oreskovic and Maskew, 2008). This is in stark contrast to how some Western countries look at the importance of Western birth parents and blood connections, whereby legal frameworks are in place that make it difficult for the full termination of rights of biological parents, for instance when native-born Swedish children are placed for adoption in Sweden (Yngvesson and Mahoney, 2000: 85). What remains lacking within the literature is more research into birth families, particularly the role of fathers, as there are a few limited studies that focus on birth mothers in India, South Africa and South Korea (Bos, 2007; Högbacka, 2016; Dorow, 1999; Han, 2010). Although not focusing on the birth family perspective, this dissertation does focus on the importance of birth parents

in realising one's sense of self, but from the perspective of the adoptees and how they feel about their blood connections, in chapter five.

Transnational adoption, choice and commodification of children

Practices within transnational adoption have been likened to a market economy engaging in the commodification of children. Cartwright highlights how images of children 'waiting' to be adopted are marketed and play into sympathies of prospective adopters (2003: 83), while Volkman argues that transnational adoption by its very existence 'creates a demand and hence a supply of children' (2005: 7). Further, Dickens explains how a demand-led market has meant that the number of domestic children needing a home are not sufficient in either quality (they are older and with complex histories) or quantity, which means adopters with enough money look elsewhere (2009 in Gibbons and Rotabi, 2012: 34). Dorow also reflects on the synergies between 'market and rescue' and 'commodification and care', acknowledging how the practices surrounding transnational adoption involve elements of exchange and value (2006: 17).

Ong (2006: 4) states that adopters are required to choose and act on a number of decisions, for instance how old the child they want to adopt is, from what country and with what pre-existing health conditions. These considerations mirror elements of choice required for any market economy. This dialogue around choice is explored by a few scholars in relation to birth families. Solinger convincingly argues that decisions to relinquish and to adopt are both regarded as decisions of choice but that socio-economic inequities are actually masked through this comparison and that in many contexts, motherhood is really only a 'privilege appropriate for women who can afford it' (Solinger, 2002: 11). Briggs

argues similarly about the lack of awareness around the individuals who 'lose children in adoption as to those who receive them' (Briggs, 2012: 18; Yngvesson, 1997). The fact of transaction is almost disguised or managed through a policy of 'clean break' adoption (Duncan, 1993:51), which Yngvesson (2012: 343) describes as a legal reproductive technology that 'frees' a child from its past, including from people and place. Through this freedom and new legal status as an orphan, the child now qualifies as available for adoption, making any past invisible and no longer real.

A number of authors also comment on the discomfort around transnational adoption and to what extent it can lend itself to child kidnap or child trafficking (Briggs, 2012; Dubinsky, 2010; Smolin, 2006, 2007, 2011; Dohle, 2008). This argument revolves around global inequalities and how some decisions are beyond choice; they are very much influenced and coerced through the political economy. Chapters four, five and six all reflect on this in some way in that factors outside the private sphere of family enable a child to be picked up from one country to be raised in another.

Are adoptees also immigrants?

The literature around transnational adoption brings up important comparative discourses around notions of identity and immigration politics. Lovelock shares how transnational adoption was incorporated into immigration procedures and legislation in the United Kingdom, United States of America and New Zealand (2000: 906). Yngvesson's research also touches on the difficulties faced by adoptees who are assimilated into Swedish culture and not classified as immigrants in policy, however cannot escape from their markers of identity which

still classify them as such. In one example, an adoptee shares that she is still marked out ‘like any other African’ (2012: 328). Hall also highlights that adoptees are positioned as ‘simultaneously placed and not stitched in place’ (1997:50) in that they are neither here nor there. A number of authors also argue this same point, of how they belong to Korea when they are in the US, for instance, but are American when they are in Korea (Yngvesson, 2002: 240; Von Melon, 1998). What makes the situation of adoptees so unique and different from immigrants in a Western host country however, is that despite transnational adoptees still being perceived as ‘other’ in their host countries, they lack the common experiences that bond immigrant groups together such as native language or culture and that they also tend to be ‘estranged’ from their birth place (Hübinette; 2007; 2005). Chapter six will talk about the importance of place in relation to belonging and complex identity formation, as a result of internal workings, but also external perceptions that are projected on to adoptees and influence how they see themselves.

Identity formation

Linked to immigration politics, the literature around transnational adoption describes how there has been an increasing body of work created by adoptees themselves who wish to navigate and share their own narratives (Cox, 1999; Von Melon, 2000; Trenka, Oparah and Shin, 2006). The addition of online forums (Selman, 2015; Anagnost, 2000) and international and domestic networks (Hübinette, 2004) has enabled even more opportunities for representation and voice. A particular focus of discussion is around race and the hardships experienced by adoptees (Kupel, 2010).

A large body of the literature aims to understand the way that adoptive families tackle the issue of culture and how much of an adopted child's heritage culture should be incorporated into their life (Dorow, 2006; Volkman, 2003; Yngvesson, 2000; Freundlich, 2000). Scholars have argued that in many instances there has been a dilution of understanding race through culture, with families, for instance, going out for Chinese takeaway more often than seeking to understand race and its place in history and present day (Dorow, 2006; Anagnost, 2000). The literature shares the increasing numbers of adoptees who are 'returning home' on visits to understand their history and heritage (Yngvesson, 2003; Selman 2015; Kim, 2010; Volkman, 2005). Chapter four is about American childhood and the experience of growing up white but not quite, and what this has meant for adoptees in establishing who they are.

The political landscape is also addressed by a number of scholars in relation to legislation and practice actively encouraging adoptees to understand their origins. There has been an increasing move towards more open adoptions with varying degrees of knowledge of and relationships with birth families. This is different from the initial 'clean break' practice of closed adoptions in the past that adopted children 'as if' they were always part of the family (Duncan, 1993; Sales, 2012). Studies have researched the challenges that transnational adoptees face in relation to their physical sense of self and experiences of racial isolation and how they have had to navigate these on their own, due to lack of understanding from their adoptive parents and peers, sometimes even contributing to their isolation and downplaying or denying experiences of racism (Langrehr, Sydney et al., 2018; Huh and Reid, 2000; Lindblad and Signell, 2008).

There is interest in researching what an adoptive group identity looks like and what the 'adopted self' is (Lifton, 1998, 2002; Goebel and Lott, 1986). Lifton (1998) identified nine commonalities among adoptees that impact on who they believe themselves to be. These nine shared identity challenges are: 'what might have been' if they remained in their home countries; the adoption process; cumulative trauma of adoption; feeling abandoned; incomplete life narrative; the burden to feel grateful; fantasising about family; adolescence challenges; and the need to form an authentic self. Another commonality is the lack of information available for adoptees to piece together their past and present (Goebel and Lott, 1986; Brodzinsky, et al., 1992). Other shared issues relate to 'separation and loss, trust, rejection, guilt and shame, identity, intimacy, loyalty, and mastery or power and control' (Verrier, 1993: 7). This dissertation adds to the literature by affirming what common conflicts exist for adoptees and focuses on how adoptees have come to understand who they are, where exactly they locate themselves and how they navigate the experiences of their racialised selves.

Outcomes of adopted children

There have been a number of large scale studies undertaken that demonstrate differential outcomes for adopted children (Juffer and van IJzendoorn, 2005 in Gibbons and Rotabi, 2012). In some studies, adopted children were seen to have positive psychological outcomes but in others there were increased risks of suicide, crime risk and substance misuse (Juffer and van IJzendoorn, 2005; Lindblad, Hjern and Vinnerljung 2002). However there are still gaps in research around adopted children's lifelong outcomes as well as how adult adoptees navigate experiences such as family reunions and becoming a parent (Juffer and

van IJzendoorn, 2005 in Gibbons and Rotabi, 2012). There is also an argument to be made around how much these type of outcome studies can be extrapolated and applied elsewhere when so much of an adoptee's experiences are due to the political economy, parental upbringing and societal interactions within a particular cultural context. The role of birth family members in supporting an adoptee's sense of self is covered in chapter five, including birth parents as well as when adoptees have their own birth children.

The response to transnational adoption - for or against

Criticism of transnational adoption has largely revolved around an argument that it continues the colonial project (Olsen, 2004; Freundlich, 2000), and is a way to exploit a country's natural resource - their children (Wallace, 2003), as well as concerns of child trafficking (Smolin, 2004; Maskew, 2004). Scholars have also talked about the alternatives to transnational adoption, highlighting that there are a range of strategies that could support children to remain with their parents or at least be domestically adopted (Fonseca, 2004; Selman, 2015; Fronek and Cuthbert, 2012). In relation to this, there is a lack of research within transnational adoption literature into how other ideologies look at how to care for children without parents. For instance in Islamic cultures, where closed adoption is not permitted, the '*kafala'* care arrangement enables long term guardianship without severing ties or links to a child's history (Assim and Sloth-Nielsen, 2014). Bartholet is a prominent scholar who is very much for transnational adoption, arguing that concerns around child trafficking could be mitigated through legal measures without banning adoption outright. The most important thing for scholars like her is that children are adopted, cared for and loved, over

institutional care (2011). A number of scholars also argue that adoption practices need to incorporate more post-adoption support, for both adoptive parents and the adoptees themselves (Rutter et al, 2009; Kupel, 2010).

Researching transnational adoption

The topic of transnational adoption transcends a number of other academic disciplines including human rights (Smolin, 2007), social work, psychology, law education (Gibbons and Rotabi, 2012) and critical studies (Högbacka, 2016). This area is also situated within a number of theoretical frameworks including biopolitics and governmentality (Kim, 2016; Sales, 2012), post-colonial theory (Hübinette, 2004) and feminist theory (Eng and Han, 2006).

The studies around transnational adoption have taken a range of angles, focusing on particular sending countries (Gibbons and Rotabi, 2012; Johnson, 2004; Dorow, 2006; Fonseca, 2004; Volkman, 2005), looking at perspectives from the point of view of adopters and adoptees (Louie, 2015; Yngvesson, 2010; Hübinette, 2006; Kim, 2010) and examining the role of state actors and agency involvement in furthering the profile of transnational adoption (Johnson, 2004; Cartwright, 2003).

One limitation in this area of research is the lack of comprehensive data available on a global scale. Weil (1984 in Selman, 2002:209) notes that ‘worldwide availability of data on foreign adoptions is uneven in both quantity and quality’ and that ‘data from the United States, while in some respects limited, was the best obtained from any country’ (Weil 1984: 277-278). Selman (2015) maintains that there remains an issue with varying levels of data between receiving countries. This is despite the requirement from the Hague Convention on

Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption that data collection should be comprehensive (Selman, 2002: 209). Accurate data enables pattern trends to be analysed more closely and fully and although the academic landscape covers good ground in relation to identifying significant trends between some sending and receiving countries, there may be other pattern trends not found due to incomplete information. For instance, there is acknowledgement in the literature that not enough research has been conducted with Chinese adoptees adopted in the 1990s and that their experiences may be very different from older adoptees (Selman, 2015).

Having undertaken this literature review and looking at where the gaps in research lie, I am interested in profiling and exploring the experience of transnational adoption from the perspective of the adopted adult and relating this to their understanding of their sense of self and racialised identity vis-à-vis their birth families, their adoptive families, wider society and states at large and their 'homeland', whether they feel this to be the country in which they were born or the one in which they were then raised.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter shares the methodological approaches taken to produce this research project and my reflexive process in relation to sampling, data collection, analysis, and considering ethical factors and limitations of the project.

Epistemology and ontology

The epistemological and ontological frameworks of this research are situated within a social constructionist paradigm, through an interpretivist lens. I focus on the experiences of the adoptees and how they construct meaning from their day to day life that influence and shape their identity and sense of self. Wodak and Meyer explain that social constructivism focuses on how the world is experienced through social interactions (2001: 20) and how knowledge of the world is produced, constructed and circulated, which enables varying interpretations of the social world (Burr, 2015) A social constructivist approach also considers social and societal contexts that inform an individual's experience and considers that reality changes and is fluid according to these different contexts and across time (Denscombe, 2009). I aim to understand experiences and the meanings behind them (Snape and Spencer, 2003: 23) while also recognising that reality is formed through these socially constructed meanings (ibid: 16). This research project is therefore interpretivist with a relativist ontological position.

My dissertation is underpinned by theories of subjectivity, influenced heavily by feminist geography scholarship, psychosocial and critical race studies and the new social studies of childhood paradigm. These fields of research focus on how differences between people are constructed (Strathern 1988), recognise diversity of childhoods (James et al., 1998), and how structures shape the lives of people, including the salience of space and place, local and global (Ansell, 2009; Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Most importantly these approaches recognise how these experiences of being situated in a particular place and context impacts on sense of self and identity formation (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 140; Hübinette,

2004; Bhabha, 1994). This theoretical framework demonstrates the relationship between socio-economic fields, political economy and everyday life in creating and facilitating the phenomenon of transnational adoption and the experiences of adoptees involved.

Method

As I focus on the experiences of adoptees and how they come to understand and negotiate their identities, qualitative research is the only appropriate method to accomplish this. This method also enables the use of the interpretivist approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 3). Qualitative research enables an 'understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants' (Bryman, 2012: 380). Finally, qualitative research allows for a rich level of detail and complexity in terms of data gathering and analysis (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 4) which supports my aims.

I wanted to focus on the experiences of South Korean American adoptees through existing narratives that reside in the public domain, for instance documentaries, interviews and autobiographies, analysing their content and the themes that arise. I explain in the ethics section why I did not opt to conduct my own primary research. I focused on the USA and South Korea due to the historical context as the longest relationship between receiving and sending countries, to ensure that adoptee experiences across several waves from the 1950s to the present day could be captured. Through the literature review, I was particularly interested in reflecting on race and identity in my dissertation.

Data collection and sampling

As part of my search for material to include in my analysis, I watched a number of documentaries and read a number of autobiographies. These included ‘A single square picture’ (Robinson, 2002), ‘The language of blood’ (Trenka, 2003), ‘All you can ever know’ (Chung, 2018), ‘Twinsters’ (2015) and ‘First person plural’ (2000). I then discovered a new online narrative documentary project called ‘Side by Side (2018) that presented the experiences of 100 Korean adoptees across the world. This documentary had not been analysed in research before. I filtered by search function and 54 of these interviews were from South Korean American adoptees (both mixed heritage and ethnic Korean). I further focused my sample to include only adoptees who were placed in white American households and not with Korean adoptive parents, which left me with 51 participants. This was because my research explores adoptees’ sense of self within a household of racial difference.

The narrative accounts were based on semi structured interviews, composed of four questions asked by the producers, but the interviews are presented as a video monologue and not through a ‘question and answer’ format:

1. Tell us about your origin;
2. tell us about your adoption or ageing-out;
3. tell us about how you grew up; and
4. tell us about the years when you became an adult, up until now.

Data analysis

I watched all 51 video accounts and was granted access to the transcripts. I used framework analysis to thematically code and organise the data, using the principles from both Goodman's method for discourse analysis and Braun and Clarke's method for thematic analysis (Goodman, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2006). I anonymised the adoptees using the codes: Story 1, 2, 3- etc, and noted gender, year of birth and year of adoption in my framework matrix. The categorisation of stories was based on the order of the videos that I watched and were randomly assigned. This process of coding is an active process (Braun and Clarke, 2019) and I noted reactions, feelings and events that the adoptees spoke about as well as my interpretations of the data. Through the coding process, I was able to define themes between and within the interviews and the shared meanings and patterns that arose. The steps around discourse and thematic analysis include familiarisation with the material, generating initial codes, establishing overarching themes, reflecting on and revising the themes, redefining the themes, and reporting the findings (Goodman, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87). Despite predominantly using thematic analysis to underpin this research project, I was keen to also consider the principles behind discourse analysis in order to explore prominent patterns that come out of the data, as well as looking at what discourse interviewees draw on and deploy in their talk. This included coding physical responses such as pauses, interruptions and emotional reactions from the adoptees.

As the data was new to me, I did repeat re-readings of the transcript in order to familiarise myself with the data. This was especially important as the accounts

were presented as a monologue and not relayed in a question and answer format. This meant that each interview was unique to the participant and might include or exclude particular themes based on each experience. Everything had to be watched and read in order to account for what each participant deemed important to mention as part of their own narrative. Once I was familiar with the data, I began to employ overarching themes around areas like emotions, reactions, birth family, adoptive family, South Korea, America, peers, neighbourhood, bullying, memories, parenthood, gratitude, knowledge, and truth. This process of assignment was an iterative process and I continued to do this until I reached 'saturation', and where I recognised a repetition of themes (Mason, 2010; Jäger and Maier in Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 126). Essentially the themes were brought about at the 'intersection of the data, the analytical process and the subjectivity' of the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The social coding schema was inductive as I developed themes and theories out of the data as opposed to a preformulated hypothesis. However, in order to ensure that I remained committed to the question I wanted to answer, I had three guiding questions throughout the coding and analysis process. These questions were formed out of the literature review, from which I knew that I wanted to focus on identity, and I reflected on what impacts on its construction and what would I need to tease out of the narrative in my analysis:

1. What personal and social experiences contribute to developing a sense of self?
2. What tensions exist in developing identity and sense of self, particularly when it comes to race and culture?

3. How do transnational adoptees feel about the discourses that are projected on them, and do they relate to or resist these when it comes to understanding who they are and where they belong?

From this I was able to further filter down the themes to be discussed in this dissertation by focusing on identity in relation to birth family, adoptive family and salience of place and how some of the other broader themes relate to these particular sites.

I employed thematic analysis in my dissertation as I wanted to provide space to share what participants hold as important and be able to analyse this rich and complex detail (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 202). The reason why I did not use discourse analysis was because I did not want to engage so much with *how* participants spoke about their experiences as much as with *what* they spoke about, although I still employed discourse analysis method in my analysis to capture nuance in speech. I considered grounded theory but felt that this would not lead me to my aim. There are existing theories in the literature around this topic and my interest is to focus on participants' lived experiences in and of themselves. Part of this includes exploring the salience of existing theories, as opposed to focusing on what new theories might be generated (Rivas, 2018).

Ethics

As I did not conduct primary research with subjects, I was not required to submit a request for ethical clearance. However, in my role as researcher, I reflected on a number of considerations relating to ethics and how it applied to my research. Ethical consideration is important and crucial to the research process and

influences it (David and Sutton, 2004: 20). My research question relates to a potentially sensitive matter for some in terms of both adoption and racialised identity, and also touches upon difficult topics such as relationships with birth families, abandonment and loss, bullying, and sense of self. Reflecting on the 'do no harm' principle (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001; Morrow and Richards, 1996: 93), I did not see justification for conducting my own primary research when sufficient raw data and material was available for analysis.

I was also acutely aware that my analysis relied on data that was collected by an independent project, and I knew that this documentary feature was not produced with my research interest or questions in mind and that I had no involvement in the questions that influenced the project (Jewitt, 2012:3). I aimed to resolve this by continually reflecting on my obligation to the participant and not my research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 83) and thinking about what would constitute as bias or interpretation in my data analysis.

Limitations and challenges

The biggest challenge faced was that, as I had no involvement in the production of the data I was using (Jewitt, 2012:3), I had to go through a comprehensive process of familiarisation. This was also overwhelming given the large amount of data. Straus and Corbin highlighted the importance of limiting the scope of research but acknowledge that this is a challenging task (1998: 40).

Although this research touches upon childhood, the narratives were provided by adults, which meant relying on adult memory. There are limitations when drawing on memory as an adult, with one key issue that adults could potentially be

recalling memories that are false or clouded by nostalgia (Douglas, 2010: 93-94). There is an absence of children's accounts in historical records (Ibid), and as some of this research touches on the experiences of adoptees adopted in the 1950's, the account of adults involved in the 'Side by Side' project is all that we have available to account for that time.

Finally, I recognised my position in this research as an outsider, and that in relation to the production of knowledge, I should be careful as to where this knowledge is situated (Thorne, 1987: 102). I was also aware that a criticism of using thematic analysis is that generation of themes is subject to the interpretation of the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 97) and might encourage bias. With this in mind, I kept referring back to my three guiding questions to ensure my research was focused and fully centred on the experiences of the adoptees.

Chapter 4: Growing up white but not quite- an ordinary American childhood?

We cannot understand who we are without considering our families and the role (or lack thereof) that they have played in our lives. Contemporary childhood is informed by and produced through three main sites: the family, schools and neighbourhoods (Thorne, 1993: 29), and identity formation and making sense of who we are begins from childhood (Erikson, 1950, 1968). This chapter explores the childhood of adoptees in relation to how it contributed to their racialised identity, and also how adoptees respond to some of the common discourses pertaining to their adoptive family. This chapter will specifically talk about how

adoptees understood their difference and their consciousness around race, the discourses of gratitude and luck, and how socio-economic fields and political factors play a key role in determining family. The theory of racial melancholia will also be considered within this chapter.

Acknowledging difference

The majority of adoptees spoke about their childhoods in mostly very ethnically white and homogeneous neighbourhoods and schools, where they were often the only, or one of very few, Korean children growing up in the area. While a number of adoptive parents introduced their adoptive children to their Korean heritage through adoption summer camps, cuisine and interaction with other Korean children and adults, this was predominantly experienced by adoptees who were adopted in the 1970s and after. For first wave adoptees from the 1950s, there was limited consciousness around race, and this was understood to be due to social work practice at the time that encouraged families to bring up babies 'as if' they were a biological relation (Andersson, 1991; Modell, 1994), and therefore white. While all adoptees knew they were adopted from a young age, for some adoptees this understanding brought a sense of shame around who they were, as no discussion around race was had. In a number of instances, adoptees spoke about how their parents encouraged them to not talk about their adoption, implying that it was a secret. There was also an aspect of denial for some of the adoptees, accepting what their parents said as truth – that they were fully 'American' – and this was taken to mean white. For mixed Korean children able to pass as white, they did. It is important to note that, for many adoptees who were acutely aware of their physical difference, they became even more keen to

fit in, and this meant not engaging at all with their Korean heritage. For instance resisting summer camps, or in adolescence, purposely not befriending other East Asian teenagers. Understanding difference as a young child was something that was thought to be negotiable. There was a lack of understanding that racial features could not be put aside or discarded in favour of what was the norm in the United States, as the below account recalls a childhood memory:

> *'I think I was about five. I was so excited to be naturalised… I asked if could go use the restroom... My mother (laughs) looks at me and said "what are you doing?" And I looked at her and I said "I'm waiting for my eyes to change". Because I thought "I'm an American! Of course my eyes are going to change. They're going to be round. I'm going to look like my mom and dad now".* ***Story 49, woman, adopted in 1973, at age 2***

This account shares not only the awareness of physical features but also the attempt to transcend and locate oneself in what is the 'norm', with an assumption that this could be changed. There is also often an assumption that children should physically look like and resemble their parents. There were a number of similar accounts of adoptees recounting their expectations as children when becoming naturalised American citizens and therefore expecting their eyes to become more round or to turn blue and their skin colour to change.

The majority of adoptees grew up in loving households and while they acknowledged their upbringing as 'ordinary' and like 'American pie', and perceived their adoptive parents as just their parents, they understood they were different. This was clear from how they looked and the bullying they encountered

in schools. It did not matter that they had American names, accents and upbringings; it was their physical features that set them apart. What seemed most challenging was having to figure out how race works in society on their own, due to the inability of some of their adoptive parents to acknowledge and celebrate these differences. Adoptees shared common experiences of their adoptive parents dismissing any bullying as racism and failing to address how race operates in society and how their adoptive child could navigate this.

> *'I encountered a lot of racism. I think honestly that it very quickly caused me to want to quit thinking at all about being Korean and being adopted. I told her [the narrator's mother] what was going on in school. "Well next time you tell them you're Scottish. You're a Morey. And we're from Scotland". And even at a very, very young age, I knew that wasn't very helpful'.* **Story 17, man, adopted in 1960, within first year of birth**

Eng and Han's (2019) theory of racial melancholia can be applied here: understanding whiteness but also recognising the hold of being Asian, even if they did not want to be. Eng and Han state that adoptees are able to recognise their adoptive parents' whiteness but that often their adoptive parents are unable to understand their adoptive child's Asianness, and the reality that physical features can emphasise exclusion. This daily structure of feeling creates a sense of sadness and melancholy for the adoptee in their quest to navigate and understand their life. There is also a challenge as the marked differences between adoptee and adoptive family not only highlight 'otherness' but also draw attention to the process of adoption, so the adoptee is always outed within society. A significant number of the narratives mentioned denial of their Korean

heritage in an attempt to fit in and the difficulties of not relating in any way to being Korean, having grown up as 'white' in all other respects.

Responding to common discourses

Part of understanding and forming their identity, is how adoptees view their adoption against the discourse surrounding them. Fairclough (1992) argues that discourse can constrain identity. I take this to mean that certain discourse can influence and shape identity and this can sometimes be limiting and simplistic. In the context of this dissertation, I can recognise how adoptees can be perceived through a very narrow and focused lens as a result of their adoption. One of these discourses is the concept of gratitude and idea that adoptees should feel grateful for their adoption and adoptive family, the alternative being an unfortunate future in South Korea.

> *'And one of the things that I think that I reflect upon is how to view my adoption, both in personal and political terms. So on the one hand, I don't feel grateful to my parents for adopting me, because they got something out of the bargain, which was two children, which they wanted. I also think that this kind of gratitude idea feeds into a kind of rescue narrative which can be problematic, particularly since its mostly white adoptive parents and mostly children of colour involved with inter-country adoption. On the other hand to label all adoption as abduction I think is false and damaging and is a real disservice to the adoptive communities. In light of that, then our adoption, probably did save our lives'.* **Story 36, trans woman, adopted in 1961, at age 1**

In this account, the adoptee shares her acknowledgement that adoption was the best option for her and her brother, but resists the trope of gratitude, recognising the complexities surrounding this discourse. Firstly, that adoptive parents also benefit from adoptions, and should not be viewed as saviours and children as victims; secondly that transnational (or international) adoptions involve a relationship between countries that posits an imbalance around power. Reflecting on these narratives also brings to light the inequalities in kinship formation, in that if adoptees are expected to be grateful for their adoptions, what of the birth families they leave behind and how they are perceived? As poor? As bad? As inadequate parents for their biological children? Gratitude, in this context, is not only an expression in relation to personal feelings towards adoptive parents, it is also deeply linked to our understanding of relations between states and the political and socio-economic systems that enable and facilitate transnational adoption to exist.

Linked to gratitude, is the discourse around luck and 'being chosen'. These two following accounts share three perspectives on this discourse.

> *'My mom turned to me and said "I always thought to this very day that I got to choose you". And she said that today she realised that wasn't true…that so many things had to have been aligned for me to be her daughter. But there was this comfort of knowing, of realising that I was meant to be my mom's daughter'.* **Story 10, woman, adopted in 1974, at age 1**

> *'But through a remarkable series of circumstances…abandonment, adoption, federal intervention, medical treatment, an American family that was unwilling to give up an abandoned orphan across the world...I was able to come to America'.* **Story 15, man, adopted in 1961, at age 2**

> *'Sometimes it feels like a lottery, like a roll of the dice. And I got...I was the lucky number that got picked. There's a different layer on life when (chokes up) someone chooses you. And someone that you could easily think, well, they've tapped out'.* **Story 14, woman, adopted in 1972, at age 1**

In these three accounts, the adoptees talk about 'choice' in their adoption, but in different ways. In the first and second account, there is a narrative that adoption was not necessarily an active choice, and that so many factors needed to happen to enable the adoption of these adoptees. This includes a birth parent relinquishing their child, the relationship between two states in relation to the adoptive process, and, in addition the will of an adoptive parent to have a child, and to adopt from South Korea. The third account talks about choice in a more active way; in that adoptive parents have a choice to 'tap out' and not bring a child into their home, so when they do, this is because this child is wanted and loved and part of the family. I highlight Kim's concept of contingent exceptionalism (2010) in chapter six, but want to briefly share one of her theories which is relevant here, 'contingency'. This is where many adoptees recognise that their beginnings were in South Korea but they could have ended up anywhere and everywhere; in this uncertainty, so many factors determine an adoptee's identity and future in a very unique way. These three accounts recognise this uncertainty, that life could have turned out very different for these adoptees.

Determining family

The idea of what constitutes a family has typically evolved within a heteronormative, biological space (Lansford, Abbey and Stewart, 2001). This explains the societal expectation around family likeness and resemblance and the connection to biogenetics. Adoption fully disrupts these notions, yet adoptees and adoptive families continue to face challenges outside the household.

From my sample, many adoptees talked about knowing that they looked different at home but that this did not really matter until they were socialised outside the household. The below account shares how physical features can mark one out and that no matter how kinship is formed, this remains a sticking point of difference and othering, which can leave adoptees feeling like they do not belong. For some adoptees, their difference was pointed out to them, not by their parent but by others. This interaction forces us to question the continued societal expectation that family members should look alike, and how this impacts on an individual's sense of self.

> *'My girlfriend had never seen a picture of me and my family. So I pulled out a photograph with my parents, my brother and my sisters. And I said "this is my family". She looked at me and she said, "why Jennifer they don't look anything like you". And I was taken aback a little, because even though I had felt different growing up…I don't know...just the way she put it, I had never really thought about it - that this is my family'.* ***Story 3, woman, adopted in 1958, at age 4***

As coping strategies, adoptees are sometimes faced with explicitly highlighting their relationship to their parents and at other times justifying how they feel, as these two below accounts share:

> *'I remember always having to be much louder when I was with them, to point out and say "mom and dad" very loudly. So that people knew that...this is my mother and father. Especially when I was with my dad'.* ***Story 49, woman, adopted in 1973, at age 2***

> *'So to this day I just have people say "do you ever think about finding your birth father?" and I say "no, why? I have a father. Hi name was Spense". To me it's people who raise you'.* ***Story 7, man, adopted in 1962, at age 10***

The need to highlight how adoptees feel and relate to their adoptive parents demonstrates the continued discourse that considers adoption as an alternative form of family, but not a 'typical' family unit. The second account also relates to how adoption separates parenting into biological and social aspects, which challenges the notion of 'parenting as a process of childbearing *and* childrearing' (Miall, 1996). The fact that adoptees have to work to prove their connection to their families adds an additional strain to understanding self and identity.

However, family units that incorporate adoption can also sometimes be an interruption to adoptees' understanding of their histories and who they are.

> *'For me I had stories about my family, and I had stories about growing up, but none of these really provided context for who I was and where I was*

from. In fact I had no stories about that'. **Story 17, man, adopted in 1960, within first year of birth**

'I felt like I was sold. I feel like I don't know who I am. I don't even know if my name is real, or my birth date is real'. **Story 19, woman, adopted in 1979, within first year of birth**

Self-identity can be argued to be deeply related to and rooted in family history and story. With adoptees, there is not always available information that adoptees can draw on to make up who they are. The reference to being sold in Story 19 also presents a negative portrayal of adoption, and posits that families can be constructed through purchase, in the absence of biological conception. Although this is not necessarily a strong theme of the discourse, it does highlight the complexities that can exist for transnational adoptees and can complicate the understanding of their sense of self.

This chapter highlighted how adoptees grew up in white American neighbourhoods, but despite their 'ordinary' childhoods, many adoptees experienced exclusion and bullying outside their household, in school and in the neighbourhood. In relation to the adoptive family, adoptees also relayed their resistance to common tropes surrounding adoption discourse and that, despite feelings of relating to their parents as their family, this is questioned by wider society. In terms of understanding their racialised identity, adoptees are left feeling different and exposed within homogeneous settings, and this is exacerbated when their differences are not acknowledged and celebrated, and instead denied or made fun of.

Chapter 5: Enduring power of the birth family

For many people, the biological family into which they are born and the family who raise them are the same family so there is little to no differentiation between biological connections and kinship, but for adoptees this is not the case. With transnational adoptees, there are shared efforts in figuring out how, if at all, to interrelate two important sites of identity – their adoptive and biological family. This chapter explores how South Korean American adoptees feel about and towards their birth families and how they understand these emotions, the knowledge and 'truth' they use to understand both their birth families and themselves and the importance of biological resemblance for adoptees in finding belonging and connection.

Feelings towards birth parents

Adoptees shared the emotional states of how they understood their adoption and how they felt about their birth parents in relation to this. Abandonment and loss were significant themes in many of the accounts by adoptees, perceiving their adoption in the United States as abandonment on their birth parents' part, and this sense of abandonment manifested in feelings of loss, rejection and isolation, which in turn impacted how they saw themselves. The concept of abandonment is almost seen as an organizing identity principle for adoptees as these two adoptees share:

> *'I think a lot of adoptees come…and you know we all deal with trauma and loss. This is how adoption starts. It's born of trauma- of family loss. So we get those hits...early in life. The sense of not belonging, the rootlessness,*

the sorrow, the lack of connectedness'. **Story 5, woman, adopted in 1961 at age 4**.

'In a way being estranged…and being…rejected is a defining trait of myself, which is incredibly unhealthy…Yeah. I guess that feeling of isolation is synonymous with adoption for me'. **Story 27, man, adopted in 1988, within first year of birth**

Abandonment, loss and rejection are defined as a form of trauma, and in these two accounts, link directly to a lack of roots and how the adoptees see both themselves and relate to others.

Despite this sense of abandonment, many adoptees, resolve this conflict by trying to understand the political and social context of the time and the factors that led to their adoption as well as how difficult this might have been for their birth families. This is resolved even more strongly for adoptees who had reunited with their birth families and were given the opportunity to understand more fully the guilt and regret their birth families faced in relinquishing them. For some adoptees, this developed into feelings of forgiveness and reassuring their birth parents that the right choice was made, which in turn relieved them of their own guilt that they felt growing up. This guilt stems from knowing their parents might have made a difficult decision, as the below account shares.

'I know…being born with a bilateral cleft palate and a cleft lip, that was the definitive reason of why I was adopted..I think my birth mother, took probably the hardest choice it seems of her life to give me up for adoption... I remember saying its ok. I'm okay- Gwenchana ['it's ok' in Korean], and I

felt like she was relieved that she had made the right decision and her relief lifted something off my shoulders that I didn't even know was there. It made me feel good'. ***Story 33, man, adopted in 1987, within first year of birth***

Not all adoptees have been able to or want to reunite with their birth families, continuing to view their adoption as a rejection and feeling fearful of the complexity that this would bring to their sense of self, articulated clearly from the below account in Story 44.

'I don't want that second hurt. What if they really did give me up, because they really didn't want me? Can my heart…and my soul take that? I don't think it could. I really don't'. ***Story 44, woman, adopted in 1960, at age 2***

Probyn states that 'bringing forth beginnings can result in a loss of bearings' (1996, 114) and that sometimes exploring the past can lead to even more complication in understanding who one is.

Knowledge and truth

Knowledge of how life started for adoptees plays a key role in understanding their sense of self. Strathern (1999: 68) explains that 'self-knowledge is considered foundational to personal identity, and that includes knowledge about both birth and parentage'. Sales continues that despite new forms of kinship, the foundational source of truth and knowledge in relation to identity formation remains the origins of a person's biological heritage (2012: 7-8). Where knowledge is fictive, fragmented or incomplete, this can make it very difficult for adoptees to understand and accept who they are.

One recurring reference that participants made was that it was not unusual for adoption files to contain inaccurate or incomplete information, including inconsistencies in date of birth, place of birth, given name and details of adoption. This raises the question of how can one come to know themselves, if they are unsure that what they know is even true. The feelings of the participants who spoke about this, ranged from acceptance that this quality of record-keeping was standard at the time, to devastation about not having access to their pasts. Despite the lack of information available, adoptees used what they knew to understand and inform their life narrative, and where they had access to family reunions or corrected information, this impacted further on their understanding of self. Story 12 shares how an adoptee finding out that she was at home to begin with, and not adopted at birth, meant that she did not feel completely abandoned, and that she believed her birth mother did try to keep her. This had changed the way she viewed her life story and herself.

> *'I thought I was in two orphanages previously. But that was wrong. So that gave me a little bit of comfort. I guess, because knowing that my family or my original mother did try to keep me for a while – about six months was sort of nice to know'.* ***Story 12, woman, adopted in 1964, at age 1***

Likewise, through a family reunion, the narrator in story 45 discovered that his father had tried to retrieve him and his brother, but was too late. Access to this information provided an opportunity for the participant to relate to his birth father and feel both empathy and acceptance for his father's actions.

'Regarding my father. He never forgot about us. He actually tried to come back and get us…a month late. He changed his mind. To live with that guilt your whole entire life...it had to have been very difficult…You know I have a couple of kids, and I could just imagine how difficult that would have been. But you know at the end of the day, I appreciate what he did'. ***Story 45, man, adopted in 1978, at age 7***

The narrator in story 21 relates how finding out the truth can be difficult. She discovered in her adoption files, that she was a child born of rape, which contributed directly to how she saw herself, equating her 'origins' with who she was. Nydam explores how understanding the context in which a biological family brought a child into the world is crucial to an adoptees' sense of self (Nydam, 1999).

'In that letter, it said that my birth mom was raped. I kind of realised …okay I'm a child born of rape. I struggled with that for a while, going…is that why there's some badness in me? Or there is some evilness in me? Or is that why I do some of these stupid things that I do…not the smartest choices?'.

Story 21, woman, adopted in 1986, within first year of birth

Linked to knowledge and truth is what adoptees believe of their birth families and the reality of who they are, either finding out through adoption files or reunions, and what this means in terms of negotiating their own identity. Nearly all adoptees spoke about their birth mothers predominantly, and the reasons behind their adoptions ranged from the stigma of being mixed heritage in Korea, to struggling single mothers and difficult financial situations. Many mixed heritage participants

spoke about the likelihood of their mothers being sex workers who worked in US army camp towns. In the following extract, an adoptee shared how finding out that her mother worked in the camp town as a sex worker, forced her to think about why she was so upset about it, and how she connected her identity with that of her mother's past. It is therefore not just knowledge of parental heritage that impacts how adoptees see themselves but also how identity is formed when this knowledge is combined with societal stigma. It also provides reflection on what we see as aspirational and what is not.

> *'I still can't exactly pinpoint my finger on why it feels devastating to me, but it does. The bottom line, is whether my mother was a bar worker or a banker or a student or a pharmacist…whatever lot she had in life, she still carried me for nine months, and chose to let me live, and chose to relinquish me, and gave me, in doing so, an opportunity to have a better, richer, fuller life. So whatever was going on for her, her choice led to unbelievably fortunate things for me. I don't know if it's because we all, in the true American psyche of being aspirational, we all want to believe we maybe came from something a little bit more impressive. I don't know'.*
>
> ***Story 29, woman, adopted in 1974, within first year of birth***

Lifton (1998) shares that one common identity challenge for adoptees is fantasising about their birth parents, and this was addressed by a number of adoptees, who had either created idealised versions of their birth mothers, or had not even been able to conceptualise them as people. They recognised their birth families as an abstract idea and were therefore unable to conceptualise why they made the decisions that they made. Again, finding out the reality of their birth

families can complicate adoptees' understandings of connection and belonging and how they view their life stories.

> *'I had grown up with this idea that my birth mother was just some single mother, who wasn't able to take care of her child and was frowned upon for [keeping] me. So I kind of romanticised this notion that she was this beautiful young mom…when I walked into the restaurant, and I saw my birth mother, I was very…there was nothing. Nothing. Immediately, I knew this wasn't how I had planned it happening. My birth mother looks very…very worn…many years later, when I talk about it, I cry'.* ***Story 22, woman, adopted in 1987, at age 1***

Importance of resemblance

It can be argued that one of the most visceral needs for adoptees is recognizing how they fit in, in relation to their physical sense of self and feeling a connection with others, given that the adoptive families they were brought up in did not look like them. Part of understanding who they are is understanding why they look the way that they do. This is something that non-adoptees do not need to face, and it forms the basis for the process of racialization: both self-racialisation and being racialised by others. There is something profound about how physical features form a part of how we see ourselves, and also how others then see us. Family resemblances not only reflect relational properties, but also can reflect community norms (Jerng, 2010: 215). For adoptees in this project, family resemblance comes back to being a source of understanding of self and piecing together a narrative of who they are. This is articulated clearly in Story 28:

'The idea of wanting to know what your parents looked like, because you hear other people say "oh you've got your fathers nose or your mother's eyes". But I have no idea what either of them look like. I don't know how I came to be. That makes me sad'. ***Story 28, woman, adopted in 1967, at age 2***

This need to have a real life resemblance is also apparent when adoptees become parents themselves, particularly if they did not have this growing up. This brings up important considerations of how despite different forms of kinship that exist, there still, remains for some a hierarchy of family structures, with biological connection sitting at the top.

'*I wanted him to look like me. I wanted to have the connection. I wanted someone that looked like me. My family. One day…he puts his hand on my face…his little hand…and he looks at me, and he's like "momma you know what?? You and I...we have the same eyes" (crying) I wanted to hear that so bad growing up'.* ***Story 49, woman, born in 1979, at age 2***

There are a lot of expectations placed upon biological kinship; this is the relationship that is 'meant' to be natural, in which there is an innate sense of knowing who you are inside, because you are part and parcel of the same genetic material. Where participants reunited with their birth families, they spoke about this natural connection or lack thereof, and the disappointment felt as a result. There is an affirmation of identity when it comes to reuniting with birth families, and the feeling of a connection completes that. Adoptees spoke about coming 'full circle' when they found their birth families or had children of their own, thus

demonstrating the importance of this, and that, ultimately, adoptees look for belonging.

> *'I was shocked to look at this person that I really still considered a stranger…looking at me with such knowing eyes, and knowing my heart, in a way that no one had ever reflected that back for me. At that moment, I was like "this is why adoptees search", they look for this moment. This moment of connection, and I got it for a split second'.* ***Story 30, woman, adopted in 1980, at age 6***

This chapter explored how the birth family plays an important role in how South Korean American adoptees understand their past, adoption and birth families, and what this means in terms of how they see themselves. I explained the prevalent need to have someone that resembles them, and ultimately the need for belonging and understanding of one's self, coupled with knowledge but also reunion. I now turn to look at the salience of place in determining identity formation and how adoptees relate to their birth place and their home in relation to their sense of self.

Chapter 6: Significance of place and belonging

Place is significant in the construction of identity and goes beyond the physical material of space. Place encapsulates societal behaviour, norms and relationships. It can include positioning in social, cultural, political and economic spaces, and draws on memories and visceral emotions about experiences. Finally, place relates to belonging, to inclusion and exclusion, and to feeling in or out of place. Through the theories of positioning, hybrid and third space concepts,

this chapter focuses on adoptees experiences of relating to both America and South Korea, how the two countries in turn 'relate to them', and the impact of this on identity formation and understanding of sense of self. I will talk about experiences of 'narrative burden', bodily alienation, what place can represent for adoptees, and what constitutes a 'real' or 'fake' Korean, according to adoptees.

Narrative burden

The majority of adoptees shared their experience of being 'othered' once they had left their home setting, either in school or their wider neighbourhood. Adoptees talked about the emotional and physical toil of having to constantly explain who they were, labelling this 'narrative burden'.

> **'***Narrative burden. It's something we all carry with us. It's the...who are you? What are you? Why are you here? What does all this mean...? thing. And it's the burden that is hoisted on people like us. To explain ourselves and our identities'.* **Story 1, man, adopted in 1961, at age 1**

> ***'****But then I went to college, I move into the dorms…And I put a picture on my desk and it's me and my entire family. And everyone was like "okay Jen who are all these white people in this picture"? I was just really shocked through this whole experience…it was really shocking to me that I had to for the first time, explain my existence to people'.* **Story 10, woman, adopted in 1974, at age 1**

> *'I remember making sure that I spoke as soon as possible when people would meet me, to set them at ease. So they would understand that*

English was my first language and that I wasn't any different than they were'. **Story 4, woman, adopted in 1961, at age 2**

These three accounts, and many others, talk to the experience of not being able to just live; the experience of having to justify and explain why they are the way they are, why they have white parents, why they do not speak an Asian language, and how they ended up in the United States of America. This intrusion of questions and assumptions can leave adoptees feeling out of place, like their experiences are not part of the multiplicity of life experiences that exist. This relates strongly to identify formation as Blommaert (2005) argues that 'a lot of what happens in the field of identity is done by others, not by oneself' (Ibid: 205). This can make identity formation particularly complex where adoptees also experience bodily alienation and do not relate to their physical bodies. A few accounts give examples of this:

'Sometimes it catches me off guard. I walk past a mirror, or will be at the mall or something and see myself, and I have to remind myself, after looking at all of these Caucasian people around me all the time, that I am different'. **Story 11, woman, adopted in 1983 within first year of birth**

'When I was 15 these truckers said "I didn't know they allowed chinks in here". I looked around…looking for some chinks. And I realised I was the only other person on the store. They were talking about me. It was a really defining moment'. **Story 31, woman, adopted in 1975, at age 4**

The concept of double consciousness or hybrid theory relates to individuals who are a racial minority, who live and operate within a society of a dominant or

majority group. Double consciousness posits that these individuals are 'in two places at the same time', whereby they embody contradictory elements of their different identities and are aware of this (Ben-Zion, 2014: 44). While this theory is helpful, it might not be the general experience for all adoptees, especially where some only know what Caucasian culture is, and cannot relate to their Korean selves in any way apart from how they look. Hübinette (2007) developed Bhaba's 'third space' theory (1994) to relate to transnational adoption, arguing that there is a space that is outside both the majority and minority culture in which the adoptee resides, in which they utilise a number of discourses to relate to and make sense of the world. This is interesting as it can be argued that identity not only comes from within, it is also externally related to how others perceive you. The 'third space' is therefore a space between two cultures that individuals navigate and create distinct and unique identities for themselves, not fitting into either one of their cultures neatly. The challenge remains for adoptees to sit comfortably within these spaces.

What if?

A number of adoptees talked about their experiences and whether they were happy to have been adopted or wished they had remained in Korea. For many, the answer is uncertain and unclear. While if given a choice, they would have liked to have remained with their birth families, they do not dispute the loving households in which they grew up and the challenges they would have faced if they remained in Korea.

> *'I really wish that I would've stayed in Korea. I don't know what my life would have been like. Definitely I am sure it would have been better than*

here. I don't know. That's something I'll never know'. ***Story 16, woman, adopted in 1961 at age 6***

'Considering the life that I have lived and still live and will live...I feel as though, no matter what, I am probably better off living this life, than I would've been if I had not been adopted. Obviously, we talked about how this is subjective, because we just don't know'. ***Story 18, woman, adopted in 1960, within first year of birth***

'My trip back to Korea - there are two things that stuck out for me. One was the fact that I looked like everybody else, and the enormous impact that had on me, in terms of anonymity. And secondly, I was for some reason really taken by watching all the groups of little school children in all the museums and historical sites that we visited. I don't know. It was just something about seeing these children, as if I could somehow envision me growing up in a more natural, I guess- to use a term that maybe doesn't quite fit- but just a more natural environment, was especially impactful for me. They were experiencing something that I don't think I really experienced as a little kid...and that I really wished, when I was a little kid, that was the life I would have'. ***Story 17, man, adopted in 1960, within first year of birth***

In Story 17, the adoptee talks about the potential of anonymity in South Korea as everyone looks the same, and the ease that gives to a child growing up, to be of the majority and not have to actively think about what they are and what they are not. This is a challenging process for adoptees who are unable to negotiate the

knowable from the unknowable and what that means in terms of understanding their sense of self and identity. Kim (2010) talks about contingent essentialism which is an interesting concept to bring to light. This is the idea that adoptees do not feel like they fit anywhere, which becomes a key organising principle for identity. While identities are often formulated through a grounded knowledge of one's history and roots, for adoptees it is this contingency - that an adoptee could have gone anywhere and been anything- that roots their understanding of self, and they are able to take something 'unstable' and make it an essential part of themselves, this 'unknown'. The only known they have is that they started out in Korea, and they build their identity upon this.

Personifying Korea

There is something about how place can be personified and represent so much to a person. This following excerpt has the participant recounting her experience when she visits the place where she was found in Gwangju, Korea and the resulting emotions of profound loneliness that she felt.

> '*It's one of the hardest trips that I take when I go back to Korea (choking up) I think its because it is a place that exists, and existed back when I was born, and will always be there….And I, in my mind's eyes, as we're standing in front of this man's house…what I saw was a little (chokes up) a little baby, three days old, in cold weather on a winter's day, sitting on that doorstep by herself. For me it was…it was so hard. So lonely and sad. It didn't matter that I grew up to be a healthy person, with a loving family, and good education, and a good job. None of that mattered. All that*

mattered in that moment was that this is how my life started -alone'. **Story 29, woman, adopted in 1974, within first year of birth**

'**The trip...thinking about it, I realised where some of the disappointments were, and what my mind was going through. I was looking for something to grasp...from the past. Because I was told that this where I grew up'.* ***Story 50, woman, adopted in 1970, at age 8

In these two accounts, Korea is the adoptees' beginning, and they are unable to divorce their experiences from where they were situated. Hall (1997) talks of individuals who are in between nations, who can have an element of imagined belonging that is anchored to places. The way that these two adoptees relate to who they are through material and physical spaces, demonstrates how sense of self does not only develop from within, and not only also from others, it is also about experiences that take place physically in a 'space'.

'Real' or 'fake' Korean

Linked to this understanding of Korea and what it means is how adoptees feel about being Korean.

'**Korea is an ancient country, and to return and to understand that I was part of that land was powerful. It was an amazing experience, to me, to look like everyone else. The other side of that is...it was clear that I was an American. And I culturally, certainly did not fit in with the world there'.* ***Story 4, woman, adopted in 1961 at age 2

***'**I mean that was the case with thousands of us mixed race children who were born in Korea and there were indeed thousands of us. In fact, we are the*

reason international adoption from Korea started. It was basically to purge the country of...its human refuse…As mixed race I see myself as minority of the minority and our reasons for being relinquished were very different from that of full race Koreans. We were seen as human refuse. Other kids it wasn't for individual reasons. We were seen as trash. That said I grew up with this Asian identity. And it's not something I own, but rather others saw in me'. ***Story 5, woman, adopted in 1961 at age 4***

Adoptees talk about not being able to relate to Korea apart from a physical sense of self. For those who are mixed-race, there is a challenge in being able to relate to a place where many feel they were not wanted. The challenge remains in not being able to escape their Korean selves, even though Korea let them go first. Högbacka (2016) states that adoption is 'not only about family formation and kinship, it is also about global inequality and social suffering'. This can not be divorced from the adoptee experience, in that Korea is a place that made an active decision to let go of its children, and adoptees recognise the importance of these state decisions in explaining where they are now situated. These accounts share how political decisions rupture private lives and impact profoundly and globally on the experiences of childhood and family.

This chapter explored the importance of place in cultivating a sense of belonging for adoptees, as well as contributing to how they see themselves. It is not only about citizenship or how they see themselves: the process of identity and subjectivity is very much influenced by how they are perceived, accepted, and rejected by other people and by state decisions.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to look at how South Korean American adoptees come to understand who they are in the context of the relationship they have to families and place, how they negotiate and resist discourses surrounding transnational adoption, and how they take ownership of their sense of self and racialised identity.

This dissertation looked at how childhood is an important site for adoptees in beginning to understand who they are in relation to their immediate family, and the expectations that come with this family formation, from outside the household. The lack of direction and guidance provided to children in understanding their racialised identity can really impact this process of navigating the challenges faced as Asian Americans, as well as becoming comfortable with and celebratory of their multifaceted identity. This dissertation also discussed the complexities that exist in relation to birth families, and the importance of knowledge of self and adoptees' true history in informing their identity, whereby even the 'unknown' can be a key organising principle in how adoptees understand who they are. Place plays an important role too in how adoptees recognise themselves, their beginnings and their sense of belonging, with potential for place to become a very material form of symbolism attached to oneself.

Finally this dissertation explored how subjectivity arises, not only through a process of internal conviction and biological and genetic material, but also how others perceive individuals and how that disrupts, confirms or complicates their understanding of race, subjectivity and who they are. This is further complicated when we consider the origins of transnational adoption and Korean state policy,

as well as how adoptees are sometimes unable to relate to their ‘homelands’. This is not only because they grew up elsewhere, but precisely because they feel ‘unwanted’ and almost betrayed by the country in which they were born. The recurrent experiences of adoptees, being in positions where they have to constantly explain who they are demonstrates that how they think of themselves does not always translate to others perceiving them in the same way. This can be incredibly difficult when they have been raised in the majority culture but treated outside of it. Theories such as third space, racial melancholia and contingent essentialism are useful theories to relate to the transnational adoptee experience and have been explored in this project.

In response to my research aim, to understand ‘*how South Korean American adoptees understand their racialised identity and their sense of self’,* it appears that the answer is as much external as it is internally placed, and a consideration that adoptees (and indeed any individual) may grapple with as a lifelong pursuit.

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