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ALIEN ASIAN: THE ROLE OF RACIAL EXCLUSION AND
CULTURAL DIFFERENTIATION IN THE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT
OF TRANSNATIONALLY ADOPTED KOREAN AMERICANS

By

Tae-Sun Kim

A DISSERTATION

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Anthropology

2009

ABSTRACT

ALIEN ASIAN: THE ROLE OF RACIAL EXCLUSION AND CULTURAL DIFFERENTIATION IN THE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSNATIONALLY ADOPTED KOREAN AMERICANS

By

Tae-Sun Kim

This dissertation is an examination of racialization -- ideologies of human racial difference and inequality—and how it shapes the lives of transnationally adopted Korean Americans. As infants and children, they are brought to the United States through the process of transnational adoption, which usually translates to interracial adoption as these children are incorporated into a racialized system that constructs them as “Asian” or “non-White,” and their adoptive parents are usually “White” or of “European descent.” Korean adoptees are largely placed in communities isolated from other Asian Americans or racial minorities. The lives of Korean adoptees provide a unique site for exploring how race is experienced, processed, and expressed in the contemporary United States.

There are two analytical dimensions to this dissertation, one dimension focuses on how Korean adoptees are racially perceived and treated by White Americans and Asian Americans. The data shows that Korean adoptees are racialized within their predominantly White adoptive communities as *honorary White people* because they are Asian American and officially adopted by a White family. But ironically they are also perceived as *perpetual foreigners* because they are of Asian descent which marks them as non-white and therefore dubiously American. When Korean adoptees attempt to get in touch with their cultural roots, usually in college or as adults, they encounter Asian Americans, which include the immigrant generation, 1.5 generation, and second

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generation. They are often stereotyped as “White” or “cultural sell-outs” due to their interracial/cultural adoption, socialization, and lack of Korean or Asian American specific social capital.

The second analytical dimension of my research focuses on how Korean adoptees respond to their racialization; it explores narratives of how individuals submit to, manipulate and resist stereotypes and rigid classifications. Some informants conformed to expectations of being White, Korean, and/or Asian American. Other times, the task of culturally “fitting in” and being true to their own feelings of cultural identity were so incongruent that they created new cultural categories, social networks, and conceptual spaces to accommodate their cultural difference. Their transnational and interracial adoption usually provides the conceptual base for getting around the rigid expectations imposed by the dominant racial systems they encounter. Some have even created or joined adoptee-specific groups where their cultural experiences are validated and their political perspectives on race and adoption can be discussed and debated. But these spaces are few and limited by time, space, and depth of personal interaction. Negotiating the terms of dominant racial systems typify their daily lives. This dissertation hopes to contribute to the critical study of race in the post-civil rights era by a) shedding light on the complex ways in which social race is being perpetuated in contemporary multicultural and multiracial social contexts, and b) investigating the long-term impact of racism, racialization, and minority status on transnationally and transracially adopted adults.

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For my Korean brothers and sisters still “searching”

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To: My father Hang Sik Kim and mother Eun Jin Chun, for choosing to make the ultimate sacrifice of immigrating to the U.S. and working endless hours at the drycleaner and Tektronix to give Joe and I a “better life.” Look at us now, a C.P.A. and a Ph.D.! My grandmother Hyun Ju Chang and grandfather Won You Kim, for raising me with Christian and Korean values. My *daene* *halmuhnee*, a.k.a. Esther, who was stigmatized as an illegitimate child and grew up dodging allegations of being adopted. You will always be family to me.

My beloved Korean adoptee friends and childhood role models who made this research matter to me: Jessica, Dan, Peter, Kelly, Keera, Jon, Kate and Yun Sook.

Dr. Andrea Louie for being my advisor from the very beginning and making sure I stayed on track; Dr. Fredrick Roberts for pulling for me to get into the graduate program and being my quantitative security blanket; Dr. Sheing Mei Ma for teaching me my Asian American cannon and helping me bring back humanity into the social sciences; Dr. John Jr. Davis for joining my committee so close to comps and yet taking over like a seasoned pro.

The Korean adoptive community who let me into their lives and shared with me such personal and painful chapters of their lives. I have tried very hard to get your stories right but if I have left something important out, excessively or inappropriately emphasized certain issues, or was too academically indulgent with a quotation, please know that it was not intentional and I apologize in advance.

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INTRODUCTION

Research Overview

This dissertation examines how transnationally adopted Korean Americans learn and respond to the unwritten rules of racial inequality, in particular, the stereotypes, stigmas, and privileges linked to meanings of Whiteness and Asian-ness. In doing so, it highlights a vastly underrepresented perspective on contemporary processes of racialization in the United States, the perspectives of Asian Americans adopted by White American families. I broadly define racialization as processes by which racial meanings are attached to people, places, and things; these processes are intrinsically unequal and contextualized. This study assumes that Korean adoptees, as well as other American citizens and residents, are socialized to learn what Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) describe as “some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification . . . and racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation” (60). What are these race rules, how have these rules changed in the era of multiculturalism, and how do adoptees learn them in the absence of Asian family and ethnic social networks is the focus of my investigation.

In my study of forty adult Korean adoptees, some informants proudly and confidently described their race or racial classification as Asian and/or Korean. When asked how they racially identify themselves on official documents, they unanimously responded “Asian” or “Asian/Pacific Islander.” However, most completed their response with a disclaimer that despite their Asian features and origins, they commonly perceive themselves as “White” or “fake Asians.” As Asian Americans, Korean adoptees are formally recognized as racial minorities that have historically faced social and

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institutional discrimination because of their non-White appearance and status. Yet many informants insisted that they live much of their lives believing they are NOT a racial minority, encountering very few experiences of racial discrimination, and to a large extent possessing a much closer affinity with White Americans than with Asian Americans. This poses several dilemmas for scholars and activists concerned about racial inequality. What does it mean for Korean adoptees or any person of color to identify as White -- Does it suggest that they, like the European ethnicities of the past, are “melting in” and becoming White? Or are they in a state of denial, deluding themselves that they are White when they are clearly being stereotyped, discriminated, and marginalized (Koshy, 2001; Koshy, 2002; Yancey, 2003; Zhou, 2004; Roedinger, 2006).

I argue that the analytical tools that have traditionally juxtaposed experiences of the White racial majority and the non-White racial minorities, though important and still relevant in many contexts, are insufficient in understanding how racial processes are being experienced within and between racial minority groups. Binary frameworks that compare Whites versus non-Whites are limiting in that they essentialize racial minorities as a homogenous group that form allied fronts against White hegemony. This grossly neglects the breakdown of racial coalitions, the diverse range of relationships that form between racial minorities and the White majority, and the struggles for power and representation that are formed within racial minority groups (Abelmann & Lie, 1995; Saito, 1998; Oliver & Wong, 2003; Vaca, 2004).

Studies on Korean adoptees have made incredible contributions to these debates on the changing face of race and racism in the era of multiculturalism. First, adoptees’ lives reveal so poignantly how racial identities are disrupted, imposed, and created within

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local, national, and global struggles for power (Dorow, 2004; Volkman, 2005; Yngvesson, 2002; Hübinette, 2004). Through no choice of their own, infants and children from Korea were adopted by American couples (mostly White Americans), who had the financial means, international networking, and the preferred and sometimes arbitrary social statuses necessary to adopt from Korea. For example, only married, “healthy” heterosexual couples who have been married a minimum of 3 years but have not had more than 1-2 divorces are eligible for adoption¹. Also Korean adoptees can now only be placed in Arkansas, California, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, Oregon, South Dakota and Texas. Residents of a few other states may be eligible provided that they are Korean-Americans and/or adopting infants/children who have “special needs,” or are difficult to adopt.² It is from these new families and communities that most Korean adoptees learn directly and indirectly about their racial identity, and its position within a broader constellation of racial dominance and subordination. I will show later how biracial Koreans who were adopted as young children may have actually learned about racial hierarchies while living in Korea.

Institutional and demographic factors that have historically restricted identities from being fluid have changed, allowing some minorities more creativity and opportunities for expressing their identities (Appadurai, 1996; Lowe, 1991; Gilroy, 1993). But these liberties disproportionately affect Korean adoptees. Rather than having their cultural hybridity validated, adoptees are often stigmatized as victims of colonization and White hegemony by people critical of international and interracial

¹ These eligibility standards can be verified on international adoption agency websites including abcadoption.org and Americans for International Aid and Adoption aiiaadopt.org.

² Holt International. (2008). *Holtintl.org*. <http://www.holtintl.org/adoption/criteria.shtml#korea>

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adoption; in my study these people included Korean/Korean American cultural camp volunteers, adoption reunification translators, students, scholars, adult Korean adoptees who have researched the history and business of international adoption, as well as Korean nationals who support the abolition of international adoption. Cut off from their true “Asian roots” through interracial adoption, Korean adoptees are perceived by Americans of various backgrounds and Asian nationals in my study as atypical Asians who lack “real” family ties, ignorant about their native language and culture, choosing to adopt the norms and values of Whites, and are plagued by mental health issues linked to abandonment and identity crises (Stock, 1999; Dorow, 2000; Yngvesson and Mahoney, 2000; E. Kim, 2005; Hübinette, 2007).

In light of these converging racial formations it is the goal of this dissertation to make sense of how Korean adoptees construct their racial identities. I offer an alternative perspective to the traditional approach of comparing White and non-White positionalities, a method Susan Koshy names *parallel minoritization*. Instead, she calls for an analysis of *stratified minoritization*, exploring how struggles for power are experienced within and between non-White groups, especially Asian Americans who Koshy describes as “crucial conduit[s] for and a site of the reconfiguration of racial identities” (Koshy, 2001, p. 155). Asian Americans occupy an unstable position within this polarized racial system. They slide back and forth, at times receiving white privileges and social acceptance, and at other times are stigmatized, marked, or discriminated against because they are racialized as non-White foreigners and threats. My research therefore furthers anthropological knowledge in the field of critical racial studies by magnifying the struggles for power at the margins. I am particularly interested in the struggles Korean adoptees encounter as

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they attempt to validate their identities amidst dominant narratives of racial essentialism espoused by the White majority and emerging Asian American political and nationalist identity formations. Informants often describe themselves as not being White enough for Whites and not being Asian enough for Asians when they retell stories of being racially taunted by peers, rejected by potential intimate partners, disrespected by racially or ethnically-like people, and incorrectly and inappropriately stereotyped by strangers, authority figures, and friends. Their personal narratives are sobering reminders of the limits of hybrid identity formations and the consequences linked to crossing symbolic racial boundaries.

Social Constructions of Asians and Orientals in the U.S.

Postmodernist celebrations of hybrid and fragmented identities offer an important alternative to the overly simplistic and constricting models of analysis that deduce individual identity and experience to race, gender, or class. However, scholars have been quick to point out the dangers of depicting identities as free-floating, as doing so can neglect the power and influence of persisting hegemonies. Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg (1996) are uncomfortable with this trend, arguing that, “Everyone became equally different, despite specific histories of oppressing or being oppressed,” and the “historical tactic[s] of the margins, was appropriated by the postmodernist avant-garde . . . and translated into a tool to construct literary and philosophical theories of otherness” (p. 3). Theorists from the margins called for a more critical and historicized reading of difference and displacement, one that recognized marginal identities and experiences as

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being numerous, stratified, and shifting (Lubiano, 1991; Spivak, 1988; Frankenberg & Mani, Narayan, 1993).

I situate this dissertation within the context of postmodern identity formations to acknowledge on a broader level the formation of hybrid and third-space identities such as Korean adoptees that clearly defy and transform hegemonic cultural systems. Yet when closely examined, we find that these identities subsume multiple subject positions that simultaneously resist and reinforce classification and hegemonies. To fully understand how Korean adoptees are positioned within dominant racial formations, I will begin with an overview of how migrant groups from various Asian geographies have been racialized, discriminated, and situated within the U.S. racial order. Then I present the struggles for power and representation that have emerged within Asian American communities, including the impact they have had on Korean adoptees and possibly other marginalized Asian American groups.

Two core stereotypes dominate how Asian Americans are racialized in the United States. First, the *perpetual foreigner* stereotype; this stereotype assumes that Americans with Asian features and origins are “Asians” first and “Americans” second, if at all. This stereotype is rooted in histories of racist immigration policies, state-sanctioned segregation, discrimination, and cultural beliefs about the innate racial and cultural distinctiveness of Asians or Orientals. As Asian Americans became “overrepresented” in prestigious universities and professions, journalists and social scientists began to depict Asian Americans as *model minorities*, the second prevailing stereotype. The second stereotype in question assumes that Asian Americans, though foreign, still represent

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racial minorities who have succeeded in America despite institutional and symbolic racism, hence challenging the very notion that racism is still a social problem.

Perpetual Foreigners

The roots of how Asian Americans have come to be stereotyped as perpetual foreigners can be traced back to the fourth and fifteen century B.C.E. in the European imagination, where the imagined geography of the “Orient” was constructed as a reflection of what Europe, the “Occidental,” was not (Okihiro, 1992; Said, 1978). As an extension of this worldview, the United States developed its own variety of Orientalism which framed its racial ideology and practices towards Asian Americans (Tchen, 1999, Yu, 2001). But for the purposes of this dissertation I narrow my focus to the **Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882**, which barred virtually all immigration from China and prevented even the Chinese already in the U.S. from becoming naturalized. For the first time in U.S. history, an ethnic group was singled out and barred from entering the U.S. This act was later expanded to encompass all people perceived to be Asian, Oriental, Malay, Hindu, and Mongoloid, who coincidentally also competed with White Americans for limited jobs and resources. In 1924, the federal government implemented its first comprehensive set of immigration regulations, the **National Origins System**, which severely limited immigration from Asia and the Pacific Islands (S. Chan, 1991; Takaki, 1998).

These immigration policies succeeded in controlling and eventually reducing the growth of the Asian ethnic populations in America. For the few who remained in the U.S., they were denied naturalization, forced to live under segregated conditions, and limited in their educational and employment opportunities, generating beliefs and

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sentiments that they were indeed foreigners because “real Americans” would not be subjected to such disparate treatment. Even African Americans and European immigrants who experienced labor and social discrimination could be naturalized as citizens and migrated with spouses, two important privileges that were systematically denied to people racialized as Asian (Takaki, 1998). It was out of these shared experiences of discrimination on U.S. soil that the racial category *Asian* was formed, and not by some imaginary, shared “Asian culture.”

The consequences of being perceived as perpetual foreigners were grave. Immediately after the Japanese navy attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941 for example, government and military officials suspected that Japanese Americans sympathized with the Japanese empire. The assumption was that Japanese Americans were inherently more connected and loyal to Japan than the United States, their nation of settlement, birth, and citizenship. Japanese Americans were perceived as potential spies for Japan, posing a security threat to the United States (Weglyn, 1996). Though many government and military officials, including J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the F.B.I., concluded that Japanese Americans were not security threats to the United States, they were overruled by administration officials in the Department of War. Falsified reports of espionage and lobbying were produced by White farmers in California, the group Japanese American farmers were in direct competition with, and added to the public paranoia which resulted in President Roosevelt eventually issuing **Executive Order 9066**. This proclamation authorized the detention of over 112,000 Japanese Americans in internment camps throughout nine states, including individuals who served in the U.S. military (Robinson, 2003).

It was not until the end of World War II that domestic and international pressures led the U.S. to modify the restrictive policies of the **National Origins System**. The U.S. passed several pieces of legislation that allowed needy Europeans to enter the U.S. during and after World War II. In addition, legislation was passed during this time period that allowed Chinese, Filipinos, and Asian Indians in the U.S. to finally become U.S. citizens. The **1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act** altered several aspects of the National Origins provisions and ended the absolute exclusion of Asian immigrants, but not without putting in place a strict quota system. Shortly after this period, the first wave of adopted Korean War orphans entered the U.S. with the passage of the **Immigration and Nationality Act of 1961**.³ According to the University of Oregon's Adoption History Project, these early adoptions were exceptional in that they circumvented the formal immigration policies of the time.

Until passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1961, which incorporated international adoption, the migration of foreign-born children to the U.S. had no place in permanent law. It was governed by a series of provisional refugee and displaced persons acts, beginning with a directive from President Truman in December 1945, that envisioned the entry of "eligible orphans" from war-torn countries as a temporary emergency and set quotas for that purpose. National concerns about immigration and unwillingness to interfere in the legal systems of sovereign nations meant that international adoptions were effectively exempted from the regulatory regime that had been laboriously put into place domestically. (<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/topics/proxy.htm>)

It is important to note here that the first wave of Korean children to be adopted by White families came three years before the passing of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** which outlawed segregation in U.S. schools and public places.

³ This wave of Korean adoptees were not only pioneers in that they were the first group of Korean adoptees to migrate to the U.S, but they also represented the first, and sometimes the only, person(s) of color to integrate their adoptive parents' hometowns.

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Four years later, after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the appointment of Lyndon B. Johnson, immigration from Asia became liberalized (Chang, 2000). Kennedy and Johnsons' hopes for a more democratic world system and support for domestic civil rights led to the passage of the **1965 Immigration & Nationality Act**, which abolished the **National Origins** policies that in the past favored quotas and preference systems. This new policy was not an intentional measure aimed at increasing immigration from Asia; because most Europeans immigrated to the U.S. at the turn of the century with their immediate families, there were few family members back in Europe to reunite with. In addition, Europe was experiencing its own post-war economic boom, leaving little incentive for Europeans to emigrate (Takaki, 1994; Jacobson, 1998).

The unanticipated influx of immigrants from Asia and the Diaspora produced significant demographic, economic, and cultural shifts in the then modestly populated Asian American landscape. Once composed mainly of the U.S.-born, the new wave of Asian Americans were predominantly foreign-born and included ethnic and religious groups spanning a wider geographic scope. By far the most significant group of Asians to immigrate to the U.S. under the provisions of this act was professionals and political refugees, many of whom were also educated elites in their homelands. The cultural capital and resources of these individuals, combined with the weakening of discriminatory policies that had historically disenfranchised Americans of color, made the road to economic and academic success more attainable than in past generations (Fong, 2002; Bean and Stevens, 2003). But the diversity of the newly arriving immigrants from Asia and its diasporic communities would create new challenges to community building efforts of U.S.-born Asian American activists, something they perceived as

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crucial in resisting racism and gaining empowerment and equality for all Americans of Asian descent.

Competing Asian American Discourses on Race and Identity

Student activists participating in the **1968 Third World Liberation Front** at San Francisco State College (SFSC) successfully organized the largest student strike that led to the formation of Ethnic Studies programs at SFSC and at other institutions. This movement had succeeded in creating a framework for collectivizing and empowering marginalized communities of color. Inspired by Black nationalism, Asian American leaders sought to mobilize Asian Americans under a common political identity that involved resisting racism and promoting an *indigenized* sense of Asian American identity (Umemoto, 1989). Asian American activists, in particular students and faculty, challenged the prevalent stereotype of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners by drawing attention to the numerous ways in which Asian migrants contributed to American culture, economic development and expansion, technology, and history. Central to constructing an Asian American racial identity was prioritizing the American-ness of Asian Americans, a discourse emphasizing their right to belong in the United States. Steven A Chin (1994), writing for the *San Francisco Examiner* explicitly credits the first Asian American Studies departments in California for constructing a model for a politically correct Asian American identity “based on the idea that Asian Americans shared a common history of exclusion in America, that they had been discriminated against, that they had been exploited as cheap labor and then discarded” (B1). In doing so, activists argued that Asian Americans would not fall victim to the state-sponsored

racisms of the past, i.e. the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Japanese American internment, which were predicated on the notion that they were foreigners (Lowe, 1991; Espiritu, 1992).

However, many of the newly arriving Asian immigrants did not readily identify with the historical experiences and political struggles of the U.S.-born Asian American activists. The post-1965 immigrants came with different histories, political identities, and ideas about their role as refugees, residents, aliens, and citizens in the United States. In their own way, the foreign-born Asian Americans disrupted the racial formations in progress, including those prescribed by Asian American activists. In *Buddha is Hiding*, author Aihwa Ong (2003) writes that a major challenge to constructing a unified Asian American identity in this matter was that:

Theoretically speaking, the model of Asian America as a community of ethnic exclusion is unable to conceptualize new transnational Asian subjects, except to identify them as “foreign-born” and therefore not Asian American. . . The Asian America model thus inadvertently excludes in the same way that the model-minority concept initially excluded them. In this sense, it becomes an encoding technique of governmentality – in the interests of economic flexibility. (259)

The new migrants formed communities and identities that vaguely resembled the political formations and agendas prescribed by university activities and academics. Their histories were disconnected from the symbolic Asian American milestones of transcontinental railroad building, internment, or Civil Rights Movement activism. In their own way, these new Asian groups promoted ethnic solidarity and resistance to assimilation. They established and reestablished communities within old and new ethnic enclaves, celebrated culturally specific events and ceremonies, encouraged intra-ethnic relationships, exhibited pride in their cultural difference, and maintained ties with their homelands

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abroad, sometimes at the expense of appearing more foreign (Abelmann and Lie, 1995; Misir, 2000; Ong, 2003; Helweg, 2004; Koltyk, 1998).

For some post-1965 Asian Americans, emphasizing an *indigenized* Asian American identity was counterintuitive. Privileging the experiences of Asian Americans who were the “most assimilated” appeared to some immigrants as a rejection or denial of one’s ethnic language, community, and heritage, and therefore an unintended validation of the superiority of things “Western.” Some immigrant/migrant groups therefore resisted the pull towards assimilation by creatively and consciously holding on to traditions and values practiced prior to their immigration/migration (Gibson, 1988; Bankston III, 2000; Kibria, 1990; Parrenas, 2000; Espiritu, 2001).

Model Minorities

Despite the ethnic, religious, political, and economic diversity within the politicized racial classification of “Asian Americans,” the overall success of many of the post-1965 Asian Americans and their descendents, earned Asian Americans as a whole the precarious designation of *model minority*. The *model minority* stereotype implies that despite their position as racial minorities, Asian Americans have achieved remarkable success in America. This perception, though not completely false when comparing disaggregated census data between the major racialized groups, has unfortunately been used by conservative political pundits, as well as lay people, to portray the poverty and under-representation of other minority groups as a consequence of their own doing and not persistent racism (Cheng & Yang, 1996). A grave consequence of promoting this

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oppositional comparison between Asian Americans and other racial minority groups has been the disenfranchising of racial minority status for Asian Americans.

Scholars and activists commonly referred to the designation of *model minority* as a myth because it overlooks vast segments of Asian Americans that are living below the poverty line, requiring language and social services, are victims of hate crimes, and go under-diagnosed for mental illnesses (Stacey Lee, 2005; Ling, 2008; Leong and Lau, 2004; Chen and Hawk, 1995; S. Sue, 1999; Rumbaut, 2005; Texeria, 2005). A grave implication of the model minority stereotype is that Asian Americans are passive and exploitable. They are perceived to be non-threatening and less political, which some conservatives explain is the reason for their success. Some go even further and argue that since Asian Americans are so successful, they no longer experience any discrimination and therefore do not require public services such as affirmative action, bilingual education, government documents in multiple languages, and social welfare. Or those in favor of banning affirmative action policies will argue that “more” qualified and therefore deserving Asian Americans and Whites are restricted from attending more prestigious universities in favor of “less” qualified and deserving African Americans, Latinos, and Native Peoples (Steven, 2005; Connerly, 2002; Swain, 2002; Will, 2002; Rim, 2006).

Consequently Asian Americans have been branded *honorary Whites* by many White Americans, but also other communities of color. The result, Asian Americans as a collective have systematically been excluded from much needed assistance and minority opportunities even if they are economically and socially at-risk. The prevalence of the model minority stereotypes also overlooks the very real problems of the glass ceiling affect that accounts for the under-representation of many qualified Asian Americans in

upper level and highly skilled positions, as well as the challenges second generation Asian Americans face in achieving social citizenship as “real” Americans (Tuan, 1999; Fong, 2002; Park, 2005; Sharon Lee, 2002).

Asian Americans have mixed feelings about being stereotyped as model minorities. For example, in my research some found the model minority stereotype to be flattering, and interpreted it as a compliment to Asian Americans who work hard and persevere in spite of hardships. Others found that while growing up, one of the bright sides to being stereotyped as a racial minority was knowing that as an Asian American they were respected as being intelligent and hard working. Asian Americans were socially and even materially promoted so-to-speak because they appeared to resemble qualities associated with middleclass, Whites. However, scholars and activists believe that perpetuating the idea that Asian Americans are model minorities are dangerous because it stereotypes Asian Americans as being the same, successful, void of any problems, and no longer affected by economic and racial injustices. They are particularly uncomfortable with this stereotype as it sets Asian Americans apart from other minority groups, making them appear unsympathetic and uninvolved in issues of racial inequality (Wu, 2002; Osajima, 2000). But to deny that Asian Americans occupy a more privileged position from other racial minority groups is to be naïve.

The Whiteness of Asian Americans

Historically, “Whiteness” emerged as a “pan-ethnic” category, as a way of absorbing a variety of European ethnic populations into a single racial category so as to distinguish them from people of African, Asian, and Native American descent who had

inferior legal and political status. Contrary to the “melting pot” metaphors of the past and the “color-blind” metaphors of the present, people who did not originate from Europe or have the features that would allow them to pass as European, were systematically excluded from the full social benefits of American citizenship. Take for example the most famous essay on the question "What is an American?" In 1781, immigrant Frenchman turned New York farmer Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur published his book Letters from an American Farmer. He wrote:

...whence came all these people? They are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have arisen. What, then, is the American, this new man? He is neither an European nor the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of populations which has ever appeared.

No longer a European, the new American represented a new race made from the stock of various European nations. European ancestry, or the appearance of European ancestry, was therefore essential in becoming American, and therefore White.

In *How the Irish Became White*, Noel Ignatiev (1996) describes how as immigrants in the U.S., the Irish were subject to much of the prejudices and discrimination they had suffered under the British. Initially, Irish immigrants occupied a position slightly above that of African Americans, working alongside them in various low wage jobs and living in deplorable city tenements. Becoming White, something their European heritage and physical features permitted, offered Irish immigrants many advantages, not least of which would be the elimination of their major competitors,

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Blacks and later the Chinese. The Irish began to organize the exclusion of Northern free Blacks from shipyard or factory employment, and continued this discrimination practice in later generations when the Irish would dominate the police and firefighting unions in most cities.

Ignatiev argues that Whiteness was a position of power and an advantage over non-Whiteness; becoming, identifying, and passing as White was a logical and effortless road towards gaining preferential treatment over other oppressed American groups. As such, Whiteness was intrinsically linked to, in the words of Ruth Frankenberg (1993), “unfolding relations of domination,” and the prevalence of White political, demographic, and cultural hegemony is manifested in its “normativity” and “structured invisibility” (6). In other words, the invisibility of Whiteness and the visibility of being a person of color is testament to Whiteness’ cultural dominance, “the norm against which all are measured and all are expected to fit (Frankenberg, 1988, p.238). So, if we are to assume that Whiteness still occupies a material and symbolic position of power, then what can we make of the honorary Whiteness of Asian Americans? Are they being incorporated into the racial elite such as the Irish, or is their Whiteness only symbolic and temporarily?

Asian Americans who adopt the norms and values associated with Whites, i.e. speaking “standard” English, listening to music genres dominated by White performers, and mainly socializing and dating Whites, are often stigmatized by Asian peers as rejecting their Asian heritage and choosing to endorse the supremacy of Whites. These claims or accusations are perhaps most commonly expressed among youth or college students, although by no means are adults and professionals above reproach (Pyke, 2003; Tuan, 1999; Lee and Zhou, 2004). Terms such as “white washed,” “twinkie,” and

“banana”⁴ ridicule Asian Americans who are perceived as being ashamed of their Asian-ness and wishing to be White. But as suggested earlier, Asian Americans continue to be victimized by anti-Asian violence, overlooked for promotions and college admissions because of the way they are stereotyped, and are expressing their frustrations towards racism and stereotyping in a variety of political and creative outlets.

Some observers (e.g., Omatsu in 1994) argue that perhaps Asian American students who confront peers about being “White washed” are responding to their racial marginalization by forming a collective oppositional identity somewhat like the African American youth described in Fordham and Ogbu’s research (1986). He argues that these youth are rejecting institutionally sanctioned behavior and criticizing peers who they believe are uncritically adopting “White ways” and accepting the role of honorary Whites when in fact they should be resisting it (Sue and Sue, 1973; Stacy Lee, 1994). Some scholars and activists often take pride in how Asian Americans are actively resisting stereotyping and cultural homogenization by creating alternative communities and spaces for expressing their experiences as Asian Americans (Ignacio, 2005; Mimi Nguyen, 2003; Mannur, 2005; Valverde, 2005; Oren, 2005).

But it would irresponsible to assume that being racialized as non-White would in itself constitute a uniform non-White experience. Researchers in Whiteness Studies have found that African Americans, more so than other racial group, serve as the definitive “other” in contemporary White consciousness. In a compelling essay entitled, *“White Americans, the New Minority?: Non-Blacks and the Ever Expanding Boundaries of Whiteness,”* authors Jonothan W. Warren and France Windance Twine (1997) cite several

⁴ These slurs are metaphors describing a person who is physically Asian or “Yellow” yet culturally or internally like that of Caucasians.

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studies in which White Americans substitute the concept of “non-Whites” with African Americans, not other racial minorities. Even in situations where their greatest competitors for college admissions and jobs were Asian Americans and Latinos, White students and residents identify Blacks and Black culture as representative of people and things non-White and “of color”. Warren and Twine argue that in the multicultural era, African Americans represent the most definitive “anchor for Whiteness” creating a “pseudo-homogeneity” among non-Black minorities, and facilitating their entrance into White privilege.

In other words, precisely because Blacks represent the “other” against which Whiteness is constructed, the backdoor to Whiteness is open to non-Blacks. Slipping through that opening is, then, a tactical matter for non-Blacks of conforming to White standards, of distancing themselves from Blackness, and of reproducing anti-Black ideas and sentiments (10).

Warren and Twine cite examples in which White residents living in racial/ethnically diverse neighborhoods specifically identify Asian American and Latinos as being different than Blacks because of their ability to “blend in” socially with Whites, an indicator that Whiteness is not fixed, and can expand to include people of non-European descent. In his article, “Racial Redistricting: Expanding the Boundaries of Whiteness,” author Charles A. Gallagher (2004) discovers through in-depth interviews and focus groups with White college students that the boundaries of Whiteness are expanding or going through a “racial redistricting” to now incorporate Asians, multiracial Asians, and light skinned Latinos. He writes:

Like the process of racialization that transformed Italians and Irish into whites, some light-skinned, middle-class Latinos and multiracial Asians are being incorporated into the dominant group as they define themselves, their interests, and are viewed by others as being like whites. As white respondents in my study made clear, Asians, and to a lesser extent Latinos were viewed as having the

cultural characteristics (a strong work ethic, commitment to family, focus on schooling) that whites believe (or imagine) themselves as possessing (pg. 60).

Gallagher asserts that this racial incorporation or acceptance of Asian Americans goes beyond, “an extension of the model minority myth,” but in fact leads Whites to see Asian Americans as “potential partners in the demonization of African Americans, further legitimizing the existing racial hierarchy” (60). Other scholars join Gallagher in their concerns about the route in which White supremacy is taking root in a multicultural America, and the specific roles honorary Whites, i.e. Asian American immigrants, White/light Latinos, and multiracials, will play in maintaining racial binaries between Whites and a collective Black underclass which will include South Asian migrants, reservation bound Native Americans, African Americans, and Black Latinos (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Edwards, Carter-Tellison, and Herring, 2004; Horton and Sykes, 2004)

The fluidity in which non-Black groups can attain White privileges is not unique to the present. In the only published ethnography on the Mississippi Delta Chinese, James Loewen (1971) describe how Chinese Americans in pre-civil-rights era Mississippi were able to successfully transform themselves from Blacks into Whites, despite being of non-European descent. He writes that the, “Key to their success in making this transition was their ability to define themselves as [non-Black] and thus as fully human, as full citizens” (p. 99). Chinese Americans were able to “prove” their non-Blackness by cutting off all of their social ties with Blacks, invoking racist representation of Blacks, and culturally imitating the White community. Loewen discovered that Chinese American leaders:

Set out to eradicate the Chinese-[Black] minority, by influencing Chinese males to end [Black] relationships and throw out their Chinese-[Black] kin, or by forcing the families to leave the community. (76, 77)

In addition to severing their social ties with Blacks, Loewen also found that Chinese Americans consciously and actively modeled themselves after characteristics they perceived to be “White”:

Chinese patterns are being pushed to one side, but there is no patterning from [Black] characteristics among the young. The way they dance, sing, the argot they use, their gestures and mannerisms – all are incredibly free of black influence, when it is remembered that most Chinese children live in [Black] neighborhoods, wait on blacks in the stores, and have more contacts with [Blacks] than with Caucasians of their age groups (81, 82).

In the end, this strategy paid off for Chinese Americans, who by the 1960s had repositioned themselves from a Black to a White status in terms of accessing the same housing, schooling, employment, and social membership opportunities as White, demonstrating how “their Caucasian atmosphere and structure prove to whites that they Chinese are not like [Blacks]” (89).

So we return to the case of Korean adoptees, a special population of Asian Americans who may feel more akin with Whites due to their adoption, and who may have reaped the material benefits of middle class Whiteness more so than their non-adopted Asian American counterparts. Are they socially accepted by Whites and Asian Americans as having crossed over and achieved White status? Are Korean adoptees adopting a White identity and receiving White privileges? Or as I will argue in this dissertation, are Korean adoptees unable to fully assimilate as White because they are bombarded with messages and experiences that prescribe their identities as Asian? And if so, what are the implications of this mismatching of personal racial identity and prescribed racial identity?

Korean Adoptees as a Case Study

Like other Asian American groups, the Korean adoptees in my study also experienced various forms of racialized stereotyping as they were growing up, some of which they internalized as compliments or power-neutral statements, and some they outright rejected. Many were cynical and critical about the cultural and racial homogeneity of their adoptive families and communities. They described their hometowns, schools, and peer groups as “White” or lacking in any “diversity” or “other races.” However, their attitudes about their racial and ethnic background were very mixed, and changed at different periods in their lives. As children and teenagers, the vast majority of my informants were ashamed of being Asian American or self-conscious about their physical differences, principally because of the negative attention it attracted from people they were trying to be accepted by and for all intensive purposes, were forced to live, interact, and be accepted amongst. However, as they left home for college or entered a more diverse work force, their attitudes took a turn, some for the better, and some for the worse. In particular, male Korean adoptees struggled to embrace their ethnic and racial identity even after adolescence because Asian-ness continued to be associated with femininity, oddity, and undesirability in the media, the public, and among peers. Female Korean adoptees were more likely to embrace their Asian features and heritage because these qualities marked them as unique, exotic, and desirable. These gendered sentiments are common among Asian American men and women who are not transnationally adopted as well (Prasso, 2005; Oren, 2005; Daniel Kim, 2005; Eng 2001; Chan, 1998; Houston, 1993; Shimizu, 2007).

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Narratives revealed that despite their isolation from communities of color, all my informants put forth effort to learn about their Korean heritage and Asian Americans, some more than others. For example, informants would research about Korea on the internet, participate in Korean culture camps, attend adoption agency picnics, learn martial arts, attend a university known for its diverse student body, try to date an Asian or Asian American person, and even participate in my research as a means of learning about their heritage. However, what they discovered is that their cultural knowledge and skills were not adequate for many Asian and Asian Americans they encountered. Many Asian nationals and Asian Americans perceived adoptees as victims of U.S. economic and political imperialism because of the capital and citizenship necessary for adopting children from Korea. They also perceived them as victims of White hegemony because they are cut off from the true knowledge of themselves and their cultural essence because they were adopted and raised by Whites. Some would express pity towards adoptees for “losing” their family, language, and culture. Others looked upon adoptees with contempt, convinced that their predominantly White peer groups and seemingly White-washed values and behaviors, reflected a deep seated desire to be White. As a result, some informants expressed feelings of shame and inadequacy because they were convinced that being authentically Asian or being unconditionally accepted as a “real” Asian would always be out of their reach.

However, these assumptions ignore the complexity of experiences and struggles adoptees have had to face as they were forced to adapt in environments virtually void of Asian American interactions, discussions about how racism could affect them, or answers regarding why Koreans do not adopt “their own” and would allow their children to be

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sent to America. I argue that the narratives of Korean adoptees provide a compelling case study demonstrating how Whiteness cannot be achieved by Asian Americans, even when they appear to be completely “cut off” from their ethnic roots and have been socially and economically integrated within a middleclass/upper-middleclass White family and community. Korean adoptees’ inability to pass as White, and their cultural distinctiveness among non-adopted Asian Americans, situate adoptees in a class of their own. Parents, friends, strangers, peers, and media, work together in constraining their racial identity even in present times.

Why an Anthropological Approach to Transnational Adoption?

Activist and scholarly claims that link the current practice of Korean adoption with the imperial domination of the Western nations in the Pacific Rim are worth revisiting. The practice of transnational adoption developed in the United States shortly after World War II, and during the Cold War. Therefore the first Asian children to be adopted by American families were not Korean, but Japanese⁵. As the plight of needy, orphaned children abroad was made visible to Americans through television, radio, and print media, religious organizations led the way in developing international adoption relief. Thousands of children were depicted as being homeless, with family killed in the war or suffering in the aftermath of war from poverty, starvation, and illness. A growing number of these orphans were “racially mixed,”⁶ a bitter-sweet outcome of Western military and altruistic intervention. The stories of these “biracial” children and how they

⁵ The Adoption History Project. (2008) *Uoregon.edu*.
<http://www.uoregon.edu/~adoption/topics/internationaladoption.htm>

⁶ “Racially mixed” and also “biracial” are put in quotes because these folk concepts are often intended to reify the notion of discrete racial groups between *Homo sapiens* race.



were stigmatized in their countries attracted a great deal of sympathy from Americans, who in return were quick to support relief efforts with financial contributions and willingness to adopt.

During the 1950s, the most common procedure for adopting children from abroad was through *proxy adoptions*, where U.S. citizens were allowed to adopt in foreign courts in absentia. Despite tremendous objections from child welfare professionals who were critical of its lack of regulations, proxies gained more ground after 1955 when Harry and Bertha Holt, a well-to-do evangelical couple from rural Oregon, adopted eight Amerasian⁷ children orphaned after the Korean War. The Holts sold their own holdings and used the proceeds to lobby Congress to institute the first U.S. laws establishing uniform international adoption procedures. As the momentum for proxy adoptions began to build, adoption professionals were troubled that these foreign children would be given unequal legal protection and inferior post adoption support than would otherwise be provided for American orphans and adoptees. Again, I cite The Adoption History Project (2005) website:

Officials in the U.S. Children's Bureau, the Child Welfare League of America, and the American Branch of International Social Service charged proxy peddlers, including Bertha and Harry Holt, with masterminding an unscrupulous, global mail-order baby racket and hiding behind humanitarian rhetoric. Transnational migrants needed the minimum standards mandated in most domestic adoptions: investigation, supervision, and probation. Professionals pointed to additional hazards in international adoption. Many foreign children—from Asia in particular—had spent lengthy periods in orphanages and needed special attention as a result. Professionals also claimed to possess crucial cultural awareness that amateurs lacked. They suggested that parents adopting foreign children needed basic education about children's home countries, rudimentary language skills, and enlightened attitudes about a host of things from food and sleeping arrangements to neighborhood integration and interracial dating and marriage. (<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/topics/proxy.htm>)

⁷ A term commonly used to describe a person born in Asia to a U.S. father and an Asian mother.

But the Holts believed that they were doing God's work. In the U.S. and Korean press, the Holts were portrayed as heroic and selfless humanitarians, prompting Oregon Senator Richard Neuberger to refer to them as incarnations of "the Biblical Good Samaritan." Many American couples applauded the Holts for creating a prompt and uncomplicated adoption process. The Holts eventually established the Holt International adoption agency in South Korea, which has since grown into a transnational and for-profit organization, branching out to other nations as well as facilitating domestic adoptions in the U.S. For four decades, Korea remained the primary sending-country in international adoption, sending over 200, 000 of its children to Western nations, 175, 000 of which were sent to the United States (Altstein and Simon, 2000).

In virtually two decades South Korea went from a war-torn, colonized, third-world nation to a Pacific Rim economic power-house. South Korea's impressive strides towards modernization and Westernization in the 1970s and 1980s, gained it the reputation of being an economic Cinderella story. It emerged as a "tiger economy," a popular term applied to rapidly developing countries in Asian (Castley, 1997). As such, South Koreans began to deal with new issues associated with industrialization, such as what to do with unwed mothers, Amerasians, the physically disabled, and poverty. In the absence of a comprehensive welfare system, international adoption seemed to some single parents and couples the most logical and responsible choice. The profile of Korean birth parents relinquishing their babies and children for adoption has now expanded to include poor, working class, and even middle class couples who believed that giving up their children to live in the U.S. would be a more desirable life strategy for the birth

parent(s) and the child. Poor and young single mothers continue to makeup a large segment, but clearly the contexts in which women relinquish their children for adoption have drastically changed. South Korea is no longer a third world country, sexuality and the sex industry has become more liberalized, women are more empowered to make decisions about their reproductive choices, and international adoption has developed into a highly bureaucratic network of players cashing in on the ever expanding demand for healthy babies (Palley, 1990; Lie, 1995; Kendall, 1996; Moon, 1998; Choi, 1998; Berquist, Vonk, Kim, and Feit, 2007).

The profiles of adoptive American couples adopting from Korea have also changed. Post-Korean War adoptions were more-or-less humanitarian gestures by Christian families, most of whom already had biological children of their own and varied in their socio-economic background. Today the couples are usually adopting from abroad because they face fertility problems and/or hope to form a family through a more expedited channel than is available through domestic adoption. Adoptions from Korea also lessen the likelihood of birth families looking for their children as can be the case with domestic adoptions, and for couples hoping for infants, Korea provides an abundant supply of male and female “healthy babies,” who presumably have fewer special needs than American children, prompting many adoptive parents and adoption workers to refer to Korea as the “Cadillac of Adoption”. Socio-economically, adoptive families are largely from college educated, middle-class or upper middle-class backgrounds because of the exorbitant adoption fees involved (Pertman, 2000; Patton 2000).

Adoptions from Korea are essentially interracial in that the children are racialized in the U.S. as “Asian” and they are placed in families that are in large part “White.”

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Historically, this practice went against the socially established practice of *matching*.

During much of the twentieth century, *matching* was the preferred practice for non-relative adoptions in the U.S. The goal was to disguise the infertility of a White couple by *matching* them up with an adoptable child that resembled their physical traits, i.e. same “race,” same hair color, and same eye color. The Adoption History Project (2005)

describes the practice of matching as:

An optimistic, arrogant, and historically novel objective that suggested that a social operation could and should approximate nature by copying it. Between 1920 and 1970, matching was popular, especially among infertile couples who sought to adopt because they were unable to conceive children of their “own.” By mid-century, infertility had become an unquestioned qualification for adoption. This reinforced the notion that matching compensated for reproductive failure by promising relationships that could pass for the exclusive, authentic, and permanent bonds of kinships that were only natural.
(<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/topics/matching.html>)

Matching reinforced the stigma and inferiority of adoption by attempting to conceal the couples’ infertility. But what happens when the non-biological connection between parent and child cannot be concealed, such is the case of interracial adoptions? Interracial adoptions, which mostly involved children of color being adopted by White couples, challenged the philosophy of *matching* by insisting that families could be formed between parents and children who did not resemble each other. But this “color blind” approach to adoption did not bode well with adoption professionals and minority community activists.

Approximately seventeen years after Harry and Bertha Holt adopted their children from Korea, the National Association of Black Social Workers issued a statement opposing the placement of Black children in White homes, calling interracial adoptions “unnatural,” “unnecessary,” and “a form of genocide.” They argued that White parents

were incapable of instilling the survival skills necessary for African American children to thrive in a racially unequal America. The organization's president, Cenie J. Williams, argued that temporary foster care and institutional placements were preferable to adoption by White families (Patton, 2000). But many adoptive parents and adoption professionals advocating for a color-blind adoption system were convinced that providing a loving home for adoptees was paramount. Nobel Prize-winning author Pearl S. Buck, who adopted several Amerasian children fathered by Black American servicemen stationed in Germany and Japan, had the following to say about her own adoptive parent experience:

One of my own beloved children happens . . . to be the child of an American Negro soldier and a German mother. . . She is our living answer to prejudice . . . She is our treasure. To all criticism I have but one reply. She is happy with us and we are happy with her. That is all that is required to make a good family (Buck, 1958).

Critiques of interracial adoption, though largely referring to the adoption of African American and Native American children, have also been raised in relation to the experiences of Korean adoptees. Many adult Korean adoptees and professional advocates are concerned that the prevalent cultural rhetoric of being color-blind, in other words, not seeing or caring about the race of one's adopted child, ignores or severely underestimates the existence and impact of racism and stereotyping on the lives of Korean adoptees (Melina, 1988; Register, 1991; Cox, 1999; Hübinette, 2007).

The color-blind approach to matters of interracial adoption is both honorable and disturbing all at the same time. The color-blindness of adoptive parents implies that a loving home trumps the quality of care that can be offered by socio-economically challenged couples of the same racial and ethnic background. But such comments are

anecdotal at best, neglecting systematic problems with child trafficking and the pressuring of poor and vulnerable individuals to relinquish their children for adoption in order to feed a Western market starving for adoptable healthy babies. To address the wide array of problems stemming from years of unregulated international adoption practices, including the abduction, sale, and trafficking of children between first world nations and the sending nations, a multilateral treaty entitled “the Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption,” was signed by 66 nations at the Hague Convention on May, 29 1993, declaring that it is in the best interest of a child to “remain in the care of his or her family of origin,” and that international adoption be considered if and only if “suitable family cannot be found in his or her State of origin”. The United States signed the Convention in 1994 and under the Clinton administration, passed it in the Congress in 2000.⁸ Activists in favor of abolishing international adoptions from South Korea continue to challenge the sincerity and efforts actually being made to find suitable homes for orphans in Korea before seeking alternatives in the U.S. and Europe.

Color-blind positions on race relations are not unique to adoptive parents but are symptomatic of post-Civil Rights era discourses on race, where imbalances of power, be they between nations or racialized groups, are masked with what Ruth Frankenberg and others describe as color and power evasive rhetoric (1993). The positive racial differentiation experienced by my informants and other Asian Americans, have in some ways made it possible for many White Americans, particularly those leaning to the conservative right, to believe that racism is something of the past. White Americans

⁸ The completed Hague Convention statement can be accessed on-line at <http://laws.adoption.com/statutes/hague-convention-on-protection-of-children.html>.

surveyed since the 1980s consistently report that racial discrimination has largely been eradicated as a determinant of economic opportunities for minority groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Far from being the victims of discrimination, studies have found that many White Americans believe that racial minorities are receiving preferential treatment with respect to a range of economic opportunities, making Whites the new victims of reverse-discrimination (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985). Asian Americans serve as a convenient case-study for individuals needing to further these claims, the case being, if Asian Americans can succeed despite being racial minorities, then why can't others do the same? Individuals who claim color-blindness do so with the hopes that by asserting that they do not see racial differences, they can somehow disassociate themselves from the deplorable racisms of the past which explicitly classified and discriminated based on race, i.e. Jim Crow and slavery. But Frankenberg (1993) argues that color and power evasiveness represents a new era of racism, "despite the best intentions of its adherents, in this sense preserves the power structure inherent in the essentialist racism" (147).

Korean Adoptees as Alternative Asian American Voices

For many of my informants, the hegemony of Whiteness was most clearly asserted through their socialization in their homes and hometowns. With no malice intent, parents, social workers, and community members worked collectively to "assimilate" these babies and children from Korea. In the early phases of U.S.-Korean adoption, both children with single and dual Asian parentage were expected to assimilate and adjust to their American lives and families. Largely due to the *model minority* and *honorary White*

stereotype of Asian Americans, adoption specialists, adoptive parents, and also the adoptive community members and peers, came to see Korean adoptees as being race-less or unaffected by racism (Dorow, 2000). However, adolescent and adult Korean adoptees began to report experiences of racism and low self-esteem associated with their minority status in counseling sessions, psychological evaluations, and in personal writings (D.S. Kim, 2007; Hall and Steinberg, 2000). These findings overlapped with other studies indicating that Asian Americans are victims of structural and social discrimination (J. Kim, 1981; Stacey Lee, 1996; Tuan, 1998). As a result, some adoption professionals encourage adoptive parents to raise their children in a multicultural home, integrating Korean culture into their lives when possible.

However, culture, whether it is a discussion of American culture, Korean culture, or multiculturalism, is commonly treated by adoption professionals and parents as fixed and oppositional categories. In my study, culture was often perceived as static or a stand-in for race. A family that adopts a child from Korea for example becomes multicultural by default because it now included a non-White member, but the Korean child's values, experiences, and cultural symbols of reference are virtually ignored or expected to be relinquished and forgotten upon adoption. The "American" in "American families" privileges White families as real Americans and reinforces notions that Americans of Asian or Korean descent are not American, i.e. they are perpetual foreigners. And though social workers stress that a well adjusted child needs to form relationships with positive Korean role models and peers, what is unclear is how parents can apply these ideas when the vast majority live in areas sparsely populated by Asian Americans or other people of color (Simon and Alstein, 2000; Macfarlane, 1992; Register, 1991). For instance, parents

who live in predominantly White communities are encouraged to attend annual picnics with other adoptive families, enroll their children in Korean culture camps, introduce their children to Korean language and culture, or even travel back to Korea on a motherland tour. But is this enough? Can the intermittent learning of Korean things and exposure to Korean people help adoptees prepare for what the National Association of Black Social Workers considers the “survival skills” necessary to thrive in a racially unequal America?

The growing number of adult Korean adoptee memories printed in books and internet sites provide some clues to the ways in which adoptees have adjusted to their adoption in the absence of Asian American peers and role models. “Surviving” in a racially unequal America has meant very different things for Korean adoptees who have been adopted into a family that represents the privileged racial class. In *Voices from Another Place*, a collection of essays and poems written by transnationally adopted Koreans, editor Susan Soon-Keum Cox (1999) explains how over time, she and other adult adoptees began to challenge the idea that their identities were colorless, stable, and politically neutral.

As the first generation of Korean adoptees became adults, the issues of identity, birth culture, ethnicity and race began to emerge. As we became independent from our adoptive families, established careers, married and had children, many of us also began to long for clarity and to explore our unique citizenship in a global context, to discover and find peace with the balance of our Korean and adopted nationalities (1).

In her closing statement, Cox argues that adoptees’ identities have been controlled, largely by those who are not transracially adopted. Even as adults, adoptees find it difficult to assert their identities.

Adoptees are usually identified and defined as children. That we mature, grow up and come into our own wisdom is often not acknowledged. We can and wish to speak for ourselves. The voices in this book all began in Korea. Now these voices speak loudly and clearly and strongly – from wherever they are (1).

Understanding the instability, social constructed-ness, and hierarchies of power intrinsic in any discussion of *culture* is the hallmark of anthropology. Open-ended interviews with adult adoptees have revealed a plethora of life experiences and emotional depth that is often missing in clinical studies, surveys, and personal essays and poems. As Susan Soon-Keum Cox suggests, Korean adoptees long to express how they believe they have adjusted to their adoptions and how they conceive of their cultural identities. Consistent with postmodernist, feminist, and critical multiculturalist approaches to culture and identity, this dissertation seeks to analyze how Korean adoptees have at once conformed to, challenged, and confounded racial ideologies, using their narratives and life experiences as the primary text.

My Positionality

In introductory anthropology courses, students are taught that all cultures, cultural traditions, and experiences are more-or-less relative. To believe otherwise would be ethnocentric. Cultural phenomena such as identity formations, rituals, and ideologies are deconstructed into analytical pieces. These analytical pieces are further critiqued for their role in maintaining hegemonic systems of race, gender, class, nationality, etc. But for many scholars of color, myself included, deconstructing and relativizing our experiences as cultural minorities can be an uncomfortable and menacing academic exercise. Our intimate knowledge and experiences as historically underrepresented and misrepresented

communities of color significantly affect why, who, and how we research. These feelings resonate in a statement made by Renato Rosaldo (1989), who writes, “for me as a Chicano, questions of culture emerge not only from my discipline, but also from a more personal politics of identity and community” (xi).

I came of age in the era of multiculturalism with an arsenal of experiences of racism and stereotyping, evidence of my so-called “authentic” minority self. My professional goal has been to join the ranks of other activists of color addressing the issues and untold perspectives of racialized minority groups, lending the authenticity of our voices as well as authoring policies and recommendations for change that affect our qualities of life. I remain convinced that “native anthropologists” possess a special opportunity of unlocking important information not accessible to outsiders, especially socially and materially privileged outsiders. But instead of discovering an untapped cache of original information, my interviews and interactions with adult Korean adoptees uncovered stories of pain and sorrow that I could not relate to as a Korean American woman who was NOT adopted.

As Korean Americans, my informants and I undoubtedly shared similar stories of being perceived as foreign exchange students, passive model minorities, and being ethnically identified as everything under the sun except Korean. In fact, for many of my informants, being interviewed about race and racism by someone who looked Asian yet spoke fluent English was a rare and liberating experience, so much so that after the interview was formally completed, the dialogue continued with them asking me questions they had never had the opportunity to ask before. It felt good to know that the interview

was not just about me and my research; they felt they got something out of the experience as well.

However, my non-adopted status also afforded me distinct privileges that should not be overlooked. As a non-adopted Korean American, I was commonly perceived by the adoptive community as an “authentic Korean,” a status that presumed that I possessed accurate information about a variety of Korean and culture related issues. I was happy to oblige when I could by writing names and special words in Korean, translating during reunions both in person and over the phone, and coordinating Korean culture camps for adoptees in elementary and middle school. But there were other questions I could not answer, nor would want to if I could; questions about proper parenting styles or whether or not I believed they, the informant, had identity and attachment “problems”. I am neither a parent nor a licensed therapist, and yet my position as a non-adopted Korean American doctoral candidate seemed qualification enough to answer these perplexing questions.

Like all researchers, I enter the field with filters of “scientific objectivity,” theoretical orientations, and a methodological protocol. Being born in Korea and sharing some similar experiences and political views as Asian Americans will most likely earn me the dubious title of “native anthropologist,” but I am still an outsider, someone clearly outside the Korean adoptee experience, a position Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) cleverly coins, the *halfie*. The *halfie*, “whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage,” suffers a “blocked ability to comfortably assume the self of anthropology” (140). She describes her positionality as split; she is “speaking for” the community in that she

shares a cultural identity with them, yet she is also “speaking from” the point of view of an academic:

Halfies’ dilemmas are . . . extreme. As anthropologists, they write for other anthropologists . . . they are called to account by educated members of these communities. More importantly, not just because they position themselves with respect to two communities, but because when they present the Other they are presenting themselves, they speak with a complex awareness of and investment in reception. (142)

But bell hooks (1989) warns in *Talking Back* that the researcher or the presumed “authority” is almost inevitably positioned to reinforce domination because they control and edit the content of their research.

Even if perceived ‘authorities’ writing about a group to which they do not belong and/or over which they wield power are progressive, caring, and right-on in every way, as long as their authority is constituted by either the absence of the voices of the individuals whose experiences they seek to address, or the dismissal of those voices as unimportant, the subject-object dichotomy is maintained and domination is reinforced (43).

Acknowledging that I do hold this position of power is an important first step because my perspectives and writing style obviously reflect an educational training and professional agenda that may or may not be palatable to all my informants.

But at the same time my positionality and likeness to my informants also offered me unique opportunities for engaging them in critical dialogues and debates about being Asian American, social engineering within the family, culture, race and power. In several segments of my interviews for example I challenge my informants about how they answered questions about racial politics and beliefs about American or Asian cultural fixity. I pushed them to be more self-critical and pointed out inconsistencies, contradictions and ambiguities in their narratives to help them understand how race and power have played a more important role in

their lives than they wanted to recognize. As a culture camp coordinator, I also used my status as an “authentic Korean” to change the curriculum and incorporated non-Orientalizing classes on Asian American grooming practices, modern Korean history, racial identity development and the Asian American college experience. Though somewhat unconventional, my style of activist methodology succeeded in illustrating the layered processes of how my informants’ cultural identities were formed over time, as well as showing them that identity is flexible and can be negotiated and re-authored with community support, reeducation and new experiences. My next step will be to contribute to publications where the central audience will be Asian Americans, Korean nationals, adoption professionals, and new generations of White parents adopting from other Asian nations such as China and India, all with the hopes of educating and creating social change.

I was privy to my informants’ most intimate and painful memories associated with their adoption. Many informants divulged to me information they had not shared with anyone, not even their parents, spouse, or best friend. As a result, I feel a tremendous obligation to those in my research. I feel an obligation to make my research more than simply a case study or contribution to anthropological theory and research. My hope is that my dissertation, and the publications and presentations to come, will provide meaningful information to the communities that have made my doctorate possible.

Methodology

I conducted my dissertation research for a period of thirteen months, beginning with the overseas portion of my research in June of 2002 and later with the domestic portion in November of 2002. My methodology included a) open-ended interviews with adult adoptees, b) informal interviews, c) participant observation, d) focus groups, and e) literary reviews of essay, prose, and poems written by Korean adoptees. **Instruments included in the Appendix*

Multi-Sited Research

In the present, transnational flows of people, media, and communication have become especially vital in reconceptualizing the scope and diversity of Asian American identities and issues. Elements of hip-hop culture, affirming symbols associated with their land(s) of ancestry, Asian pop culture, Asian American cyber communities, grassroots activism, and Asian American gatherings and rallies, have come to represent the Asian America of the twenty-first century (Ong, 1999; Prashad, 2001; Lee and Wong, 2003; Maira, 2000). However, Asian America was, and continues to be, a contested and negotiated construct. The transnational realities of the postmodern era require a revamping of older methodological approaches. George Marcus endorsed a modern ethnography that reflects the multiplicity of global influences on local communities and identities. Marcus (1998) states:

The idea [of a multisite/multilocal ethnography] is that any cultural identity or activity is constructed by multiple agents in varying context, or places, and that ethnography must be strategically conceived to represent this sort of multiplicity, and to specify intended and unintended consequences in the network of complex connections within a system of places (52).

This perspective is especially appropriate for my research on adult Korean adoptees, as most of my informants linked their cultural identities to multiple communities of importance: their hometowns in which they were adopted, the nation of their birth (Korea), their communities of racial/ethnic affiliation, and distant or cyber communities of Korean adoptees.

The State of Michigan

Prior to moving to Michigan for graduate school (1997), I was not aware that there was a significant Korean adoptee population in Michigan. It was not until I was approached by a group of adoptive parents to teach Korean folk drumming classes for Korean Culture Camp in Flushing, that I realized Michigan, as well as other states in the Midwest such as Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois, had a long history of adopting from Korea, spanning fifty years. Exact numbers are impossible to come by because of strict confidentiality laws and incomplete record keeping at the State and Federal level.

150,000 is the most commonly cited figure for the approximate number of Korean adoptees placed in American homes since the Korean War. Currently in Michigan, there are approximately four Korean Culture Camps for transnationally adopted children and teenagers, attracting anywhere from one hundred to two hundred campers each summer.

There are three nationally affiliated adoption agencies that continue to place Korean children in Michigan homes. These agencies are Americans for International Aid and Adoption, Family Adoption Consultants, and Bethany Christian Services. Support groups and organizations for adoptive parents and Korean adoptees can be found in Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor, Flushing, Novi, Southfield, and East Lansing. Because of my

familiarity and involvement with the Korean adoption communities throughout Michigan, I chose Michigan as my primary geographic location for recruiting informants for interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Others individuals fitting the profile of Korean, internationally adopted, 18 and over in age, adopted by White Americans, raised in a predominantly White community, but were raised in other states were included in my sample to add to diversity of perspectives and experiences as they relate to multiracial heritage, age, and sexual orientation.

South Korea

Thanks to the conveniences of modern technology, Korean adoptees are able to physically return to Korea with relative ease. An estimated 2,000 to 3,000 adoptees return to South Korea annually (Sohn, 2003). Some choose to return on their own, some go as a part of a study abroad program, and others go in large motherland tour groups with fellow adoptees and family members. Because some adoptees, social workers, therapists, and adoptive parents place an important emphasis on the physical return to Korea, whether it is to search for biological family, learn about their cultural roots, or to participate in a conference, I wanted to include Korea, or adoptees' return to Korea, as a research site.

In July of 2002, I joined a group of forty-seven teenage and adult Korean adoptees on a motherland tour to South Korea. Seven of the participants were from Michigan and two were actual campers I worked with at Sae Jong Camp. In addition to collecting data, I also served as a resident counselor and translator.

Cyberspace

The internet has been an essential tool for Korean adoptees' searching for their roots, community, support groups, and answers. There are numerous support groups, blogs, e-mail lists, and chat groups created by and for Korean adoptees. Friendships and communities created through the internet have spawned an interesting phenomena within the Korean adoptee community know as "mini gatherings" and "big gatherings". Groups of adult Korean adoptees identify a city, or in the case of "big gatherings" a country, to meet face to face.

Cyber communities are an important venue for adoptees to openly discuss and debate sensitive topics about adoption, racism, inequality, and Korean culture. Because these cyber communities are most often facilitated and dominated by Korean adoptees, scathing critiques of adoption, adoptive parents, non-adopted Asian Americans and Asians, and discrimination are not uncommon. For this reason, I wanted to include, KAW@yahoo.com, one of the most long standing and prolific Korean adoptee cyber communities, as a research site. Four of my informants, as well as myself, frequently contribute to this site.

Open-ended Interviews and Sample

I interviewed forty adult (over the age of eighteen) Korean adoptees, diverse in age, class, sexual orientation, family status, political orientation, and involvement in Asian American/Korean social networks. My sample included twenty females and twenty males. All but three of my informants were raised in the State of Michigan in communities they self described as predominantly "White". The three non-Michigan

residents currently live in Illinois, Indiana, and Pennsylvania, and were raised in communities where they and their Korean adoptee siblings represented the only people of color. I included them in my sample to better represent the experiences of Korean adoptees that identify as gay, lesbian, and bisexual. The length of the interviews varied tremendously, with the shortest interview lasting a little over an hour, and the longest, five hours. Of the forty interviews, 30 individuals' narratives and quotes were used in the dissertation. Individual statements were selected primarily on the basis of length and depth; those who answered questions with the most detailed examples, reflection, and to a large extent eloquence of articulation, were selected if the overall tone and substance of their statements corroborated with that of other informants AND if their comments or experiences offered a contrasting perspective.

Informal Interviews

Informal interviews were conducted with people I came in contact with at Korean Culture Camp and the motherland tour to Korea. These brief encounters were used to gather different perspectives about Korean adoptees and their endeavors to search for their heritage and biological family. Informal interviewees were conducted with adoptive parents, Korean Culture Camp volunteers, foster parents of Korean adoptees, and Korean nationals.

Participant Observation

My personal and professional involvement with various Korean adoptee and Asian American social networks has made it possible for me to collect data in settings

where Korean adoptees represent the majority of the organizers and participants, as well as places where adoptees are the topic of discussion yet represent a small minority. My research is based on observations made primarily at four major sites: 1) Korean Culture Camp; 2) KAW@yahoo.com; 3) the KAAN Annual Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and 4) a motherland tour of Korea with Korean Ties.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were conducted, one with six adult Korean adoptees and another with twelve Korean nationals. Both groups were shown a film entitled *First Person Plural*. The film is an autobiographical account of an adult Korean adoptees reunification with her biological mother and the impact it has had on her identity and relationship with her adoptive White parents. Participants were asked a series of relatively similar questions regarding the filmmakers childhood in a predominantly White community, her feelings about her adoptive and birth families, and the significance of her trips back to Korea. The purpose of the focus groups were to compare how similarly or differently adoptees and Korean nationals felt about interracial adoption, cultural identity, and the significance of returning to Korea.

Analysis and Organization

Information gathered from the sources mentioned above were transcribed and coded using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 2.0. The interview sample was collected non-randomly, thus limiting to what extent experiences and opinions could be generalized. However, the collective body of transcribed information from the interviews,

participant observation, and focus groups, produced reoccurring data sets that were analyzed for its content. Coded text associated with memories of life in Korea, emotions associated with birth parents, reactions to racism and stereotyping and age and gendered experiences of racialization appeared in a significant portion of the interviews and observations. These patterns represent the foundation of the dissertation.

This dissertation is organized chronologically following the developmental histories and memories of my informants. Chapter one focuses on the early childhood memories of my informants, some of whom recall vivid memories of their lives in Korea. The main goal of this chapter is to glean some understanding of how my informants remember being racialized in their predominantly White adoptive communities, and the impact these early experiences may have had in shaping their attitudes towards race, racism, and their sense of racial identity. The second chapter focuses on how my informants responded to being racialized, specifically as foreigners by strangers, and model minorities or honorary Whites by associates and family members. This chapter reveals the limitations adoptees face in their conscious and unconscious efforts to transcend their Asian racialization and instead be themselves or pass as White. The third chapter examines how my informants are received by Asian Americans and Asian nationals, in particular, how they are marginalized as racial sell –outs and victims of White/Western hegemony, forever alienated from their so-called true Asian selves. This chapter reveals how racial formations produced by Asian Americans may also reproduce hierarchies that essentialize Asian American cultural identities in extremely narrow ways, so much so that they may alienate adoptees. And the fourth chapter focuses of adoptees’ attempts to search for their cultural roots and community through alternative and perhaps

less threatening venues, such as cyber communities for adoptees, culture camps, and motherland tours. For many adoptees, these venues are disappointing and limiting in scope. The limitation and even disappointments experienced from these valiant efforts may challenge some academic and lay peoples' romanticized characterizations of multicultural, hybrid and transnational identities. These narratives reveal the various constraints that control individuals and communities from transcending dominant classification systems and expressing the uniqueness of their cultural identities and histories. I conclude the dissertation with statements about the larger implications of the research in terms of understanding how racism and White hegemony manifest themselves in an increasingly multicultural society.

CHAPTER 1: GROWING UP KOREAN AND WHITE

I feel White most of the time. The only time I don't feel White is when I'm being stared at or discriminated against, like when I was dating, I was asked what would the kids look like, or when I'm called *yellow* or a *chink*, that's when I know I'm not White. And I know what you're getting at with this question; I learned all about hegemonic systems. Is there a possibility that I lack racial awareness; that I'm in denial of my Asianness; that I'm selling out, "I can't be White. No, no, I have to be something else". But you see with me, this is all I know, so how can I be selling out? How can I sell out an Asian culture I never had?

Daniel, age 41 or 42

**the accuracy of his age is uncertain because of incomplete birth records*

The goal of this chapter is to address the conundrum of how Korean adoptees (KADs) are positioned with the U.S. racial order, and how they in turn identify themselves. Are they honorary Whites, do they identify as people of color, are they multicultural, or are their cultural experiences and identities too marginalized to constitute a recognizable identity group? The concepts of *perpetual foreigner* and *model minority* are particularly relevant in understanding the nature of how the KADs in my study were racialized, and the impact these experiences had on their sense of identity and belonging in their predominantly White communities of adoption, and their racially diverse communities of interaction.

As Daniel's quote suggests, the relationship between race and culture are indeed arbitrary and constructed; an individual's racial classification does not have to match the culture of his or her socialization and identification. But Daniel is hardly free to choose his identity either. His Whiteness is revoked when he is singled out as a person of color, but he has also been challenged by activist colleagues and his graduate program to interrogate his own internalized racism and his adoption into social circles of White

privilege as an Asian American adopted by Whites. This is why he asks rhetorically, “Am I a victim or perpetrator of White hegemony”? Though Daniel’s level of self-critique and familiarity with social theory is rare, his perspective on being racially marginalized as a KAD was a common sentiment expressed by my informants. I will begin with my informants’ earliest childhood memories of being racially differentiated, and work up to adolescence and young adulthood to illustrate the complex journey, the back and forth debates about cultural belonging, they have traveled in constructing their identity.

Informants recall memories of being teased, stereotyped, or treated as if they were foreigners as early as three years of age. Many remember being mistaken for Chinese and Japanese, a catch-all concept that presumed that people of any Asian origin were biologically and culturally the same. But the narratives also reveal that despite being mistaken as foreigners from time to time, my informants eventually became accepted by their family, peers, and community members as an exceptional minority who has culturally blended in and no longer disrupts the status quo (Warren & Twine, 1997). During open-ended interviews, conference presentations, and cyber community discussions, adult KADs acknowledged that despite being racialized as Asian, they lived much of their lives feeling as if they were racially and culturally White, and even forgetting at times that they were Asians.

As they grew into adolescence and adulthood, their family, friends, and associates grew to accept them as regular members of the community, and perceived them to be *model minorities* and *honorary Whites*, instead of racial minorities or cultural “others”. Similar to Loewen’s description of Chinese Americans in the Mississippi Delta, my informants possessed a “Caucasian social atmosphere,” which differentiated them

from the more alien and stigmatized non-White groups. But if my informants did possess a “Caucasian social atmosphere” which facilitated their acceptance, it was not without its share of incidences. Narratives are filled with stories of racism, stereotyping, and differential treatment precisely because they were not White. Even in the absence of overtly racializing or racist language, my informants knew that the physical differences between themselves and their birth or adopted communities, marked them as “outsiders” and “others”.

Isolated as the only, or one of few individuals of Korean and Asian descent, my informants learned to deal with their social marginalization by employing a variety of coping and defense strategies. These strategies ranged from physically fighting against racist aggression and taunts, passively accepting racial harassment and stereotyping, vigilant attempts at socially “fitting in” with the racial group in power, and even opting to date or marry interracially, all to minimize or draw attention away from their difference and social stigma as Asians. There is no mistaking that for my informants, Whiteness was a transitory status that they had no control in maintaining.

Presumptions or aspirations of being White could be, and were, rejected and challenged throughout their lives. Therefore feeling White or forgetting they were Asian was not so much a matter of claiming a cultural identity or being disillusioned about one’s racial status, but more so the result of being treated in very specific ways by White peers and Asian/Asian Americans. Adoptees’ honorary White privilege manifested itself in the following ways: (a) being able to maneuver in their social environment without being singled out or discriminated against as a person of color, (b) being accepted as a “native” American, rather than a foreigner from Asia, and (c) being essentialized by

Whites, Asians, and even themselves, as being culturally one thing, American, i.e. they were presumed to possess a singular culture, were without a “marked” culture, or were alienated from their natural culture of origin. Hence, Whiteness was both an unmarked and marked racial status; among family, friends, and close associates, my informants felt White because they were NOT differentiated because of their race, yet among Asian Americans and other people of color, they were marked as being culturally White washed and alienated from their essentialized Asian cultural roots.

Informants’ childhood narratives are filled with stories or examples of being socially differentiated. Informants knew that they were not a part of the racial majority because of the reactions and comments their Asianness generated, especially when they entered White social spaces. I have identified and broadly named three reoccurring modes of differentiation. The first mode is characterized by **negative experiences of racial differentiation**, in particular, experiences where adoptees’ physical differences were associated with negative connotations such as character flaws, abnormality, ugliness, and a bleak life chance. These experiences were usually accompanied by teasing, social isolation, physical assaults, and institutional discrimination. The second mode is characterized by **positive experiences of racial differentiation**, where Korean adoptees were distinguished as gifted, exotic beauties, being uniquely attractive, youthful, and desirable specifically because of their Korean or Asian heritage. And the third mode, **interracial shock**, is where the mere presence of a Korean adoptee or a Korean adoptee with their White family and/or friends, trigger reactions of surprise from strangers. These nonverbal signals, though not explicitly derogatory or complimentary, represent moments in adoptees’ lives where their physical difference was acknowledged, creating and/or

reinforcing feelings of racial differentiation from the majority group. Rather than taking these particular narratives as representative, I draw on them to borrow a concept from Ruth Frankenberg (1994), to “begin the process of defamiliarizing that which is taken for granted” (44) to analyze the racial structuring of KADs’ lives. It then becomes possible to examine the way racism and racializing experiences shape these individuals’ environments, daily encounters, and self perceptions.

My informants were adopted from Korea as both infants and children; the youngest to be adopted were three months of age, and the oldest was thirteen years old. Informants adopted as young as eighteen months of age recall both dream-like and vivid memories of life in Korea. Some remember the love and care of a birth or foster parent, while others remember neglect and abuse. Those with vivid memories of their life in Korea share in common, experiences of poverty, hunger and living under humble conditions at home, the orphanage, or on the streets. For the majority of my informants who were adopted as infants, their first and only memories are of life in America. All my informants were adopted by White couples and were raised in predominantly White communities throughout Michigan and other Midwestern communities. I use the word White to encompass individuals who may culturally identify as American or European immigrants, yet they are racialized in the U.S. and described by my informants as White. Four informants described their hometown or one of their hometowns as somewhat more diverse because they included some international students, Arab Americans, and African Americans.

The Early Years: Childhood Memories of Korea

Being of mixed racial ancestry or possessing a physical disability immediately marks Korean children and their birth parent(s) as social deviants and pariahs. They are physically unmistakable and socially unacceptable. Narratives recounting the experiences of Korea's Amerasian and disabled populations are scant, but revealing. Donald, Janet, and John are three informants in my study who represent the first wave of U.S. – Korean adoption. They were adopted shortly after the Korean War and were adopted as children, not infants. Donald and Janet are Amerasians and John is physically disabled; all three have vivid memories of Korea, and as adults, have all returned to reunite with family, villagers, and friends.

The first phase of U.S.-Korean transnational adoption began in the mid-1950s following the aftermath of the Korean War. During this phase, the majority of children sent overseas were *hone-yo-ra*, or “mixed blood” children of American (and other United Nations) military men and Korean women. Famous American author Pearl S. Buck, who herself was an adoptive mother, coined the term *Amerasian* to describe this group of orphans and adoptees. The racial, ethnic, and national origins of Amerasians are extremely diverse, yet Koreans commonly racialized them as being either *Meegouk* or *Gum-doong-ee*. *Meegouk* translates to “White American,” where as *Gum-doong-ee* is a pejorative describing contemptible African Americans⁹. Though a great deal of articles and literature suggests that many of these children were cruelly stigmatized and “abandoned” by their Western fathers and Korean mothers, Donald who was adopted at

⁹ The term *Gum-doong-ee* is used loosely by many Korean nationals and Korean Americans to describe African Americans they believe to be untrustworthy, disrespectful, and menacing such as soldiers stationed in Korea, hip hop artists, and customers who are perceived to be shop lifters or trouble makers. However, it is not uncommon for Koreans/Korean Americans to simply generalize the term to all African Americans, regardless of circumstance.

age ten and Janet at age six, remember being loved and cared for by their birthmothers and grandparents and do not describe their experiences as abandonment. As for their fathers, neither expressed feelings of anger or resentment.

When asked about his birth parents, Donald preferred not to dwell on the unknown circumstances surrounding his mother and father's relationship, and instead views his birth as a blessing and cherishes the happy memories he has of his birth mother:

I think there was a patrol that went through my village and they were probably stationed there for a week or two or month or whatever the situation was, and I really don't know personally what [my parents'] encounter was like. And I don't put any thought to it because I look at it this way, if they didn't have their encounter, I wouldn't be here. I don't believe it was anything like rape because she had a very, very tight relationship with me. In fact, she treated me more special than her three Korean children. My mother taught me to really love. I think it had a lot to do with the way she held me. We would just look into each others' eyes and communicate.

Here, Donald juxtaposes himself with his siblings who he presumes had a biological Korean father. He does not explicitly exclude himself from being Korean, but he does suggest that despite his mixed background, i.e. his physical and perhaps paternal difference, his mother treated him with special care, above and beyond the care a mother may give to a socially stigmatized child. Janet, on the other hand, was more open about the nature of her birth mother and fathers' relationship, much of which she remembers through childhood memories and others she discovered when she returned to her birth village as an adult.

I knew from the time I was young that I had an American father, although I found out later that he was British. He was American in that he was not Korean. She would show me pictures of a man in a military uniform. I remember her showing me pictures and saying that he was going to come back to get her. And when I returned to my village in 1982, the women said my mother never married, she waited. Can you believe it? He left her with the understanding that he would come back for her and he never did. It's kinda like Miss Saigon.

When Janet returned to her home village as an adult, the village elders recognized her right away and welcomed her back. She learned that her biological father was a highly ranked military official, making her somewhat of a child celebrity in the village. Janet was told that her mother had moved away from the village, and with great sadness, she had chosen not to look for her any further.

In the telling of these early personal narratives, both Donald and Janet remember having close relationships with their birthmothers. But beyond their mother-child relationship, they were socially ostracized because of their mixed ancestry which was marked by their physical difference and the absence of a father. In both their cases, they were the only Amerasians in their village, making their visibility all the more prominent. However, both acknowledge that within their respective villages, they were treated with great care. Donald uses the word “nirvana” to describe his pleasant village memories. It was only when Donald and Janet left their village to attend school in a neighboring village that they attracted negative attention. The *negative experiences of physical differentiation* they experienced were social and institutional in scope. Donald recalls being called derogatory names, but he qualifies his statement by insisting that Koreans are not the only people who discriminate against people of mixed ancestry:

I stood out so instantly because I was the only one. I was considered *me-gouk-nome*, which means American bastard. I don't think it's limited to Koreans. I think whenever a new, different people come into a territory then obviously you're going to be labeled. And if you're a part of that new entity, where you're mixed, then you're caught in between. So from both sides you're considered a bastard. It really doesn't have to do with Korea. I mean America is the same thing. It's one of those things that probably bothered adults more than it bothered me. As a kid, people calling me names had no affect on me.

Me-gouk, which literally translates to “American” is a racially specific term which may have initially applied to White American soldiers fighting in the Korean War, but later

came to include all people resembling the physical features of White Americans, i.e. Whites Canadians and Europeans. Janet recalls being tormented mercilessly as a child because of her physical differences. In particular, she was teased for having hair that was different in color and texture. She also remembers being disliked by adults, who for whatever reason singled her out for punishment.

The biggest thing I remember was being called red-head, and back then, all Korean girls had their hair cut straight and they had bangs, and I had this crazy cowlick so I could never have bangs. I remember holding my hair down, trying to get my hair to go down. So I remember them making fun of my hair because it wasn't black and it wasn't straight. I also remember that when something went wrong, or there was a problem, I was always blamed for it even if I wasn't anywhere near it. There were some things missing from the sink, and I remember being accused of it and I didn't even know they had it. I wasn't there. There was proof I wasn't there but it didn't matter; the adults punished me anyways.

However, Amerasians encountered more than just teasing and differential treatment; they were systematically denied rights that would allow them to fully participate as Korean citizens.

In describing the racial formations specific to the U.S., Omi and Winant write (1994), "race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation . . . efforts to explain racial inequality as a purely social structural phenomenon are unable to account for the origins, patterning, and transformation of racial difference" (56). Similar racializing processes characterized the experiences of Donald and Janet. Their racialized difference did more than just incite name-calling and social stigma; it was accompanied by discriminatory practices that prohibited *hone-yo-ras* from fully participating in the society as equals. Both Donald and Janet report that they were restricted from gaining access to public schools because of their mixed ancestry. Janet recalls being turned away

at the doors of the local elementary school because she could not formally register as a resident:

I couldn't go to school and I remember different times going to school and lining up with all the other children but never being allowed to go inside. They always stopped me at the door. And I was told later why. It was the fact that I wasn't registered and you could only go to school if you were registered, and you were registered under your father's name, and if I didn't have a Korean father, I couldn't be registered. So there was just no future for me there.

Janet knows that it was very difficult and painful for her mother to relinquish her for adoption, but a decision she eventually made because of her conviction that for a fatherless Amerasian child, life in America would be unquestionably better than life in Korea.

And I remember my mother telling me that she couldn't give me a good life and that if I went to America, I would have a good life. I'm sorry, I might get emotional (Jan begins to cry). The other thing is that when we said good-bye, she was extremely distraught as I was. I don't think I realized it until I got on that plane that this was final. And I know that a lot of adopted children struggle with why their mother gave them up, but I never had to struggle with that. I felt really fortunate in that respect because I didn't grapple with feeling rejected and wondering who my mother was.

Korean society commonly uses paternal lineage as the basis for official registry and identification. The detailed lineage is recorded in an official family registry called a *hojuje*, a system modeled after the Japanese *koseki* registry system which was imposed on Koreans during the Japanese Occupation in World War II (Schmid, 2002). Under the system, the status of each family member is defined in relation to the male family head, or *hoju*. Upon marriage, women are taken from the register headed by their father and then placed under a new one headed by her husband. The children are absorbed into the father's family and therefore registered in all public documents under their father's

patrilineage. Without formal family ties, individuals cannot register for school, official activities, or marriage (Chun, 1994).

Amerasian children cannot be included in a family registry if their fathers are not Korean citizens. In some rare cases, the mother's father, i.e. maternal grandfathers, registered their biracial grandchildren under their registry to enroll them in school, but this was not without its complications and limitations. Even Amerasian children who make it into school face constant discrimination by their peers and teachers, and many quit under the pressure. Amerasians are discriminated against in essence because they symbolize the violation of two firmly established institutions, the presumed racial homogeneity of Koreans and the expectation of legitimate paternity. Amerasians' "American" features mark them as the offspring of an illicit sexual relationship, invariably marking their mothers as either sexual workers or "easy and loose" women who pursue questionable foreign men over their own men (Kendall, 1996; Chun, 1994; Kelsky, 2001).

Though none of my informants were raised as adults in Korea, had they done so, they would have surely faced other forms of social and structural discrimination. Korean-Amerasians were barred from military service, which is compulsory for all South Korean males. The rejection was especially painful for Amerasian men because their lack of military service further erodes their claim to Korean citizenship, a painful reminder that they are outsiders in their own nation of origin. Lacking a military record also makes it difficult to secure employment since most employees require evidence of military service. As such, Amerasians are usually condemned to a life of low wage and low skilled labor; they often work in temporary construction or factory jobs, or as street

vendors. In recent years, some Amerasians have taken advantage of their “American” physical features to become professional models, entertainers, and athletes (Hu, 2004; Demick, 2004).

In March 2, 2005, the South Korean National Assembly passed a revision of the Civil Law, formally abolishing the family registration system. The revision bill was approved by a 161-58 vote with 16 abstentions during a plenary session. Under the revised Civil Law that took effect in 2008, a child is allowed to assume his or her mother’s family name based on mutual consent from both parents. If a woman remarries, her children can also take the stepfather’s family name with the court’s approval. It is still too early to assess the impact this policy will have in empowering children raised by single mothers but the bill will grant children access to much needed social services and opportunities (Morley, 2005).

Additional legislation to expand rights and services for Korean Amerasians were advanced after the April 4, 2006 visit to South Korea by Super Bowl MVP Hines Ward and his mother, Young Hee Ward. Ward, who left Korea at the age of one, donated a million U.S. dollars to create the Hines Ward Helping Hands Foundation, using his celebrity status to promote social and political reform (Koehler, 2006; Wiseman, 2006). The *Korea Herald* shortly produced a 10-part series on multicultural social change in Korea. Authors attributed Ward’s visit to the government’s decision to grant legal status to people of “mixed” heritage and reform the way institutions socially marginalize and stigmatize Amerasians. Hae-n In Shin writes, “The term “mixed blood people” was changed to “people of international marriages” in future government documents. Furthermore, the government is reviewing plans to give citizenship or residency status to

those who marry Koreans and to their children. And school textbooks that describe Korea as a “nation unified by one bloodline” will be changed to one that has a “multiethnic and multicultural society (Shin, 2006).”

The Plight of the Needy

It is impossible to know exactly what Donald and Janet’s lives would have been like had they grown up biracial and father-less in Korea. What is clear is that the Japanese Occupation of Korea and the ensuing U.S. presence in Korea i.e. military, humanitarian, and media, was directly responsible for creating two modern Korean phenomena, a racial order emphasizing racial purity and the homogeneity of the Korean race (Nadia Kim, 2008; Dower, 1986; Brooker, 1991) and the practice of international adoption to address poverty, illegitimate births, and multiracial children (Lie, 1995; Hubinette, 2002).

In the early phases of international adoption, American humanitarians encouraged Koreans to save orphans and Amerasians from a life of poverty and discrimination by allowing them to be adopted to the United States, a nation characterized for its wealth, charity towards orphans and adoptees, educational opportunities, modernity, and multicultural tolerance. These campaigns to find and “save” Amerasian children were relentless and tremendously effective (Briggs, 2003; Alstein and Simon, 1990). Janet recalls the day Molly Holt, daughter of Harry and Bertha Holt, arrived at the village and spoke with her mother about relinquishing her for adoption. Molly Holt was also the founder of the Children’s Center, an orphanage in Korea for disabled infants and children.

One day there was a jeep that came to my village and they were looking specifically for me, and Molly Holt was one of the women and we met in a neighbor's home and my mother was there and there were other women there. Molly and the person she was traveling with had a clip board and they asked me if I would like to go to America. What child wouldn't at that point? I went with Molly in the jeep and the village women were all crying and wailing. We drove to another village and we picked up a biracial girl, a Black Korean, she was about my age. And then we went to another place and we picked up a little boy who was 3 years old and he ended up becoming my American brother. My American parents adopted two of us at the same time and we were put together to form a sibling group.

Single mothers in general, but women with Amerasian children in particular, faced the prospect of never getting married. Janet's mother held on to the hope that her boyfriend/lover would return for her and marry her one day, and for years remained single, living with her family. But Donald's mother was less optimistic. She knew that for her to remarry, she would have to relinquish Donald for adoption. But because he was a much older child, placement was unlikely. So she approached an American priest working in the village and pleaded with him to find a home for her son. Donald says:

My adoption was simple and clear. Mom asked me if I wanted to go to America and I said yes. Six months later, I went to America. Dr. Hoffman was the missionary priest at the village and he helped to arrange me to come to America. Because I was ten, it was hard to find families that would adopt me. He asked his sister who had eleven kids of her own, and she decided to adopt me. She wasn't seeking to adopt but said, "I already have eleven. What's one more?"

Donald was adopted by a Catholic family in Jackson, Michigan, and Janet, a Mennonite family in Hesston, Kansas.

John was adopted at the age of thirteen by a Dutch American family in Kalamazoo, Michigan. His physical differentiation is not that he is Amerasian, but that he was born with a physical disability. John has no memories or information about his biological family but remembers growing up in an orphanage in Il San with other disabled and Amerasian children. Unlike Janet and Donald who are confident that their

biological mothers relinquished them with the knowledge that they would be adopted by Americans and have a better life, John is not so sure about his biological parents' intentions. Knowing first hand the prevalent discrimination disabled people face in Korea, he presumes that his biological parent(s) relinquished him because of the abnormal development of his lower body and the feelings of shame and embarrassment that might have been culturally associated with that:

I was in an orphanage for a long time, 12 years. That's quite a long time, plus being disabled, there was little chance I would get adopted out. But when I heard I was going to be adopted by Americans, I was pretty excited. When I was going through my identity crisis freshman year at Michigan State, I rejected Korean society for first rejecting me and then abandoning me. I was rejected twice, obviously by my biological parents and then societal rejection as an orphan and as a disabled. It took me a long time to forgive, but I'm ready to return to Korea now.

John's experience of being socially differentiated also differed from that of Donald and Janet in that he lived in an orphanage with other disabled children, and was raised within a social network of peers and role models that could identify with his experiences as an adoptee and a disabled person, as well as provide comfort and protection from bullies. John enjoys reminiscing about his childhood in Korea, in particular, his relationships with his male peers and *hyung-dl*, or big brother like friends.

There were positives to growing up in an orphanage. We had a lot of comradeship. I'd hang out with the boys and we did a lot of things. There was less supervision so we did pretty much whatever we wanted to. Because we were orphans in a public school, we were singled out and just got teased more. I think also some of the biracial kids were also singled out. On numerous occasions I remember asking older boys to help protect me because other boys would tease me. My best buddy was one of them. He was never adopted though, but we still keep in touch.

John's adoption was exceptional in that he and his orphanage friends were placed in the same state by the same adoption agency. As a result, he and his childhood friends were

able to get together for picnics. Holt International continues the tradition of hosting picnics for families with children from Korea, but of all my informants, John stands out as the only one who actually looked forward to attending these picnics. Other informants did not particularly enjoy the picnics because they felt they had nothing in common with the other adoptees. This was not so for John who came to the picnics to reunite with childhood friends.

I went to many, many picnics (giggle). I got to meet my orphanage mates. I liked going because I got to see my friends. We kept in touch a little bit but we lost touch. I'd like to make contact again. Ha Min Tae was my best buddy. We hung out together. I was saddened when he left, 'cause he was my buddy. So when I saw him here at the picnics, I was very excited.

John was also able to share with me some issues he believed Amerasians with African American heritage may have experienced. John had an Amerasian brother who was of mixed African American heritage. He believes that his brother struggled tremendously because he was racialized as Black in Korea, but also Black in the U.S. He was moved around from various foster homes, unable to emotionally attach or feel a part of a family or community.

Tae-Sun: Who are in your immediate family?

Mom and dad, seven of their biological kids, and four adoptees, and one died. He was half Black and half Korean. In high school I was aware that he died, it was an issue of race. It was homicide. But thinking back, I saw the struggle with identity. He went through four foster families before he was given to us and my parents couldn't control him so he was sent back to a place in Texas and when he came back he just wanted his own freedom but he still struggled with identity and got involved with sex and drugs. It all caught up with him. For me that was an eye opening.

Tae-Sun: In what way was he struggling with identity?

He didn't know who he was and where he belonged. He didn't fit among Koreans and he didn't fit among Whites, so he joined the Blacks. I don't know if he fit in

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with them either, but he tried. He lived a very reckless and dangerous life, probably to escape his pain.

John alludes to the special impact of being Amerasian with African American ancestry, a perspective I was unable to include in my sample. Blackness, much like White-ness, is a marker of racial otherness, illegitimate paternity, and the sexual relations formed through the war and post-war experience. However, White-ness was socially privileged in much of Korean society in that it represented American power, modernity, democracy, wealth, and allure. The negative experiences with White soldiers could be mitigated by romanticized perceptions of White Americans as liberators and prosperous Westerners.

African Americans, commonly referred to in the pejorative *gum-doong-ee*, do not share in this prestige. They are instead doubly stigmatized with war-related stereotypes of unruly American soldiers and biased U.S. media propagating images of them as dangerous, poor, and inferior to White Americans (Morrow, 1997; Abelman and Lie, 1995; Kelsky, 2001). In *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA*, Nadia Y. Kim writes that Koreans learned about the U.S. racial system of privileging Whites over Blacks from the racism and informal segregation practiced by White military personnel, and many even adopted this racial system for motivations linked to their own experiences of oppression:

As a formerly colonized and presently occupied people, [Koreans] displace their internalized inferiority in ways that foster prejudice and discrimination. . . Within a context of *multiple* hierarchies, however, South Koreans (and the margins in general) follow a more complex “detour” wherein they *reify* oppressive mythologies (e.g. prejudices) as part of their resistance to U.S. dominance and Blacks’ role in it...In the 1970s South Korea, White soldiers admitted that they heard Koreans repeat soldiers’ anti-Black epithets without full comprehension of the meaning or the level of animus . . . Korean owners of bars/clubs feared that working with Black patrons would alienate the more numerous and allegedly better-paying White customers (Moon 1997: 71) (Nadia Kim 2008: 93, 94).

African Americans resisted Korean prejudices but also adopted stereotypes and abused their power over Korean locals, demonstrating their own “detour” from White racism and exacerbating the problematic race relations. Especially with the rise of the Black nationalist movement in the U.S., African American soldiers in Korea, but also in Germany and Vietnam, were less tolerant of the second class treatment they were receiving while defending national interests abroad.

During this period, the tensions reached a feverishly racialized pitch, as fights between Black and White soldiers and between Blacks and Korean residents were common. . . . In a context in which dark skin and Blacks were already seen in a less favorable light, such incidents spurred the idea that Black soldiers, more so than Whites, cause trouble. Moreover, although Koreans had become familiar with Whites in multiple favorable roles and statuses much before the first Blacks arrived – benevolent missionaries, U.S. diplomats and presidents, General MacArthur, Audrey Hepburn – their exposure to Blacks was largely limited to soldiers and unsavory mass media stereotypes. Because Koreans generally perceive all American military personnel to be low class, uneducated, and unrefined – part of anti-U.S. resistance – there is little to disrupt the Black image (Nadia Kim: 94, 95)

Coming to America

Adoptions processed after the Korean War, or in the second phase of U.S.-Korean adoption, mainly consisted of “healthy” infants, children, and sibling pairs of two Korean parents. In my sample, informants adopted in the latter phases of U.S.-Korean adoption history were mainly adopted by middleclass and upper middleclass White families. Infertility was a common factor influencing why my informants’ parents chose to adopt. Overseas adoption, in particular adoptions from Korea, came highly recommended because of its expediency. Two of my informants were actually adopted with their biological sibling, and nearly one third were adopted with another child from abroad. In

this segment, I explore the initial adoption memories of informants that were adopted as young children.

Informants who remember the first day they arrived in the United States describe the experience as confusing. They were not adequately informed about where they were going and with whom they would be parented by. Some were traumatized from the experience and have struggled to form attachments with their American parents ever since; others rolled with the punches, and bonded with their new found family. Alex, who was adopted at age four, was orphaned, in other words his biological parents were deceased. His extended family chose to relinquish him for adoption. At the age of thirty-one, Alex still harbors negative feelings about how his adoption was handled. He remains very critical of how adoptive parents are selected and he hopes that adoptive parents today are more prepared, culturally sensitive, and aware of the various issues involved in adopting a child from Korea. Alex's memories of coming to America were that of being scared and confused, especially because of the physical and linguistic strangeness of his new family.

I was very scared and very confused. When I grew up in the society of Korea, all I saw was Korean people, slanted eyes, flat nose, round face, and black hair, and speak our language. Then all of a sudden I came to the United States, and I thought I died and went to hell because I never seen White people in my life, I never seen Black people in my life, I never seen all these weird things in my life. What the hell happened here? Did I die and go to hell or die and go to outer space somewhere?

Tae-Sun: Why did you think you died and went to hell? Why not heaven?

I knew I wasn't in heaven because I was very confused and felt totally lost. I was very scared at the same time. They were speaking some fuckin' foreign language and I didn't understand what the fuck they were saying.

Alex describes his arrival to America as a series of traumatic experiences. He blames both the Korean adoption staff and his adoptive American parents for poorly preparing him for the culture shock he was to experience. He says:

They could have tried to learn the language, try to make me feel comfortable when I came to this foreign country. Try to understand how a little child feels in their head, okay? And try to make them the customs of their food because they're use to eating Korean food and all of a sudden you come to the U.S. and they're giving you fuckin' meat with bread on it. You don't know what the hell it is and you almost choke to death. My first memory was coming to the United States and seeing my folks. I didn't know who the fuck they were. I was like, "Who the hell are these people?"

Tae-Sun: You didn't know that they were your new parents?

No. An [adoption worker in Korea] said, "By the way, you're going to the United States to live with these people". I was like, okay. But they didn't tell me these were gonna be my new mom and dad. I never had a picture, they never sent me shit. When I came here in 1979, I came here Thanksgiving night. It was around 10:30, 11:00. And my parents gave me a fuckin' white piece of bread with some plain ass turkey with nothing on it, and I didn't know what the hell it was. I took one bite, and I almost choked to death. It tasted nasty. I remember feeling really sick and being really scared.

Janet, who was introduced earlier, was adopted at the age of six and was cognizant of her distinctive physical features and Korean cultural background in much the same way Alex was. Despite being picked on in Korea for her red hair, Janet was acutely aware that she was culturally and physically different from her new family and community. She too has stories of having to eat meals with her American family, yet longing for the food she grew up eating in Korea:

To ease the transition to American life, my mom cooked rice for us once a week. But we ate it with milk and sugar, uck, and I hated it and I didn't know how to tell her. I would beg her to burn the rice a little bit, like they do in Korea, but she wouldn't because she was afraid it would ruin her pots. And I use to crave grasshopper. So one time, I picked a whole jar full of grasshoppers and I took them to her and begged her to cook them for me. And she told me that when she saw the jar of grasshoppers, she just wanted to throw up. She said, here let me take you to McDonalds, and I remember thinking, that would be good too.

Age, awareness of physical and cultural difference, and memories of birth family, all play an important role in how adoptees' transition to their new lives and parents in the U.S. Sam, who was adopted at the age of three, remembers his arrival to America as being very confusing, but not necessarily disappointing or traumatic. He was relinquished as an infant and has no memory of his birth parents. His earliest memories of being cared for involved adult caregivers in an orphanage, not parental figures. Sam claims that he was not aware that he was physically or culturally different from his American parents until much later in life when he entered high school. Until he actually learned what a mother and father was, Sam treated his adoptive parents as adult caregivers. Like Alex, Sam was not told about the details of his adoptive family. He remembers receiving a gift one day and being taken aside by an adoption worker who then showed him a picture of a man and a woman:

I remember the care worker pulled me aside from the other kids and took me to a laundry room with a big ass nasty sink with a bunch of dirty ass dishes in it. That's how poverty stricken the place I was in. I was really confused because I was three years old, and why was I in this room? And she gave me this bunny rabbit and I was happy to have this rabbit, but I didn't know what it was for. Then she showed me pictures of a man and a woman, but I don't remember her explaining that those were my mom and my dad. I think she said these people sent you this present and I took it and thought, cool! Two grown adults gave me a bunny rabbit that I can put my hand in (smiling, Sam lifts his hand and emulates rabbit ears with his index and middle finger). I was happy but I didn't know what was going on. That's it. I don't remember the airplane ride at all. Rumor has it, the stewardess said, excuse me, flight attendant, said I was asleep the whole time, just kinda hanging out eating tuna fish, which is crazy, because to this day I hate planes.

Tae-Sun: Do you remember what you thought when you first saw your parents?

I didn't grasp the fact that they were my parents 'til like 6 months in. I didn't know what was going on. I thought they were care workers. I didn't know what parents meant because I didn't have parents. Until the age of 4, I didn't understand the parent thing. I knew these two people liked me and wanted me in their home. I couldn't speak a lick of English, but they were so ecstatic to have

me that they didn't care I didn't talk English, but I was talking nonstop. Who knows what I was saying?

Sam goes on to describe a carefree life growing up in Grosse Pointe, one of the most affluent suburbs in Michigan. For most of his childhood, he forgets he is Korean and adopted.

But leaving Korea did not always translate into forgetting Korea. Some informants remember secretly mourning the loss of their family and friends, afraid to discuss their feelings with their American parents out of respect and guilt. Others remember being haunted by their memories of Korea in their sleep. Some informants had night tremors¹⁰ and/or had reoccurring nightmares of abuse, poverty, and neglect. Kai, who is twenty three, describes some of sleep disorders he endured during the first years of his adoption:

When I first came to the U.S. my parents would tell me that for the first couple years I would every single night, I would wake up and have night tremors. You just wake up and you don't know what you're doing, it's like sleep walking. Every time they would find me up against the wall as if I was scratching to get out. And I guess one of the reasons was because I was put in the care of my grandmother and grandfather and I guess my grandfather was an alcoholic and he wasn't that nice to us. And for some reason I remember this hand trying to reach for me. That's all I remember, just this hand reaching for me. And that was often times what my dreams were about at night. I was in this small room and the rooms would just get smaller and smaller and smaller and I felt like I was trapped and was going to suffocate. And there was white smoke everywhere. Like every single night no matter how many times I had that dream, the same dream kept reoccurring. And my parents would find me in the living room up against the wall and that's how they would find me. And I would never remember doing that the next morning.

The trauma and stress of adjusting to life in America was often compounded when they were enrolled in school. With no established E.S.L. (English as a Second Language) program, those adopted as children were often held back several grades, and sometimes

¹⁰ Night tremors are uncontrollable shaking while in a state of sleep. This condition is often caused by stress.

even diagnosed with learning disabilities they did not have. In the case of Daniel, a forty-two year old high school teacher, he was placed in special education which he believes significantly retarded his learning.

Language was truly a traumatic experience for me growing up. Because I couldn't speak English, I was held back in kindergarten. They didn't let me go to the next grade so instead, they kept me there. Language was also a barrier for me because I was put in special education classes and I was put in classes with kids like this one kid who couldn't feel any pain so he would put his hand in fire. We had kids like that and I am wondering, where am I? Why am I here? Talk about identity problems.

As children, my informants demonstrated great resiliency as they pushed themselves to learn the English language and the social mannerisms of their new American family and community. However, despite their accelerated assimilation, my informants experienced other challenges to fitting in as Americans.

Chinese, Japanese, Dirty Knees: Orientalizing as Children

At random moments in their childhood and youth, my informants remember being set apart from other people in their community because of their unique physical features. These feelings were specifically triggered by comments and actions that linked their physical features to being foreigners. As suggested earlier, the Asian racial construct is contingent on notions of the exotic, threatening, and inferior Orient. At face value, being perceived as a foreigner may not seem especially offensive, but for my informants, taunts, jokes, and mockery about being Chinese, Japanese, or Asian were inherently degrading and menacing. But these concerns are not unique to Korean adoptees.

Three of the most often cited studies on immigrant students in public schools by John Willshire Carrera (1988), Laurie Olsen (1988), and Ruben G. Rumbaut and Kenji Ima (1988) found that racial and ethnic hostility towards Asian students were a part of the

social environment in many schools and communities. Olsen writes, “Almost every student in our sample reported the first school year included incidents of being called names, pushed or spat upon, deliberately tricked, teased and laughed at because of their race, language difficulties, accent or foreign dress” (35). Racialized social labels and the methods by which these labels were deployed may in fact represent some of the earliest social experimentations children have testing and simulating racial hierarchy. In *Asian Americans: Personality Patterns, Identity, and Mental Health*, Laura Uba (2003) asserts that it is very common for children in America, even toddlers, to be aware of racialized differences. However, they perceive these differences as mutable, something that can be changed.

Very young children do not have ethnic-identity constancy: That is, just as they think they can change their gender, if they so wish, when they become older, they believe that their ethnicity is mutable. . . . Preschool and early elementary-school-age children are, in some-ways, cognitively and emotionally too immature to understand the meaning of their ethnicity; they are often able to identify who is a member of their ethnic group, but they might deny that they belong to that ethnic group. (107)

I will return to this idea of mutability in the next chapter when discussing how some informants attempt to change or disguise their Asian-ness, which they experienced to be an inferior social position to that of being White.

Childhood experiences of being teased were explicitly racial; the intention was to put down, humiliate, and suppress KADs because they were not White. Unfamiliar with Korea or Koreans, White peers racialized Korean adoptees as Chinese, Japanese, or Asian. The teasing was usually accompanied by pulling back the sides of their eyes with their fingers and making ching-chong sounds or insulting comments, which signified two things: First, it identified the eyes as the physical feature that exposed Korean adoptees as

outsiders and non-Whites. Race after all is a socially constructed belief that humans can be separated into biologically distinct and discernable groups. Second, the teasing marked Korean adoptees as foreigners even though they are American citizens with White American families. For Alex, the racial teasing began as soon as he entered kindergarten. He, like Daniel, was also held back in his classes because he could not speak English:

When I was attending Mason elementary school, the White kids and White girls had never seen an Asian kid and I was in kindergarten. I was the oldest fuckin' kid in kindergarten, and the tallest kid in kindergarten. We were outside for recess and this 5th grader or 4th grader called me this saying, "Chinese, Japanese, look at these, I got dirty knees". I didn't understand what that meant but he made this facial remark, putting his finger by his eyes and squinting them. You know what I mean? So I went over there and clocked him. I decked him so hard that he had a bloody nose, and after that, I got my respect. But I got 'spended. I was the only elementary kid who got 'spended for four days in school. Then when I came back, I guess the principle wrote a letter to every kid's parents about racial slurs.

The school yard experiment of asserting White racial dominance failed in this case. After the incident, Alex gained the respect of his peers and he began to feel more a part of the school knowing that the teachers and the administration would not tolerate racism. But the racism Alex faced at school was not an isolated case. What worked at Mason, did not work elsewhere. In the fifth grade, Alex's parents moved to the town of Leslie, where Alex would be faced with similar encounters of racism. But unlike at Mason Elementary, there was no attempt made by the school administration to curb future outbreaks of racial teasing and intimidation. Alex says:

But in 5th grade, we moved to a fuckin' country school called Leslie. And that's a White dominant, country school too. Then again I had to get my respect again because I was the only fuckin' Asian kid and so I got in a fight in 6th grade. I decked this kid; got 'spended again. But this time, they didn't write a letter to all the parents. But the kids respected me. They treated me like I was tough and

respected me because I didn't take any shit from other kids. I got kicked out of school a lot. That's why I guess I'm a very angry person.

When there was no consequence for racism and no institutional protection from it, Alex was forced to deal with matters on his own terms; he did this by being tough and standing up to bullies. Unfortunately for Alex, the school administrators were more concerned about curbing his behavior than they were with the racism of the other students. As a result, teachers and administrators continued to punish Alex for his failure to respond to racism in more institutionally permissible ways. By the time he reached high school, the racism became unbearable and Alex dropped out of school and ran away to Chicago's Koreatown.

Female informants also shared childhood memories of racism. Some responded by aggressively fighting off their assailants, while others tried to passively flee the situation. Reba, twenty two, described herself in elementary school as a "biter and a kicker":

Tae-Sun: What are your earliest memories of childhood?

I was a biter and a kicker (giggle). My teachers couldn't control me so they'd call my parents and they'd have to come and calm me down. I also remember picking up a chair and throwing it at a crowd of kids (giggle).

Tae-Sun: Why were you so combative as a little girl?

I remember the kids picking on me, you know making the ching chong faces and hitting me and just antagonizing me. The teacher never did anything about it so I guess I took matters into my own hands (giggle).

Kathy who is twenty nine, was teased regularly on the school bus by girls much older than her. Unlike Alex and Reba, Kathy never got into a physical altercation with any of her perpetrators because they usually outnumbered her, and were much older and bigger.

She remembers dreading the bus ride home, frightened that she would be physically assaulted.

It was on the bus. There were these two girls that use to terrorize me everyday when I was in the fourth grade. They use to call me China woman and I swear I thought they were going to beat me up, that's how bad it was. That was my earliest memory of people out and out coming after me on a bus. It's different when kids call you names and taunt you and say stupid things like trying to speak Chinese to you and making those Chinese-like sounds, but these two girls would come after me and follow me on the bus and make me feel as if they were going to hurt me. They were much older; they were in 6th or 7th grade.

Again, we see that being “China woman” is the pretext for being singled out and made fun of. My informants’ Asian-ness or presumed Chinese-ness was showcased for ridicule by the chorus of ching-chong clamoring and name calling, and then followed up by physical intimidation. There was an eminent threat of being physically harmed. No one on the bus, not even the bus driver, would come to her defense. This fear of being tormented and eventually being assaulted because of their Asian-ness, coupled by feelings of abandonment by school officials and authority figures in the face of racism, is a feeling not uncommon to other Asian American youth.

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1992) acknowledged that “(T)he pervasive anti-Asian climate and the frequent acts of bigotry and violence in our schools not only inflict hidden injuries and lasting damage, but also create barriers to the educational attainment of the Asian American student”(Fong: 99). Research by Michele Ott (1994) confirmed the commission’s national findings in a variety of schools in the New England area. Ott interviewed 266 Asian American students and found 54 percent of the respondents had been called racially degrading names and 24 percent had been physically attacked in school. Despite this high number of incidents, 69 percent of the respondents

said they never reported any incident to a teacher. Twenty-five percent felt that teachers would not care and 30 percent said teachers would not do anything if the incidents were reported. These overlapping experiences of racial harassment provide an important insight into why Asian Americans may passively respond to racial teasing and harassment – they fear that they will be ignored or punished if they challenged racism from Whites.

Racism within the Family

Sadly, some informants reported incidences of racism from within the immediate family and extended family. In some families, it was common place to make fun of, or degrade Asians and other minorities with the KAD present. Oddly enough, when my informants would confront their parents or extended family about their racism, they would immediately become defensive, either denying that they were racist or denying that racism still exists in America. In some cases, family members perceived KADs as honorary Whites who they assumed shared their opinions about White superiority/supremacy. In other cases, the imbalance of power between the adoptive family member and the KAD, created a hostile environment intolerant of challenging racist comments and attitudes.

Harold, who is thirty, describes both his parents as racists, and claims that when he would talk to them about being racially discriminated, they would invalidate his experiences and even reprimand him for making his claims.

I'll put it this way, my father does not believe that racism exists because when we had the conversation before I went to Korea, my mother and I got into a shouting match and she got angry, I was angry, and my father chimed in and said, "Ever since you were adopted you always thought people were picking on you," like

somehow it was contrived, like I made all this up. Racism doesn't exist in America, and for a White man growing up in Stevenson, it probably doesn't, even though he did not like my sister dating an African American man who worked in the same department and was an engineer. I mean, the way he felt towards that guy. . . And my mother hates Native Americans. Can you believe that? At some point you're like, she's a 6th grade teacher and she's a racist! I'm sure there are many other closet racists who are teaching 6th grade, but it disturbs me! It does, especially having five Korean adopted children, how can you?!? (Long pause) It's unfathomable to me!

Here Harold is dually troubled by his parents' attitudes about racism. First, his parents do not believe that their Korean son could be a victim of racism and second, they deny the existence of racism while making racially biased comments towards African Americans and Native Americans. For Harold, his parents' racism manifests itself in their denial of racism towards Asian Americans and their beliefs that African Americans and Native Americans are inferior to Whites due to their own doing, and not anything related to White supremacy and colonization. Perhaps in their minds, they are "good" White people who cannot possibly be racist because they adopted Korean children or because they have not participated in the overt and abhorrent acts of racism characteristic of the Jim Crow era. Or as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes in *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, self-professed progressives and anti-racist Whites use color-blind rhetoric to avoid confronting the racial realities of the current times, which still position them as racial elites and beneficiaries of White privilege:

Compared to Jim Crow racism, the ideology of color blindness seems like "racism lite." Instead of relying on name calling (nigger, Spics, Chinks), color-blind racism otherizes softly . . . yet this new ideology has become a formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order. Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-Civil Rights era, color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era. And the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege

without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards. Shielded by color blindness, whites can express resentment towards minorities; criticize their morality, values, and work ethic; and even claim to be the victims of “reverse racism.” (3, 4)

Belief in one’s color-blindness, coupled by the act of adopting a child or in Harold’s case adopting several children from another nation and race, may serve as adequate evidence for one’s immunity to racism. But for some of my informants, their adoptive parents’ or extended families’ racism could not be justified or erased simply by adopting a Korean child; on the contrary, it became a rule-breaker of sorts, inhibiting KADs’ abilities to fully trust and attach to their adoptive families.

After Alex dropped out of high school, he ran away to Chicago’s Koreatown not knowing a single person. For a few years, he found work at a Korean restaurant and developed friendships with some Korean American young men who took him in and treated him like a little brother. They taught him about Korean history and cultural values, invited him to stay at their homes, and made him feel proud of his Korean heritage. As a result of this experience, he decided to reclaim his Korean birth name. Excited about his new found self confidence and outlook on life, he called his grandmother in Michigan to tell her the good news.

I told my grandmother, hey I’m going by my birth name. She asked me what it was and I said it’s No Chung Ook, and she said, why do you want to have that chink name for? I hung up and never spoke to her again.

Tae-Sun: That was over fifteen years ago. Have you spoken to her sense?

Yeah, but only because I feel obligated. I see my family once in a while, but only for reunions. I don’t interact with them a lot because sometimes I don’t feel like a part of the family. They make racial remarks when they watch t.v. and then they’d look at me. “Look at those rice eating mother fuckers” . . . “Look at how Asians are so short” . . . “All these mother fuckers are taking our jobs, these Asian mother fuckers are taking our jobs away from us”.

Tae-Sun: And even though they weren't directing those comments at you, how did you feel?

I felt angry. I felt disappointed. And I felt depressed about that because why would they say something like that when they're my family? They adopted me, an Asian kid and I'm one of those gooks on t.v. too.

Harold and Alex are especially disappointed in their adoptive families for adopting children from another country and racial group, yet raising them in a racially intolerant environment that loathed their Korean ancestry and demeaned other people of color.

Kathy believes that her parents were open about their racism because they perceived their children to be White, and assumed they would share in their prejudices. When Kathy returned from college more aware and sensitive to racial matters, her parents were caught off guard by her new found identity and peer group.

My parents are really threatened with my activism and racial consciousness. They say, "We don't think of you as a minority. You're just Kathy." They think I'm a fraud, like I am just inventing experiences of racism and sexism. They think of me and my sister as White. Since they didn't see the racism, it must not exist. Before I went back and started making a lot of Korean American friends my sophomore year in college, my mother felt I was rejecting them, so she became very angry that I had all these Asian friends. She still feels that way sometimes even though that was a long time ago. We had a conversation recently and she said, "Do you think you're better now that you have all these Asian friends?" And I remember saying to her, "No I think I'm better now because I have a diverse group of friends, they are not just one color."

Some adoptive parents may find it difficult to accept their Korean children as racial minorities or victims of racism for a variety of reasons. As Kathy indicated, because her parents have not witnessed their children experiencing racism, or perhaps their understanding of racism is not the same as their Korean children's, to them, racism was not an issue to be addressed. It is also possible that some adoptive parents really are color-blind to their children's race; they see them as their children, and not a racial

minority (Melina, 1988; Abramovitz, 1991). But perhaps another reason as to why adoptive parents do not see their Korean children as racial minorities is because Asian Americans are commonly perceived as honorary Whites and model minorities who are successful, unaffected by racism, and most like Whites (Register, 1991; Pohl, 1992; Coughlin, Abramovitz, & Bleier, 2004).

The Terms of Honorary Whiteness

Perhaps because Korean adoptees are recognized by their families and close associates as being severed from their Asian roots and lacking in any discernable cultural difference, they are accepted as *normal* or White. After all, a privilege of being a member of the racial majority is the luxury of blending in rather than standing out as a foreigner or outsider. Blending in or being accepted as a member of the racial majority enables subjects to circumvent racial discrimination and profiling, a privilege my informants associated with feeling White. Daniel speculates that being Asian and exhibiting “acceptable” social mannerisms may also factor into why he is treated with less suspicion than his Mexican American wife.

My wife tells me that she feels that she’s being discriminated because she’s Mexican, but all of a sudden when I’m there, they don’t seem to question me, they don’t follow her around the store and they leave her alone. For whatever reason, I’m okay to them, because of my race or my mannerism or in my dress, so when I’m with other minorities, it’s as if I’m White.

For Harold, his adoption and socialization in a small, predominantly White community facilitated his honorary White status. When he visits his family and friends in the Upper Peninsula, he struggles to be accepted as a person of color. Despite his new found interest

and pride in being Korean and Asian American, he is perceived as a fraud, a White person trying to be non-White.

My friends always tease me that I'm Whiter than they are. Whatever that means? And now that I'm more involved in my culture and critical about my Korean heritage, they just laugh at me as if I'm some White guy trying to get in the world of Asian-ness. It's odd actually. I don't have any credibility with them.

But whatever honorary White status Korean adoptees may achieve among their family, friends, and hometown associates, cannot be as easily extended to their social encounters elsewhere. Korean adoptees are for the most part racialized as foreigners and non-threatening model minorities, as are other Asian Americans. Random and unexpected experiences of being singled out remind my informants that they are racially marked as Asian, and as such, have yet to transcended their social status as a racialized minority. Harold illustrates the poignancy of this reality by referencing an incident that occurred days before his interview with me.

I was at a Sushi-la the other week with my girlfriend and we were seated by the window. This group of frat boys tapped at the window and started slanting their eyes and making ching-chong noises. I was so pissed, but what could I do? They were in a pack. They'd all kick my ass. I felt so small and humiliated with my girlfriend there. I'll tell you one thing; they would have never gone to a soul food restaurant and picked on Black guys like that.

Allison speaks of the time she went to Disneyworld for a family vacation, and the photographer hired to take a picture of the family kept shooping her away, not realizing that she was a part of the family:

He thought I was a tourist or exchange student. He kept motioning me to move to the side and he finally got annoyed and told me to get out of the picture. Finally my dad figured out what was going on and told the photographer, hey, this is our daughter. I was so embarrassed. He had this look of shock on his face, like no way, she can't be your daughter. Actually, now that I think about it, I think he even said, "Oh, I'm really sorry, how was I suppose to know? I thought she was a foreign exchange student".

Other informants describe similar experiences where strangers are shocked and do a “double take” when they learn that my informants have White parents and are linked to a European ancestry. I asked Kathy if there was ever a time that she felt as if she was not a part of her family, to which she responded:

When people say things to us like, “Are those your kids,” or people would mistake my sister for being my father’s girlfriend. Here’s this sixteen year old Korean teenager and a fifty-five year old White man. I also have a very, very German last name, Putzkammer, which I hated having. You know, you walk into a doctor’s appointment and they do this double take like, “How could you be a Putzkammer?” And then comes all the questions.

Some may dismiss the questions as friendly conversation, but I argue that below the surface lies the need to explain an inconsistency in the racial order, i.e. how is it possible that an Asian, who is conceptualized as a perpetual foreigner, has a European last name which is tantamount to being American? Accepting that a person of Asian descent could be this intimately related to an American family and identity is so unconceivable to some, that they are compelled to believe that Korean adoptees would naturally be unsatisfied in a White family, be perpetually longing to return to their Korean parents, and instinctually exhibit the behavioral patterns of their primordial Korean roots. Twenty year old Cindy explains:

A lot of people have asked me, like teachers and other adults especially, have asked me the question, “Do you ever want to go back to Korea and find your biological parents,” and that sort of thing, and I’m like, “Not really. I don’t have that desire”. And they say, “Oh, maybe when you get older, you might feel that way,” and I was always a little bit offended that they questioned the fact that I was content with where I am and how I am with my White family. It’s a very common question that soon as people hear that I’m adopted, and that I’m in a transnational family, they ask whether I want to go back. And that’s a valid question, but then when they hear my response, they don’t believe me. . . On that same note, people are surprised that I’m so much like my mother. Why would that surprise you? Because they see the physical difference and not that I’ve lived here since I was 6 months old.

I imagine that questions about searching for one's roots and family would surface in many communities where the connection between biologically related children and parents are privileged over families formed through adoption. But in this particular adoption context, the connection between Korean adoptees and their White parents are further contested as the social construction of Asian-ness in the U.S. reifies ideologies about the primordial linkage between Asian Americans and Asia, even when those connections are weak or absent (Glick Schiller, 2005; Yngvesson, 2005; Tuan, 1999; Dorow 2006;). As Cindy expressed above, people who ask her these questions are in disbelief that she has no longing to "go back" to Korea and reunite with her biological parents because "they see the physical difference". The physical or racial differences between Cindy and her adoptive parents make it all the more difficult for some Americans to accept her family as "real" and long-lasting.

Model Minorities by Nurture

Being racialized as Asian also implies super intelligence and possessing a prowess in mathematics, the natural sciences, and computer sciences. Interestingly, my informants seemed somewhat ambivalent about confronting or being offended by this particular stereotype as it represented a bright spot in their history of being negatively stereotyped. Again, this type of stereotyping was a far cry from the racisms of the past that included segregation, lynching, and cross burning, but nonetheless represent acts of racialized stereotyping. Valerie, who is twenty, says that her White friends use to tease her because she was Asian, and would openly stereotype her as a model minority. But she chooses not to make a big deal of the comments. She copes with the jokes by "laughing it

off” or “finding it funny” even though she acknowledges that other racial minorities in the same situation would probably be offended.

Sometimes my very best friend would say kinda racist remarks to me, but I was never offended by anything that anyone would say. I would always laugh it off and I still do. For example, she would say, “It’s because you’re Korean that you get good grades,” and I would just laugh. It was never that bad because deep inside I knew they never picked on me to be mean. That’s probably wrong of me though.

Tae-Sun: Why do you think it’s wrong?

Because other minorities probably think that I’m being weak and not appreciating my Asian background.

Valerie is not the only one in my study who “laughs off” other people’s ignorant comments and stereotypes. Several of my informants giggled or laughed at awkward moments in their interviews when discussing their encounters with discrimination, differential treatment, stereotyping, and racism, an instinctual reaction Susan E. Chase names “disrupted talk” in her book, *Ambiguous Empowerment: The Work Narratives of Women School Superintendents* (1995), to describe the difficulty some individuals have in articulating their opinions about discrimination because it forces them to express “awareness of the contentious and explicitly ideological character of discourse about inequality” (55). Valerie prefers to downplay the significance of being “positively stereotyped” in her own dealings with her friends, but not without acknowledging that other minorities may interpret her behavior as internalizing or tolerating racism.

But there are downsides to being stereotyped as an academic high achiever, especially if one struggles academically, as Betty sadly discovered when she enrolled in a chemistry class at Michigan State University.

I remember even up at State, I was in Chemistry and we had study groups, and everybody wanted to be in my study group. When I first got to the study group, I was like, “Hi guys, I don’t understand any of this. I’m so bad at chemistry and math,” and they were shocked. They just assumed that because I was Asian that I would know all this stuff. After that, I stopped getting calls. I’m like, great! Now I don’t have a study group.

Daniel, who is a high school science teacher working towards his doctorate, admits that growing up, he actually looked forward to the positive attention he would receive from peers and teachers because of the prevalent stereotype that Asians were innately intelligent.

It attracts compliments, even when the compliments are not deserved. A lot of times people say, “You’re good at science,” but really I’m not that great. I was assumed to be smart, and teachers would treat me that way. Good or bad, that might have been a good stereotype because you think hey, I’m smart, so that means teachers can grade me differently. But I still got C’s and D’s (giggle).

Of my forty informants, three do not have college degrees and have no immediate plans to obtain one. The rest have either graduated from a four year college, have a graduate degree, or are in the processes of obtaining a bachelors degree. Of those still in college or already graduated from college, over three-quarters self-described themselves as being high achieving students in high school and in college. Only two informants associated their intelligence or academic performance with their Asian heritage or their own innate abilities. The others attributed their educational values and achievements as natural outcomes of being adopted by middle/upper class families, having one or two parents who are college educated, having parents who valued and encouraged hard work and education, and/or attending well funded suburban schools. Matt, who is thirty one, describes his road to academic success and college as being paved and strictly monitored by his adoptive parents.

Tae-Sun: What was the role of academics in your family?

Oh man! It was, “You better find your potential,” or “If I know that you’re coming home with crappy grades because you didn’t give an effort, they’ll be hell to pay”. However, I was self-motivated anyway, so it was never an issue, not once. I knew from elementary school, high school, and college, that this was the path I was going to be taking. I could expect this and this for the next 20 years. “Now after college, that’s your choice. However, we’re gonna make sure this is what you’ll be doing until then”. And financially, we didn’t pay a thing. Mom and Dad paid for it all, so we never worried about finding financial aid, knowing we’re gonna have this humongous debt after graduation from college. It was, “We have the money, and you’re going. And you’re finding yourself a program you’re interested in. You’re gonna study and you’ll have a great time doing it, and after that, you’re cut off”.

Daniel believes that in his situation, being stereotyped as the smart Asian kid was completely misplaced, and indicative of the way in which Asians were commonly racialized when he was growing up. He credits his White, middleclass parents for preparing him for college and instilling within him and his siblings, the value of higher education.

My dad taught mathematics and my mom taught chemistry. They both have Masters Degrees. I think I took a lot of their cues of wanting to really learn. They were high school teachers so I got to know high schools real well. It was interesting homework wise; my mother would always force me to do my homework where as my father would always do my homework (giggle). They tried to establish middle class values, White Anglo Saxton values. Values being that of education, the value of being independent, the value of working.

But not all adoptive parents were so forceful or deliberate in their parenting approach. Neither of Kathy’s parents graduated from college, but she too performed well in high school and was accepted to a prestigious art college. Kathy describes her parents as being lower middleclass, conservative Republicans, lenient in their parenting style, and fortunate to live in Mount Clemens, a suburb outside of Detroit.

Tae-Sun: Describe the values you were raised with growing up?

Honesty probably. My parents expected us to get A's and B's in school, but they would never help us with our homework. They would try, but they couldn't do it, they'd be like, "Oh, you're so much smarter than we are. We can't do it."

Tae-Sun: How supportive were they of your artistic career?

They were supportive but they weren't influential. They let me take art classes when I was little, at a little art center. I started taking them when I was in high school but I paid for them myself. They use to buy me supplies, take me to museums.

Tae-Sun: What behaviors did they particularly discourage?

Well, I don't know. I was kind of a hard child growing up. I had a hard time in school. I got into a lot of trouble when I was in high school. I excelled when I was a senior because I had already done my stuff. When I was 15 I was suspended for drinking and being drunk at school. I hung around this bad crowd. My parents didn't do that much; they weren't that strict, I didn't have a curfew when I was a senior. My parents let me drink at home. My mom and I got drunk once together on Champaign. They were conservative Republicans but at the same time, they just trusted me. My mom was always like, "I'd rather you drink at home than you go somewhere and drive."

My informants pursued a diverse range of degrees and careers; few felt pressured by their parents to follow any one particular career path. It was more important that they choose a career that will allow them to be financially independent and emotionally fulfilled. If they pursued a career that was "stereotypical" of Asians, such as engineering, medicine, finance, or the computer sciences, they believe it was more circumstantial than natural.

The Politics of Interracial Desire

As young adults, the nature of racial stereotyping takes on more adult and mature overtones. Within the context of a White, patriarchal, and heterosexist social system, foreign-ness, passive hard work, and small stature lead to the stereotyping of Asian American females as exotic, ultra-feminine, selfless, and highly desirable sexual partners. On the flip side, these same racial stereotypes stigmatize Asian American males as alien,

weak, and sexually undesirable (Eng, 2001; Chan, 1998; Shimizu, 2007; Prasso, 2005).

One result of this imbalanced stereotyping of Asian sexuality is that intimate relationships between Asian females and males are constructed as tenuous or unnatural. In my study for example, some female informants believed that it was natural or effortless for them to be attracted to White, Black, and Latin males, whereas the idea of dating, marrying, or being intimate with an Asian male did not enter their consciousness or was deemed unlikely and unthinkable.

In addition to the culturally embedded assumptions that depict Asian Americans as model minorities, the media also creates images of emasculated Asian American men and exotic Asian American women that accentuate these essentialized differences and distribute them for mass consumption. In *The Asian Mystique*, author Sheridan Prasso (2005) describes this “casting Asia as the feminine,” (11) as a phenomenon that has exploded in its reach due to the internet, sex tours, and mass media:

Asian-American women, in particular report experiencing an increase in “fetishism” about them, fostered by Internet-connected communities that encourage the viewing of Asian women through an idyllic, sexual, mystique (15) . . . If there are some admirable aspects of the portrayals of Asian women in Hollywood and on TV, it’s hard to say the same of the portrayals of Asian men. . . With a few exceptions, Asian men on screen have been small, sneaky, and threatening – or spineless, emasculated wimps, or incompetents who may well be technically proficient in martial arts, but impotent when faced with white man’s superior strength or firepower. Lacking machismo, they almost never get the girl. (103)

My research provided a means for testing the extent to which these globalized perceptions and images trickled down to the communities in which my informants were adopted into. I asked my informants to describe in detail the stereotypes of Asian people they encountered growing up. First I asked them to describe stereotypes of Asian people as a whole and then followed up with questions about how Asian women and Asian men

were stereotyped differently. In general, the responses overlapped with Prasso's observations that Asians were generalized as being ultra intelligent, feminine, foreign, small, and passive hard workers, but their answers also revealed the pervasiveness of Western, patriarchal hegemony in the racialized experiences and worldviews of my informants. Female informants reported that stereotypes about the exotic Asian mystique often crossed the lines of decency, with White and Black males publicly propositioning them for sex or inquiring about their special aptitudes for servicing men. Male informants on the other hand referenced Western patriarchal standards of beauty to explain why they find the petite and passive qualities of Asian women unattractive and undesirable. Ironically, it is this same standard that stigmatizes them and other Asian males as being small, weak, and sexually under-development.

Helen, a thirty one year old high school teacher, describes her take on Asian stereotypes:

The stereotype was that Asians are generally smart, both genders. We eat dog (laughing). You don't need to hide your dog when the Asian comes over. Women have the sexy Asian mystique thing going on; we're mysterious; that I automatically give a good back massage; that I giggle with my hand covering my mouth; that I'm supposed to be petite. I guess we have slanted vaginas; tampons are so hard (laughing). I never understand that one! Most teenage boys wouldn't get that stereotyped yet. I think it's just as an adult. That stereotype wouldn't do me any good unless I was auditioning for a porno because it's really more of a sexual thing. With the guys, I heard more of the "you're a Bruce Lee Asian guy" or "You're the revenge of the nerds Asian guy." Big buff hot Asian guys are not the norm in the media here, which is not true because obviously there are a lot of them but they're just not portrayed that way.

Betty, who is almost ten years younger than Helen, reported similar experiences of being stereotyped as hypersexual and accessible for sex.

[The stereotypes are] that we're all good at math, that we're all becoming engineers, and that all Asian women have weird things about their sexual preferences and how we're all suppose to be bi-sexual. I have had so many people

come up to me and say, “I don’t know if you find this rude, but is it true Asian women are really kinky??” No, that is not true! A lot of guys think that Asians are these kinky nymphomaniacs.

Tae-Sun: And what are the stereotypes about males?

Males? Well I’ve heard that supposedly Asian guys are suppose to be small (i.e. have small penises). But, I’m not sure. Don’t really know, but that’s what I heard.

Male informants had a different take on how Asian women were racialized. Many admit to being attracted to the physical features of White women, such as blond hair, protruding facial features, and fuller figures. In this respect, the Korean males went against the conventional grain of their White male friends who found the exotic qualities of Asian women more appealing. Matt succinctly breaks down the stereotypes for Asians in general, Asian women, and then Asian men:

Overachieving students. Tae Kwon Do, Karate. Eat a lot of rice, short, somehow involved with computer programs. Asian women: no hips, no butt, flat chested, zero figure, no sex appeal. Asian guys: short, scrawny, wear glasses, nerdy, rice dicks, unathletic.

Because of the unflattering ways in which he described Asian women, I asked him whether or not he was physically attracted to Asian women, to which he replied hesitantly:

Yeah, but they have to have Caucasian features. Let’s keep it real simple. I don’t like flat butts and flat chests. There’s got to be a robust personality and the physical features have to match the personality, and that’s tough. Everyone has their standards right? Mine are high. Even Black women, I think Halle Berry is gorgeous, but that’s because she has Caucasian features.

Alex shares similar sentiments with Matt concerning Asian women’s anatomical deficits and lack of sexual prowess.

For example, [the stereotype is] that we’re a rice eating people, that we have slanted eyes. For males, we’ve got small dicks. For girls, they have no chest, no ass, and their privates are side-ways. Never heard that? That for females, they

don't know how to have sex. We're book worms, we're very smart in math. We're copy cats. That's about it.

Like Alex and Matt, Harold too is not particularly attracted to Asian women. He cannot relate to nor understand his White friends who fetishize Asian women. He believes that his White friends are attracted to Asian women simply because their features are such a stark contrast to that of White women.

I mean the guys that I'm with, they love Asian women. I'm like, "That's not a good looking Asian woman, I'm sorry man," and they're like, "Oh she's hot! Are you blind?" They don't get past the black hair and their skinny, or sorry, petite-ness. They're very exotic. They have a very tight vagina which is suppose to enhance sexual pleasure for men. And there's talk about Asian women's sexuality, that you could split them open. Since Asian guys have small dicks and White guys have big dicks, you know that kinda thing.

The perpetual foreigner and model minority stereotypes are infused in these gendered perceptions of Asian females and males. The exoticness and passivity of Asian women position them at extreme poles of sexual desirability. In their encounters with non-Asian men, they were racialized as a physically exotic, sexually available for male conquest and domination. However, from the perspective of Korean adopted males, the exoticness and passivity of Asian women were synonymous with difference and otherness which reinforced the negative stereotypes associated with being Asian. Because Asian women reflected in a sense their own Asian-ness, many of my male informants could not conceive of themselves ever being attracted to them or being in a relationship with them, signaling internalized racism and the "the psychological injuries inflicted by racism on men of color" (Daniel Kim, 2005). Scholars conclude that many Asian American men reject Asian women as partners and instead seek relationships with, or the domination of, White women as a response to the degrading and emasculating confines of inhabiting

Asian masculinity (Nemoto, 2008; Daniel Kim, 2005; Truong, 2006; Chua and Fujino, 2007).

However, my male informants' negative perceptions towards Asian women and strict preference to date/marry non-Asian women did not necessarily bind them to honorary White-ness as I had expected. In an unlikely and totally unexpected turn of events, four of my male informants shared with me that their significant others, three of whom were White and one of whom was Chicana, expressed insecurity and even some hostility towards their participation in my research when they discovered that I was a young Korean woman. One man's wife even insisted on sitting through half of the interview, after which my informant replied, "She's never understood this part of my life and she's upset that all of a sudden someone, you, are showing so much interest in my identity". At the beginning of my interview with Matt, he jokingly said:

I'm in the dog house because of you.

Tae-Sun: What do you mean?

Well, let's just say that my girlfriend was not very happy with me driving out here to be interviewed by a Korean woman. Her exact words to me were, "And I hope she's fat and ugly," then she slammed the door.

Tae-Sun: Oh my gosh! I am so sorry. I mean, did you tell her that you've never met me in your life and that the interview was going to be conducted in an office?

Oh, it's not your fault. She's just paranoid and insecure because she's White and she thinks I'll be more attracted to an Asian woman because they're supposedly more exotic and different and petite. So now that I've seen you, what should I tell her when I get back?

Tae-Sun: Ummm, tell her she was right. I'm fat and ugly.

These women's insecurities stemmed from their own perception of Asian women as being distinctly different from White women, in other words more *exotic*, a catch term

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that seems to be frequently invoked. Perhaps their own exposure to media representations of Asian women, have led them to believe that all Asian women are exotic in appearance, petite in frame, and more desirable to American men. These quotes also allude to the stereotyping of my informants as *perpetual foreigners*. These White women feared that their Korean men, despite their socialization and rejection of Asian women as life partners, are perhaps in a temporary state of denial and may one day decide to want a woman they share the same Asian background with.

Male and female informants however seem to agree that Asian males are racialized as the least desirable because they do not conform to dominant standards of masculinity. As peons to their White, Black, and Latin counterparts, Asian males pose no physical threat or competition. As such they are symbolically castrated, and in the view of some American men, make illogical suitors for Asian women. Betty illustrates this point as she embarrassingly recounts incidents where even in the company of her Korean American boyfriend she was approached by random men for sexual information.

Tae-Sun: How do you feel knowing that people may associate you guys with these stereotypes?

Kinda bugs me. It really bugs me, especially when we're together and you see people looking at us, and you wonder why they're looking at us. And even in the mall when I'm with an Asian guy, they will come up to me and say profanities.

Tae-Sun: Like what?

I don't want to say it. It's dirty.

Tae-Sun: I've heard it all; let's hear it.

It's so dirty. Guys come up to John and say, Oh you're girls got a tight pussy. John's like, "What are you talking about?!" And John will just look at him, and like think, do you not see her holding my arm? Like you think I'm not gonna stick up for my girl? And even when I was with my friend Ted, and he's Asian, guys

came up to him and said, “You like having sex with her right, because her pussy is tight?” He said, actually we’re just friends. And I get that a lot. Oh, is she kinky?? Random people come up to me. I remember I was at the mall by myself. Bad idea. Bad idea to go to the mall by myself. And this group of Black guys just surrounded me and started asking me all these questions, “So you like it up the butt, do you like it doggy style, you really kinky, do you like whips and stuff, do you do handcuffs and stuff??”

This scenario is particularly alarming because Betty’s Asian-ness elicited vulgar comments by complete strangers in a public setting, the mall. The presence of an Asian male was not a deterrent; instead, the young Asian men were expected to volunteer personal information about their sexual relations with Betty, and stand by as these men disrespected her.

This chapter illustrates how transnationally adopted Korean Americans are intrinsically connected to hegemonic systems of racialization despite their atypical or underrepresented method of migration and social incorporation. Their stories of being stereotyped, teased, harassed, and marginalized differently than individuals in the racial majority are not unique to them, although because of their isolation from other Asian Americans and adoptees growing up, it may have appeared so at times. For most of my informants, initial experiences of being racially stereotyped was in the form of being teased, harassed, and socially marked as a social deviant or outsider. In Korea physical disability or being biracial marked individual children and their birth parents as deviants, less productive or shameful members of society that would be nominally integrated into school and society. In the U.S., Asian features would stand out as social markers of difference and attract social derision, misunderstanding, and marginalization.

Being racialized as an Asian included the two-pronged assumption of one's cultural and physical exoticness and intellectual prowess. As children, being physically exotic attracted negative attention in the form of teasing, harassment, and misunderstanding; being perceived as intelligent by friends, peers, and teachers was an unforeseen or even undeserved advantage to being Asian. As young adults, these stereotypes affected how they would be perceived and treated as sexual beings, revealing this time the odd and often disturbing ways in which race, gender, and sexuality are intersected. For males, physical features associated with being Asian, i.e. being small, petite, and lean, coupled by their presumed proclivity towards academics instead of athletics, branded them as less desirable. For the females, it was the opposite. The impact these experiences had on my subjects, and their varied responses to them will be addressed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: LEARNING MORE RACIAL STEREOTYPES AND NAVIGATING WHITENESS

As children and young adults, my informants inhabited a social space artificially divided into two distinct racial categories; communities, people, and cultures were racialized as either White or Black. Even fashion, music, behavioral patterns, values, and modes of interpersonal communication were essentialized in relationship to one of the two racialized constructs, with the adoptee and Asians occupying an exceptional or “flexible” racial position that is different, but not as different as Blackness (Dorow 2006). Where the Korean adoptee fit into this world view as Asian Americans was not always clear. In their encounters with strangers they discovered that their Asian heritage marked them as foreigners from Asia. These assumptions were linked to additional stereotypes about their intellectual prowess, social passivity, myths about their anatomically novel features, and sexual predispositions. But being interracial adopted into a small town afforded them some degree of honorary White status especially among family, peers, friends, community members, and close associates who because of their closeness and regular contact, came to accept adoptees as “normal people” instead of racialized or cultural “others.”

Experiences of racialized misconceptions and stereotypes accumulated over time, and collectively influenced how my informants navigated their daily lives and plans for their future. Despite their veneer of confidence and cultural assimilation to the racial majority, I argue that my informants are very aware that their Asian-ness is a vulnerable social status that attracts a wide range of social responses, some of which are incorrect, inappropriate, and confusing. These responses tip off what social norm has been

disrupted. Contrary to what many of their White friends and family members have told them about how they forget that the KAD is a person of color or that they, the friend or family member, do not see the adoptee as Asian, Korean, or a minority, my informants are able to identify numerous examples of how they were not able to socially “pass” as White. Narratives show that adoptees’ reactions to racial situations are mediated by their personality, level of perceived threat, self confidence, concern about consequences, and sense of appropriateness. This racial awareness manifests itself behaviorally in a variety of ways, as consensus, non-reaction, or direct confrontation to White hegemony and racism.

Responding to “Benign” Stereotypes, Racism and Racial Microaggressions

In his book *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*, Frank H. Wu (2002) addresses the peculiar phenomena of “superficially positive” stereotypes, and the implications of encountering these stereotypes as a racial minority who may be socially and economically on par with White counterparts. He describes this privileged minority group as people “most like Whites”.

I suspect I have it much easier than many others. Asian Americans are stereotyped in a manner that is at least superficially positive. . . [these stereotypes] are vexing exactly because they are minor. As race becomes less significant socioeconomically, it can become more important symbolically and politically. The more two individuals are alike in other respects, the more are glaring any race-based differences in the treatment accorded them. (9, 10)

In this statement and in chapters to follow, Wu suggests that even upwardly mobile minority groups such as middle-class Asian Americans and African Americans cannot avoid being stereotyped in their professional and personal lives, an annoying reminder of their misrepresented and subordinate position as non-Whites. When faced with these

moments of misunderstanding, Wu claims that Asian Americans have to make an on-the-spot decision, “Asian Americans must decide whether they can and should disregard the racial tone” (12). He claims that there is no right or wrong approach; one’s reaction will not guarantee a change or even an apology. Wu illustrates with personal vignettes:

I find that when I respond, even if I try to reason with someone, people sometimes become implacable, and the effort to engage them is futile. They insist more hotly that they are right, not racist. They were merely claiming the parking space they saw first, and even if they said “you know, this is the way we do it in America” or asked “how long have you been in this country, anyway,” it wasn’t a veiled racial reference and I shouldn’t take it as such. (12)

My informants shared similar feelings of uncertainty. How do they react to different forms of racial stereotyping? What battles are worth fighting and which ones are better left alone? What I discover is that even passive or evasive responses to racism and stereotyping are not without impact. Informants evaluate and negotiate on the spot how best to address racial situations and misunderstandings, yet another clear example of how Korean adoptees cannot avoid their non-Whiteness.

Informants who grew up in small, close-knit communities, stood out racially. When asked the open ended questions, “Describe your hometown” and “How diverse was your hometown community?” all but three of my forty informants described it as being NOT diverse, predominantly White, and/or without any diversity other than the adoptee and possibly their other adopted siblings. Though their initial incorporation into these communities may have come as a surprise at first, the novelty of their presence wore off with time and they were eventually accepted as American, code for “normal” and “White” (Frankenberg 1993). However, from time to time, my informants and their family would leave their hometowns, on vacation or to move to another town or city. It is

at these points, where the shock of their Asian-ness or non-Whiteness triggered reactions of what I call *interracial shock*, which unlike the schoolyard or school bus confrontations, did not escalate because the White family is present, and therefore able to clarify the context.

The initial shock can result from a variety of factors, e.g. shock to see a person of color in a predominantly White setting, shock to see a White family with non-White children, or shock to see an Asian with a European last name. Leslie, who is eighteen, remembers going to the mall with her mother on several occasions and noticing how people would stare at the both of them. When she asked her mother why they were staring, Leslie was disappointed to hear her mother's reply.

I could tell they were looking at me. They would look at my mom and then at me and then try to figure out what happened. One day I got sick of it and asked my mom why people keep staring at me, and she said, "Oh honey, it's because you're so cute". I don't know why she said that. I could have handled the truth. I'm Asian, she's White, and they're not use to seeing that. She could have said it just like that and I would have been like, "Oh, I get it. So it's about them and their ignorance, and not about me." Instead she tried to maintain this illusion that everything was normal, that no one cared that I was Korean, that I was like everyone else (giggle). Whatever; as if.

Some informants experience these types of encounters so frequently that they have mastered the art of reading body language and non-verbal signs. When they try to explain to their White family or friends what stereotypical assumption have been made, they find it difficult to believe and wonder if their Korean family member or friend is not just imaging things. With no witness or people to validate their experience, some informants get the reputation of being crazy, paranoid, or too sensitive. Sujin explains:

People don't think I can understand English and say the most outrageous things. I swear people will talk to me slowly, or really, really loudly, and I have to check 'em and remind them that Americans don't just come in Black and White. But no

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one is there to witness this, so everyone thinks I'm crazy, and making up these stories. They think I'm being paranoid, like I enjoy making up these stories.

For Betty, she chooses to disregard her White family or friends' disbelief, and instead dismiss their reactions as the result of their White privilege which has shielded them in this country from having similar experiences or empathizing with people of color.

Tae-Sun: How would you respond to people who think you're being paranoid?

Oh, my mom says that all the time. "They're not looking at you Betty." Oh, yes they are mom! I feel like they don't know what it's like to have people look at you. They don't understand that people are looking at me because as White people they have never had that kind of experience. It might be the slightest body movement they make, but you know that they are doing it towards you. Where as people like my mom, people won't do that to her. And I even notice that people don't do it to me as much when I'm with my mom as when I'm with myself or if I'm with other Asians.

Tae-Sun: Can you give an example?

They'll just look at you and then they'll look at their friend, and then they'll both look at you. Or sometimes even people point to their eyes and look at you, and it's just kind of like, yeah right, that was so subtle dude. And my mom is like, "Well maybe they're just scratching their eye and they just happen to look your way?" No mom, I'm pretty sure it was directed towards me. And other times, people just stare at me. They will just blankly stare at me.

These vignettes illustrate how the public domain outside an adoptees' family and hometown, present unexpected and uncomfortable moments of racial awareness. In Leslie's situation, the disbelief was that she, an Asian person, could possibly be related to a White family. For Betty, her Asian-ness was shocking enough. People stared at her because these communities may have been so racially homogenous that the presence of an Asian person prompted a knee jerk reaction of inappropriately staring. Because these public glares and stares are instinctual and nonverbal, my informants respond by making mental notes of what occurred and internalizing their differentiated status. These racial

slights or *racial microaggressions*, are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, intentional or unintentional, and communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial insults (D.W. Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Aisha; Nadal, and Esquilin, 2007). It is precisely because the offense is slight and generally unintentional, that the perpetrators minimize its significance and the victims, in this case KADs, are ambivalent about how to respond or if to respond.

The Threshold

During their teen and early college years, my informants learned to tolerate and excuse *racial microaggressions*, especially those made by friends, family, and other individuals they believed had good intentions. After all, confronting and challenging every incident of being stereotyped can get incredibly wearisome and stressful. Informants had their own personal thresholds however. Those who define or understand racism as behaviors that threaten one's safety or deny equal opportunity were more apt to correct or challenge the person(s) making the offense. At other times they would choose to ignore or down play the significance of being incorrectly stereotyped because they either believed that the situation did not warrant a confrontation, they did not want to make the person feel uncomfortable or humiliated about their mistake, they did not want to come across as being too sensitive about racial matters, or because they were uncomfortable correcting a White person about their error. Social status and perceived social power also influenced how my informants chose to respond to being stereotyped. When informants are stereotyped or discriminated by a person of equivalent social status, informants are less likely to dismiss or walk away from a confrontation.

Sophie, who is thirty and avidly learning about Korean and Asian American literature and cultures, reflected on some of the “innocent” assumptions strangers would make about her because she was of Asian descent.

Oh when I use to work at Olive Garden and I was a greeter. I would open the door for people and say, “Good evening, how are you?” One of the elderly couples came in and they said, “We just wanted to tell you that your English is so good,” and I said, “Thanks. I’ve been here since I was 6 months. It should be pretty good!” It was a pretty innocent comment but obviously they wouldn’t have said it but they saw my face and assumed I was straight from Asia. I had a professor in college too, Saginaw Valley, who asked me if I would be able to keep up on the readings in the English class assuming that I was a foreign exchange student.

Tae-Sun: How do you feel about that, people assuming that you are a foreigner and can’t speak English?

Now I just blow them off. But I could see how it could lead to more detrimental things happening but it never prevented me from getting something. That would have been a cause for action or a cause for bitterness. But the off handed stuff, that’s quickly put to rest, it’s not a problem. However, if that same person was making a judgment about scholarships or jobs then obviously it would have been a much bigger deal.

Here, Sophie makes an important distinction between “innocent” stereotypes and “detrimental” stereotypes, those that when institutionalized or acted upon could deny her opportunity and access. She is aware that the customers’ comments reflect the prevalent assumption that Asian Americans must be foreigners, but because the customers held no position of power that would deny her opportunities, she chose to correct their assumption in a non-threatening and humorous manner. However, Sophie neglects to consider the obvious power dynamic of being an employee of an establishment; had she confronted or corrected the customers in a less compassionate way, she could have been reprimanded, poorly reviewed by a supervisor, or fired. Also, in her encounter with the professor; his assumption that Sophie was an exchange student was not intended to deny

her opportunities, but he none the less wielded a great deal of symbolic and material power. Had Sophie corrected him, she could have run the risk of embarrassing him, or worse, angering him to the point where he could grade her less favorably. Now that Sophie is a certified high school teacher with a Master's degree, I wonder if she would respond differently in a similar situation with someone of equivalent rank.

Chris, who is 42, also believes that there is a time and place for confronting people about racial issues. In his opinion, racism is not as prevalent or menacing as in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. He is turned off by minority activism and believes it is counter intuitive and encourages people of color to only see themselves as a race which can lead to self segregation and thwart racial reconciliation efforts. Chris will entertain conversations about race but only when he believes the conversation will produce social change, such as when he is among colleagues, Asian Americans, and adoptive parents at Korean culture camp. He believes that these venues are more receptive to racial dialogue, and as a board member and somewhat of an elder figure in the adoptee community, he occupies a position of authority. However, around strangers or people he believes are set in their ways, he chooses to go along with the charade rather than risk embarrassment to the other person.

Tae-Sun: Did people in your community even know you were Korean or that Korea was a country?

If they knew their history about the Korean War, that's about as far as it went. But even that information was not totally correct. There were people who would ask, "Did your parents die during the Korean War?" and then I started thinking, well, the Korean War ended in 1954, I was born in 1963. But when people ask me those kinds of questions, I never embarrass them about it. I could say to them, look, the Korean War ended in 1954 and I was born in 1963, but then that would embarrass them and make them feel stupid for asking me a question like that. And that also happened down in college. I went to a Christian college and there was a young

lady down there and she was a very sweet young lady, upper classman, and the first thing she asked me was, “How do you like America?” and I just didn’t have the heart to tell her I lived here almost all my life. And then she again approached me later and asked me how I liked American food. I just didn’t have the heart. I just smiled and didn’t say anything. A lot of people say, “Well, why didn’t ya?” But I just don’t want to make an issue out something like that. It’s unnecessary. What would it change?

The key here is intent. Chris believed that the intent was good; these individuals were asking him these questions not to exclude him or degrade him, but to learn from him and establish a personal connection. But again, I have to wonder to what extent Chris’ reaction is mediated by an internalized fear of being rejected by the group in power or a fear of being further misunderstood as a person of color. Especially being one of the only people of color at a small Christian college, Chris was particularly vulnerable to being labeled un-Christ-like had he responded to the young woman in a more confrontational manner.

But aside from the material consequences that could have accompanied Sophie and Chris had they insulted a customer, publicly correcting a professor, or embarrassing a student leader on campus, there are symbolic power imbalances mediating these social encounters. The offense was readily dismissed or forgiven because it came from a White person, a person with symbolic power over non-Whites. In *Playing the Race Card: Exposing White Power and Privilege*, authors George J. Sefa Dei, Leene Luke Karumanchery, and Nisha Karumanchery-Luik (2004), describe this passive response to White peoples’ innocent racial comments and questions as the result of oppressed subjects “disciplining” themselves and “internalizing the surveillances” that would allow people of color to facilitate the persistence of White hegemony (61). They argue that, “these seemingly innocuous statements and questions are charged with meaning and

always arise as manifestations of power functioning through the application of difference” (64). In short, it is because of the prevalence of White power, and the underlying threat of challenging that power, that adoptees and other people of color may consciously and subconsciously tolerate numerous *racial microaggressions*.

Sujin, a social activist and artist, believes that adoptees, herself included, are socialized to submit to Whites and show deference to them in the face of discrimination and misunderstanding. She thinks adoptees struggle to be critical of White people because they were adopted and “saved” by White parents from a life of poverty in Korea. They are passively pressured by parents and strangers to be grateful for being in this country and suppress how they really feel about being mislabeled, misunderstood, and alienated from their heritage. During the interview, Sujin took out a textbook she was reading in her graduate social work course, and began to apply some of its contents to our discussion.

Tae-Sun: So do you fit any of these stereotypes?

Some of them. I realized through this race class that I’m taking now. We learned about one, how racism affects majorities and two, how racism affects minorities, and I realized God damn, in fact I have it right here, us Korean adoptees, it pisses me off how we go right down the list of it. And I realized that I am the damn victim, but I thought I really freed myself from all this stuff.

Tae-Sun: How are adoptees victims?

Victims in that we play out the stereotypes and live up to societal expectations that we’re weak, submissive, passive, and inferior to Whites. We’re not suppose to defy them, even when they’re wrong or out of line. Here it is right here, number one, **Internalization of Inferiority/Low Self Esteem**: That’s adoptees all the way a lot of times. Also, **Assimilation**: Oh God, that’s totally adoptees, and it pisses me off. **Exaggeration Visibility**: And this is me too. Example, low riding cars, the wild ass hair and nails, the baggy- baggy pants, basically [these symbols are] saying I don’t have shit but look and me, I’m fly. **Protectionism**: Like the house slave and the field slave, how the house slave protects the master, like an anonymous adoptee we all know, does a lot of protectionism. “Oh White people

can't be wrong, oh don't correct them if they're wrong even though if we speak our mind or say something a little off, they'll be quick to criticize us and tell us not to be so sensitive". **Self Hate:** "Why do you have blue contacts? Why are you dyeing your hair blonde and perming it?" It's different if it's for fashion, but for a lot of adoptees, it's not. They hate their Asian features and they're trying to get rid of it. And **Colorism:** Actually there's this little acronym we learned, I never knew it: If you're yellow you're mellow, if you're red you're dead, if your brown stick around, if your black stay back. Have you heard of that?

Tae-Sun: Uh, yeah.

Really? I never heard of that. Well, of course not, like my parents would tell me. But yeah, it's interesting to see how other minorities perceive us. We're mellow, another way of saying we're passive.

At the time of the interview, Sujin lived in Detroit, was estranged from her adoptive family, and had a large network of Asian American and African American friends who not only identified with her feelings but also encouraged her to express them through public poetry readings, publications, and speeches at Korean adoptee forums. But in all fairness, unlike Chris, Sujin was not in a position where her political views on race could alienate her from her community or peers. If anything, her confrontational approach earned her greater credibility as a radical activist/artist, and further expanded her network of fans and friends.

Case in point, not all of my informants were able to objectively evaluate the inconsistent ways in which they responded to stereotypes, misunderstanding, and intimidation. Some would dismiss or down play discrimination and ignorance when they came from White people, but were far less forgiving when they came from other people of color, i.e. people they perceive as social equals or inferiors. In response to the question, "When do you not feel White," Will, a thirty-one year old accountant, identified several examples including when his "best friends" call him *rice dick* and other racially

degrading terms, and when his White fiancé declined his marriage proposal because she and her family could not accept an interracial marriage. However, he repeated several times during the interview that he had no malice towards White Americans, and refuses to play the role of a racial victim. But when asked to describe instances where he was singled out or discriminated against because of his race, he excluded the two examples of his friends and fiancé and instead focused on examples where he was racially singled out by African Americans:

I was on the campus of Ferris State and these Black guys looked at me and called me a *chink* or something about me being Chinese. God I was so pissed. And Black people have the nerve to talk about racism and discrimination. And you know what? It was my White friends who stood up for me.

Tae-Sun: The same friends who call you rice dick?

That's not the same thing and you know it.

Tae-Sun: Okay, explain to me how these scenarios are different?

They just are. The Black guys didn't know me and were specifically saying that to pick on me. My White friends know me from when we were kids and it's a term of endearment, so they're just saying those things to joke with me. They don't mean any harm by it.

Tae-Sun: Will, please explain this to me because I have White friends and they have never called me a racially degrading term, you know why? 'Cause if they did, they know I would kill 'em. How is it okay for your best friends to call you rice dick? Are you just defending them because they're White?

So what if I am? Can you blame me? I mean, I was adopted by Whites and grew up with them. When I'm around them, the rules change. What am I suppose to do, tell them to stop? We're guys for crying out loud.

Here, Will admits that it is permissible for his White friends to call him racially degrading names because they are White and their brand of male bonding includes the playful slinging of racial slurs. Will suggests that by confronting them about their usage of racial slurs, their childhood friendship would be comprised or distressed. But

friendship or not, it was clear throughout the interview that Will refused to interrogate the prejudices and privileges of White people. Unable to retaliate with a comparable racial slur about White males, Will instead opted to generalize about the inferiority of other racial minority groups. He unabashedly critiqued African Americans and various South Asian American groups as being physically unattractive and possessing backwards cultural values.

Tae-Sun: So you would only marry a Korean or White woman? Why not other minorities like Vietnamese, Black, Chinese?

No way. First of all, I don't find them physically attractive. Especially Vietnamese or Laos women; they look and act really slutty and they'll go with just about any guy. And the guys, oh God they're the worst. They're a bunch of punks who can't keep a descent job. They're thugs . . . I won't date other minorities because they just can't get their act together. They're given all these opportunities, opportunities people like you and me never had, and yet they're still poor, they still want more, but you give them more, and they still stay the same.

Tae-Sun: But wait a minute Will. How can you generalize about them? I mean you know Black people who are doing well for themselves, or Vietnamese folks who work really hard. And don't get me started on your White roommate who you admit is the biggest freeloader of them all.

Yeah, but those are just individual cases. The liberal media will have you thinking that minorities are so oppressed, but they're not. They choose the behavior, just like my roommate. He's broke because he's lazy and doesn't know how to manage his money. But if a Black person is broke, it's because of racism? No, he's lazy too, but I can't say that because I'll be politically incorrect.

Will's power-evasive perspective on the social conditions of different racial and ethnic groups reflect a general attitude he has about the racial order in the United States; all races are created and treated equal, and material inequalities that may exist can be overcome with hard work and sacrifice. Harold on the other hand was more self-reflexive and sensitive about the persistence of racial hierarchies. As he reflected on his

antagonistic attitude towards Korean men, he wondered to what extent he himself had internalized White hegemonic attitudes about the inferiority and weakness of Asian men.

When I first came to campus, I tried playing basketball at the IM East and there were some Korean guys playing and I really didn't like them very much, the FOB's, Fresh Off the Boat Koreans.

Tae-Sun: Why didn't you like them?

They looked, or maybe it was my perception, my defense mechanism, but it was just like they were a close-knit group and they were very exclusive about it. The unwritten rule of basketball is that the five that get there first have the next game and they take on the winners, and I was there first and then a whole bunch of Koreans came and then all of a sudden I was excluded. Granted the unwritten rule is known to American men, but still.

Tae-Sun: Did you feel dissed because you're Korean too but they didn't invite you to play?

Yeah, like how dare these Asian guys treat me like a stepping stone? And the guy spoke to me in broken English, and I'm just like dude, speak my language man. You don't talk to me. I got up in his face and I wasn't gonna back down. And I'm not a violent person but the adrenalin was pumping like, "let's take it outside". And I'm normally not like that with White guys in similar situations but maybe I'm not like that because I don't have the physical prowess in most circumstance but because I feel like I'm dealing with Koreans of my stature who are not necessarily body builders, I feel like I can go head to head with them. I'm sure they were trying to act more superior over me because they were treated not so well as foreigners, but I won't let a FOB treat me like shit. I feel like such a White guy saying that, you know looking at Asian men as effeminate or unthreatening, but it's true. That's how I see them.

Herald claims that the Korean men did not pose the same level of threat that White men would have in "similar situations," allowing him to confidently confront them about their breach of American courtside etiquette. Yet, he also admits that his confidence may have been affected by his internalized perception of Asian males, which is consistent with hegemonic constructions of Asian male femininity and weakness.

Oriental Pride and Power

In the absence of derogatory language, comments, and threatening behavior, some of my informants found it unnecessary or difficult to react defensively to some forms of racial stereotyping. Many female and Amerasian males for example, admitted to being proud of their unique Asian features, which reinforced gendered as well as racialized hegemonies. Popular images of Asian females may reinforce notions of femininity in that they are petite, submissive, youthful, and exotically beautiful. Whereas Amerasian males may be able to disguise or deemphasize physical features that would otherwise stigmatize them as being effeminate and undesirable if and only if they possess idealized Western qualities such as tall stature, round eyes, and light hair, with just a hint of an exotic look (Williams-León, 2001; Price, 2003; Fulbeck, 2001).

Donald was teased about his mixed heritage both in Korea and in Jackson, Michigan. But with the positive affirmations he received from his adoptive father and a little help from the media, he learned to take pride in his mixed heritage. He remembers watching the movie *Hombre*, where actor Paul Newman plays a White man who was raised by Apache Indians, and straddles two cultural worlds, not feeling comfortable or accepted in either context. In his various encounters with racial bias, Paul Newman's character chooses to embrace his Native American heritage while unveiling the corruption and insecurities of his racially biased perpetrators. After watching this movie, Donald was inspired to do the same.

Shortly after I arrived here, some kid called me a half-breed. That made me think about who I was, and I said to myself, he's right! I am a half-breed. And then I said, and I'm damn proud of it! You see, attitude makes the difference. Some of the things my father use to say when we would be getting dressed in the morning, he would say, "Aren't you lucky you were born handsome. You can always make money." Well, I guess nowadays you can get plastic surgery, but it was one of

those things he used to say constantly and it makes you feel good. I kind of like the idea that they're looking at me different. I don't want to be like the other ones. I want to be the different one. I want to dress different. That's called individualism and independence.

Later in life when he was attending art school, Donald said he went through an angry-stage for really no particular reason than to go along with the social climate. When one day, a complete stranger stopped him and commented on his attractiveness.

When I was going to college, I was a very angry young man. It had nothing to do with adoption. It was cool to be upset. If you're always a smiley face, people think there's something wrong with you. But if you've got this little frown and mean streak in you, people think, "Wow, he's cool." And I got to college and I had this frown on my face, and one day in the elevator, this elderly old lady, she looked down at me and said, "If you got rid of that frown on your face, you'd be the most handsome man I have ever seen." And I got home that night and I did a self-portrait and I looked at myself in the mirror and I said, "What the hell are you pissed off about? Get that frown off your face." And I changed that day. That lady changed me completely.

It was difficult for Donald to resent his "difference" because it attracted positive attention from strangers. He has made a living and a name for himself as an artist designing "difference" and promoting the beauty of this Asian and White heritage. In his study of multiracial comedians, Darby Li Po Price argues that in the U.S. racial taxonomy, some multiracial Asian American men are able to capitalize off their exotic or ambiguous racial appearance and increase their "options for expressing masculinity" (2003: 330).

However, the two other Amerasian men in my sample were less enthusiastic about their "difference" mainly because they socially passed as Asian instead of White or biracial.

Jack, who was one of the first Amerasian babies to be airlifted from Korea by the Holts, had the following to say:

Exotic? Me? Oh no. I was made to feel unattractive. My self esteem was very low and before I was born-again (as a Christian) I hated myself and being adopted.

My paper work says that I'm Amerasian but most people can't see it. I'm just an Oriental guy to them.

Greg, who is in the entertainment business, believes that men who look "Asian" are still overlooked as sex symbols or leading men. Fed up with the limited roles offered to Asian male actors like himself, he has chosen instead to work behind the scenes as a creative producer. He believes that biracial Asian men who possess a combination of physical features that are more palatable to mainstream audiences stand a better chance in show business.

I think if you're hapa it's easier to get a gig in the entertainment industry. I mean look at Keanu Reeves and Dean Cain. I mean, they can't even act but they still get these dream roles. I have the short end of the stick because I'm hapa but I don't look hapa.

Tae-Sun: Why do you think it's easier for guys like Keanu Reeves and Dean Cain to get these leading roles?

Um, because hapas look cool. They're pretty boys and Hollywood likes pretty boys. I mean, look at 'em. They have the best of both worlds. They have the dark hair, sexy chinky eyes, they're tan. But they're also tall and have the defined nose, they're built.

Tae-Sun: But you're tall, tan, and good looking. Why not you?

Well thank you. Well, I look 100% Asian so that's how I get casted, as an Asian. And the leading roles available to Asian men are all stereotypical. And actually, now adays, even those roles are hard to come by because they're being taken by Hong Kong superstars like Jackie Chan and Jet Li and Chow Yun Fat.

Greg's personal and professional experience suggests that despite greater visibility of Asian males in mainstream media, the images nonetheless perpetuate stereotypes of the past. The implication being that the only physically desirable and romantic Asian males in media are those who do NOT look Asian.

Being perceived as physically attractive and desirable were import to my informants, and a matter they took very personally. Media images played a vital role in shaping how others perceived their desirability, and as a result, how they felt about themselves. The females in my research were especially prone to receiving complements about their Asian features, exotic beauty, and petite body frame. Despite the negatives of being a racial minority, many of my female informants could take pride in the fact that as Asian women, they were perceived as attractive and desirable. Allison, who is twenty two, says that when she was growing up, her parents frequently complimented her for her unique beauty which was the result of her not being White.

I got a lot of positive reinforcement from my parents growing up. They would say, "I'm glad we adopted you because if we had our own kids, they would look like us, just plain old fat white people." You see, everyone in my family is overweight and I wouldn't consider myself thin by any means, but compared to them, I guess I am.

Tae-Sun: How did that make you feel, knowing that your Asian-ness is associated with being pretty and thin?

Oh, it made me feel really good. It made me feel fortunate and proud to be Asian for once, like I can eat whatever I want and I'll still be thin.

Sujin also had similar experiences with her family, but she admits that she has mixed feelings about being perceived as an exotic beauty, especially with her new found understanding of Orientalism. She said that her father adored her, called her his China Doll, and dressed her up in all sorts of costumes and took pictures of her. She also remembers vividly how his Vietnam veteran friends would come over to visit and flirt with her even though she was barely a teenager.

It was kinda sick now that I think about it as an adult. I think some social workers would consider it child abuse. I don't remember anything sexual happening, but I do remember thinking that they were getting a little too touchy feely with me. And my dad, shit, he didn't do anything about it. His friends would be flirting

with me, touching my hair and telling me how pretty I was. Isn't that fucked up? I didn't realize until I was taking these classes in social work that that kind of behavior is inappropriate.

Sophie takes great pride in her Asian features, especially now that she is in her thirties and has had a baby. She associates her youthful look, petite figure, and thick hair with being Asian.

Tae-Sun: Are you ever proud of being Asian?

Well, my achievements are not the result of being Asian, but from a genetic stand point, yeah I'm very thankful to be Asian. We look 10 or 15 years younger than our real age. My hair! I'm so happy I have Asian hair. I have thick, Asian, dark hair. The gray I'm a little upset with but I can color that! Women are going to thin out and these little blondies are going to be losing their hair and we're just gonna have one thick head of hair. I like that! I've learned to put on makeup. Teen magazines didn't do Asian faces so I didn't know how to apply it on then. Oh, and I'm glad I'm petite! Have you seen Asian women after pregnancy? They are so thin!

With the exception of Donald, my other male informants, including two others who are biracial but are rarely mistaken for being biracial, seldom received compliments for their exotic look, except on occasion from their adoptive parents. Their Asian features, e.g. their short stature, eyes, hair, and face, were things to be made fun of, not admired. Unlike their female counterparts who could grow out their hair, the males struggled to find someone in their community who could cut their hair properly. A reoccurring observation I made at two Korean culture camps from 2001 to 2004, was that the Korean boys and teenagers had one of two hairstyles, one that was completely shaved off and the other, thick and unruly. As for body type, my male informants were frequently made fun of for having a shorter stature, and even stereotyped by friends as being gay, effeminate, and having a smaller penis which they refer to as a "rice dick". If my informants were positively stereotyped at all, it was for their perceived intelligence,

which ironically my informants attributed to the middleclass, Christian work ethic of their White parents, not their Asian heritage.

Harold describes how Asian men in general and he in particular is and was stereotyped in school. Despite being quite the athlete at his high school, Harold believed that prevailing stereotypes about the intellectual prowess and small stature of Asian males stigmatized him and other Asian males as less- masculine and less-desirable compared to their White counterparts.

Both [Asian men and women] are stereotyped as having squinty eyes and being small, frail, or scrawny. I've been called skinny and scrawny. Not having much physical and athletic prowess. Very smart; he's the first one you'd pick for your chess team but not for dodge ball (giggles). They're very geeky, nerdy, small penises, not very muscular, probably knows karate but physically White brute strength would wipe out any amount of their karate.

Tae-Sun: So, do you fit any of these stereotypes?

I'm short, I'm 5'7. I don't know if I'm scrawny but I don't think I'm the most muscular man in the world. But they did use to call me Michael Jordan with slanted eyes. Sounds like a complement but it really isn't 'cause I use to be able to jump very high and played decent basketball. I guess I've been athletic. I just recently learned that I am a nerd because I listen to NPR all the time going to - classes. We won't talk about penis size. I'll just say that I've never had any complaints.

Matt, a forty three year old journalist, describes how these gendered stereotypes may affect the way Asian males are perceived in gay communities.

Tae-Sun: Why do you think all your partners have been White?

Well first of all because that's most of the gay men out there (laughing). And secondly, well specifically speaking to the underlining question about why I haven't dated Asians, one thing was when I was in my twenties, there were hardly any gay Asians. I mean there were so few, and those who were out there were, sorry to use the phrase, FOBs¹¹, so it was a very different cultural dynamic I couldn't bridge with them. And they were primarily looking for White men

¹¹ FOBs is an acronym for Fresh Off the Boat. This slang term has been adopted by many Asian Americans to describe recent Asian immigrants.

anyway, as was I. Those who had come here, for whatever reason, they were either recent immigrants or maybe they were either 1.5 generation, but like me, they saw White men as potential sexual partners. They didn't see other Asians that way. It's only been in the last few years that I can look at an Asian man and see him as an attractive person.

I later ask Matt to explain why he and other gay Asian American men struggle to find themselves and other Asian men attractive? He explains that Asian-ness is almost always a marker of femininity, and for those who seek partners with a normalized, balanced, or masculine gender, gravitate towards men of other racial groups. As such, an Asian male dating another Asian male is perceived as an anomaly, or the equivalent of a lesbian couple. Whites, Blacks, and Latinos have more gendered possibilities in that they can be accepted as feminine and masculine. For Matt, the prevailing stigma of being Asian, coupled by his adoptive experience which limited his interactions with other Asian Americans, contributed to him not being attracted to Asian men. He says that rather than seeing Asian men as potential life partners, he instead perceived them to be like brothers. Romantic relationships with Asian men were therefore tantamount to incest.

Tae-Sun: Are you attracted to Asian men?

(Giggle) Well it's so funny because I have to explain that. In my case in particular, it has been an interesting path because growing up, the only Asian male person I knew was my twin brother. So, when I first came to Chicago and met other gay Asians, I could only think of them as brothers. I couldn't think of them in terms of attraction because it felt actually incestuous to me.

Now I'm at a different point. When I was in Korea, I saw some men and thought, "Oh he's kind of attractive," so I'm finally at the point in my own evolution where I am able to say that I could be attracted to an Asian man, because it's actually a self integration. It's a part of bringing a broader Asian-ness into my own life.

Donald describes other ways in which Asian men and women of different ethnic backgrounds are commonly stereotyped, but he does not necessarily see these stereotypes as being negative or untrue. As a world traveler and a highly respected and accomplished member of the Michigan Asian American community, Donald's perspective tends to reinforce ideas akin to the model minority stereotype, that Asians are quiet, passive, intelligent, and hard working social climbers.

Asians are quiet. We don't like to make any kind of confrontation. They're kind of known to be meek, very super intelligent, very academic, a lot of good, positive aspects. So if a corporation wants to hire people, Asians are at the top of the list, they're very good.

Tae-Sun: Are there any gender specific stereotypes?

Japanese women tend to be more accommodating, very soft. Korean women are very strong. They tend to be someone who can take the lead, "I'm gonna do this!" Vietnamese women, they are strong too, acting sometimes like the head of the family. For men, Japanese men are very strong in terms of, they have a specific goal and they go for it all the way. It might be a simple thing like cutting paper, but they'll devote their entire life to doing something with that piece of paper.

Donald acknowledges that these are stereotypes, but when applicable, are admirable qualities. Consistent with dominant perspectives on Asian Americans as model minorities, Donald believes that their passive and diligent work ethic have made them desirable employees.

Longing to Be White, Wanting to be Normal

Early childhood memories reveal that my informants were aware both consciously and subconsciously that they were a part of a racialized environment. Periodic and unexpected experiences of racial differentiation be they negative, positive, or in the form of interracial shock, represented disruptions in the social order. In the absence of racial

diversity, White hegemony became the undisputed social norm. KADs therefore became the alien presence in the otherwise “normal” White environment. So, what happens when Korean adoptees, or any person of color, must grow up and live in an environment where they represent that alien presence, the token minority?

Researchers across disciplines have long questioned the impacts of being a person of color, especially when the individual is positioned in a predominantly White cultural context. Do they learn to adapt through cultural assimilation, or are the fruits of their efforts limited and self annihilating? In *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*, author bell hooks (2004) tackles the issues of Black self-esteem, and how the post- Civil Rights Era quest for equal rights and upward mobility have neglected to address the issues surrounding the emotional and psychological health of living within a White supremacist culture. She argues that the dominant paradigm for evaluating the prevalence and impact of racism in the lives of African Americans is through material analysis, investigating how racism is “blocking access to material well-being” rather than the “care of the soul” (18).

We were never away from the surveillance of white supremacy in the world of racial integration. And it was this constant reality that began to undermine the foundation of self-esteem in the lives of Black folks. . . no psychologist rushed to study the impact of the Black psyche of moving from racial segregation to an integrated world. Since the logic of white supremacist thinking had made it seem that Black people were longing to be close to white folks, it was not possible for our fears to gain a hearing (13, 14).

She uses the example of *colorism* among some African Americans, the valuing of light skin over dark skin, or the preference for achieving White features such as light skin, straight hair, and European-like facial features, to begin understanding the emotional function of wanting to appear more White.

We will never know when enslaved Black folks began to understand fully that the more they imitated the mores of their white colonizers the better they might be treated, [but] ultimately this began to establish a new standard of aesthetics based primarily on *the longing to be treated with less brutality*¹². (38)

It is with this framework that I approached the analysis of my informants varied reactions to being racially differentiated.

Negative experiences of racial differentiation, positive experiences of racial differentiation, and interracial shock, collectively affected how my informants perceived their racial identity and reacted to stereotyping and racism. For most, they conceived of their racial identity as White. As children they grew up believing they were White, and even as adults, still have moments of surprise when they see their reflection and realize that they are not. But despite realizing that they are racially Asian, they express time and time again that they “feel White” which is associated with being normal or being like everybody else, everybody other than racial minorities who must therefore be *different*. White-ness, or feeling White, is associated with an explicit meaning that reflects the power of Whiteness. For my informants, Whiteness was associated with feeling normal, thus being unmarked by symbols of difference and reminders of racial vulnerability.

At very young ages, some of my informants learned to internalize a preference for physical features associated with White-ness. Their daily encounters with people in their hometowns shaped their worldview. Especially for informants who were too young to remember their lives in Korea, the Whiteness of their adoptive communities represented the normal life by which they had to conform. However, their attempts to resemble White people were not spontaneous acts of mimicry; they were hopes of socially fitting in and reducing the stresses of being negatively differentiated as Asians. Failure to pass as

¹² The final phrase was italicized for emphasis; it does not appear in the original text.

White or the reminder that they are not White, were usually followed by feelings of despair and disappointment.

Betty recalls her earliest memories of wanting to physically resemble the features of her White family members and the drastic measures she took to carry out her transformation.

Tae-Sun: Have you ever wanted to be White?

(pause) I've had that thought when I was in high school, but not so much now. I really had that issue when I was younger too when I first found out I was adopted. I wanted to look like my mom, I wanted to get contacts to make my eyes blue. I wanted to perm my hair and bleach it. I did sneak my way into having my hair permed. And one time I had spots in my hair that were brown because my cousin bleached her hair with peroxide, and I asked how she got it blond, and she said she used peroxide. So I went home and put peroxide on my head. It looked terrible because it turned brownish. That's when I first found out I was adopted. I was like, wow, I'm different. I need to be the same.

I wanted blue eyes for a while. For a while I was staring at a blue marker, thinking I could color my eyes. My mom came in and was like, What are you doing? And I was like, I want blue eyes. And She was like, Do not put that marker in your eye (giggle)! I asked, It won't work? And she was like, No!

I then wanted to get my hair permed. And my mom was like, "You're not old enough yet," but my grandma gets her hair permed so when I went with her to the salon, I said, "Grandma, I want to get my hair permed," and she was like, "O.k. honey."

Betty no longer feels this way, and instead volunteers her time at Korean culture camps and student conferences to share with adoptive parents, high school students, and college peers her personal history in an attempt to reach out to young Asian American adoptees who may struggle with their self-concept.

As adolescents, these feelings of wanting to fit in are extended to peer groups and are further complicated by gender and the need to feel masculine, feminine, and attractive. Harold describes the special challenges he faced growing up trying to develop

a masculine gender identity in a society that deemed Asian males physically unattractive and effeminate.

Tae-Sun: Have you ever wanted to be White?

Always. Growing up it was such a battle. I would honestly feel so White that when I would look in the mirror, I would be shocked. And I would be so very disappointed. I remember one time I watched Tom Cruise in Top Gun. I think I was in 7th grade or 6th grade. I wanted to be Tom Cruise, I wanted to be a fighter pilot, I wanted a crotch rocket to ride. And I would be like trying to act like Tom Cruise, mimic Tom Cruise's body motion. I wanted to get a watch like him, an aviator's watch. Then I looked in the mirror, and thought damn, I will never be like him. I'm sure White people have gone through that too but I think it's doubly negative when you can't even come close to it. I just wanted to look like an average white guy. At that time, I would have preferred to be an average looking White guy than a good looking Asian guy.

Kathy, who today is a prolific performance artist who has performed many pieces that overtly challenge established gender roles, tells a much different story of how she performed her identity as a high school cheerleader.

Tae-Sun: Have you ever wanted to be White?

I never actually taped my eye lids¹³, but I wanted to be accepted. I think that was really the basis of my social life, was to be accepted so I did a lot of things I didn't necessarily want to do but I thought it would make me popular. That was my goal. I had this goal when I was in 8th grade, I was going to be popular. So I became a cheerleader. So it was really funny because I made varsity when I was a sophomore, but I could never be accepted even at that. Supposedly I beat out all these juniors and seniors that were trying to get on varsity, but the one's who made it, were so mean to me, I hated it. They were so mean to me and then I quit. They use to make these petty comments about my hair, because my hair was so different from theirs. They were all blond but me. I didn't have poofy bangs, my hair was just one length, so they would complain and tell me I was ruining the look of the group.

¹³ In order to create the illusion of having double eye-lids, some Asian/Asian Americans add a special adhesive tape to their eyes. Others take more intrusive route by having double-eye lids surgically created.

As adults, many informants remember these experiences and laugh. For Betty and Kathy, these stories serve as benchmarks in their development and reminders of how far they have come in accepting themselves and embracing their Asian heritage.

For Harold and other male informants however, the significance of these stories continues to resonate in their current lives because comments and jokes about their undesirability as Asian men are repeated by strangers, friends, peers, and the media. How they choose to respond as adults vary. Matt, who is a former athlete and currently a probation officer, admits that he feels more White than Korean. But it is usually comments made from his White friends that remind him that he is Asian and in many people's eyes, less desirable as a mate.

I feel like I'm not a true Korean. I've never been to the homeland, I've never experienced the customs or the traditions, I don't know anything about the language, very, very little exposure to the written language. In that sense, will I ever feel like I'm Korean? Not in the slightest sense. Now fitting in with the Caucasians? For the most part I feel I have fit in. (Laugh) I hate my friends sometimes though. It's a constant reminder with my friends that I'm a short, slanty eyed person. And they do it in a loving way. However, it's a constant reminder. So in that sense, am I 6 foot, blue eyed, with freckles, and blond or red hair? No. And they let me know that.

Sam perhaps represents the most extreme example of internalized racial self-hatred in my sample, but his comments merit some attention as it captures the intense emotions of a young man obsessed with wanting to be perceived as normal and thus worthy of being loved, attracted to, and desired.

Tae-Sun: When are you reminded that you are not White?

When I look at my penis in the shower. Oh, when I look in the fuckin' mirror!

Tae-Sun: What do you say to yourself when you look in the mirror?

You're beautiful. Just kidding. What goes through my mind is uhhh, damn, I'm Asian, but at least I'm handsome. Sometimes my friends would say this, like when I wake up in the morning and my hair is fucked up with no gel in it and it's going all crazy, my friends are like, "Dude, you look so Chinese right now." But that's good because they think I look more Caucasian when I'm groomed up. But there are some moments where they're like, dude you look so Chinese. But they're being serious. They forget that I'm Asian until my hair goes crazy like the Asian guys on the street. Sometimes, they would say, hey, you look really Asian today, and I would be like, I do? And whatever I'm wearing, I would put in the garbage. I was that bitter. Even today, if someone said I look really Asian, whatever I'm wearing, it's in the garbage. I'm dead serious. Doesn't matter if I just bought the outfit, it's in the garbage. I never wear it again.

Though many informants respond to their racialization by trying to conform to White ways, there are others who find African Americans and their perception of Black culture a more desirable route to acceptance.

African American Influences on Adoptees' Racial Consciousness

The role and influence of African Americans in shaping the racialized experiences of my informants are significant. As suggested earlier by Warren and Twine, a persistent racial paradigm shaping the racial worldviews of Americans is one that positions African Americans as the preeminent non-White group for which Whiteness is juxtaposed. Non-Black minority groups such as Asian Americans undeniably represent a racialized other, but it is precisely because they are perceived as adopting White values and White ways that they are perceived as model minorities. These sentiments resonate in the narratives of several of my informants, who find themselves situated in a social environment artificially divided into two oppositional racial groups, Whites and Blacks. Informants expressed that their adoptive White parents assume or expect them to live a life similar to theirs, one that is free of racial consciousness and cultural deviation from the White

norm. Living in a predominantly White community may have helped facilitate such an existence, but in Michigan, eventual contact with African Americans is unavoidable.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau report, 14.2 percent of Michigan residents are African Americans, which is two percent higher than the national average. The percentage of African Americans in Detroit is even greater, 82 percent, making it the second largest concentration of African Americans in the entire United States after Gary, Indiana. The significance of African Americans to the racial history and landscape of the state of Michigan goes without saying for most residents. The 1943 and 1967 Detroit race riots, the “White flight” out of Detroit and into the suburbs that came shortly after, and most recently, the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court ruling striking down the University of Michigan’s affirmative action policy, position African Americans as central players in matters of economic disparity and political dissent. Where and how Korean adoptees are positioned within this polarized racial worldview is the focus of this segment.

First, I want to validate the assertions made by Gallagher (2004) and Warren & Twine (1997) that non-Blackness facilitates the “quasi-White” status achieved by Asian Americans. In other words, it is because Asian Americans are not Black and are not associated with Black culture that they can “blend in” with Whites and attain a more privileged level of acceptance. My research findings corroborate with this statement. Many informants knew for example that their adoptive White parents had initially wanted to adopt a White American baby, but were discouraged by the long waiting period and bureaucratic red tape. Adopting an Asian baby represented, in the words of one informant, “the next best thing to a White baby”. Some were told that their parents did not want to adopt an American child because “they came with problems,” or “had

issues,” such as histories of abuse, ties with birth family, and in the case of adopting biracial or Black children, “behavioral problems”. Others believed that Asian children could “more easily assimilate with Whites because . . . they were isolated from Asians,” and therefore incapable of adopting an alternative culture. What is evident is that Korean heritage did not preclude my informants from claiming a White identity, nor did it stop their parents from imposing onto their children a White identity.

Sujin says that her Korean ethnicity did not preclude her parents imposing on her a White identity; she believes that her parents raised her to be White and became threatened by the idea that she would taint the racial purity of their family by dating someone who was not-White. She describes an incident in which her mother discovers that she is dating an African American boy and demands that she breaks up with him. Sujin remembers the feelings of shame and guilt that came over her as she explained to her boyfriend’s mother that she could not date her son because he was not White.

I was dating this Black guy, his name was Aarif, and I was a sophomore in high school and my mom found out and she didn’t want us dating. I felt so messed up, so terrible, so guilty, like what the hell, I’m different too! ‘Cause to me, [Aarif and I both] had the same hair, same eyes, he had a funny name, I had a funny name, he’s from somewhere else, I’m from somewhere else, what the hell? So I told his mom Bernice, and she went off! I thought she was going to hate me too but she’s like, “You ain’t White!” And I was like, oh yeah. She said, “Where does your White mom come off saying that?” She was basically saying your White mom doesn’t want you going out with my Black son because she thinks you’re White and she thinks you should be with someone White. I really think [my parents did] try to keep me White.

Sujin’s statement suggests that her adoptive parents, in this case her mother, wanted her to break off her relationship with Aarif because he was Black. However, I was curious as to know whether her parents objected to the relationship because Aarif was Black or

because Aarif was not White. How differently would they have responded if Aarif was of Asian descent? I asked Sujin this question, to which she responded:

If he was Asian, I don't think they would have made such a fuss, I mean after all, I'm Asian. I mean don't get me wrong, I think they'd still be shocked and disappointed because in their mind, I'm still "their" daughter and if I was to go off with an Asian guy and his Asian family, they would feel I abandoned them, especially my dad. But you know how White folks are; you can bring home anyone but a Black person.

In the end, Sujin decided to defy her parents' wishes and continued to see Aarif through high school and college. After graduating from Michigan State University, Sujin moved to Detroit where she lived and worked amongst a predominantly African American population. She then moved to California to live in an area with a greater concentration of Asian Americans, but she still equates her activist and counter-cultural roots to the Black Detroit communities she lived in for so many years.

Daniel is convinced that his parents consciously and aggressively worked towards socializing their three Korean children to be culturally middle-class and White, a task that was met with tremendous resistance. Daniel and his two sisters were culturally and socially drawn to the African American communities in Detroit, a pattern that truly disturbed their White parents, so much so that they moved the household to Howell, Michigan, a town infamous for their active Ku Klux Klan. Daniel explains:

I have two hometowns, Farmington Hills and Howell. Farmington Hills was a suburb of Detroit, and at that time it was pretty dirt road, but it's still a suburb. But in Detroit, I remember having a great time. My best friend was African American and we got along so well. I would spend nights there all the time. I had an [African American] girlfriend, and to this day I don't remember how my parents allowed this, but I had a sleep-over there. My sisters really got into the Detroit scene of drugs, music, culture, and this and that. So that was the reason why we moved out.

Tae-Sun: What attracted you guys to African Americans?

There was definitely acceptance. I mean, they took me in like family. As a child, they would take me out to eat, I would sleep over, hang out; it was complete acceptance. And there were no qualms, no doubt that I could be accepted.

In Daniel's account, his parents distanced their Korean children from non-Whites because of the negative influences associated with their communities, such as drugs and possibly other unwanted elements of "urban life". But Daniel believes that living in the suburbs, and then later moving to rural Howell, created different sets of problems as he and his sisters struggled to be accepted. Daniel believes that the move to Howell marked the beginning of his family's disintegration:

Tae-Sun: But you were living in the suburbs. Was it that bad?

I think it was more that we didn't see role models, identification, or validation. We couldn't see how this was good for us. We were middle-class but miserable. Where is the pay off? And in the case of my sisters, they weren't accepted at all. When we got to Howell, my sisters completely rebelled. They shut down, they stayed in the house; they didn't do anything. One sister ran away a lot, the other rebelled; there were suicide attempts. I recall one incident in Howell and also in kindergarten when I really wanted to run away from home and go back to Korea. I was really ticked off about something, I don't recall what it was, and their response was, "Go ahead. Pack your bags." I really have to give it to my parents. They went through a lot raising us kids.

As a child and even to a large extent as an adult, Daniel felt conflicted about his racial alliances. He was adopted by Whites and raised in predominantly White communities but he did not want to be White, and at times, resented his middle-class upbringing which he felt kept him isolated from interacting with other Michigan communities. For him, the only viable and desirable alternative to being White was to be Black.

I truly wanted to be with my African American friends, I wanted to be Black. I acted Black, danced Black, but it was clearly pointed out to me by my friend that I could never be Black. When I am with African Americans, I talk that way, and it's unconscious. My wife notices that too, she says, "That doesn't sound like

you,” but it’s not intentional; I slip into it, not to mock or mimic, but because I feel that comfortable with them. But then again, I do that with White people too. When I’m with them, I speak their way, and again, it’s all unconscious.

Here Daniel describes how he moves fluidly between White and Black social environments, modifying his speech patterns in order to fit in with the behavioral norms of the group. However, Daniel contends that Blackness is not as easily achievable as Whiteness. His African American friends and his wife stop him when he speaks in a “Black” vernacular, reminding him that it is not appropriate for him, an Asian American, to assume a Black identity. Yet they do not challenging the appropriateness of an Asian American assuming a White identity. The hegemony or unquestioned goal of attaining Whiteness is maintained and Daniel’s longing to be absorbed into Blackness is rejected. Cultural Whiteness, e.g. talking White or acting White, can therefore transcend a person’s racial designation, as Daniel further elaborates in a vignette he tells about meeting the “only African Americans in Howell”.

Howell was predominantly Caucasian, homogeneous, very few minorities there, maybe the occasional foreign exchange students, maybe one or two African Americans. And I actually knew the two African Americans which was really amazing because I thought I could relate to them. But they didn’t turn out to be really Black at all. They turned out to be more White and so I turned out to be the banana, and they turned out to be Oreos.

Tae-Sun: What made you a banana and what made them Oreos?

I know where you’re going with this. Race and identity being constructed and all, but banana and Oreo implied that we spoke with the standard English, we were more reserved and quiet, kept our emotions inside, and can’t dance, and so on.

Daniel and his African American friends lost their Blackness so to speak, when they conformed to the behavioral norms of the majority, which here includes speaking the pervasive vernacular, adopting a passive demeanor, suppressing one’s emotions, and

lacking rhythm. The allure of Blackness, in other words the allure of not being White and normal, was absent in Daniel's new friendships.

African Americans as Fetish and Foes

The attractions some Korean adoptees have with African Americans are not necessarily contingent on forming close relationships with them or identifying with their struggles. For example, some informants who grew up in areas completely isolated from African American communities also expressed a fascination with African Americans and hip hop culture, especially during their adolescent and college years. Even when personal contact and relationships with African American communities were limited or superficial at best, some informants exhibited elevated levels of attraction to African American bodies and artistic expressions constructed as "Black". I argue that these relationships to African Americans or to Blackness are uniquely different from those experienced by informants who grew up socializing with African American peers and identifying with their experiences as people of color. In fact, some informants' fetishes for African Americans resemble the fetishizing experienced by Asian American women, where media driven stereotypes of Black sexuality and hip hop trendiness form the basis for desirability and cross cultural experimentation.

Calvin reported that he specifically applied to Michigan State University so that he could leave his "White bread town" for a more diverse city. Despite growing up in a predominantly White community, he admit that he was fascinated with media images of African Americans, and confessed to being attracted to Black women. While discussing interracial dating, Calvin shared the following:

I love Black girls though. I have a thing (giggle) for them.

Tae-Sun: Really?

I like the small ones, not like the big [ones], what you're thinking.

Tae-Sun: What do you think I'm thinking?

Well, I like Black girls more along the lines of how a White guy would like 'em. You know, Black guys like thick Black women, but that's not me.

Here, Calvin makes a clear distinction between how Black men and White men desire Black women differently. He assumes that Black men subscribe to an alternative standard of Black female beauty which includes "thick" or plus sized women. In contrast, Calvin aligns himself with White standards of Black female beauty, which is thin or "small" sized women.

The Black-Asian racial fetishizing may also go both ways, as explained by Kelly, a twenty year old female informant. Kelly admits that she is going through a "wanna-be-Black, hip-hop stage" where she wears hip hop fashion, listens almost exclusively to hip hop music, and dates African American men. She acknowledges that she might be going through a phase, rebelling against her "boring, White upbringing". But her rebellious phase does not involve claiming a Black identity or relinquishing her White identity. On the contrary, Kelly's experimentation with Blackness is very selective, and does not include befriending African American women nor trying to empathize with their experiences of feeling overlooked or disrespected by African American men who date outside their race.

Tae-Sun: So you're just dating Black guys now?

Yeah, pretty much. I get a lot of catcalls when I'm walking or going to the caf. I think the new thing is Black guys and Asian girls (giggle). It's kinda cool because

I'm really into Black culture anyway and it's this totally different experience for me.

Tae-Sun: So do you also have Black female friends?

No, not really (giggle). Actually, I get a lot of dirty looks from Black women. I think they think I'm taking their men or something which is total bullshit.

Tae-Sun: Why do you think some Black women are critical of Black men dating out of their race?

I don't know, something about being dissed. They think that if a Black guy dates outside their race then they're rejecting all Black women and trying to be with the more dominant race, but I don't think that's it. I mean we're all adults here and we're just dating people that we like.

Here Kelly invokes a power-evasive analysis of why African American women would be critical of interracial dating patterns. Ironically, it was she who made the observation, "I think the new thing is Black guys and Asian girls," assuming that there is a discernable, non-random dating pattern emerging between Black men and Asian women. But she quickly dismisses the notion of an unequal racial dating hierarchy, for doing so might position her in the unflattering role as a privileged subject. Instead, she chooses the role of victim, and demonizes African American women as irrational and jealous individuals who wrongfully give her dirty looks.

Calvin and Kelly's sentiments parallel the fascination many suburban White youth have with the consumption and mimicry of hip hop culture, a phenomenon which has earned some youth the derogatory title of *wigger* (Kitwana, 2005). Author William Wimsatt (2001), a White graffiti artist and journalist covering the rap entertainment scene, writes in his memoir that White teens embrace hip hop fashion, language, and music because it allows them opportunity to take part in a forbidden Black, inner city culture. "By entering into the hip-hop sphere, I felt like I was opening a whole world that

was closed to me before--it gave me a basis to meet all these people I had been scared of, whose main context for me was that they stole my bikes". The attraction, he says, is part admiration, part fascination, and part fear. "A lot of white kids suspect they wouldn't make it through what inner-city blacks do, so there's an embedded admiration that's almost visceral," Wimsatt says. "Fear is one of our strongest impulses, and poor black men are the greatest embodiment of that fear" (31- 33). However, there is reason to be more critical. Visual anthropologist Matthew Durlington (1998)¹⁴ describes the *wigger* phenomena as a "contemporary manifestation of the blackface tradition," in which, "suburban youth may be simply attempting to expand their horizons by recognizing and utilizing forms of alternative symbolic culture that surround them in mass media". Exocitizing and mimicking what they believe to be an essentialized Black culture is in this sense a form of color-power evasiveness, "tasting" difference without living or even recognizing the full social consequences linked with being Black in the U.S.

As non-Whites, it is certainly possible that Korean adoptees and other Asian Americans may identify with some of the struggles African Americans have experienced as racialized minorities, but not within the context I present in this segment. The adoptees I feature in this segment enter their relationships with African Americans from a position of tremendous privilege and social capital; they can disguise their social and economic privilege while safely experimenting with a racially disadvantaged culture, which in itself is a position of power and privilege that is afforded to them precisely because they are not Black. Their lack of racial consciousness and political activism signifies their fetishizing

¹⁴ Quotes came from a paper presented at a panel at the American Anthropological Association meetings, December 2, 1998 in Philadelphia entitled Seeing Culture: The Anthropology of Visual Communication at Temple University. The article was retrieved on-line at <http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/aaa/matt.html>

of African Americans, rather than their empathy towards them as fellow oppressed people of color. In a chapter titled, *Wiggers*, Crispin Sartwell addresses this particular allure or fascination Blackness and Hip Hop has for many suburban White youth seeking an excursion from their privilege and undisturbed lifestyle, a sentiment that resonates with the narratives of some of my informants:

So coding black is a way to rebel against one's own culture and one's own family, not just in some general sense in which each generation rebels against the previous one, but specifically against the content of whiteness as polite good taste, deference, and self-effacement. The culture we have made is immensely dull and safe, and we've made it specially by excluding from ourselves anything interesting and dangerous . . . All the signifiers by which he [the wigger] codes black are essentially made within Hip Hop: the clothing, the slang, the music, the graffiti and other art. Hip Hop is the wigger's instructional manual, and since Hip Hop is available everywhere, wiggerism is available even in North Dakota or for that matter Paris, where, no doubt, it is even more interesting. . . There really is no reason any longer for anyone to act white, if they don't want to" (43)

Being racialized as people of color presented unique challenges for Korean adoptees living in the state of Michigan, where racial discourses are often framed as being either Black or White. What is clear is that many of my informants resisted minority homogenization, in other words, being classified as "minorities" because it was usually synonymous for African American or sharing the same issues and concerns as African Americans (Dorow 2006; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003). Though they were not White, Korean adoptees were not Black either. Some informants appreciated the social networks they formed as a result of minority homogenization, but nonetheless became frustrated that their identities and experiences were being all together neglected. Other informants resented any association with Blacks, choosing instead to occupy a racial no-man's-land or striving to assimilate to White ways as much as possible.

For John, who attended Michigan State University in the 1970s, interactions with African Americans did very little to help him address his identity issues as a person of color. In good faith, John made efforts to attend minority programs and met with advisors, but he felt as though he was a minority within a minority, unable to relate or fit in with African Americans who during his college years, represented the majority of the minorities.

Percentage wise it was probably around 98% White, and the minorities were mainly just Blacks. I noticed that they segregated themselves in the dorm and cafeteria. They probably segregated themselves to identify themselves as a group and interact.

Tae-Sun: How did the MSU community accommodate for minorities?

I think they made an effort to assist minorities because I went to minority groups and meetings and met with an advisor and all that, so they were making an effort. And they had an advisor for those struggling minorities.

Tae-Sun: Did you use those services?

I did somewhat but it wasn't helping me because I was a minority within a minority (giggle). It was mainly for Blacks. I didn't see many Asians. I don't recall seeing any Asians actually. This was 1978. Even my advisor was Black. If he was a Korean, I think it would have made a difference.

Linda, a recent graduate of Michigan State University, expressed similar sentiments. She believes that because African Americans represent such an overwhelming majority of the minority population, other non-White groups are simply expected to identify with their issues. Linda describes her experiences attending a pre-college program for students of color where African Americans made up the majority of the non-Whites. She was disappointed that "the minority issues" addressed in the program were irrelevant to her experiences and needs as an Asian American.

Tae-Sun: So how was it being in MAGIC [a summer program for incoming freshmen], because aren't APAs still underrepresented in that program?

Yeah, and I told them that. I was like really disappointed when I came to the program, and they were like, "Oh my gosh! Why??" So I told them. It was good because I met a lot of new people and I got to know what the campus had, but not necessarily in the activities they had planned for us. It was geared towards retention and I had no doubts in my mind that I was going to graduate eventually, or that I would have problems in college just because I had always been on the college prep course.

In addition, Linda was dissatisfied with how discussions and activities on racism were handled, with Whites being portrayed as the sole perpetrators of racism. For Linda, these discussions were too simplistic and limiting, as her experiences of racism did not involve Whites at all, but instead with African Americans.

Tae-Sun: Describe your experiences with racism?

I lived in South Lyon, Gladstone, and the Upper Peninsula, all predominantly White communities. But it was never a real problem. I've never not gotten along with people. The worst of it came when we moved to Flint for 6 years. And that's the first memories I have of being called a Chink or being called these new kinds of words that I didn't know because I never heard them before and I never thought about it. I always thought I just kind of blended in regardless of my skin.

Tae-Sun: What was that like, to be called those words?

I had a hard time with that just because I didn't understand where they were coming from and I hadn't really been exposed to any racism before. The communities we grew up in when I was in elementary school, kids just kind of accept you for who you are, they don't really care since they knew my family and my father from the church. Parents didn't care about them hanging out with me because they knew I came from a good home. But in Flint, it was completely different because they didn't seem to accept it and they didn't seem to want to know me at all just because I was different. I was Korean and they didn't like it at all. It was just so horrible. They would just say names all the time, and I can remember I'd start crying or something and I'd go to my sister.

For one informant, continued contact with African Americans solidified deep seated prejudices he learned growing up in more affluent White communities. Sam

believes that his prejudice against African Americans developed as the direct result of his negative interactions with them as a teenager and while serving time in prison as a young adult. The nature of his prejudices stem from his personal belief that American society is divided into two separate class cultures: White middleclass/upper class culture and a Black underclass culture. Blackness, to Sam, is an inferior cultural system which perpetuates irrational and undeserved materialism and bravado. He shows contempt for any group that would choose to adopt Black ways, be they African American, Arab American, or White.

Tae-Sun: Were you happy that you moved to a more diverse area?

Good question. When I moved to Troy in 8th grade, that was much more diverse and you know what? Yes and no. Yes, I'm glad because now I can understand different cultures, and no because that experience built up the prejudice I have now because I might have been around the bad apples of certain nationalities. Like for example, I don't like Arabs at all. Not one bit. Like Chaldeans, especially.

Tae-Sun: What is it about them that you don't like?

Oh don't get me started! Everybody hates them! They live fuckin' nigger rich. Their parents buy them Mustangs and Escalades and Cadillacs when they are 16. All they do is work in Party Stores. They think they're gangster. They talk Black but they hate Black people. They wear Black clothes but hate Black people. They think they run shit. They think they're so bad ass. They talk trash. They don't fight unless they have like 30 guys with them, and they're all cousins. They think women owe them everything. They think they are so fuckin' good looking, they think they're so damn cool, but they're a bunch of fuckin' losers! They're fuckin' trash!

Sam's contention with Arab Americans is that they breach an unwritten class rule; to be rich, powerful, and privileged, one must be White and upper class (Oliver and Shapiro, 1997). He believes Arab Americans are frauds, projecting a class identity and lifestyle they have not earned. He names this behavior "nigga rich," which to Sam is an outgrowth

of Black culture. When I confront Sam about his derogatory language use, and ask him to explain why he loosely uses the “n” word, he replies.

Then I would have to give you the whole reasoning behind why I don’t like Black people. I just don’t like them. Their values, the way they raise their kids, the way they talk, gangsters, Ebonics, I just think it’s disgusting! And what I hate even more, is White people who talk ghetto; wiggers.

Tae-Sun: Have you ever had any positive experiences with Blacks?

Fuck no! Even the ones I’m cool with, they’re still trash. There’s this term called *Blackin’ out*, like no matter how educated a Black guy will seem, you get him mad and he’ll *Black out* on you. Like even Colin Powell, even the smart and educated, I call them the “educated brothas.” Even the “educated brothas” that try to use big words that make them sound more intelligent, but they sound like dumb niggers. Even educated Black guys, you get them pissed, then they stop talking White and go to, “ah hell nah, straight up, flat out, fuck that shit, ya know what I’m sayin’.” A Black guy’s a Black guy. No matter how educated, don’t matter if he goes to Harvard, unless he’s from Europe, but if he’s from the States, I don’t care where he grew up or what parents he has, you get him pissed, he’s going to turn into the monkey that he is.

Sam shares the opinion of other conservative leaning Americans that African Americans who live in poverty “choose their lot in life” by repeating and condoning destructive cultural behavior. The irony of course is that Sam, through no merit of his own, was “saved” from a life of poverty and stigma in Korea through international adoption and gained the privileges of an upper class lifestyle through inheritance, not rugged individualism.

But Sam insists that his prejudices were not formed out of ignorance, but through experience. For example, he references his own African American adoptive sister and sister-in-law to justify his belief system, claiming that both had opportunities to improve their life chances when they were incorporated into an upper-class White family, yet they chose to squander their inheritance and revert back to their “dysfunctional Black

values". After being released from prison, Sam claimed that he had nothing and received help from no one, not even his parents. But through hard work and fiscal conservativeness, he was able to rebuild his life, something he believes African Americans in similar situations do not do.

Tae-Sun: How did going to jail impact your life?

Yeah, it impacted my life; it made it a lot worse. I had an absolutely awesome future going for me. I was in college. That was why I didn't finish college because I went to prison. Here's the honest truth, and I hope you don't think of me any less, but I hate Black people. I don't hate all of them. I give everyone a fair shake. Granted prison isn't the best place to characterize a group of people, but it's a long story. It's their values, what they want out of life, it's all so fuckin' twisted. It makes me sick to my stomach. They would rather put twenties on their rims¹⁵ so they can be a rap star before they provide for their girlfriend or family. It's called nigger rich.

Me, I spent a lot of money, I have a lot of fun, but I also pay my bills, don't ask for money from the government or girlfriends. I have a Rolex, but I worked hard for it, it helps me at work, makes me look better at work. But I'm a bit like my dad too. I'd rather drive the Nissan, which is not a bad car. So many people spend all their money on their damn car, and you'd think they are rich, but they are not. It's all show and no go.

His conclusion was that African Americans constitute their own separate culture, one that no longer is impeded by systematic racial discrimination. In his worldview, Americans of all racial backgrounds have a choice to adopt White ways or Black ways, and for him, he chooses White ways.

Race Conscious Dating, Marriage, and Reproduction

The certainty that they and other Asian Americans would continue to be racialized in the future biased my informants' most personal decisions. Who they will form intimate relationships with, where they will raise their children, how they will teach their children

¹⁵ This refers to the installation of twenty inch, chrome rims on automobile tires.

about their ethnic heritage and racial status, and the racial or phenotypic preferences they have for their children, all reflected a keen awareness of how race did and could impact their lives. This awareness influenced some informants to prefer and pursue intimate relationships that would better accentuate their Whiteness such as dating, marrying, or having children with a White partner. In doing so, informants hoped to conceal their minority status in the short term, and in the future have biracial children who could pass as White and avoid racism all together. Other informants perceived interracial unions as a threat to Asian Americans achieving greater power in the U.S., and therefore some informants committed themselves to perpetuating their Asian-ness by dating, marrying, and having children with Asian partners. Informants that shared similar political views about the importance of perpetuating an Asian American community but happened to be in an interracial relationship themselves, chose to contribute to the cause by raising their biracial children in a diverse community and nurturing a positive sense of Asian identity.

Studies focusing on Asian Americans' interracial dating and marriage patterns can be divided into two camps: assimilationist perspectives and racial/gender hegemonies perspectives. Assimilationist centered research (Gordon, 1964; Sung, 1990) posit that the increased frequency in interracial unions between Asian Americans and Whites is a natural outgrowth of desegregation and the repealing of anti-miscegenation laws. Other studies suggest that in addition to desegregation, changing social structural factors, i.e. the over-representation of Asian women immigrating to the U.S., combined with racial/gender symbols that represent Asian women as exotic, feminine, and ultra docile partners and White males as more macho, empowered, and desirable than Asian males,

explain why Asian American females are more likely to date and marry interracially than Asian American males (Shinagawa and Pang, 1990; Fong and Yung, 2000).

Too often missing from these structural analyses, is the role of racism in shaping how individuals choose their mates. Fong and Yung's study of Chinese and Japanese Americans involved in interracial relationships alludes to the impact negative cultural and racial stereotyping may have on Asian Americans' ability to be attracted to other Asian Americans as desirable partners. They discover that both Asian American men and women in their study exhibited an aversion to marrying within the same race even when potential Asian American spouses were available because they were on one hand opposed to the cultural attributes associated with "Asian" family and gender roles, and "the media promotion of white beauty and power encouraged them to date and marry white Americans" (594). But little is said about how past experiences of being victimized by racism directly affects dating, marriage, and parenting choices. My research revealed that personal experiences with racism factored into many of my informants' decisions about who they would have intimate relationships with, how they would prefer their children to physically look, what neighborhoods they will live in, and how they will educate their children about their ethnic heritage.

A common perception among single male informants was that if they had biracial children with a White partner, their biracial children would be immune to the racism and biases they experienced. Harold for example, admits that he has only had White girlfriends despite having had many opportunities to date Asian women. He explains his dating choices as a matter of *proactive planning*. By dating White women, he believes he could minimize the likelihood of attracting negative race-based attention. Furthermore, he

believed that if he was to have a child with a White woman, his child would have a better quality of life because of their anglicized features.

Tae-Sun: Why would you never date an Asian woman?

Because, then you're two moving targets. At least if you're with Whites, you can try to blend in or be the token minority friend, but if you're walking down the street with an Asian woman, then you stand out and people look and people judge.

Tae-Sun: What do you think they are thinking or judging?

Hey, there goes two Asian people, two foreigners, two outsiders. They're not thinking, oh there goes a couple.

Tae-Sun: Is that so bad, that strangers may think you two are foreigners or outsiders?

I guess it's not. But when you're so use to drawing negative attention because of your race, you just get sick of it and want to minimize it as much as possible. I guess being with a White girl is an indicator that you're kind of in, and you're children will be hapa so they will have it better than you.

Calvin is like Harold in that he is highly conscious of the fact that he is uncomfortable being Asian. But for Calvin, his racial consciousness is a source of shame; he questions whether or not he may be suffering from some sort of dysfunction because he is the only one among his friend that do not find Asian women attractive. He believes that overtime he must have internalized a pseudo-Darwinian worldview that programmed him to desire Whiteness and produce White heirs.

I know I'm demeaning myself down, but this is what has been thrown at me through the media, through growing up. I mean like unilinear Darwinism, White Europeans, then further down the line was Chinese, Native American, African American. So I'm trying to emulate White at all times because that's the highest point that you can get through. And it's only through interracial marriages or extending your genes through a White person, that you can become White and be a good person and be smart and do this and that. But consciously I know I don't want that at all.

In contrast to Harold and Calvin, Sam offers a more critical perspective on interracial unions. He believes that the valorizing of biracial or multiracial individuals masks struggles for power and representation that are still very much debated issues between African Americans and Whites.

Tae-Sun: Because you are set on not being with an Asian woman, if you had kids, they will be biracial. Do you have any concerns?

Not at all. I think mixed babies look absolutely beautiful, and that's in right now. That's why I'm not worried about it. There's a lot of biracial people out there, mulatto like my nephew, and they are fine, except if they are in public with their parents maybe. White people hate a Black guy with a White girl, and Black girls hate Black guys with a White girl. Black guys hate Black girls with a White guy.

Here, Sam is both optimistic and critical about the way biracial individuals are exoticized and “in right now”. He personally believes that biracial children are aesthetically beautiful and interracial combinations are increasingly more visible. But he also acknowledges that interracial couples and biracial children do not exist in a carefree, color-blind society either. He has noticed that in public, interracial couples and biracial children are scorned, and he uses the word “hate” to describe how they are perceived by members of their racial communities.

Female informants expressed a somewhat different perspective on interracial dating and children. Like their male counterparts, most of my female informants preferred to date and marry out of their race, preferably to White men. Nonetheless, many expressed some disappointment in having biracial children, because doing so would deemphasize Asian physical features in their children and in essence, erase physical markers of their Asian ancestry. Again, for my female informants, Asian features were assets. Having interracial children would threaten to deemphasize or eliminate altogether

the racialized features that reaped them so much social privilege. Sophie, who was pregnant during her interview, had the following to say:

Tae-Sun: Why do you think that most of the men you've dated have been white?

Probably because there weren't any Asian guys to date. Now that I'm older I'm realizing that I'm not attracted to Asian guys. I'm assuming because of the media and because there weren't many around.

Tae-Sun: How do you feel about that?

I sleep at night, but I said to Jason (husband), if I have a daughter my daughter is only going to be half and when she has a child and marries a white guy that child is only going to be $\frac{1}{4}$ and I looked at him and said that in 3 generations I'm gone. He said, well what do you want, to marry an Asian guy? Do you want to adopt or what? Well I said, "It's not that strong but it's in my head". It's not going to motivate me to action but it's definitely something I think about.

Sophie later gave birth to a beautiful and healthy daughter, who she describes as having a perfect blend of both her parents' racial features. She has gone to great lengths to expose her daughter to elements of traditional and pop Asian culture by buying her a *hombok* (the traditional Korean gown), feeding her rice, and decorating her room with Hello Kitty motifs. But she still expresses a longing to have what she describes as a "pure" Korean baby. Both she and her husband talk openly and optimistically about adopting a child from Korea one day.

Betty, who is single and still attending college, is also concerned about the race of her future children. For Betty, having an Asian husband and having biological children with that husband is her way of preserving her Asian ancestry, which she already believes has been jeopardized enough by her interracial adoption. Like Sophie, Betty uses blood quantum as a tool for measuring racial preservation.

Tae-Sun: How can you be so sure that you will marry an Asian man?

I've had issues with that and my friends have gotten mad at me about it. I'm not gonna not marry somebody because they're not Asian, and true love is true love. I was thinking about it and I would rather have an Asian or Korean husband. Cause if you think about it, my whole family is predominantly white, except for my brother, my sister, and myself. And if I marry somebody that's White, my kids are only gonna be half and they're more likely to marry somebody who's white which means my grandkid's will only be 1/4, which means that within 3 generations my lineage will be completely gone. Being adopted, I don't want that to happen. I don't want my lineage, my genetics to be diminished when you look at the family tree. When people look at the family tree, there will be these random Asians in the middle, and I don't want that to happen. I want my lineage to be strong.

Both Betty and Sophie believe that by marrying a White man and having children with them is equivalent to identity annihilation. They assume that by marry interracially, their children will follow suit and marry/reproduce with White individuals, which for them, is an undesirable outcome. Despite their childhood wishes of wanting to be White, as young adults, Betty and Sophie are extremely proud of their Asian heritage and struggles, which they believe are reflected in their racialized features. They fear that the absence of these racial markers in their children and grandchildren would somehow conceal or even erase traces of their Korean roots and the histories of their struggles.

Referring to a similar condition found among contemporary Native American populations, Gerard Vizenor (1990) describes this “perverse arithmetic” (12) as a necessary discourse of survival and solidarity among marginalized populations. In *American Kinship*, David Schneider (1980) writes, “Because blood is a ‘thing’ and because it is subdivided with each reproductive step away from a given ancestor, the precise degree to which two persons share common heredity can be calculated, and ‘distance’ can thus be stated in specific quantitative terms (25). However, when applied to the informants in my research, this discourse of precise, objectified relatedness and distance, combines with hegemonic ideologies of racial authenticity, purity, and

contamination, forming an identity-creating-kit (Spivak, 1993, p. 4) which can in turn stigmatize or further exclude individuals of mixed heritage.

Janet for example explains how disappointed she was when she attended the first organized gathering of adult adoptees in Washington DC, September of 1999 (Freundlich, M, and Lieberthal, 1999). She attended the gathering assuming that finally she would find a peer group where she would socially fit in, and not be questioned about her identity, only to find that her mixed ancestry became a new basis for exclusion.

People asked me what I was doing at the gathering. They thought I was White so they asked if I was an adoptive parent or a social worker. I met some nice people, but I didn't feel accepted the way I thought I would. I don't know if I will go to another gathering like that again.

Answering to a completely different question concerning the reliability of her birth records, Sue expressed relief that she was not biracial like a peer of hers.

My information may not all be there, but if there's one thing I'm certain about, it's that I'm a pure Korean. My friend Helen just got her birth records and she found out that she was mixed, and she's been freaking out ever since. I mean if you look at her you can tell by her nose and bone structure that she's not completely Korean, but she wouldn't believe it.

Tae-Sun: Why is she freaking out about the fact that she is biracial?

Oh because she had these fantasies about her birth mom being so pure, innocent, young, and poor, that kind of thing. If you're mixed, the picture kind of changes. Now her mom could be a prostitute, or she gave her up because she wanted to get rid of her so she could marry a Korean guy, that kind of thing.

Janet and Sue's comments reflect a disturbing preponderance for stigmatizing biracial Korean adoptees for the reproductive choices of their biological parents. It appears that in the process of claiming their Asian identity, some adoptees privilege the dual Korean ancestry of their biological parents as a symbolic trump card over biracial adoptees, who they perceive as one-parent short of being authentically Asian.

An important response my informants had to growing up in a White community was the feeling of obligation to teach their children what they themselves did not receive from their parents, specifically, information about Korea, interaction with racially and culturally diverse people, and tools for dealing with racism. Though some informants believed that their adoptive parents were negligent in their parenting and could have done more to teach them about their birth family, Korean heritage, and racism, the majority believed that their parents did the best they could with what information they knew as White Americans. As parents, expectant parents, and possible parents in the future, my informants were certain that they would be proactive in addressing matters of culture, heritage, and racism with their children.

Exposing their children to Korean culture and people ranked very high in terms of parenting strategies they would apply in their household. The primary reasoning behind this parenting strategy is that as Koreans or biracial Koreans, their children had a birth right to know something substantial about their Korean heritage. Alex who is the proud father of a Korean and Mexican daughter, believes strongly that both he and his wife have an obligation to teach their daughter about both her ethnic heritages. He claims that had it not been for his daughter, he would have no interest in ever returning to Korea.

Tae-Sun: Would you like to visit Korea?

Hell no! There's nothing for me there. What for? Like I said, my mother left me, my father died, I don't have any siblings, my aunt put me in an orphanage. Screw my family! My last name might be No, and I'm proud to be a No, I'm proud to be Korean, but there's nothing for me to go back to. For what? To learn the history or the customs or the language? I'm too damn old for that shit now. If I go, it will be for my daughter. She gets a lot of Mexican culture now (because they live in Texas and their grandmother speaks Spanish to her) but no Korean. When she gets older, we'll go to Korea or go to LA . . . I won't rob her of her culture. What she wants to do with it is her business, but I have to at least give her something to base her decision on.

Lisa, who has a six year old biracial son, started sending her son to Korean culture camp as soon as she discovered there was one. She believes that it is her obligation to give her son a more balanced representation of his dual heritages, something she does not trust the media or schools to do.

Tae-Sun: Why do you send your son to Korean Culture Camp?

Why not? He loves going to culture camp and learning about Tae Kwon Do, drumming, art, and cooking, and I want him to associate being Korean with positive things. As you already know, the media is not too kind in the way they portray Asian men or Korea. And the schools still have a long ways to go. I don't even think the teachers would have the slightest clue about any other culture than White America. It's my duty to educate my son about where his mother comes from and where he gets his eyes, his hair, his great tan, and his beautiful face. And because I'm adopted, I don't have the tools to teach him about Korea. So I send him to KCC, and actually I like going there too because I want to learn this stuff too. The ladies in the kitchen taught me how to make the pancake and the kimbop, so now I can prepare it at home.

Lisa alludes to the functionality of exposing her son to Korean culture or Asian Americans, to develop a positive racial identity so as to mitigate the effects of negative stereotyping perpetuated in the media, schools, and society at large. Because, "the media is not too kind in the way they portray Asian men or Korea," and "the schools have a long ways to go," Lisa has to therefore turn to culture camps as an alternative source for creating positive images of Asians and Koreans.

Matt also has a biracial daughter and he is motivated to expose her to diverse cultural communities and forms because he is concerned that as a biracial girl who physically looks Asian, she may attract prejudice and face a lot of adjustment and identity issues. As the Asian parent, Matt holds himself responsible for helping his daughter form a healthy relationship with her Asian identity.

Tae-Sun: Did you have any concerns about having biracial children?

This has to do with my own evolution because when I was younger, I know there was a lot of prejudice against biracial people. And I've evolved tremendously, and so my own concern was that there would be prejudice against her, but that obviously didn't stop us from having her. What I would want to do for her is to give her a wonderful sense of comfort about her own racial identity. I mean, no minority in modern society can grow up without any racial issues but I want her to have as few issues as possible and I want her to be as well adjusted as possible. It all depends on me. Her access to a successful integration in terms of her Asian-ness, because she does look Asian, will depend on me. I want to give that to her.

The impact of being racialized Asian is long lasting and permeates the far reaches of my informants' consciousness, from how they feel about themselves, who they find desirable, who they can and cannot foresee having intimate relationships with, and how they raise their children. What is clear is that Asian-ness occupies a position of racial inferiority and stigma, and as a result, attracts discrimination, harassment, humiliation, and social marginalization. Even female informants that admit that their Asian features have afforded them some level of esteem and marketability in White heterosexist dating contexts they also recognize how unequally this affects their male counterparts. In spite of this, some informants have resolved to live in predominantly White communities or remain in the company of White family, partners, friends and neighbors; they learn to live with the jokes, the subtle and overt forms of exclusion, and reminders of their racial difference. Then there are the others, KADs who either by choice or accident find themselves living in cities and towns with a significant Asian American population. The following chapter will explore the nature of my informants' interactions with Asian American individuals, communities, events, and cultural forms. In particular, I will focus on how their experiences with non-adopted Asian Americans revealed alternative forms of racialization that essentialized race and culture in ways that marginalize Korean

adoptees as prodigal Asian Americans that are marked by their interracial adoption and perceived White cultural norms.

CHAPTER 3: ENCOUNTERING ASIAN AMERICA

I've never actually attended a Korean American church because it's still a little intimidating for me to be around Koreans. I never know how they will perceive me. Will they pity me; will they actually want to get to know who I am? 'Cause I've had people get upset at me because I'm adopted, because I speak English and not Korean, or they feel bad for me because I was adopted. Adoptees elicit all these reactions. My Korean American friends will be very blunt with me and tell me that as an adopted Korean I will face discrimination from the first generation, but I don't think the second generation is any easier. They're just as difficult. They have their own cliques, they have their own prejudices, and they are still controlled by their parents in many ways.

Ted, thirty-three years old

Postmodernist perspectives that celebrate cultural forms in which relationships become globalized, identities hybridized, and communities borderless, are optimistically democratic in intent, but as Robert Young (1996, p. 4) observes, these subjects simply represent new forms of "stability and self assurance" that mask the inability of other groups to express themselves with such freedom. Asian American political and social formations for example may explicitly claim an identity and space that contests the rigidity of racial, cultural, and national identities, but they may also gloss over the persistence of hierarchies and the creation of new systems that privilege certain Asian American identities over others. In this chapter I focus on Korean adoptees' encounters with Asian Americans and the new rules of acceptance and exclusion they learn as they attempt to understand if and how they are incorporated into Asian American cultural spaces.

My informants' encounters with Asian Americans were diverse and a variety of factors influenced how they received and responded to these encounters: their age, their comfort with their ethnic and racial identity, and the overall context in which the

encounters took place. Regardless of whether my informants reported positive or poor experiences with Asian Americans, what was clear is that interracial adoption socially marked and differentiated them from non-adopted Asian Americans.

Adopted and non-adopted Asian Americans reinforced the perception that interracial adoption *changed* the very nature of adoptees; adoptees were hence “broken,” social misfits who were plagued with a variety of mental illnesses because of their abandonment, interracial adoption, and maladjustment to dominant American social systems and then later Asian American and Korean social systems (Volkman, 2003; Yngvesson, 2003). Their adoption was sometimes characterized as a curse, a cultural marker of difference that got in the way of adoptees achieving cultural authenticity and full acceptance within Asian/Asian American communities. Being adopted by White parents or being an “adoptee” was code for being alienated from one’s essentialized Asian roots, which was substantiated when an adoptee could not speak Korean or lacked knowledge about certain cultural norms. Korean adoptees were also marked as culturally confused about being Asian, Asian American, and a person of color. As such, their social mannerisms were often seen as awkward and their empathy towards and allegiances to communities of color, suspect.

Sara Dorow’s warns against pathologizing adoptees’ struggles to form cultural identities as peculiar “left over feelings of loss and rejection or individual experiences with racial prejudice,” rather than understanding these struggles as actions that, “surface because the historical, racial, gendered and classed conditions of abandonment and adoption are *still* present” (Dorow, 2006, p. 25). Transnational adoption scholars (Yngvesson, 2002; Anagnost, 2000; Eng, 2003; Dorow and Hartment, 2000) are now

using the less loaded, yet in my opinion rather orientalizing, term *haunting* to describe the ghosts of past and unsettled relationships that arbitrate adoptees' worldviews, life choices, and perceptions of identity and belonging.

Visceral Kin

Because my informants were raised in areas isolated from an Asian American enclave or sparsely populated by Asian Americans, when they did encounter another Asian person, be they Asian nationals or Asian Americans, they were often caught by surprise and filled with feelings of anxiety. For some, seeing another Asian person invoked a strong sense of familiarity and connection; for others, they became overcome with embarrassment and were quick to disassociate themselves from the interaction. But whether they were drawn to other people of Asian descent or felt uneasy, what is clear is that there was a conscious or subconscious recognition that they shared a common cultural origin and fate. Their common origin linked adoptees and non-adopted Asian Americans to a foreign and *exotic* place in Asia, and their common fate was that of people racialized as Asians in America. But beyond that, there lies a tremendous range of experiences and expressions of identity that were affected by adoptees' histories of abandonment and interracial adoption.

In *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*, author Sara Dorow validates the conflicting and unsettled feelings many adoptees have about their origin and identity, as manifestations of real and present experiences of marginalization and pain:

[T]he "identity issues" of postadoption are not just the result of leftover feelings of loss and rejection or individual experiences with racial prejudice; rather, they

surface because the historical raced, gendered, and classed conditions of abandonment and adoption are *still present*. This is why a number of these scholars, including myself, have employed the language of “haunting,” which refers to the ghosts of unsettled pasts, foreclosed relationships, and excluded others that haunt the present and push for recognition and for the restoration of history to the present. (25)

Dorow’s study focuses more squarely on the narratives of adoptive parents, particularly White adoptive mothers, and how they feel “haunted” by the circumstances surrounding the relinquishment and adoption of their children which invariably places them in the awkward position of one who transforms and reproduces global injustices. The idea of a *ghost* birth mother hovering over the lives of the adoptive family has also been widely documented in other adoption case studies (Yngvesson, 2002; Eng, 2003; Dorow and Hartman, 2000). My research has also produced such narratives. But in contrast to the *hauntings* experienced by the adoptive mothers in Dorow’s research, the *hauntings* experienced by my informants were tangibly triggered by the presence and touch of an Asian woman.

Janet remembers the first time she saw an Asian woman in the United States. It was during recess when she had the encounter. For Janet, the sight of an Asian woman in her exclusively White hometown could only mean one thing; that her birth mother had come to take her home.

I was at school one day, I was on the playground, and there was an Asian lady standing on the outside of the fence looking in, watching the children play. And I kept on wanting to go over to her because she looked like my mother. But I think it was just because she was Asian. The whole recess I was looking at her but I didn’t go to her because they told us to never talk to strangers. So I went home from school and I told my mom that when I was on the playground, I saw this lady who looked like my mom, and maybe it was my mom coming to get me. And my mom said to me, “Don’t talk about your Korean mother anymore. I’m your mom.” At bedtime, I would always pray for [my biological mother] and that’s when my mom would say, “It’s okay for you to pray for her. You can keep on praying for her, but don’t talk about her anymore because I’m your mother. (Jan

becomes very sad telling this story and cries as she finishes) That was very painful for me.

In the telling of this painful childhood memory, we are at once reminded of the cultural realities of, and the personal constraints placed on, young Janet. For one, Janet lived in a racially homogenous community where the presence of another Asian person was so out-of-the ordinary that Janet can only conclude that her mother has returned to take her home to Korea. Two, Janet was adopted at the age of six and had already formed a strong and loving attachment to her mother and Korean extended family. Not fully understanding adoption and the unwritten expectations of her new family membership, Janet is, for the lack of a better word, forced to suppress and replace the memory of her birthmother with her new adoptive mother. She is told, “Don’t talk about your Korean mother anymore. I’m your mom.”

Mary, a first generation, Amerasian adoptee I met during a panel discussion at a Korean American adoption conference, shared during the panel presentation, a story about her first encounter with a middle aged Korean woman and how it aroused within her, feelings she had been repressing about her birth mother.

Because I’m Amerasian, I didn’t really have racial identity issues as a child. I just went along as if I was White because I was able to pass as White. But my first trip to Korea was the most spiritual experience of my life, and not for the typical reason of returning to one’s homeland or meeting one’s biological parents. In Korea they have these public baths and my friend, who is also adopted, and I decided to check it out. When you’re at this public bath, they make you take off all your clothes and lay there while a woman scrubs every inch of your body with this abrasive cloth. This was the first time since I was a baby that a Korean woman, a post menopausal woman, touched my body. And because of how I was positioned, it was like a fetal position, I felt helpless and vulnerable like a baby. And when she touched my body I began to sob uncontrollably. I believe at that moment I allowed myself to let go, and finally express my suppressed feelings of missing my mother.¹⁶

¹⁶ This quote was written freehand while Elizabeth was sharing her story on the panel.

Here Mary claims that she, “didn’t really have racial identity issues as a child,” because as an Amerasian she was able to pass as White and I am presuming therefore able to skirt racial bullying and harassment. Like Janet, Mary’s statement eludes to the racial homogeneity of her life experience in the U.S. since it was not until her mid-forties that Mary was again physically touched by an Asian woman.

For Mary, the public bath scrubber was not just another human being performing an unusual custom; she was a proxy birthmother who fit the part precisely because she was Korean and in her words, “a post menopausal woman.” The telling of this encounter is particularly moving. Mary describes being touched by this Korean woman as a spiritual experience infused with familial symbolism. While being scrubbed Mary was naked and placed in a “fetal position.” She felt, “helpless and vulnerable like a baby,” and then she “began to sob uncontrollably.” Mary says, “I allowed myself to let go, and finally express my suppressed feelings of missing my mother.”

Mary’s experience is a telling reminder of the human cost of adoption; the emotional toll paid by adopted children as they are rapidly incorporated into their new families and the perhaps added emotional anxiety adoptees experience as they attempt to reestablish relationships with people and places linked to the country of their birth and eventual separation. Informants shared other ways in which they felt haunted by the memories or ideas of birth family. For some, interacting with other Koreans or even traveling back to Korea invoked a tremendous amount of unease. Some feared that if they were to learn more about their culture or look for their biological family, they may uncover painful information such as discovering that their parents had already passed away, that their parents were not poor and powerless but instead chose to relinquish them

out of convenience, or that their parents were *bad* people, possibly prostitutes, womanizers, dead-beat fathers, and abusers. One informant named Holly was especially scared to search for her birthparents even though her adoptive brother had undergone the search process. She replied:

If I was to find out that my parents died, I would never be able to forgive myself.

Interviewer: But what if one or both are alive? Or what if you are able to find extended family?

I know. I have thought about that too. I really would love my son to meet his Korean relatives but I'm paralyzed by fear. At this point I'm just use to my life and I've pretty much forgotten about the past. (Pause) I told my brother that the next time he goes to Korea, Kyle and I will come visit him. But I'm not ready to search for my biological parents not yet. I'm just not ready.

Interviewer: Why the fear? I don't think I quite understand.

Oh gosh, I don't know. Maybe I will feel that I was a bad daughter. I should have looked for them and I didn't. I let all this time pass without doing anything. Maybe I could have helped out and I didn't. Or maybe I couldn't help. Maybe they need my help and I can't communicate with them. I let myself forget Korean. Or maybe I look for them and they don't want a relationship with me. Maybe they have gone on with their lives. I think as an adoptee I'm afraid that maybe deep down inside they never wanted me.

Sujin who was nine months old when she was adopted, has no memories of her Korean birth family. However, she remembers feeling an immediate affinity with Asian Americans and wanting to interact with them as much as possible. She was frustrated, both as a child and as an adult that the presence of her White family disrupted these interactions from developing.

My interactions with Caucasians were vastly different from other Asian people regardless if they were Korean, Chinese, or whatever. And I always knew my White family behind me would just mess it up. I'm trying to make a connection with Asian folk and these White people over here just mess it up.

Tae-Sun: How were they messing it up?

Them just being around me repelled Asians from talking to me. I use to do experiments. I remember we would be at a restaurant, and I leave to go to the bathroom and of course I would get lost. So I would wander around the bathroom, peak around the corner and look and smile at people. Everyone was so nice and receptive, probably because I was a little Korean girl, but then when they saw my White family, it was always different. I would ask people on the street what time it is and they would nicely ask, "What are you," "You're so pretty," "Where are you from" or whatever. And when I was with my Caucasian family, it was always, "What the hell happened" or "Oh, she's one of them." I felt so robbed. Their presence totally overwhelmed the situation.

Both Janet and Sujin confess that even as adults they think about their birth mothers frequently and at times become overwhelmed with sadness and depression. Proactively seeking out relationships with Asians and Asian Americans, or visits to Korea, have helped them and other informants deal with the pain of being separated from their birth family, but it is by no means a panacea. Some informants disclosed that they have had to seek professional help for reoccurring depression, suicidal ideation, struggles to form interpersonal attachments with family or significant others, and hyperactivity, symptoms they directly and indirectly attribute to feelings of loss and alienation. Others describe their emotions towards their birth family as perpetual feelings of *loss*, a persisting condition they have come to accept about their lives. Even informants who have since reunited with their birth family and maintain close ties, grieve the decades of separation that they cannot get back and the chasms of cultural/language differences that continue to exist between them (Tieman, Ende, & Verhulst, 2005; Powell and Afifi, 2005).

In their efforts to join an Asian American community and learn about their heritage, some informants intentionally applied to colleges and universities that described their student body as diverse. One informant in particular, Linda, wanted to attend a university in which she could learn Asian and Asian American histories. The absence of

such courses at one college, coupled by a college recruiter's misstep in acknowledging the special needs of Asian American students, ultimately resulted in Linda selecting Michigan State University as her university of choice.

Tae-Sun: How has coming to MSU affected your perception about your racial identity?

It was one of the main factors why I chose to come here. I was accepted at Kalamazoo College and here [Michigan State University], and I was having a hard time deciding where I wanted to go because on one hand Kalamazoo College has awesome study abroad programs and everything, and here it's big and I wasn't sure, and it's close to home. But I went to visit Kalamazoo College and it was all upper-middle-class Whites. The recruiter made this one comment that really turned me off to the school. I said, "What do you have here for Asian Americans? 'Cause I knew in college I really wanted to learn about Asian history or Asian American history and she directed me toward a Black student alliance group on campus. And I was like, what the heck? You're at a college that claims to be diverse yet you're sending me to the Black student alliance? They were basically telling me that my issues were the same as theirs'. So I was really turned off and I basically told them, "You know what? Forget it. I don't want to go to your college. Don't even try to recruit me and I'm telling every single one of my friends not to come here."

Linda is an exceptional informant in that she approached the college application process determined to select a college/university that included academic programs geared towards the study and support of Asian Americans. Her awareness about the distinct racial experiences of different non-white groups stemmed from her personal experiences attending a predominantly Black school in Flint. Since her matriculation, Linda has become one of the most active student leaders in the Asian American community. Asian American students frequently refer Korean adoptees to Linda, with the hopes that Linda will help adoptees feel more comfortable participating in Asian American organizations and events.

Twinkies, Whites, and Fake Asians

Not all encounters with Asians and Asian Americans aroused familial sentiments and attraction. More often than not, my informants reported feeling surprised, shocked, uncomfortable, and even embarrassed at the sight of Asian people. There was no differentiation made between Asians or Asian Americans; both groups represented *others* that generated feelings of discomfort. The sight of another Asian person made them aware of how they are racialized in the U.S., as odd foreigners that are stereotyped and picked on. But because their encounters with Asians and Asian Americans were rare, and their relationships with them even more so, some informants chose to maintain the predominantly White social networks they were most familiar with and where they represented the only Asian American presence. Within these proscribed spheres, informants felt they had more control over how they were being perceived, and as such gained greater self-confidence to either challenge prevalent racial stereotypes, or simply stand out and get noticed as the only Asian.

But there is a catch twenty-two. By selectively isolating themselves from Asian Americans, adoptees often run the risk of being perceived as racial sell-outs by individuals who presume that to have a healthy ethnic identity, adoptees must also associate with their ethnic communities and date within these groups. Even when adoptees form close friendships with Asian Americans, it is not uncommon for them to be differentiated because of their White family upbringing and adoption, a marker of their problematic Asian status. Betty recalls an experience she had her freshman year in college. She was on the bus with friends and became overwhelmed by the number of Asians she saw riding the bus. Her friends, who were White and Latina, were also taken

aback, not because the bus was occupied by so many Asians, but because of Betty's peculiar reaction to seeing Asians.

I felt so weird even on the bus. When I saw other Asians I would turn to my friends and say, "Hey! They're Asian. Look at them," and they'd be like, "Yeah, so what?" It was no big deal to them. I was like, "But there's so many!"

Tae-Sun: Why were you so surprised?

Because I just became so accustomed to not seeing Asian people. My world at that time was mostly White with maybe some Hispanics, Blacks, and Arabs, but not Asians. It took me awhile to accept the fact that they belong here too.

Donald, who earlier expressed how he has learned to embrace his mixed heritage and perceives his physical difference as a blessing and a reminder of his uniqueness, also admits to having had an aversion to Asian/Asian American communities when he and his wife moved to Toronto, Canada. Because he had grown up "the only Asian" in his family and hometown, or one of a few Asians at college and the working world, he came to expect and even relish the special attention he would attract simply because he was the lone Asian. Living in Toronto, a city densely populated with Asians, threatened Donald's sense of physical uniqueness, something he had come to appreciate and even depend on for positive attention.

Before moving to Detroit, my wife and I moved to Toronto and there is a very large Asian community there, especially a lot of Chinese. When I would go outside I was shocked to see these Asian faces everywhere. I mean they were in the park doing Tai Chi, and it was no big deal to anyone. And I freaked out because I wasn't different anymore. So shortly after, we moved to Detroit and as you can see, we are still here.

Tae-Sun: How did your wife feel about this?

Well, she is from the Philippines and is use to being around Asians. But she has been very supportive of my needs. But I think after all these years, she's grown tired of me talking about my issues. She's heard it all (giggle).

Both Betty and Donald conceptualized a racial worldview in which people of Asian descent occupied at best a random or marginal presence. Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Arabs regularly occupied their material landscape and therefore not surprisingly were normal fixtures in their racial worldview. But being confronted with a new racial reality, one where Asians are regular participants in the social and material environment, generated feelings of self-consciousness. Why the self-consciousness? Later in the interview, Betty disclosed a childhood experience with Korean Americans that shed some light on why she and other adoptees may feel self-conscious around Asians and Asian Americans: fear that they will be abandoned or rejected from their ethnic community, a social unit where membership is presumed to be automatic and unconditional (Uba, 2003).

For some informants, this feeling of vulnerability further accentuated unresolved feelings they had about being relinquished for adoption by their birth family, as birth families also symbolize a social unit in which membership is presumed to be automatic and unconditional. Being relinquished for adoption or even divorce among their adoptive parents represented a severe violation of the parent-child contract. For those who conceptualize relationships with other Asians and Asian Americans in similar ways, i.e. as an unconditional bond or “blood” relationships, acceptance and rejection by them may take on greater significance than say with individuals of a different racial background.

One summer, Betty’s mother encouraged her to enroll in Sae Jong Camp, a Korean culture camp that was largely attended by second generation Korean Americans. Betty soon learned that despite being among other Korean Americans, she was negatively

differentiated because she was perceived as culturally White and alienated from her essentialized Korean roots.

I was so traumatized. It makes me want to cry just thinking about it. My mom thought it would be a good idea to go to culture camp, so I went. And all the kids made fun of me, called me a White girl and a Twinkie. Crazy thing is, I didn't blame them. I agreed with them that there was something wrong with me. How come they're Korean American and I'm Korean American, but I don't know all the things they know?

Tae-Sun: Well easy, they have Korean parents who speak to them in Korean and teach them things and you don't. How were you suppose to know?

Even though I am adopted, then how come I didn't try to know more? I self blame myself for not knowing. If I really valued my ethnicity, I would have done the research. I've researched everything else, why not where I came from? Maybe they were right about me, that I was a sell out and in denial that I was Korean. When I came home from camp, I was like, how come I don't know about kimchee or hongl¹⁷ or this or that? How come I don't know that they were gonna be mean to me, because if I would have known the culture, then I would have known what to say to them. I never went back and I was haunted by that experience when I first came to Michigan State University.

Betty felt as if she was to blame for being rejected by the other Korean American children, that their critiques of her cultural inadequacy were legitimate. She insists, "I've researched everything else, why not where I came from?" In this statement, Betty concedes that race and culture are essentialized, and that regardless of her adoption, she should instinctually be motivated to have ethnic pride and learn about her birth culture. And because she has access to Korean cultural material and knowledge via books, the internet, classes, and other media, she believes that her childhood disinterest in her heritage reflected her own internalization of White supremacy and racism. Later in the interview, Betty admits that in her own dealings with Korean adoptees on campus, she

¹⁷ Hongl, also commonly spelled *Hangul*, is the Korean language.

has found that even well into adulthood, many try to conceal their racial insecurities by simply choosing to isolate themselves from Asians.

You can tell which Koreans are adopted because they freak out when they see another Asian. Rather than getting to know Asian Americans, they would rather stay ignorant about them and just hang out with their White or Black friends. I mean what do they really know about Asian Americans and the different cultures to be turned off by them so much; nothing, absolutely nothing! I think they have one or two bad experiences and then just give up on all Asians. That's so unfair because they don't do that with White people you know, have one or two bad experiences and decide they won't have anything to do with them. They have so much self-hate that they don't allow themselves to embrace Asian culture or people. It's pretty sad.

Here Betty associates the behavior of adoptees choosing to avoid relationships with Asians/Asian Americans with internalized racism and self hatred. She believes that the self hatred prompts adoptees to be more critical of Asians/Asian Americans, which in turn rationalizes their disdain towards Asians, and eventually leads to avoidance.

Betty's portrayal of the insecure KAD most closely overlaps with sentiments made by Sam. For Sam, seeing other Asians/Asian Americans makes him feel embarrassed and uncomfortable; he has internalized the belief that Asians, in particular Asian men, are physically unattractive and socially out of place. Seeing other Asian Americans reminds him that he too is Asian, and as such, is associated with an inferior or undesirable racial group. As a result, he avoids contact with Asian Americans, hoping that in doing so he will blend in with the racial majority, pass for White, and circumvent the stigma of being Asian.

When I look in the mirror or when I'm at the mall or on the street and I see another Asian person, I'm like, oh shit! There goes another Asian. Is that what people see when they see me? Oh hell no, I hope not! I avoid Asians like the plague. As a matter of fact, I was so bitter about the fact that I was Asian, that in high school, I never, ever got with Asian girls. I wasn't even attracted to them. I

put my mind in the framework that I would never ever want to be associated with an Asian girl at all because then I would look more Asian. I only wanted to date White girls, because one, that's what I was attracted to, plus to other people it made me look more White. I didn't want to be seen with an Asian girl because then I'd be stereotyped as the Asian guy with the Asian girl.

Sam is very open about his prejudices towards Asians and his self-consciousness about being Asian himself. He jokingly calls himself a "fake" or "not a real Korean," but quickly comes to his own defense by criticizing Korean Americans for being ethnocentric, self-righteous, and rigidly defining the boundaries of Asian authenticity.

They think I'm a white boy so I guess that makes me fake and they're all too good to talk to me, even if they're butt ugly. They think they're too good for me because I'm not a real Korean, even though I've had sex with four of them.

Tae-Sun: How does that make you feel when people treat you as if you are a fake Korean?

Everyone is entitled to their own opinion. I throw around my opinion every minute of the day, so I don't care what they say about me. I could act like a polite, calm Asian guy and try to fit in, but what's the use? They'll find some other reason to talk about me. Sometimes I go overly overboard and act more outrageous just so no one can think I'm fitting into the Asian culture. I don't want to be your classic Asian guy because that's not what I stand for. I want to be known as the Asian White guy, that's my claim to fame basically.

Sam's desire to socially pass as White or be the "Asian White guy" might appear to some Asian Americans as an attempt to reject his Asian essence for the futile opportunity to gain White privileges. But there may be more at stake. In *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption*, author Randall Kennedy (2004) explores the practice of *racial passing* as it relates to individuals with African American heritage, who because of their light complexion and mixed heritage, are perceived as White and may subsequently adopt a White identity. Kennedy posits that racial passing is an act of defiance intended to circumvent the social stigmas of being Black, while simultaneously

subscribing to the hegemonic paradigm which associates Whiteness with power and superiority. He argues that “passing requires that a person be consciously engaged in concealment [and] the combination of silence and a non-black appearance will lead observers to perceive him as white – or expressly assert that he is white, knowing all the while that the assertion is false according to ascendant social understandings” (285).

Sam attempts to defy the social stigmas linked with being an Asian male. He does this by embracing qualities he believes are the antithesis of being an Asian male, qualities he aptly associates with being White. Sam assumes that there is a “classic Asian guy” that embodies several of the qualities associated with the *model minority* stereotype, that they are polite, calm, weak, and physically/sexually undesirable. Understandably, Sam rejects this imposed norm because it conflicts with his own personality, which he believes is that of an outgoing, confident, and physically attractive man, qualities he names as being White. But as hard as he tries, Sam cannot pass as White in the way Kennedy describes some multiracial African Americans have been able to do. Sam’s attempts to conceal his non-Whiteness are limited, something that has brought him a great deal of pain. Sam’s feelings are not unique; many people of color in the U.S. have tried to ignore or dismiss their ethnic background in an effort to develop and understand their own identities as individuals, something that is often overlooked as they are too frequently judged by racial stereotypes (Root, 1995).

It is imperative that Sam’s antagonism towards Asian Americans and his own Asian heritage is analyzed beyond his individual chauvinism. As suggested in the previous chapter, Asian American males are commonly meant to feel as if their Asian-

ness strips them of their masculinity; their Asian features make them especially vulnerable to racial teasing, prejudice, and public acts of humiliation even well into adulthood. This is why I am inclined to believe that Sam's longing to be the "Asian White guy" stems from his desire to be treated like an individual, not the unflattering racial stereotype that has haunted him since childhood. He elaborates with another personal vignette:

When I walk in the bar and I'm with all my White friends, I kinda stand out. Mostly guys will prejudice me, probably think I'm some Chinese kid with a bunch of White kids. And when I talk and I hang out, they all like me. I have a paranoia, that people are singling me out. That's why I use to get in a lot of fights. I thought people were prejudging me.

Tae-Sun: What would they be prejudging about?

Something. Whenever I go to Déjà vu, they're like, "Oh, it's Bruce Lee. What up dog?" Why do you have to call me Bruce Lee?

Tae-Sun: What is so offensive about being called Bruce Lee?

It's not Bruce Lee per say, it's just the idea that because I'm an Asian guy, people think they can just make fun of me and get away with it. I feel that if I wasn't Asian, people would give me a chance, they would treat me like they would treat any guy, at face value. Right now, my face value sucks. I'm at a total disadvantage.

Adam reacts to years of being racially degraded as an Asian male by showing hostility towards other Asians, who he blames for his own marginalization, a phenomena that leading scholars in the field of Asian American psychology link to the legacy of racism (D.W. Sue, 2003). Because he does not have the power to challenge the White hegemonic system in which these meanings are produced, he chooses instead to channel his frustrations towards the marginalized racial group for which he finds himself perpetually being categorized as.

But not all my male informants had such difficulties dating inter and intraracially. Ted, who was also raised in a conservative and upper middle class suburban community, acknowledges the real challenges Asian American men face as they attempt to date in a community that stereotypes them as undesirable. But he is also critical of male KADs for intentionally limiting their dating options by excluding African American or Asian American women as partners, and for not recognizing and dealing with their social ineptitudes that make them undesirable partners in general.

Tae-Sun: Describe the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the people you have dated?

Interviewee: Caucasian, Caucasian.

Tae-Sun: Do you know why?

Interviewee: They were available (laughs). I'm joking. I grew up in Michigan and in some sense, yeah, availability.

Tae-Sun: Well, you lived near African Americans? Was that an option for you?

Interviewee: No. That was never an option for me. My parents use to say, "Never bring home a person who's Black." They would never accept that. And plus, I never socialized with them. I never saw them.

I've dated Hispanic, is that the appropriate word? Let's just say Latina. Vietnamese girl, one Korean, two Korean, and a Chinese, but that was when I was at U of O¹⁸. It was also during the whole self-discovery thing and actually finding the Asian woman attractive, and thought, oh, they're not bad.

Tae-Sun: We're not (sarcastically).

Interviewee: No, you're not, no matter what the others say (giggle). And that's an awful thing to say, but adopted men say that all the time. They're like the only American men who don't like Asian women (giggle). And the big debate at the KAAD conferences¹⁹, the one that happened in Seattle, the one that happened in Minneapolis, was the Asian men calling the adopted women sell outs because

¹⁸ University of Oregon

¹⁹ An international Korean adoption conference

they were dating or married to White guys. And I'm looking at them going, the only reason you have so much angst is 'cause you can't date in general.

Not all informants react so negatively to being labeled as *Twinkies*, *Whites*, and *Fake Asians* by non-adopted Asians and Asian Americans. Some treat these labels as terms of endearment, especially coming from close friends or significant partners. Others feel as if these labels may seem harsh on the surface, but are more or less correct. But rather than feeling hurt or inadequate, some informants press on and learn as much about their heritage as they can and accept their marginalized status without compunction. Linda, who is a member of a pan-ethnic Asian American Greek sorority, says that her sorority sisters refer to her as their "little White girl," because she adds a unique novelty to their group's practice of appreciating cultural diversity.

Tae-Sun: How do you feel when your APA friends call you their little White girl?

I think it's kind of funny because I know it's like a joke and I know that's part of what they love about me is that I bring this different aspect into the community. Anybody who's adopted and becomes involved in the community, they think it's so cool because here's an Asian who is so White. I think they're really welcoming, I've found, compared to a lot of other communities I've been to. But maybe it's college and just being open to other people.

Ted, who left his predominantly White hometown in Michigan to attend a more racially diverse university in Eugene, Oregon, describes his relationships with his Korean American friends as close and honest. He shares a story about the time one of his Korean American friends explained to him how his adoption limits his ability to be a real Korean.

One of the things my friend said to me when we were at the bar, and we were really drunk, well he was, and he said to me, "I want to tell you something but you're gonna get mad at me," and I'm like, "No, just tell me, I don't care. I'm not gonna get mad at you". He goes, "You will never, ever be Korean," and I'm like, "Duh!" and he goes, "Because you're adopted," and I'm like, "Oh" (with a sigh).

But you know, that's a true and correct statement, and I will never hold that against him. It's a reality check.

He adds that moving to Oregon and interacting with Asian Americans have helped him to understand the nuances between these various communities. In doing so, he realized that adoption, or being raised by White parents, made him a different Asian American, rather than an inadequate one. Ted, who works for Holt International and participates in all the major Korean adoptee conferences and events, is critical of adoptees who struggle with their identity because they do not feel "Korean enough" or are not accepted as Korean:

One thing I don't understand about adoptees is that why do they try so hard to be a part of a culture that they will never totally, 100% understand. There are so many adoptees that beat themselves over the head because they are not Korean enough or because Korea won't accept them, but why does Korea have to accept you? You were raised in America or you were raised in Denmark and you should be proud of that. To me, Korea has no obligation to us. This is our lot in life. Some had to take their chances on the streets of Korea as orphans; we were raised in America. Both are discriminated against, but I happen to think that we got the better end of the stick.

Ted's perspective is very optimistic, and one that many anthropologists would surely concur with. Being interracially adopted should not preclude Korean adoptees from being Asian or Asian American, especially if they are racialized in the same way as other Asian Americans, i.e. like perpetual foreigners and model minorities. Korean adoptees' unique upbringings and environments of socialization should instead be considered welcome additions to the many cultural experiences that are encompassed in the political rubric "Asian American."

But like the racialized nicknames that were given to my informants by their White friends, the ones given by their non-adopted Asian American friends should also be scrutinized. The power dynamics that exist between non-adopted and adopted Korean Americans, in particular the social capital linked with being an authentic Korean, are

important to consider as they disqualify adoptees from attaining important symbolic roles within larger Asian American contexts. Adoptees are overlooked as purveyors of Korean culture, and even rejected as marriage partners on the grounds that their lack of clear family roots, their relinquishment/abandonment, interracial adoption, and eventual socialization by White parents disqualify them as “real” Koreans.

The Value of Cultural Authenticity

In her article, “Wedding Citizenship and Cultures: Korean Adoptees and the Global Family of Korea,” Eleana Kim (2005) argues that Korean adoptees “occupy a peculiarly privileged position in the context of the global economy. Having been reared in predominantly middle-to upper-middle-class White families, adoptees may lack cultural “authenticity” but this is seen as a necessary loss in return for the benefits of material wealth, “success,” and the opportunities afforded by the West” (67). Kim of course is referring to the opinion shared by some Korean nationals and adoptees that for orphans, losing one’s cultural authenticity is a small price to pay for gaining membership in a materially privileged White American family. But I would like to focus on the idea of adoptees losing cultural authenticity for a moment, as it appears to be a reoccurring theme in terms of how they are differentiated and marginalized by Asian Americans.

Interviews suggest that adoption by White Americans symbolically obliterates adoptees’ chances for ever authenticating their Korean identity. Even adoptees that have learned the Korean language, interact comfortably in Korean/Korean American social settings, and possess greater knowledge about Korean traditions than some non-adopted Korean Americans, are marginalized or marginalize themselves as “fake Koreans.” To

borrow a term from Eleana Kim, it appears as though those adopted and non-adopted Korean Americans are both guilty of “double-orientalizing” (66), or constructing an essentialized notion of Korean-ness that privileges non-adopted Korean Americans over Korean adoptees simply because they are constructed as having a primordial connection to their Korean roots, via direct relationships with their biological Korean parents.

For example, Ted is actively involved in the local Korean American community, is married to a Chinese American woman, has traveled to Korea numerous times for both professional and personal reasons, moves comfortably in Korean/Korean American social settings, and yet he is convinced that he will never be completely Asian or Korean because he was not raised by ethnically/racially matching parents.

Currently I’m taking a Korean language course. I took one in college but I failed it miserably, so I’m taking it now with about five other adoptees. I think just networking and socializing with my friends and within the Korean community it has enabled me to learn more about Korean culture. Will I ever learn Korean culture 100%? No, only if you’re raised in it can you learn it.

I challenged Ted on his statement with an anecdotal comparison between him and my cousin, who despite being raised in a Korean family, knows less about the culture and language than Ted does, and consciously dates White women because he resents being Asian. I asked Ted to compare himself to my cousin:

Tae-Sun: So who’s more Korean, you or him?

Um, that’s an interesting question, and I see where you’re getting at with that question, and I don’t know how to answer it. Just that for me, I feel that because I have White parents and grew up in a White world, White culture seems more natural and it feels less learned than Korean culture. Korean culture is so distinct from mainstream White culture in so many ways that I think adoptees like myself feel that it will always be beyond our reach. I forget that Korean Americans have to learn and relearn Korean culture too.

When confronted with a simple example of a Korean American who has chosen not to maintain his Korean lineage, language, and family customs, Ted realized that he made the common mistake of believing that Korean Americans and Korean culture were inseparable because of the influence of Korean parents, and KADs were somehow condemned to be separated from their birth culture because they had White parents.

The image of the tragic Korean adoptee alienated from Korean culture also took on a gendered dynamic. Some of my female informants expressed that not being authentically Korean thwarted their ability to claim what they believed to be the social rewards of being racialized as an Asian woman. Sujin describes herself as being socially handicapped by her adoption. She is self conscious that when she dates a man who was attracted to her because of her Asian appearance, she may be misleading him because she feels culturally inadequate. She also feels that her adoption has affected her ability to form committed relationships, again, a characteristic she associates with Korean women. For Sujin, being adopted or being raised White has cheated her of the qualities that make Asian women desirable to Asian men and exotic to American men.

I felt like I was cheating him. I felt like I was false advertising. He thought he was getting this, but he's really not. I didn't feel like I could really deliver and stand up to what I am. I'm not saying that Korean means X or Y or Z, but damn, I should know something. I feel that being adopted has cheapened me. Also too, because of my adoption I can't attach to people emotionally and my level of trust is really low. Oh, my messed up meaning of commitment and bond and nurturing. I'm scared that I'll screw up my kids. Because of my lack of Korean exposure, it made more tension on the relationship because I would over compensate and think things like, "I'm not being Korean enough, I'm too fat, I'm too ghetto, why would this guy want me when he could have the real deal?"

Here Sujin *double orientalizes*. Though she acknowledges in one statement that Korean culture cannot be essentialized, i.e. defined as being X or Y or Z, she nonetheless believes that she is false advertisement, attracting men who believe her to be culturally

exotic and nurturing as a wife and mother. These qualities reflect her own internalization of the perpetual foreigner and model minority stereotype, as well as a patriarchal reading of Asian gender roles. She assumes that to be an authentic Korean woman, or in her words, “the real deal,” she must exhibit foreign cultural behavior, lack any discernible problems, and be a nurturing and committed wife and mother.

The bad news is that gaining Korean cultural competence does not guarantee authenticity or equality with all Koreans and Korean Americans. As adoptees form closer relationships with Koreans and learn more about dominant cultural values, they become aware of the entrenched stigmas associated with being an *ee-byang-aw*, Korean for “adoptee” and “orphan”. The more precise translation of *ee-byang-aw* is “adopted child” or “orphaned child,” a paternalistic title which assumes that even adult adoptees are child-like and developmentally scarred or stunted. These stereotypes about KADs’ disabilities or their White cultural socialization, serve as social markers of differentiation and stratification.

In the summer of 2003, I participated in The Korean Ties Program, a motherland tour stationed out of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. During the tour, I met two Korean adoptees (one male and one female) living and working in Seoul. In an informal interview, I asked Jean and Kevin a few questions about the challenges they faced as they attempt to “become Korean.” They began by explaining that there are implicit and explicit symbols that reinforce the marginal status of adoptees, inhibiting them from ever attaining equal status. For example, male Korean adoptees are dissuaded from claiming Korean citizenship because in order to do so, they must first serve in the military just as all Korean males must do. Or to make a living in Korea, repatriating adoptees must often

accept jobs as English teachers or tutors, which inhibits their ability to learn the Korean language.

Jean, who has lived in Korea for two years, shared with me some of the more subtle ways in which adoptees were marked as different and inferior in Korea.

Tae-Sun: What is the new term that is being used for adoptees?

Ee-byang-een, which literally means “adult adoptee.” It’s not an original term by any means. It’s just our way of letting people know that we’re not children anymore. Yes, we were adopted as children and orphans long time ago, but we have matured and can think like grown adults.

Tae-Sun: Aside from the name, do Koreans treat you like children also?

Hmmm . . . not as much as White adoption workers or White parents do, but it’s still there.

Tae-Sun: Can you give me some examples of how differently White adoption workers and parents treat adoptees like children versus the way Koreans do?

Yeah sure. Well for one, a lot of adoption workers are also adoptive parents (giggle) and so I think when they are talking to adult adoptees, they unconsciously treat us like their [adopted] children. I’ve noticed that almost all of the adoption conferences are organized by White adoptive parents, mostly women, and they control the tone of the conference. They’re always in the room monitoring what adult adoptees have to say and if they don’t like what the panelist is saying, even if that panelist is a highly educated person who knows the adoption industry inside and out, the White moderator will interrupt and try to discredit everything that the adoptee said. It’s very paternalistic. I’ve also noticed that these White women are very controlling, even in their personal lives, like over their husbands and children. They can’t stand to be corrected by an adoptee.

Tae-Sun: And Koreans?

Koreans are paternalistic in that they pity adoptees. They think that we suffered a great deal because we lost our ties to our birth family, and some adoptees were abused by their American parents, so when they talk to you and find out you’re adopted, they’re like, “Oh,” with a sigh (giggle). And they try to be your mother or brother or uncle (giggle) and maybe some of that is just cultural, but I sense that they feel ashamed that they have allowed international adoption to go this far, and so maybe out of guilt, they try to be really nice to adoptees.

In addition to the pejorative tone associated with being adopted, Jean and Kevin discuss the challenges they have faced as they tried to date and marry local Koreans. When asked if they would like to marry a Korean, Kevin, a thirty two year old from Wisconsin, responded:

Yeah, of course, but it doesn't mean I can. I have had two long-term relationships with Korean women, but they both chickened out before I could even meet the parents. I was dumped, both times!

Tae-Sun: I don't mean to beat a dead horse, but was your adoption part of the reason?

Well, there's a little more to it than me just being adopted. I mean, don't get me wrong, the issue of family roots, or the lack there of, is always there. But I personally know of two adoptees who did get married to Korean women, so I know it's not impossible. I think my issue was that I worked in the *hogwon*²⁰, which is not the most prestigious job for an American. Pretty much any American or Canadian can get a job at a *hogwon*, as long as they speak English, so people will judge me and wonder, "Whoa, he was adopted and yet he's teaching English? I think Koreans assume if you're adopted by a rich White family, then you should have a better job. Me, I'm estranged from my American family so it's not as if I can get married and go back to America to this great life. So basically her parents wouldn't approve of me because I'm a loser by Korean standards.

Jean felt doubly disadvantaged in the dating scene because she was adopted and female. She believes that some Korean women and their parents may look favorably upon their daughters marrying an male KAD because due to their adoption and White culture, they hold the prestigious status of "American." By marrying a "real American," Korean brides-to-be can look forward to immigrating to the U.S., as well as having less intrusive parents-in-law. But for female adoptees, being "American" carries with it less flattering connotations. As "American" women, they are often stereotyped as sexually promiscuous, overweight, unattractive, and domestically challenged because they were raised by liberal White parents.

²⁰ An English learning institution.

I haven't been as lucky as Kevin here (giggle) because adopted females are not as exotic of an item as adopted males.

Tae-Sun: What do you mean by that, exotic?

Well, the guys are seen as American guys more so than Korean guys. They are tall, they can speak English, and the kicker is, if you marry an adopted guy, you won't have a Korean mother-in-law (giggle). What woman, or what mother for that matter, wouldn't want her daughter to have a good relationship with her parents-in-law? And the extra bonus is that the girls can get American citizenship and still marry a Korean, instead of say marrying an American soldier stationed here. But for us adopted females, it's not that easy. They think we're fat and unfashionable, and let me tell you something, they're not shy about telling you this to your face. Oh yeah, and they think we're easy and lazy. I think it's because they think American women all have premarital sex and are not as domestic and hard working as Korean women. Well, maybe they have a slight point there, (giggle) but hey, no one likes to be called a slut (giggle), least of all me!

Both Kevin and Jean suggest that adoption aside, gender and class may also influence whether or not an adoptee is able to marry a non-adopted Korean national. The prospect of immigrating to the United States and possibly reaping the financial rewards of marrying into an upper-middle-class White family, make some KAD males highly desirable partners for Korean women who might not have similar opportunities for upper mobility in Korea. An added advantage to marrying an adopted male is that the Korean bride would skirt the traditional duties/burdens of taking care of parents-in-law. Adopted females however are disadvantaged in the Korean dating market in that their Whiteness or Americanness marks them as less domesticated and cultured as locally socialized Korean women. Marrying a Korean woman socialized by White Americans may not necessarily be appealing to a Korean man who is accustomed to Korean standards of beauty, and may expect a wife to be attentive, chaste, and capable of fulfilling highly demanding domestic skills unique to Korean cultural norms.

Messed up with Too Many Issues

How differently are adoptees received by Korean Americans? Because the focus of this study was adult Korean adoptees' and their accounts of their racialized life histories, direct interviews of non-adopted Korean Americans were limited to four interviews of Korean Culture Camp volunteers and two participants at a KAAN conference. These interviews, coupled by sentiments raised by some adopted informants, revealed yet another dimension of Asian American stratification. Both second generation Korean Americans and some Korean adoptees stereotyped adoptees as inherently "broken," possessing mental illnesses related to their socialization and maladjustment to White culture. When specifically asked whether or not they would marry a Korean adoptee or marry their current partner who is adopted, informants responded in the negative, claiming emphatically that they would never marry an adoptee because they were "messed up" or had "too many issues." "Messed up" and "too many issues" were code for being plagued with mental illnesses due to their adoption and alienation from other Asians.

Bo is a twenty-three year old Korean American volunteer at a Korean culture camp. He initially volunteered for the camp as a favor to his girlfriend who is a KAD, but he has since returned to the camp out of moral obligation. Bo believes that many of the "issues" his girlfriend has as a young adult in terms of her multicultural competence and self esteem, can be traced to her adoptive family's decision to avoid discussions about racism, Korean heritage, and ethnic pride. His hope is that the campers who attend Korean culture camp will receive positive affirmation that may be lacking at home, school, and in the larger community.

I hate myself for saying this, but yeah, her adoption created problems in our relationship. She didn't know how to interact with my parents and she really didn't care to learn. I think my parents could overlook the adoption thing if she seemed interested in being Korean, but her adopted parents raised her to be inflexible. I mean, she really lacked some basic communication skills, like how to show respect to elders, how to interact with people from different cultures, taking pride in being Korean and knowing what you're proud of.

Tae-Sun: So why do you volunteer for KCC?

I feel obligated. [My girlfriend] is the way she is because she was raised by White parents who really didn't have a clue about Korean culture or racism. She wasn't raised in a diverse community when she was growing up so she really didn't have an opportunity to learn about that kind of stuff. So I figure that these camps are a good thing. Maybe by helping at this camp, these young adoptees won't turn out like my girlfriend.

For Bo, his girlfriend's cultural insensitivity, inflexibility, and perhaps ignorance stems from being adopted by White parents who did not have the interest or the tools to socialize their daughter to be acceptable to his Korean parents. Other Korean American informants seemed to believe that the very process of being adopted has permanently scarred some adoptees from forming intimate relationships. Therefore, regardless of whether adoptees learn about Korean cultural norms or not, they are psychologically scarred. Elizabeth, a veteran counselor of numerous culture camps, expresses her reservations about dating or marrying someone adopted.

Tae-Sun: Would you date or marry a guy that was adopted?

I don't know. I guess it all depends on the person. I've met a lot of adoptees working for culture camps and just based on the ones I've met, I don't think I would.

Tae-Sun: Can you please elaborate on why you wouldn't?

Well, at first I thought they were just like me, Korean American, just needing validation about being Korean and American, you know wanting friends and role models that were Korean American and that kind of thing. Then I learned that it went beyond that. Some adoptees have a lot of issues that run deeper than just cultural identity. For example, a lot of them are depressed and no amount of

therapy or medication helps them. A lot of them have intimacy problems, especially with Koreans. I mean it makes sense. They feel that their Korean parents abandoned them and maybe if they get too close to Koreans they'll be rejected again. (pause) And there are significant cultural differences too. They're raised so differently. I've met adoptees who smoke and drink with their parents, some dropped out of college or never went at all and it was cool with their parents, they don't value religion or community.

Elizabeth later acknowledges that non-adopted Korean Americans "have our own set of issues too" which is why she prefers to date Korean Americans. But she describes Korean American "issues" as being related specifically to having Korean immigrant parents, something she doesn't expect Korean adoptees or other Americans to understand or fully appreciate.

Second generation Korean Americans were not the only ones in my study who objected to the idea of dating or marrying a Korean adoptee. KADs themselves subscribed to the idea that KADs were culturally inept or emotionally scarred to the point that they too would not date a fellow adoptee. Interestingly enough, it was my informants who were the most bicultural and politically active that seemed most resistant to the idea of being intimately involved with a KAD. Kathy, who has had relationships with adopted and second generation Korean Americans, explained that she came to the conclusion that she would not date or marry an adoptee after years of interacting with them in the U.S. and in Korea.

Tae-Sun: Can you see yourself marrying an adoptee?

Oh hell no!

Tae-Sun: Why not? I mean, you would share so much in common.

That's why I wouldn't marry one (giggle). I mean, I'm still dealing with my own issues so I can't have another screwed up adoptee as my boyfriend. One of us has to be normal and I know that that sounds so awful and I know that there are some well adjusted adoptees out there, but that's only a small fraction.

Tae-Sun: Are you well adjusted?

What do you think Tae-Sun? Am I well-adjusted or am I one of those fucked up adoptees? (giggle)

Tae-Sun: No comment. I plead the fifth.

No, I mean seriously. I look fine on paper. I went to a prestigious college, my parents are middle class, I've got a great job, but I'm still struggling to be happy with my American life. I mean, I was trained to say it, "Yes sir, yes ma'am, I'm so lucky that I was adopted by my American parents," and if I didn't say it, then people think I'm a spoiled and ungrateful adoptee. But you know Tae-Sun, (pause) I want to find my [biological] parents. You know, a day doesn't go by where I don't think about them, not one day! It's like this gaping hole in my life and I can't fill it! I can try to mask it and pretend it doesn't matter anymore, but it does. Losing your family and birth culture is a big fucking deal and it's not something you just get over! I mean, it affects how I look, who I date, where I live, how I want to raise my kids, how I want my kids to look, how I interact with my parents, how I see the world. It affects everything.

When asked the same question, Sujin, who has also been actively a part of Korean American communities and comfortably dates Asian American men, responded unfavorably to the idea of marrying another adoptee. Her objection is that if she were to marry another adoptee, it would deny her the benefit of learning about her lost Korean heritage. She would end up instead inheriting more Whiteness, thus locking her into the hegemonic cultural system, a system she believes is responsible for keeping adoptees "brainwashed":

Tae-Sun: Can you see yourself marrying an adoptee?

I thought so, but the only way that I would, is if he was like me. Not saying that I'm the ideal, but I mean in terms of his commitment to Korean culture, if he had some language skills, was down with the food. But I really don't want White American in-laws, I really don't. I want to be with someone who I can learn from or extend myself with. If I married a Korean man or a Korean American man, every day would be an education, cooking this, or the history, or vocabulary words, or even their take on fashion is inspiring at times and sometimes not (giggle). Little Korean hints here and there, how they package their lunchbox, how they clean, all the unconscious Korean cultural stuff they do, you know the stuff you can't learn from a class or a book.

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Tae-Sun: But there's no one White culture or Black culture. I mean it can be cool learning from that, right?

Yeah, but my family's White and I live in Detroit. I learn their culture or their cultures anyway because it's in the mainstream. You see, if it's in the mainstream, then you learn about it, like it or not. I was forced to join a culture that wasn't suppose to be mine and now if I want to be Korean again, I have to basically be with a man who lives Korean culture. But being with an adoptee is like the blind leading the blind, excuse me, the brainwashed leading the brainwashed.

Sujin's interpretation of her alternative or third space identity is far from glamorous and liberating. She depicts adoptees as colonized subjects that were forcibly removed from their family, nation, and culture of origin, and then incorporated into the colonizer's culture to the point where they can no longer reenter their native communities as insiders.

What we learn from the perspectives of the KADs in this chapter is that the process of negotiating cultural identity can be fraught with obstacles and contradictions. Initially my informants entered communities with larger Asian and Asian American populations so as to learn about their birth heritage and befriend individuals who they believed shared in their experiences. But in the process of demystifying Asian or Korean culture, they also learned of its internal hierarchies which unmistakably differentiate adoptees and situated them in inferior positions. Some, like Ted, Linda, Jean, and Kevin, accept that they will be marginalized by Asian Americans and Korean nationals, but nonetheless continue to live in South Korea or in areas densely populated with Asian Americans because they prefer this form of marginalization to that of their predominantly White hometowns. For others, like Sam, Kathy, and Sujin, their marginal status remains a constant source of annoyance, reminding them that they can never be White enough for their adoptive communities and never Asian enough for their communities of ethnic identification.

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In the next chapter, I examine more carefully some of the non-traditional cultural spaces Korean adoptees inhabit in their quest, or their adoptive family's quest, to find a like-community of Koreans and perhaps a sense of cultural roots. These spaces include Korean culture camps, motherland pilgrimages to South Korea, and cyber communities.

CHAPTER 4: SEARCHING FOR KOREAN ROOTS, DISCOVERING KAD IDENTITY

I am a part of this forum to vent and gripe and complain, for validation and community. And from this I get the strength to address issues raised in the world. I get the fortitude to continue and address questions about adoption – the ever loving “so how does THAT feel?” and “why is your last name _____?” Which one of your parents is Asian?” or, more recently, “I’m not like other Koreans, you should talk to me.”

By immersing myself into KAW [Korean Adoptees Worldwide] when I need validation and empathy, when I need to be able to talk without explaining, in part KAW has kept me from completely self-destructing and has provided solace.

Dave, “RE: So it all boils down to price and infertility?” Online posting, Thu, 07 Nov 2002. koreanadopteesworldwide@yahoogroups.com

My informants are ensnared in a difficult binary of sorts; they are unable to fully assimilate into their adoptive community because they are not White but they are also unable to pass as Korean or Asian American because of their interracial adoption. As indicated in the previous chapters, Korean adoptees find it difficult to find a cultural or ethnic community they feel completely a member of because of their marginalized status as non-Whites and as interracially adopted individuals. So the search for community and roots continues; in their efforts to find a place to belong, many adoptees choose to participate in communities or programs created precisely for Korean adoptees.

This chapter explores three ways in which my informants, as well as other Korean adoptees worldwide, have created and discovered opportunities for meeting each other and learning about their unique cultural roots which involve educating themselves about their native homeland of Korea and sharing personal stories of growing up transracially adopted. These include Korean culture camps, motherland tours to South Korea, and cyber communities. These alternative methods of community building and roots

searching often serve as *safe KAD places*. Participants often cite these activities as therapeutic counseling sessions among like peers, as opportunities to express strong opinions about the inequalities they have experienced as Korean adoptees, and as creative launching points for forming more concrete relationships across towns, cities, states and even national borders. However, these communities do not operate in a vacuum; they are influenced and mediated by Koreans/Korean Americans, adoptive parents, and program staff who all have a stake in maintaining the status. Most are unable or unwilling to change the powerful forces that drive international adoption and limit adoptees' access to their birth families and culture, so these *safe KAD spaces* serve as perceived tools that can help adoptees better adjust to, or cope with, their adoptive families and communities.

Ironically, it is in these so-called *safe KAD spaces*, that they encounter the most conflicting messages about cultural identity, and despite valiant attempts at building a unified KAD community, these groups remain temporary and transient. Initial feelings of community are quickly disrupted as individuals have to leave for their respective homes, realize the significance of their political differences, or as they come to terms with the sometimes discouraging impediments imposed by state policies, adoption agencies, adoptive and birth families, and praxis of race in their daily lives.

In her study of youth participants on the **In Search of Roots** program, a motherland tour that accompanies Chinese Americans to mainland China in search of their ancestral roots, Andrea Louie notes that the experience of being in China produced some unexpected results:

However, rather than producing firmly rooted and unambiguous Chinese identities, these transnational interactions more often result in encounters with unfamiliar ways of being Chinese. Ironically, transnational connections reveal

disjunctions that are created in part by other conjunctures created by global flows between Chinese and Chinese Americans (2004: 8).

Korean adoptees participating in culture camps and motherland tours have similar expectations of these programs and similar unexpected results. Though initially they enroll in these programs to learn about *their* Korean culture and to form close ties with Korean people and the country, what they encounter instead is a premeditated staging of Korean culture that does not fit their experience as Koreans adopted into a White American family. As a result, much like the **In Search of Roots** participants, Korean adoptees who have participated in culture camps and motherland tours, find themselves experiencing unfamiliar ways of being Korean over and over again, leading them to question where their roots really lie. What they thought of Korea, Korean culture, Korean people, and the circumstances of their adoption are untrue or much more malleable, modern, and subjective than once thought. Movement however is essential; mobility to Korean places adds new information into KADs' consciousness which then allows them negotiating room to construct their KAD identities. Louie writes, "The idea that a sense of roots can only be produced through mobility, or that roots themselves can refer to attachments to multiple places, is important in examining identity production in the context of globalization . . . constructions of Chineseness play a central role in these negotiations because of the ways in which both the U.S. and Chinese governments define Chinese Americans according to their ancestral origins in China" (190).

Korean Culture Camps in the State of Michigan

In an attempt to help KAD children adjust properly to their interracial lives, some adoptive parents opt to enroll their children in Korean culture camps (KCC) during the

summer. The hope is that the exposure to Korean American role models, culturally affirming activities, and interactions with other adoptees, will minimize future “problems” their children may have with their adjustment. It is now common practice for international adoption agencies to refer adoptive parents to a Korean culture camp, but in the state of Michigan, Korean culture camps are not underwritten by agencies; instead, they are funded, organized, and worked by volunteer parents and Korean Americans. I will give a brief overview of the Korean culture camps in the state of Michigan, all of which I have participated in as a counselor, teacher, and Korean American education coordinator.

Korean culture camps have played an important role in introducing Korean adoptees and their families to other Korean/Korean American people and elements of Korean culture in the state of Michigan. These experiences also plant early seeds of interest among several adoptees to later in their lives attend diverse universities and return to Korea on study abroad programs or independent pilgrimages. The goals and activities of Korean culture camps vary. In the state of Michigan alone there are currently three fully functioning Korean culture camps, yet they vary in their organization and mission. There is Sae Jong Camp, Korean Culture Camp (KCC) in Flushing, and Korean Culture Camp (KCC) in Southfield, a suburb of Detroit.

Sae Jong²¹ Camp, which is held in a retreat-like wooded camping area, was initially created by Korean American immigrant parents in the metro Detroit area in the

²¹ The camp is named after King Sae Jong the Great who is regarded as the most enlightened ruler in Korean history. King Sae Jong was born in 1397, and ascended the throne in 1418 at the age of 21. He was the fourth king of the Choson dynasty. During his 32-year reign, King Sae Jong vigorously promoted learning. He was responsible for the creation of the Korean Hangul alphabet, a scientifically constructed alphabet which is touted as his greatest achievement. This alphabet enabled literacy to become more available to the general population, who could not be expected to master the classical Chinese language that was the official written language of Korea at the time.

1970s. According to the testimonies of active camp directors and counselors, a group of church elders agreed to establish Sae Jong Camp primarily because they feared their second generation children were assimilating into the mainstream White culture at the expense of their Korean language, ethnic self esteem, Christian values, and Korean traditions. As the Korean American immigrant community began to grow, the services once offered at culture camp, i.e. language, culture, and identity classes, were soon being replicated at Korean American churches. However, the need for Sae Jong Camp did not disappear as some expected it would. In the late 1980s, camp directors began to notice a shift in the camp demographics, with less second generation Korean Americans enrolling and more Korean adoptees and adoptive parents expressing interest.

Today, Sae Jong Camp offers two sessions, one session is mixed with second generation Korean Americans, adoptees, and biracial Korean Americans, and a second session is offered one week later exclusively for Korean adoptees. This second session's curriculum and activities are coordinated specifically to deal with sensitive matters pertaining to adoption and ethnic/racial isolation. When asked about the impetus for creating a separate session exclusively for adoptees, the founding director of the adoptee session replied, "As second gens²² we expect adoptees to just fit in and assimilate with our sense of culture and identity. It wasn't until I volunteered for Camp Tiger [a culture camp for adoptees] in Minnesota that I realized just how different their experiences and needs are. They have wounds and perspectives that we can't relate to."

The Sae Jong Camp staff includes Korean international students, second generation Korean Americans, biracial Korean Americans, and Korean adoptees. The curriculum includes courses in language, culture, identity, and recreational activities that

²² Short for second generation, Korean Americans.

range from guitar, Korean drumming, art, and archery. Camp organizers, participants, adoptive parents, and therapists credit Sae Jong Camp for providing adoptees a “safe space” and a “therapeutic environment” to talk about adoption, racism, and cultural alienation. The camp continues to be directed and organized by Korean American immigrants associated with local Christian churches and their adult Korean American daughters and sons.

Korean Culture Camp in Flushing is directed and organized by adoptive parents. The focus of this camp is introducing campers to diverse aspects of Korean culture by participating in culture classes such as folk drumming, fan dancing, Korean cooking, Hangul, and Korean-themed arts and crafts. Campers are assigned to a class named after Korean symbols such as Dragon, Rabbit, and Mountain. Korean American and/or Korean adoptee college students chaperone their assigned groups from culture class to culture class throughout the day. Issues of adoption and racial identity are not to be addressed because they are perceived as NOT being cultural by many parent board members and organizers. On several occasions, disputes over this policy have erupted between adoptive parents and Korean American volunteers. KCC in Flushing boasts an active relationship with the Korean American community in East Lansing, for whom they rely on heavily for cultural instructors. For five years, I have worked closely with the parent board members to include workshops for high school campers and adoptive parents addressing issues of racial identity and racism, bringing in adult Asian Americans and Korean adoptees to help facilitate various exercises. These efforts have triggered opposition from some parents who feel these issues are not “cultural” and the domain of the family. Still other parents find these workshops incredibly useful as they have helped

them to understand the struggles their children deal with because of their race and adoption. KCC Flushing is run out of an elementary school, and has no Christian emphasis, as many of the participating adoptive families are atheist and agnostic.

Korean Culture Camp in Southfield is organized primarily by a single adoptive mother who is employed by an international adoptive agency. In contrast to KCC Flushing, KCC Southfield leaves the curriculum design and programs in the hands of Korean American church members. The emphasis of this camp is building an organic relationship between Korean adoptees, their parents, and the Korean American community. The culture camp is held at a Korean American Presbyterian church, meals are prepared by congregation members, and former youth group members serve as camp counselors and teachers. Campers are divided up into classes named after important Korean cities such as Pusan, Seoul, and Taegu. The camp counselors are responsible for creating their own class curriculum which may address issues of race, identity, and adoption. Counselors are strongly encouraged to bond with their campers, forming big brother and big sister type relationships. There is a break during the day in which campers sign up for one “elective” offered by paid instructors who teach Korean drumming, fan dancing, cooking, Tae Kwon Do, and Korean-themed arts and crafts . KCC Southfield boasts that it offers a “natural” Korean American cultural experience because campers freely move within a large Korean American church rather than an “artificial” cultural environment contained within a wooded camping area or an elementary school. Counselors and campers have more time to bond since they are not constrained to rigid class schedules, and as such, campers leave this KCC feeling more

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The three Korean culture camps share a similar mission and philosophy about KADs. Their mission is to give adoptees a *positive* exposure to Korean people and culture. Why is this type of exposure important? The adoptive parents who enroll their children in these camps believe that their children are racial minorities in the United States and are therefore alienated from their ethnic heritage and community. Some believe that it is unconscionable to not expose their children to their birth heritage, and that as racial minorities in the U.S., exposure to Korean culture and people will build their self esteem so that they can overcome the impact of racism on their lives and self image. But Korean culture camps by definition are problematic in that they assert that there is a distinct or discernable Korean culture that is static and teachable. For many camp organizers, which include adoptive parents and Korean American volunteers, there is “a Korean culture,” one that is visually stunning, historically located in a traditional past, and accessed in the state of Michigan at culture camps taught by “authentic” culture-bearing Koreans. The uniqueness, the exotic beauty, and difference of select traditions and symbols ensure camp participants that they are learning about Korean culture and not American culture.

What exactly are these unique traditions and symbols? The staple cultural courses offered at KCC Flushing and KCC Southfield includes Tae Kwon Do (Korean marital arts), folk drumming, calligraphy, Korean cuisine cooking, and fan dancing. What these activities share in common are their focus on cultural difference, more explicitly, their stark difference to activities and images constructed as being American or Western. For

example, at KCC Flushing, posters and booklets donated by the South Korean Embassy or Korean travel agencies are displayed in the halls and classrooms. The images depict an Orientalized Korean landscape and people; there are pagoda-shaped buildings, martial artists in competition, young Korean women dressed in traditional *homboks*²³, and a table setting with *kimchee*²⁴ and other unusual side dishes. These cultural symbols are intended to excite and stimulate the campers, reminding them of their unique and impressive ethnic heritage. What these images unintentionally do of course is mark adoptees and the Korean American volunteers as *perpetual foreigners* linked to an essentialized and static notion of Korea that is at its root, opposite the U.S., American culture, and American people.

At KCC Flushing, the primary goal of the camp is to expose adopted children to traditional Korean culture and “real” Korean people, i.e. Korean nationals, immigrants, and non-adopted Korean Americans. The hope being that the positive exposure to exotic, unique, and exciting cultural traditions by kind Korean/Korean American volunteers will encourage their adopted children to take pride in their own Korean ethnicity while they are firmly rooted in a predominantly White America. The logic being that Korean pride, if strong enough, will help them mitigate negative experiences they will encounter as a racial minority. One parent at KCC Flushing feared that his six year old son, the victim of persistent racial teasing in his school and hometown, would become introverted and self conscious about being Asian. He brought both of his adoptive children, his Korean son and Indian daughter, to KCC with the hope that the camp experience would instill an

²³ A *hombok* is the name of the traditional Korean dress.

²⁴ *Kimchee* is a staple of Korean meals. It is a spicy, pungent, fermented cabbage dish that is served with most meals.

ethnic pride that would protect him from the years of racism he would inevitably have to face. Tearfully, this father expressed:

It's one thing if you're being teased by other kids, but adults (pause) but when adults do it, how is he to know that they're wrong? To him, they are authority figures so he don't know any better. That's why I brought him here. I brought my daughter too. She's from India and so far she hasn't experienced anything like that, I don't think. But my son (pause) I can already see the racism getting to him. He use to be so outgoing. He would play with any kid and would just talk, talk away. But now he holds back and just hangs out with us at home. I know it's because the kids are making fun of him. I don't want him to grow up hating himself for being Asian and I wanna thank you and everyone here for making this camp. It's wonderful and I can already see him opening up and making new friends.

Some parents also believe that learning about Korean culture is their children's birthright and as responsible parents, they must make every effort to provide cultural information to their children. This conviction has influenced many participating camp parents to drive hours, everyday, for a week, to bring their children to Korean Culture Camp. Some parents that live in other states or in remote parts of Michigan take their vacation time off in Flushing so that the entire family can participate in the camp. One parent shared, "There's only so much you can learn about a culture from a book or the internet," and she later adds, "and even if I were an expert on Korean culture and history, like say I had a Masters or Ph.D. in that region. That doesn't change the fact that I'm a White woman and I'll only have second hand knowledge of that culture . . . [my daughter] needs to learn about the Korean culture from an authentic source". Some parents clearly place a premium on the authenticity of the Korean experience, something these camps promise to deliver and otherwise cannot be replicated in their homes or hometown because of the absence of real-Koreans.

The adoptive parents' intentions are good; some even express chagrin at other parents who refuse to bring their adopted children to culture camp. However, these adoptive parent narratives offer a somewhat unusual or unfamiliar way of being Korean, to the adoptees who are hearing these stories but also to Korean American volunteers. For these families, Korean culture is likened to an inoculation. For one week out of the year, their children get inoculated with authentic Korean culture which can be administered at a culture camp. If effective, the inoculation will protect their children from racism and emotional stress brought on by alienation and perhaps adoption. However, the problem with the inoculation approach is that it does not treat the ailment, which for some of these children is being the only or one of the only people of color in a predominantly White community that perpetuates White hegemony and likely ignores, misrepresents, or pathologizes other racial identities. Attending KCC does not help them fit in or feel assimilated to their White adoptive communities; if anything, the emphasis on the differences between Koreans and Americans reinforce feelings of social marginalization. To illustrate this point, I refer to a brief interview I made with two young men who were forced to volunteer for KCC by their mothers. They are in high school so they are too old for the camp; instead they are given the role of Counselor in Training or C.I.T. They assist the counselors or the instructors at the different culture classes.

Tae-Sun: Why are you volunteering for KCC?

Spike: My mom made me.

Roland: Yeah, me too.

Spike: My mom has been on the board since the beginning.

Tae-Sun: You guys don't sound very happy to be here?

Spike: I hate being here. I mean the little kids are really cute and everything but I've been coming here since I was 5 and I've learned everything. I'm even more advanced than the Tae Kwon Do instructor. He's just a brown belt.

Tae-Sun: How about you Roland? Do you like being here?

Roland: Not really. I don't see the point of this. I mean, how does this help me? I was born in Korea but I'm American. It's kind of weird that we have to learn all this Korean stuff when we're never going back. I don't even have Korean friends.

Tae-Sun: Why do you think this camp is so important to your parents? Why do you think they forced you to be here?

Spike: I don't really know. I mean she always gives me the same old answer about how cool Korean culture is and how lucky I am to be Korean and how I'll thank her for this later. And I'm like, if Korean culture is so great, then why should I keep going to culture camp? Why don't I move back to Korea? You know, and I get bored of Korean culture after the millionth time.

Roland: I think they think they have to do this because we're adopted from Korea. I mean, they're trying to do the right thing I guess. But none of this helps you know. KCC is good for little kids to do fun crafts and see other adoptees I guess, but when you get older you want to do other things. It's like, "Come to KCC and learn how different Koreans are." It's like you come together for a week and then you don't see each other again for another year. You just get tired of it.

This exchange is not representative; there were other teen volunteers who loved playing with the children and the opportunity to see childhood KCC friends. But these young men raised the point that Korean culture was not helpful or interesting to them anymore. In essence, Korean culture is a tool; it entertained them as children and it was a parenting strategy for several years. It has now become boring and useless, and it is only out of respect for their mothers that they volunteer begrudgingly. Perhaps KCC is like little league baseball or Boy Scouts; there are some lessons and symbols that they will remember, but as an activity, it is something they simply outgrew.

New Ways of Being Korean

Inspired by my interviews with Spike and Roland, the following year I incorporated more useful or relevant activities for the C.I.T.s to participate in. For example, I brought in Asian American hair stylists and make-up artists to groom the teenagers in modern Asian and Asian American styles. I also recruited Asian American male college students to play basketball with these young men and to teach them how to play modern Korean and U.S. songs on the guitar. I interviewed Spike and another C.I.T. a year after, asking them if the new programs were to their liking. They both loved their new hairstyles²⁵ and the opportunity to meet Asian American students from Michigan State University, a college they both hoped to attend. One of the young men commented that he had never met Korean guys that were 6 feet tall until this summer and that he can no longer brag that he is the tallest Asian he knew. Several of the teenage girls also enthusiastically lined up to have a make-over performed on them from a Korean college student who brought with her Korean cosmetics and application tools. As she was applying the make-up on one of the girls, I asked her to tell the girls about double eyelid surgery and skin whitening²⁶, two common beauty trends in South Korea. The campers were shocked to learn about this procedure but quickly broke out in giggles at the new information they just learned.

The Korean college student turns to me and replies in Korean, “These girls are so country looking. Their hair is so bluntly cut, and their skin is so tan.” I asked her if I could translate to the girls what she said so that they can learn about modern Korean

²⁵ Most of the male campers had their heads shaved or they were cut in an unruly style because no one in their hometowns knew how to cut or style Asian males’ hair.

²⁶ Korean women, but also some men, strive to look more “American,” code for White, by undergoing a surgical procedure where a double eyelid fold is artificially created and/or by applying skin whiteners to their tanned skin.

beauty standards. She gave me permission and so I did. The campers did not appear affected in a positive or negative way. The college student replied in her broken English, "But it is ok for you because you are American and Americans like dark skin and plain style." One camper says, "I like getting a tan. Everyone else in my family is jealous because they sun burn." Other campers laugh and nod in agreement. Another camper asks, "Does it hurt when you get eyelid surgery?" And the college student responds, "Yes. You are awake when they do it." Some campers look at each other with a mortified look on their face while others are expressionless.

I ask the campers what they think about double eyelid surgery and one camper says, "I like Asian eyes. I don't want to change them." Another camper says, "I hated my eyes 'cause kids use to make fun of them, but now I'm kinda excited about trying make-up." I hear other girls chatting about how confused they are when they read teen magazines and cannot seem to apply the make-up on their face the way the White models do. The exchange between the campers, the college student, and myself is exhilarating. The learning objectives are different from the traditional culture class, but I sense that the campers are happy with the outcomes nonetheless. They learned basic Asian make-up application techniques and factoids about the latest Korean beauty styles, something several of the girls were grateful to learn as they are of make-up wearing age. Some adoptive parents are peeking into the room, curious about what their daughters look like. One mother is thrilled and asks the college student where to buy the cosmetics. The student replies, "Korea or maybe in Koreatown." Disappointed with the answer, the daughter asks, "There's no Koreatown here." And the student replies, "Clinique is good too. You have Clinique here right?" The girl looks confused, and the college student

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gives her one of her cosmetic products as a gift muttering something about if she ever goes to Korea, to look up that particular brand.

Aside from adoptive parents, Korean and Korean American volunteers also have an agenda. For some, like myself, it is important that Korean culture and people are not stereotyped or essentialized as traditional relics; the culture and people should be represented as dynamic, diverse and modern just as American culture and people are. Korean women do not look like the tourist posters on the walls of the KCC, with bone straight, black hair and traditional Korean dresses, fixed in a royal courtyard surrounded by majestic castles. Today they have dyed brown hair, double eyelid surgery, and a preference for white skin and Tommy Hilfiger jeans, reflecting the penetration of Western beauty standards, media images, and products to Asian markets.

Other Korean volunteers were eager to contribute to the CIT curriculum by teaching history; what happened to the majestic castles, wealth, and exotic Korean material culture; the invasion and eventual occupation of the Korean peninsula by Japan.

Below are participant observation notes I took of a Modern Korea class offered to CITs by a visiting scholar at Michigan State University, Mr. Kim in the summer of 2002:

Mr. Kim writes on the chalk board the title of his lesson plan, "The Japanese Occupation of Korea." Mr. Kim explains that his academic background is history. He begins the lecture by asking the CITs what they know about Korean history. There is laughter and giggling. CITs look around to see if anyone will respond. No one responds so Mr. Kim looks at one of the young men and asks him what he knows about Korea. He responds, "*ahn nyoung ha sae yo* and *gom sa hob knee da*, which means hello and thank you in Korean. When Mr. Kim realizes that their knowledge of Korean history is none existent, he looks disappointed and does not pursue the questioning any further. He goes into his lecture.

Mr. Kim says that Korean history is 5,000 years old. Since I was assisting him, I interjected during a silent pause and asked, "Do you know how old U.S. history is?" No one answers so I respond, "Just a little over 200 years old." A CIT jokes, "America is just a baby compared to Korea," and others begin to laugh.

Mr. Kim explains that if anyone of the CITs were to go to Korea, they would see that it is more developed than Michigan. He says that Hyundai produces more cars for the world than any other automaker in the world, including General Motors or Ford. He says that this accomplishment is amazing when considering that Korea has been invaded 610 times and was devastated by the Japanese Occupation and the Korean War.

He repeats over and over again that the Japanese devastated Korea and the CITs look very confused. So I ask him, "Mr. Kim, why did the Japanese invade Korea?" He responds, "Japan wanted to dominate Asia, and China was their main target. Korea was the bridge to China so Japan planned on building roads and tracks going through Korea to get to China." Mr. Kim says very generally that thousands of Koreans were tortured and killed during this process. He said, "the Japanese used terror to kill the spirit of the Koreans." He describes some of the torture methods and insists, "The Japanese refuse to apologize for what they did to Korea. They do not even teach it in their schools. The whole world knows what they did in World War II, but they refuse to teach the younger generation." Mr. Kim pauses for a few seconds, collects his composure and says, "This is why Koreans hate the Japanese." The room is silent.

After the lecture, I randomly ask some CITs how they enjoyed Mr. Kim's lecture. One young lady said that she had never heard of this history and was glad that she learned about it from a real Korean historian. The young man who joked about American history being a baby said, "I've never learned this at KCC before."

For Mr. Kim, a middle aged Korean man who survived the Korean War, knowledge about Korean culture was incomplete without understanding the role of the Japanese Occupation in the devastation and division of Korea. His sentiment is shared by many of his countrymen and women. Equally important to this history is knowing how Korean people survived the Occupation and rebuilt their country into a modern, technologically advanced, first world nation, hence his intentional comparing of Korea and Hyundai with Michigan, General Motors, and Ford. Though I was not able to follow up with any of the CITs, I imagine that Mr. Kim's lecture seemed somewhat out of place at KCC amid the exotic travel posters, martial arts classes, and crafts.

The leadership at Sae Jong Camp, which is coordinated by second generation Korean Americans and adoptees, also offer adoptees new insights and nuances on being

Korean. The camp is advertised widely as a Korean American culture camp rather than a Korean culture camp; its goal is to validate the *multiple* and *changing* identities expressed among Koreans in the United States. As such, organizers assert that lessons about Korean culture and identity are incomplete without discussions about racism, social marginalization, alienation, and identity change. Alienation and racism are accepted by these leaders as social problems negatively affecting young Korean Americans' self esteem and their willingness to embrace their ethnic heritage. Therefore camp organizers and counselors intentionally structure time for peer bonding/trust-building activities, the development of big brother and big sister relationships between campers and their counselors, and discussion forums about race, culture, family, and adoption. Learning about exotic or traditional Korean cultural forms are treated as minor goals at this particular camp, as made evident in their mission statement:

Our mission is to provide all Korean-American children the opportunity to explore their Korean-American identities, learn about their Korean heritage, and make friendships to last a lifetime. Our camp also provides an opportunity for campers to share their experiences with other campers and counselors who are able to encourage, support, and most importantly, empathize. This does not imply that we attempt to define or shape your child's identity. Nor do we pretend to have the answers to all of their questions. We acknowledge each child as an individual who possesses unique and very personal life experiences as a Korean-American and/or adoptee. Each camper will be challenged to grow and encouraged to share, all while having fun.

An impressive statement for sure; it acknowledges that there is no fixed Korean culture or identity and the emphasis of the camp is to empathize, develop lifelong friendships, have fun, and grow as an individual. If one were to exclude the Korean references, one might mistake this camp's mission with that of any U.S. summer camps'. I interviewed several Sae Jong Camp alumni. I was curious about the long term impact of attending this camp.

Kai recalls his initial reluctance to go to the camp. As a high school student he felt that Asian gatherings such as Korean culture camp were undesirable and in fact undermined the efforts of integration. Ironically he does not recognize or problematize the segregated White gatherings he was routinely exposed to in his hometown and school.

Later on in life in high school, I went to a camp called Sae Jong Camp and I was really disappointed I didn't pursue it earlier. I know that I received fliers and mail about it but to be honest, I really didn't want to surround myself with Asian people at that point in my life. I felt like, what am I achieving by segregating myself for two weeks with all these Asian people when you're raised to believe that diversity is this great thing. I felt Sae Jong Camp was a way of segregating yourself. That's how I viewed it.

But one summer I thought what the heck, maybe I can meet some cool friends, or try something different, so I went and tried it out and I had a blast. I really connected with a lot of the counselors, a lot of the guys. It was a little different than what I thought because there was a lot of drama inside the camp among the campers.

Tae-Sun: Did you go to the mixed one or the adoptee one?

I actually stayed for both because what happened was I met a girl the first week (laugh) and she asked me to stay for the second week and so I said sure. I asked my mom when she came for visiting day, and told her I met this girl, and she let me.

Fascinated about why Kai, who had been so skeptical about socializing at a Korean American camp all of a sudden decided to attend two sessions, I followed up with additional questions that soon revealed the nature of his unique camp encounters.

She was from Novi. She was the same year I was. She did the camp for many, many years and I guess every year that there's this conflict between girls and guys where girls will fight over guys and guys will fight over girls and I had no idea going into it. I knew there was a gender imbalance but I didn't think it was going to be this bad. It was kind of funny but flattering too because to have all these girls come up to you like that. I mean, in high school I would date and stuff like that and I had girlfriends but not to this extent where girls would just talk about you and you hear rumors. I would get all these chingu-gram (Korean for "friend") grams²⁷. Camp was fun. The drama added to the excitement.

²⁷ Chingu-grams were informal messages that campers and counselors wrote to one another. During a designated period of the day, campers would or would not receive chingu-grams.

*Tae-Sun: Who did you take to the dance?*²⁸

I had the sweetest little toddler girl. I got drawn to them. I spent most of my time with them, like the little kiddies.

Tae-Sun: How did that make you feel, them encouraging mentorship?

It definitely felt good to talk to the little children because I know what they are going through and I know what they are thinking. I was just thinking the entire time, “Oh man I wish I had someone who was older talking to me about this stuff, comforting me and telling me all these things I want to hear,” and so I did that and took the initiative. I didn’t really go there to have a fling. Most of the campers I found out go there to meet boys and girls to date. I just went there to meet people. I didn’t really due the activities. When I had free time, I just talked to people, especially the counselors.

Kai accurately describes the special feature of this particular culture camp that may not be available at other camps and social events, ethnic-peer bonding and mentorship. He grew up learning somehow that it was unhealthy and counterintuitive to socialize with Asian Americans. Without a mentor or “someone who was older” to let him know that his feelings were valid and commonly experienced by other Asian Americans, Kai had no other recourse than to shoulder his burdens alone. As a result of being a camper at Sae Jong, Kai admits that he entered college feeling more confident about being Asian American and participating in Asian American student organizations.

One parent expressed that prior to coming to Sae Jong Camp, her teenage son was introverted and suffered from low self esteem about his ethnicity:

I swear, Nick was so quiet, he was introverted and kind of the school nerd. But after one summer of Sae Jong Camp he blossomed. Just look at him. He’s like the big man on campus. I think seeing the Korean American counselors made a huge impact on him. He realized that he could be cool and that being Korean was cool and that these pretty girls liked him because he was Korean. Nick said to me as we were driving up here, “Hey mom, I want to go to college so I can come back and be a camp counselor.” I’m telling ya, it brought tears to me eyes.

²⁸ On the last day of camp, there is a prom-like dance. For the early segment of the dance, young campers and older campers are randomly matched through a lottery system. These matches are intended to foster big brother and big sister relationships between the grades.

As this parent's statement suggests, Nick's exposure to Korean people, in particular, "cool" Korean American college students, challenged his experiences and perceptions of being Korean in his hometown school. In essence, Sae Jong Camp introduced him to an unfamiliar yet desirable way of being Korean. Though no mention is ever made about the role of Korean culture in building this young man's self esteem, it is clear that the exclusively Korean American camp environment somehow facilitated the development of his positive self image and awakened in him an outgoing personality. When I asked the parent whether or not her son has learned more about Korean culture as a result of his camp experiences, she replied,

Not really. I mean, he can read and write some Korean, and I think he likes the food now, but that's really not why he begs me to come back every year (giggle).

Tae-Sun: Oh really? So why does he come back.

The girls, of course (giggles). And also the young ones look up to him because he's tall and athletic and handsome. It's a big boost to his self esteem.

For Nick and Kai, attending Sae Jong Camp and finding community among adopted Korean Americans, provided them the rare opportunity to fully participate in the American patriarchal and heterosexist social experience for the first time in their adolescent lives. For a week, sometimes two weeks, these young men experience life without being marginalized because of their race. They, and other Korean young men, are instead recognized for their abilities, physical attractiveness, and perceived by young campers as role models precisely because they are Korean. And because females outnumber males, approximately 3 males to every four females, male campers, in particular the more attractive high school students, were perceived as rare and prestigious

partners. Interestingly enough, competition between the females developed, with individual females or cliques of females determined to flirt with boys or form short term relationships with one, a clear indicator of the young men's new status.

But one of the *popular* high school females, Andy, explained this social phenomenon as both a fun yet futile ritual in which relationships are formed temporarily, only for the involved parties to be later separated by distance and forced once again to integrate into the dominant social order.

Tae-Sun: So rumor has it that Nick and Andrew are both interested in you. Do you even like them?

(giggles) Well . . . I don't know, it's so crazy here, but I love it! I mean, I never liked Korean guys until I came to Sae Jong. I never realized how hot they were until I came here. I mean, I don't want to choose 'cause I like them both, for different reasons, you know what I mean. But then I think, what's the point? It's going to end after this week anyways so I might as well just have fun (giggle).

Interview: What's going to end?

Well, it's like this every year. You have these flings, but then camp is over and you go back home. And I live here and they live there and reality sets in that we're not going to see each other until next year. I mean, I've tried to keep in touch, but you live so far away from each other so you just lose touch. Like after camp, my phone bill is outrageous! But after a few months it dies down.

Andy's statement reveals vividly just how fleeting and negligible these experiences of community are in the lives of these young Korean Americans. If the function of Korean culture camps were to instill ethnic pride, self esteem, and feelings of Korean adoptee community, it does so in spurts, a yearly spurt during the summer. To what extent these spurts of Korean cultural pride will neutralize the more frequent experiences and messages of White racial hegemony they will be bombarded with as they return to their respective hometowns, is not something that can be determined in this study.

What these observations and narratives suggest is that the Korean American presence at culture camps introduces to adoptees, and also to their parents, new ways of being Korean. These new people, practices, values, and behaviors seem to offer adoptees more room for inclusion. Adoptees can participate in the haircuts, the make-overs, the basketball pick-up games, the lectures, and the dating economy. They are also made aware of their deficits, i.e. their “country” look, their cultural ignorance, and their low self esteem, but are accepted as Korean Americans or modern Koreans nonetheless.

Motherland Tours to Korea

Another method by which Korean adoptees seek to find community and empathy within a supportive and like- group is through motherland tours, or travel programs for adoptees and adoptive families to South Korea. There are several private motherland tour companies that have emerged, tailoring the experience for Korean adoptees and their families. In 2002, I participated in The Korea Ties Program, which is one of eleven motherland tours serviced through The Ties Program. My role was as translator and counselor, and on four occasions I had the privilege of translating reunions between adoptees and their foster parents. The program website describes the tour as, “a journey like no other as your children are not simply “visiting” some place . . . they are feeling a place that is at the core of who they are”, and as such, the experience may bring about very strong emotions. The staff, “prefer to have adoptees of any age travel with parents, close relatives or friends, or spouses”

(http://www.adoptivefamilytravel.com/about_us.asp).

Not including the accompanying parents, the youngest Korean participant on my trip was nine years old, and the oldest was thirty one. The program lasts two weeks, and some participants choose to extend their stay. The goal of this and other international adoption related motherland tours are similar in that they offer adoptees the opportunity to visit their country of birth so they can experience the culture and people in a more general way with the assistance of travel and adoption professionals. The Korean Ties Program also offers participants the opportunity to visit their orphanage, place of birth or “founding,” such as a police station or fire station. Whenever possible, reunions with foster or birth family are also coordinated; on my trip, one birth parent reunion was made.

Below are notes I recorded during the orientation speech; it was not written verbatim. Most of statements are made by one of the lead staff people, Pam. The main message Pam conveys in this orientation is that of respect. Tour participants are first urged to respect other people’s right to search or not search for birth family, and then secondly, they are encouraged to respect the cultural and communication difficulties that may arise as they interact with adoption professionals.

Some families will be making choices to meet with foster and or birth families and that might not be the choice for your family. But we should try not to be judgmental. Today and tomorrow we will be visiting Eastern and Holt Adoption Agency to review personal adoption files. We must be open to the fact that the reviewers may not always disclose all the information in the file because of birthparent confidentiality. They are only doing their job. We must learn to accept the cultural differences that may prevent us from getting what we want.

Language is also something to think about when the reviewers are translating the documents. English is their second language so if the translations seem “cold” or “institutional” it is not intentional. Try to keep questions simple because they may have difficulty with long winded questions. So questions should be direct without a lot of colloquialisms. Take your questions with you, listed in advance. Take a notepad so that you can write things down.

Stay positive and upbeat. Don't be confrontational. It will get you nowhere and it will close the lines of communication. Kids, please no attitude. The workers will think you are not mature enough with the information. We must be accepting of what we cannot control. We must be grateful for the agencies that made our families possible.

Wednesday we will be visiting Esther's House, the maternity home for mothers preparing to relinquish their children for adoption. 30-50 birthmoms stay there. One thing to keep in mind, the moms are interested in hearing from the adoptees more so than the American parents. They want to know if you are accepted, how people treat you in the U.S., and if you are happy. They want to know if your [American] grandparents love you.

Please ask them questions. You can get an idea of what your birthmom was going through before she made "the decision." Kids don't be shy. Sometimes they ask really unusual questions like when did you come of age, and did you learn to drive because many birthmoms are also young and they don't know about things abroad. Showing emotion is good. We will cry. We are in a society where they openly show their emotions so tears are acceptable whether they are tears of sadness or joy.

Bring socks because we have to take our shoes off and sit indoors. Walking barefooted in someone else's home is considered inappropriate.

Afterwards, Pam asks if there are any questions. None of the adult or youth adoptees raise their hands. All of the questions are asked by adoptive parents.

Parent: Can we also leave things in the files for the birth family?

Pat: You can bring things for the file like recent pictures and letters.

Parent: In the files, is there information we didn't have before?

Pat: You won't know until you see them, like small details about what time the baby was born. Put those questions down on your question sheet.

Parent: Do we refer to our child by their Korean name? ²⁹

Pat: Yes. The workers will refer to them that way.

Parent: What information can I ask about the birthmoms?

²⁹ Most of the adoptees were renamed by their adoptive parents, usually with a European name.

Pat: I'd ask my child what would they want to know. The information in the files are quite thorough. I would even let your child hold the file so they can feel the real thing and know it's not a copy.³⁰

Parent: Do you know about the thumbprint story?

Pat: Yeah. There was a story of an adoptee who came back and looked through his file only to find that it only had a piece of paper with his thumb print.³¹ The social worker let the child place his thumb on it.

The staff of the Korean Ties Program is highly trained and equipped to answer the most challenging of questions as indicated in this passage. This is one of the many luxuries promised by the program, something independent visits to Korea cannot easily facilitate. Depending on the needs and services requested by each participant, the total package ranges anywhere from \$3,000 to \$4,000 per participant including a round trip ticket, hotel stays, a home stay with a Korean family, translators at hand and visiting tourist attractions.

However, this series of comments and questions draws attention to the relative voicelessness, powerlessness, and cultural alienation of adoptees, even within the context of a motherland tour that seeks to reconnect adoptees to a homeland that is “a place that is at the core of who they are.” In the orientation, adoptees are told to tolerate with grace and a positive attitude the numerous obstacles that may get in the way of exploring their homeland, adoption information, and interactions with locals. These obstacles include their adoptive families' choice not to search for biological family, adoption workers refusing to disclose some information in the adoption files in order to protect the confidentiality of the birthparent(s), “cultural differences” that may prevent them from

³⁰ Most adoptive parents and adoptees have only seen photo copies of their birth records and documents in the files.

³¹ The implication of this story is that this particular individual was abandoned or haphazardly relinquished for adoption without any letter, toy, or blanket from their birthparent. As such, when the individual was brought to the orphanage, their thumb print was taken as their sole document of identification.

getting what they want, and inadequate translation. Adoptees are asked to instead be “positive and upbeat,” and “be grateful for the agencies that made [their] families possible.”

When Pam opens the floor for questions, none of the adoptees raise their hands. It is the adoptive parents who ask the questions; I am struck by how marginalized adoptees are in this exchange. “Do we refer to our child by their Korean name?” This seemingly harmless question highlights that adoptees lacked the power to retain even their Korean birth name.³² Even the adults participating in the program have far more agency than when they were children, but still chose to keep the name given to them by their adoptive parents. When one parent asks, “What information can I ask about the birthmoms?” Pam responds, “I’d ask my child what would they want to know.” In this exchange, Pam attempts to redirect the flow of the parents’ curiosities and excitement, and return to the emotional needs of adoptees and the questions they may have about their history. But even with Pam’s cues, adoptees remain silent and passive. It is their adoptive parents, in particular their adoptive mothers, who do all the talking.

Debunking Myths about Korean Birthmothers and Orphanages

Perhaps the most anticipated portion of the tour is the visit to Esther’s House, a half-way home for expectant mothers preparing to relinquish their babies for international adoption, and to Sung Ae Won, one of the several orphanages visited on this tour. Adoptees and their families are able to interact with birthmothers (BM) as well as hold

³² All but one of the adoptees participating in Korean Ties retained their Korean birth names. The others were renamed by their adoptive parents with European/White names. HOWEVER, not all Korean adoptees were relinquished knowing the actual name they were given by their birth family. In the absence of a name, adoption workers such as directors, nurses, and foster parents, give the children a Korean name.

and play with babies and children awaiting adoption. Two other native translators and I are asked to facilitate these meetings. The other translators are Ji-Hyun, a 30-something Korean native woman who was formally trained in English and Mrs. Oh, a senior Korean woman who has participated in several motherland tours and helps the American staff and participants navigate society once they arrive in Korea. Due to her age grade and her professional experience in this field, Mrs. Oh wields a great deal of social power. She is referred to by the other Korean volunteers as an *ajuma*, a term used to describe an older married woman who due to their age and life experience, are entitled to greater social power and privilege than other females or males.

Several of the adoptees in Korean Ties, but also some in my interviews, have long wondered about the circumstances surrounding their relinquishment. Many believed *stories* and birthmother *myths* often taught and reinforced to them by their adoptive family, social workers, therapists, books, and strangers. These myths coupled with the model minority myth and romanticized images of poor Asian women create a particular type of birthmother image where she is powerless and therefore innocent and just in her decision to give up her baby for adoption. The visits to Esther's House and the orphanage introduces into the consciousness of the adoptees as well as their adoptive family, new information that completely contradicts these birthmother myths, and exposes them to a Korean culture that on many levels turns the model minority myth and Orientalized stereotypes of Korea on its head. Though of course no direct correlation between these birthmothers and orphans can be made to every Korean Ties participant, what was clear to me after these visits was that for several of the participants, the new information they learned triggered new curiosities about Korean culture and made them question

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altogether the validity of their adoption stories/histories. I will begin with observation notes taken from Esther's House.

The meeting of Korean Ties participants and birthmothers takes place in a small and warm room. Everyone but Mrs. Oh is seated. Seven birthmothers are seated in one corner and two in another. All the birthmothers have delivered their babies and are waiting for their adoptions to be processed. All the Korean Ties participants enter the room leaving their shoes outside. I walk into the room five minutes late but fellow staff member fills me in on what I missed. An adoptive parent asked the BMs if they would ever tell their future husbands that they gave a child up for adoption. One BM answered that she would have to because this is the 2nd time she gave birth to a child and relinquished them for adoption. The first child was by a c-section and the scarring is apparent. She couldn't hide this information from her husband even if she wanted to.

By the time I enter the room, the lead translator, Mrs. Oh, is encouraging the BMs to speak up and ask questions because this is such a rare occasion and these people came a long way for this opportunity to learn about why they were given up for adoption. The room has been very silent until then. Mrs. Oh tells the BMs that these returning adoptees represent their children so they should really be more open. The adoptees are silent. One adoptive mom (AM1) speaks up. AM1 asks all the BMs how does it feel when they are about to give their child up for adoption.

BM's remain silent and 3 begin to cry silently. None respond. Mrs. Oh encourages the BMs to speak but none do so she picks out one of them and tells them to speak. Once prompted by Mrs. Oh, the BM begins to speak. She responds, "I am doing this because I have to in order to give my child a better life." There is silence. AM1 asks if she knows whether or not her children were adopted domestically or internationally. The birthmother looks around puzzled and says, "Of course the babies are adopted internationally." Mrs. Oh interjects, "Most adoptions are international. The moms want their children to go to America because they believe they will have the best opportunities there."

Mrs. Oh encourages the BMs to ask questions of the adoptees. One BM asks how the adoptees are treated in America because they are Korean and their parents are not. One teen KAD says that she is not treated differently and that she has a good life. The KAD's mother AM2 reiterates that she considers the KAD her *real* daughter regardless of the fact that she is Korean. AM3 says that her town is all White and very small. Everyone knows how much she and her husband wanted children so when her son came from Korea, he was like a movie star and his picture was in the newspaper. A 30-something KAD who has a prominent speaking and learning disability adds that when he came to the U.S., he was also very popular because he was the only Korean in his school. AM1 looking at her daughter and then to the BMs says that she has 4 biological sons and she

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considers her Korean daughter her own and loves her just as much. And though she has never seen her BM, when she looks at her daughter's face, she sees the BM. She says that when her daughter said to her one day, "I don't even know what my mother looks like," I put her in front of the mirror and said, "That's what she looks like." The BMs are all crying and so are many of the KADs.

An adoptive father (AF1) tells the adoptees that they can ask anything. They are the closest they will get to meeting their BMs. He wonders if maybe the adoptive parents should leave the room so that the KADS and the BMs feel safer about asking questions. There is still a reluctance to speak but no one leaves the room.

Mrs. Oh asks how old the BMs are. The youngest is 15 years old and the oldest is 23. When the youngest birthmother said her age, the room gasps. All but the 15-year old are college graduates. Mrs. Oh asks the 15 year old mother to explain the circumstances of her pregnancy. She hesitates and finally says it was with a school mate. AF1 asks the BMs if the birthfathers and their own parents know about the pregnancy. Only the 15 year old BM raises her hand and says that her parents know and they support her decision to be at Esther's House. The rest are shaking their heads no and a few respond out loud that their boyfriends do not know.

Mrs. Oh responds angrily, "Why didn't you tell them, the guys? Don't you think they have a right to know?" One of the older BMs said that she thought she could find a better mate in graduate school, insinuating that she could marry "up." If she told her boyfriend about the pregnancy, he would want to marry her right away. Mrs. Oh shakes her head with disapproval and asks if others were in similar situations, and some nodded their heads. She repeats, "So all the babies are by boyfriends, right? Peers, not some bad guy right?" The BMs nod their heads in the affirmative. Several bow their heads in shame. AF1 asks the BMs where their families and boyfriends thought they were during the months they are at Esther's House. One BM responds that she told them that she was working out of town temporarily in a factory.

Another BM says that many of them do not even know that they are pregnant until a month passes and they do not have a menstrual cycle. She disclosed that for a month, she smoked and drank regularly. This continues to haunt her and so she asks the KADs if they are in good health. Some KADs nod in the affirmative, but there is no verbal response. Mrs. Oh says, "Look at them. They all look healthy and they are well taken care of." AM4 says, in the U.S. adopted children are completely covered by health insurance as all the members of the family are. If some health problem were to arise, the children would receive good care.

One KAD asks the BMs, "If your children came back to Korea and looked for you, would you meet them?" No one answers the question so Mrs. Oh motions towards one of the older BMs to answer. She says, "It depends on the circumstance and if I am married and the type of relationship I have with my

husband.” Another says, “Yes, but I am afraid that they would hate me.” Mrs. Oh asks her why they would hate her and she replies, “Because I just let them go. I took the easy way out and had a stranger raise my kid.”

There is silence. Mrs. Oh says that time is running out and suggests that only the KADs and BMs rise and hug each other. All BMs are crying but cooperate. The KADs leap up and hug them. Several of the KADs are crying too, but they do not say anything or ask questions of the BMs. After the hugs, Mrs. Oh asks everyone to stand and hold hands, forming a circle to sing the Korean folk song *Arirang* and ends cheerfully by clapping her hands 5 times and saying *dae han min gook*³³.

The birthmother narratives and the exchanges made in this meeting, especially the ones made between the birthmothers and Mrs. Oh, render Korean women in a very different light. With the exception of the 15 year old, the birthmothers in the room appeared modern, educated, very much in-control of their lives and perhaps even middleclass adults who chose to relinquish their babies for adoption without informing the birthfather. Not one of the seven women informed the birthfather in fact, indicating to myself and to others that perhaps the deadbeat father stereotype may not be completely appropriate and accurate in explaining why some Korean women relinquish their babies for adoption. In one woman’s case, she relinquished her baby so that she could further climb the socioeconomic ladder so-to-speak and avoid marrying her current boyfriend altogether.

Mrs. Oh’s management of the meeting was also rather interesting; it went against the earlier recommendations of the Korean Ties administrative staff which was to hold back from asking pushy and sensitive questions that may seem culturally offensive. One might say that Mrs. Oh even pressured the birthmothers to disclose very personal and

³³ This phrase translates to “Long live Korea!” The motherland tour took place during the summer in which the World Cup was being co-sponsored by South Korea and Japan. South Korea made the semi-finals, the highest placement of any Asian soccer team in World Cup history. There was a tremendous outpour of Korean national pride, as evidenced by these chants.

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even shameful information with the group because she believed the adoptees were entitled to know this information. She stated, “These people came a long way for this opportunity to learn about why they were given up for adoption.” When the birthmothers disclosed that they did not inform the birthfathers about their pregnancy, Mrs. Oh was stern and overtly judgmental, a reaction that surprised many of the Korean Ties participants. The source of Mrs. Oh’s disapproval was that these women relinquished their babies for adoption when they had the means to keep the child. She made a point of emphasizing that the birthfathers were boyfriends who were not informed of their birth and not strangers or negligent partners. For Mrs. Oh, their choice to relinquish their babies for adoption seemed premature, indulgent, and perhaps even selfish since most of these women appeared as though they could have kept and raised their babies if they cared to.

The visit to Sung Ae Won Orphanage also reinforced a similar local view of birthmothers as irresponsible women who relinquished their babies for adoption too abruptly.

Sung Ae Won Orphanage is in Pusan. We arrive in the middle of a typhoon. It is typhoon season. One of the staff members hands me pamphlets to pass out to the adoptees and their families. She asks me to tell everyone that there is an error in the pamphlet. There are now 18 staff members at the orphanage, not 13. Everyone is brought into an open area that resembles a cafeteria.

A middle aged Korean man comes out from a back room and walks up to an elevated stage. He is accompanied by a younger woman, his translator. The man, Mr. Choi, welcomes the Korean Ties participants. He chants *dae han min gook* and claps 5 times and repeats so that everyone follows. Mr. Choi introduces himself as the director of the orphanage. He says that he has adopted several of unadoptable children. It is very important to him that Americans, especially the adoptees, are aware of all the reasons why Korean women relinquish their children for adoption. He has met several adoptees who return to Korea with myths about powerless and poor Korean women who abandon their children for a

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better life in America; these types of stories are in the minority. He offers the two most common reasons why children/babies are dropped off at his orphanage.

Reason 1: Women do not want to raise their children. They are more interested in pursuing a career rather than raising kids and being a homemaker. Many women who relinquish their babies are grown and working adults. Reason 2: Korean teens are experimenting with sex and not realizing the consequences of their actions. When the girls get pregnant, they are too young or immature to take care of the babies so they leave them at a public place³⁴ so someone brings them to an orphanage. These are not poor girls; they span the economic spectrum.

Mr. Choi explains to everyone that the babies and kids in the orphanage are happy and loved. When we meet them, we are not meeting malnourished and abused orphans, but angels. All the children are in good physical health and none of the current children have physical or mental disabilities. He said that we will see for ourselves when we meet them. Mr. Choi says that we will be tempted to give immediate attention and affection to the beautiful babies, but he encourages us to give attention first to the ugly babies (He laughs). He asks that we do not kiss the babies or pass them around too often.

He thanks everyone for visiting the orphanage and shows us where the babies are located. The director's wife comes up behind him and introduces herself. She says that typically in Korea, man is referred to as the heaven and woman as the land. She laughs and she says, "Heaven has forgotten about the land." The director comes up and apologizes; he lightly touches his wife on the back to signify an apology. She says that she has prepared gifts for all the guests from America, Korean flag pins. She and her husband pass them out. Afterwards, the Korean Ties participants enter nursery rooms where they play and hold the babies. There are caregivers already in the rooms feeding, holding, and playing with the babies and toddlers.

In this exchange, Mr. Choi is a warm and caring man who has adopted several children of his own, going against the common rhetoric perpetuated by Koreans and also adoption workers that domestic adoption in Korea has failed because of social stigmas about raising someone else's children. Mr. Choi who supervises many of the initial intakes and health evaluations of the babies, shares his professional assessment of why babies are relinquished for adoption. He is troubled that when adoptees come back to Korea to learn about the circumstances of their adoption, they come with exaggerated

³⁴ Common public spaces include fire stations and police stations.

ideas about poor Korean birthmothers forced to relinquish their babies and the deplorable conditions of orphanages. I admit that of all the orphanages I visited during this experience, I too was impressed at the conditions of the orphanages including the ones for disabled and multiracial children who may linger in orphanages to adulthood. As the tour of the orphanage came to an end, it was difficult to determine what impact the experience had on the adoptees. They held sleeping babies, interacted playfully with one another, and took plenty of pictures. There were no staff people prohibiting visitors from entering certain sections of the orphanage in fear that they would see a depraved area; it was business as usual at Sung Ae Won.

When entering another play room, everyone sighs at the sight of a beautiful multiracial baby who appears to be of African American descent. She is being held and groomed by a staff person. An adoptive father asks if multiracial babies linger longer in the orphanage and the worker says nonchalantly, “Not really. Americans request multiracial babies too. Some want Korean and White and some want Korean and Black. No healthy baby lasts here for very long.” The adoptive father asks to hold the baby and once he does, he utters that he wants to take her home. The worker smiles and tells him that he cannot. “She is very cute, yes?” The babies’ adoption is currently being processed, but the care worker understands the man’s reaction as if to imply that Black babies are “cute” and not necessarily lingering in orphanages because they are not as adoptable.

Similar to some Korean culture camps, The Korean Ties Program falls short in nurturing community and fellowship between adoptees and other Koreans in a sustained manner. A central goal of the tour is to focus on the development of the adoptive family

unit by attempting to validate the cultural heritages of each member of the interracial family, especially the Korean adoptee because their cultural heritage is marginalized in their adoptive community. As indicated on their website:

We staff all of our programs with an adoption professional/discussion facilitator...something we see as critical to your time in Korea if it is to be the identity building experience for your child, and the bonding experience you want it to be for your family. Our journey will leave us awed by Korea and its people—truly rich in beauty, warmth and tradition. It is our sincere hope that your participation in our program creates a family memory that, like your family ties, will last of lifetime. (<http://www.adoptivefamilytravel.com/korea.asp>)

The hope is that interracial families will heal and flourish when every member acknowledges the “rich” Korean culture that was lost in the process of adoption. As indicated in earlier chapters, adoptees, non-adopted Asian Americans, and adoptive parents/adoption professionals commonly attribute Korean adoptees’ low self esteem, social ineptitudes, mental illnesses, and conflicts within the adoptive family to their loss of Korean cultural awareness and pride. Therefore, the focus of returning to Korea on a guided tour is not necessarily intended to encourage Korean adoptees to challenge their adoption and cultural assimilation. The main intent is for the entire family to have a memorable experience in Korea that will help adoptive parents acknowledge the importance of Korea in the lives of their Korean children and for adoptees to feel closer to their adoptive family through their shared Korean experience.

The structure of the program is highly regimented and tour bus leaders, counselors, and translators are prepped every evening for the next day’s schedule with cell phones to communicate along route so as to facilitate the smoothest transition from destination points. Groups of thirty one participants move from location to location, and retire in the same hotel each evening with the exception of one evening where family

units are hosted by a local Korean family. Because the program emphasizes that adoptees bring family, parents, close relatives, friends, or spouses along on the trip, families tend to travel together in a large pack. Even within the larger group of thirty-one, most families travel together or couple up with another family so that adoptees are never without supervision. Logistically the structure and comprehensive supervision is necessary to minimize the risk of adoptees getting lost in Korea and to adequately address emotional issues that may spontaneously arise among the adoptees and their families. As one parent aptly remarked, “I’m scared to death of losing my daughter. I look into the crowd and all I see is a sea of black heads. If she gets lost, how’ll I ever find her?”

But despite these fears, program coordinators acknowledge the importance of a motherland tour that balances tourism with “healing,” a concept that is broadly used to include adoptees’ feelings of loss, abandonment, confusion, and isolation, as well as adoptive families’ unresolved struggles, misunderstandings, and grudges with one another. Two separate discussion groups called *Talk Time* are scheduled in the evenings, one for adoptees and another for adoptive family members and significant others. The purpose is to process participants’ feelings and observations. Adoptive family members and significant others are particularly encouraged in these sessions to empathize with the life experiences of Korean adoptees.

Though the various safety nets provided by the tour, e.g. the daily agendas, supervision, and discussion sessions, may succeed in creating a well oiled program, it unintentionally inhibits relationships from forming, such as relationships between fellow adoptees, as well as relationships and conversations between adoptees’ and Korean locals. If adoptees want to share personal stories and feelings with one another, it is

usually done in the absence of their parents, usually late at night in the hotels when their parents have retired.

The large group of White Americans moving about the cities and buildings immediately drew the attention of curious locals. The stares and incomprehensible comments by locals made White participants self conscious in ways they have never felt before in the U.S. The novelty of the experience made some feel special, like rock stars; others felt uncomfortable and vulnerable. During a group counseling session, some of the White siblings shared feelings of isolation and discomfort with so many people staring at them. One sibling was irritated at the special treatment her Korean sister was receiving whenever their family was introduced in public as an adoptive family. She felt that she was invisible, that “I don’t count because I’m not Korean. I just have to move along like a tourist”. The facilitator, who was a Korean adoptee and professor of psychology, encouraged the White siblings to be more compassionate and patient, for their Korean siblings have had to endure similar feelings of isolation, discomfort, and invisibility most of their lives while living in predominantly White communities in the U.S.

When curious strangers asked the Korean tour guides who the Americans were, they would often reply that it was a group of American parents and their adoptive Korean children. These comments would invoke a wide range of emotions from locals. Some were pleasantly surprised that they would bring their children back to Korea, others were confused about why anyone would adopt a biologically unrelated child especially if they were fertile and had biological children “of their own,” some expressed admiration for the American parents calling them “angels” for adopting Korea’s children, and many felt shame that Korea, with all its modern advances and economic development sent their

children away for foreigners to raise. As a result, many adoptees were disappointed by the attention their White family and partners brought to the group; they were disappointed that even in their homeland of Korea they were standing out as “others”.

Another unintended result of the programs’ mission and structure was the self-regulated silencing of adoptees. Because adopted participants were never far from the reach of their adoptive family members, they were constrained in what they could say and the emotions they could express when their parents were present. This seemed especially true when adoptees were provided opportunities to question and converse openly with foster parents, adoption professionals, and the birthmothers at Esther’s House. The reasons for the silencing are unclear and cannot be substantiated with direct quotes as I chose not to probe the participants on this issue. I chose to instead speak casually with adoptees during shopping outings and with Korean staff and social workers who participated in this and other motherland tours.

Adoptees often chose to silence themselves for some or all of the following reasons: (a) when they met the women at Esther’s House and their own foster parents they were overwhelmed by their emotions and were left speechless; (b) they feared that communicating with people associated with their birth experiences would somehow hurt their adoptive parents’ feelings or make them feel insecure about losing their adoptive child; (c) they feared that their feelings or questions to foster parents or expectant mothers would appear inappropriate and disrespectful to their adoptive parents and to these women who symbolized their birthmothers; and (d) adoptees felt that delving into these issues would somehow prompt their adoptive parents to abandon them.

Finding Community and Voice in Cyber Space

In Building Diaspora: Filipino Cultural Community Formation on the Internet, Emily Noelle Ignacio investigates how geographically dispersed individuals of Filipino descent have built a Filipino cyber community called soc.culture.filipino. Through consensus, debate, and humor, members exposed common histories, struggles, and oppressive processes that they shared as members of the Filipino Diaspora. The value of this new form of ethnographic methodology Ignacio argues is that, “ In uncovering – and publishing widely—these patterns and underlying histories, there is the possibility that members of different diasporas would recognize the positive and negative effects of common sociopolitical issues upon them . . . the next step for all of us, however, is systematically studying how online relationships and conversations regarding all these issues affects people’s offline choices and view of the world” (145, 146). I conducted a similar investigation of the largest and most successfully sustain cyber community of adult Korean adoptees. The group is aptly named Korean Adoptees Worldwide, or KAW for short. The group was created and continues to be maintained by Sunny Jo a Korean adoptee from Europe who is a well known critic of international adoptions from Korea and is an advocate for adoptee rights.

No topic was off limits on KAW, be it the racial politics of interracial dating/marriage, Korean social hierarchies, race-traitors, chronic depression, suicide, multiracial discrimination versus multiracial chic, racist adoptive parents, the evils of international adoptions, and even KADpropriation, or the appropriation, misrepresentation, and exploitation of KAD knowledge by researchers. Most of the members were adoptees, but there were also several non-adopted lurkers as well;

prospective adoptive parents, White Asia-philes and Korean and Korean American allies and researchers. Though I could dedicate an entire chapter or dissertation on the debates generated on KAW, instead I will narrow the focus on the transformative impacts of membership in KAW. Referring back to the question Ignancio asks in her book, how have these online relationships and conversations affected KADs' offline choices and view of the world? What are the opportunities and limitations of this type of transnational community formation?

Perhaps the most valuable contribution KAW has made in the lives of its members is creating a relatively safe space monitored by and dominated by KADs. As I will qualify later, KAW is not a politically neutral space by any means nor are the conversations polite and politically correct. What makes KAW special is that KADS are provided a place where their experiences and identities are validated and authenticated without the overt mediation of adoptive parents and adoption professionals. Sunny Jo explains in a chapter she wrote in *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, the enormous reach and influence adoption professionals or experts have in controlling how the lives of adoptees' are presented for mass consumption:

In the past, and even today, "experts," professionals, and adoptive parents are often the ones telling KADs what "the adoption experience" is actually like. . . Much funding, prestige, and power is entangled in this creation of "adoption professionals," and they have long been the ones setting the stage on which adoption policy and evaluation is being promoted, thus determining how it is framed (286).

KADS that question or challenge the imperialistic and capitalistic ideology that White couples in the First World are entitled to an unfettered right to adopt children from other nations are:

Portrayed as being maladjusted or having personal problems, meaning that the real concerns with adoption are taken out of the larger context and are reduced to individual, personal issues. This belief is evident in the many professional adoption conferences held across the globe. Adult adoptees are not frequently invited, unless they also belong to a “professional” group. If adoptees are part of the event, it is often as participants in panel debates or presentations about their lives and stories. As a result, adoptee voices are reduced to individual, personal, experiences, which then can be evaluated and discussed by the “experts” (286-287).

KAW is perhaps the antithesis of these highly regulated conferences coordinated by adoption professionals and adoptive parents. KAW is loosely monitored by Sunny Jo and the conversations get very heated, political, and confrontational. Though KADs enter the cyber community at various levels in their personal development and awareness about racism and the politics of Korean adoption, their experiences and comments are validated as authentically KAD. What they are not however is essentialized or immune to challenge; KAD members of all political persuasions add their two cents and even when alternative views are not presented, one of the many members pose as devil’s advocate for the sake of discourse. I will illustrate with a conversation stream triggered by the subject, **“So it all boils down to price and infertility?”** a discussion about the role of wealth, race, and Western dominance in fueling the current international adoption business between the U.S. and South Korea. This dialogue took place in November of 2002³⁵.

After several members shared why their parents adopted them from Korea, members began to identify reoccurring patterns in peoples’ stories. Their adoptive parents were infertile, wanted healthy babies (preferably White), did not want to be waitlisted for years or go through complex domestic procedures, and they did not want to deal with the drama of birth family coming back for their children. So they went with the more

³⁵ Grammatical/spelling errors and abbreviations reflect the style of the original author.

convenient, expedient, but also expensive option of adopting from South Korea.

Members expressed rather cynically and angrily their feelings about being a part of this process, and how South Korean and U.S. adoption agencies and professionals helped to accommodate and fuel this market. A new KAW member named Victor, responded to the negative tone of the messages and posed his own set of questions.

This is not a criticism, but an observation. I've noticed in the short time I have been on this list, there is much cynicism related to the adoption experience. To attempt to gain a balanced perspective, I wonder how many – even if they see that things were not the “ideal”, have found peace with/in their experience. In other words, have you come to the place where you find yourself grateful that someone cared enough (whatever the motivation – selflessness or selfishness) to “take you into their lives”?

The first respondent to Victor's post, Jill, only had contempt for the South Koreans who have allowed the adoption system to persist when the nation is capable of addressing the social problem of unwanted babies; she did not hold either her birth or adoptive families responsible for any of the negative feelings or experiences she had as an adoptee.

Basically, I harbor no adoption-related ill will towards my a-parents, or my b-parents³⁶, whoever they may be. But I am ticked off at South Korea for a) shipping me out and b) failing to pick up the slack and take care of their own. Given what resources my mother had, she did her best. I think it's unrealistic for me to expect her to have been able to provide me Korean heritage stuff on Cape Cod in the 70's. There was no world wide web, no parent groups, hell, I doubt there were even Koreans on the Cape.

Another member who goes by the alias Alien, as in resident alien, was more critical of the assumptions underlying Victor's questions, that a critical discourse on adoption was somehow biased, unbalanced, or unfair.

Victor, That's just it. Right there in your very question. Would you ask a non-KAD if they were at peace with/in their experience, grateful that they popped out of their birth mother? I don't want to go around every day eating humble pie, grateful for the peace within my own experience. The question is not so simple. We are far beyond that. We are trying to understand the “how” and “why” behind

³⁶ “A-parents” is short for adoptive parents and b-parents is short for birth parents.

our most “greatful” experiences so as to improve the situation for future generations. It gives some of my friends the creeps to think they were sold and bought, which is something our counterparts never have and never will think about in reference to their own peaceful experience. This is in the same line, of when we hear “lucky”. “Aren’t you “lucky” you got adopted?” Oh yes . . . very lucky . . . logically speaking, that means we were lucky to be shipped out of the country . . . lucky to be abandoned on the streets and lucky to fend for ourselves as a kid. We are lucky never to see our birthparents again. We were lucky as hell . . . I guess. And we’re happy as hell . . . peaceful as hell.

In this retort, Alien unpacks and exposes the details of most KADs’ adoption experiences which include being abandoned, expelled from their native country, and adopted into a culturally and racially different family by force as infants and children. He uses sarcastic language about being grateful and lucky to express how unreasonable he believes it is for people to expect adoptees to be grateful and lucky considering the losses they have endured. Sunny Jo, the creator and monitor of KAW, is also an active participant. She challenges Jill’s notion of not holding adoptive parents accountable for successful or failed adoptions. She is very critical of indulgent and unwarranted valorizations of adoptive parenthood:

I am grateful to my parents that they raised me well and provided for me, but then that is something I would expect from any parents, a- or b-parents. if you’re gonna have kids then you’re expected to take care of them. Kinda like the chris rock (who is black btw) thing: ‘niggers say ‘I have never been in jail’. You’re not supposed to be in jail! Niggers say ‘I take care of my kids’. You’re suppose to take care of your kids!!! What do you want? a cookie????’ my a-parents’ reasons for adopting was not ‘to take me in’, but because they wanted a child and couldn’t make one themselves. There was nothing grand or noble in it, just a ‘normal’ human desire. Should I feel grateful for that? Should bio kids be grateful for being born??? i doubt it. ‘we’ (who have decent parents) should be grateful for growing up with ‘good ‘ ppl cuz many don’t, but then, if ppl have children then they’re responsible to ‘be good’ to them. i know, lotsa ppl don’t , but that should not be used as a ‘standard’. you can’t say that a store should be grateful cuz you don’t steal, since there are so many others who shoplift.

Another member, Annie, agrees with Victor that the tone of the conversations are excessively negative; she offers a more positive perspective. For Annie, adoption or race-

related problems are exaggerated and not necessarily unique to KADs or other people of color. Problems faced by adoptees are not systemic, hegemonic, or insurmountable; they are individual responses, healthy or not, to a predestined fate.

I absolutely agree with Victor that there seems to be a “glass half” empty perspective to why our parents adopted us. I realize that everyone is on their own journey when it comes to their own situation, but one of the great things about a message board is that we can all come together and discuss the things we are feeling and thinking and maybe sometimes to just let others know you are not alone. I, like most of the posters, was adopted by caucasian parents into a predominantly White community. I experienced identity and self-esteem issues (but really, what kid regardless of their race, doesn’t), and racism but I also experienced a lot of love, joy and support from my family and friends. As an adult, I went back to Korea (not a birth parent search) with a tour group and have felt more complete with my adoption experience than ever. For me, it was not about finding my bio parents, but just learning and experiencing the country I heard so much about but at that point seemed more like “Honalee” as is “Puff the Magic Dragon, an imaginary, idealized place.

My tour group went to Pungjamon (the DMZ) and for me, this really brought it together. The sadness I felt for the people of both countries was indescribable, and I truly understand that my life in the States was exactly the life I was meant to have. Everything happens for a reason and the point I am trying to make is: who cares how my family, or any family came together? The point is, we are family. I would also like to make a very general statement to those who seem to think that people like me (who have no desire to search out my birth parents) are lacking emotional depth and don’t know who they are. I respect your choice to do whatever you want to do, please respect that I don’t need to.

Annie’s response to “those who seem to think that people like me are lacking emotional depth and don’t know who they are,” does not directly address the crux of what the other members’ have objections with, that is the human loss and pain experienced by the children trafficked in a for-profit adoption business. Annie normalizes and therefore minimizes the culture and race specific alienation KADs experience. But it appears as though Annie has chosen to detach herself from Koreans, as indicated in her statement about going to Korea not to search for biological parents but to learn and experience the

country she heard about. And when visiting the DMZ, she felt sadness “for the people of both countries.” In visiting Korea as a tourist, Annie chose to hold herself back from learning about adoption history and the adoption business. Seeing the Demilitarized Zone, perhaps a symbol of the dividedness of Koreans or the destruction caused by the war, reinforced Annie’s preexisting conviction that she was destined for a better life in the United States.

A better life is debatable. The fact is that there were far more children not adopted overseas and were instead raised in South Korea by their biological families. Those who remained in Korea undoubtedly faced poverty and struggles, but millions survived the Korean War and the Japanese Occupation to help develop South Korea into the first-world nation that it currently is. The awareness that South Korea is technologically, educationally, and economically advanced and capable of developing their own welfare system to deal with unwed mothers and neglected children, is what prompted respondents like Jill, to react so unfavorably to South Korean institutions.

The next respondent reminds everyone to be cognoscente of the fact that prior to KAW and the internet, KADs had no similar forum to sustain these types of conversations across time and space. Eun Jin emphasizes that KADS are so conditioned to put forth a positive spin on their adoption and suppress any negative feelings that it is only logical that anger comes across so frequently in a place like KAW. She, like Alien and Sunny Jo, believe that anger is a very normal and healthy reaction to what adult adoptees have endured.

Eun Jin: Of course, you realize that we are really the first generation that has been able to make contact, voice the pain, look at solutions. So, if the pain is overwhelming, it’s because we’ve held it in for so long, often alone. I find it interesting when people say that we need to “get over it” or “find the good” or

“find a shrink”, etc. etc. etc. But that’s bullshit. When someone loses a loved one, do we tell them, “okay, you’ve had 6 months . . . you should be able to work through it by now”? No. And yet we feel comfortable telling individuals who have lost whole families that they should be happy and grateful for what they’ve got. Most of us don’t know our birthdates, many of us were abandoned on the streets. We’ve grown up in White families, in White neighborhoods with no one to talk to about our differences. Now, we’re voicing our anger, our pain, our cynicism. So what if it sounds like that’s all we do. We owe no one an apology for that. It’s our right, and if people don’t want to hear the pain, they can fuck off! Go find a “happy” adoptee group that is still sucking it all down. And by the way, this IS my happy stage. Usually, I’m postal ;-)))

Eun Jin’s post highlights another important contribution that KAW makes to KADs worldwide; it provides a therapeutic alternative to mental health professionals and social workers. In KAW, KADs’ anger are not pathologized but instead viewed within the context of pain, grief, and loss.

Virtual Dojang

In *AsianAmerica.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace*, co-editors Rachel C. Lee and Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong argue that spatially scattered ethnicities and racially defined groups such as the case with Asian Americans may have more readily embraced cyber community formations because “virtualness” or the groups’ politically contrived pan-ethnicity is built into their founding history. They assert, “If *diasporic community* is not an oxymoron, then we must consider how virtual media might be more seamlessly adopted by ethnically or racially defined communities whose geographic proximity has not been (as) crucial to their sense of cohesion” (xix). Lee, Wong and their contributing authors then proceed to wage in on the “progressive” possibilities of cyberspace for diasporic Asian communities, and conclude that “narratives of racial difference, orientalism, global power, and Asian nationality enter into that “consensual

hallucination” known as cyberspace” and racial and national hegemonies are “subtly extended—rather than vanquished—in cyberspace” (xx). Similarly, conversations and relationships formed in KAW reflect the persistence of the status quo and cultural hegemonies more so than KADs’ abilities to transcend them. Though there are a few exceptions, most KAW members return to their off-line lives which are in predominantly White communities, mainly or exclusively dating and marrying Whites, and holding onto skeptical perceptions of Koreans and Korean culture.

My research reveals that to depict KAW as a unique or counter-hegemonic Asian American cyber community, virtual homeland, or a safe space would be inaccurate and minimizing. The members of KAW are aware of the material lives they must return to and the political and emotional relationships that they are entwined in. As such, I liken KAW to a *virtual dojang*, a Korean martial arts training studio where individuals come and train; they learn to defend against aggressors, build fitness by pushing one’s mind and body to its limits. In a dojang, members spar with each other in an effort to develop each others’ strengths and techniques; members acquire new tools and learn about one’s deficits and potential through wins and losses they observe or participate in. Similarly, KAW is no make-believe place for alter egos and cultural tourism; it is a place where KADs come to process their feelings among empathetic peers, and then they use the tools they have been introduced to, be it new and conflicting information about adoption and culture, verbal come-backs, or confidence to better navigate their complex lives. Yes there is sparring and pushing of one’s buttons, but there is also growth, therapy, empowering validation, and raw honesty about issues and feelings not suitable for discussion outside of KAW.

Dave, another respondent to the So it all boils down to price and infertility?

dialogue, had the following to contribute about the impact KAW has had on his ability to address painful and persisting struggles in his life.

I am a part of this forum to vent and gripe and complain, for validation and community. And from this I get the strength to address issues raised in the world. I get the fortitude to continue and address questions about adoption – the ever loving “so how does THAT feel?” and “why is your last name _____” which one of your parents is asian?” or, more recently, “I’m not like other koreans you should talk to me.” By immersing myself into KAW when I need validation and empathy, when I need to be able to talk without explaining myself and my reality, I am able to continue. Very simply, in part KAW has kept me from completely self-destructing and has provided solace. I contend that adoption is very different from growing up in your birth family and birth culture in that adoptees were left, were given up for a reason. Granted, in some cases very good reasons, still in other cases not so good reasons. And that knowledge, that I was given up, has always been a part of me. It’s not logical or rational by any means but I wonder what I did to cause my parents to abandon me. Having grown up in the U.S. where I was taught that parents love unconditionally and (are supposed to) care for their children without fail. Children raised in their birth families simply don’t have to (and I don’t think do) wonder why they were abandoned, given up, and if/when it’ll happen again.

I actually am pretty satisfied with my situation. That said, I wonder what if and why and there are things I want to know, that simply won’t let me go. Stuff like family medical history – I am SO tired of doctors – and did I have a name before I was assigned one by the courts? Are there people in the world who actually look like me? I wonder what it would be like to be with family who look like me. This is going on and on and I’ve got homework to do. Before I go, one last thing: I don’t necessarily want to be on the road to “recovery.” I don’t necessarily want to be at peace with my situation if that means blind acceptance. I’d much prefer to own my pain and my life and my thoughts and my feelings – if that makes people uncomfortable then good: it’s suppose to.

For Dave, KAW is a special space that allows him to think through and articulate the human price paid for his adoption. Dave writes that he is “satisfied with [his] situation,” as if to reassure himself and others that he is a lucky adoptee, one that was not abused or neglected by cruel and ignorant American parents. But despite his privileges, there are still pains and torturous questions that speak to an aching dissatisfaction. By providing a

critical mass of empathetic KADs in one place, KAW does what no other place can do – make KADs normal, not different.

The next conversation stream has the subject heading **Help! I'm drowning**, and it illustrates the instantaneous normalization, validation, and support that can take place in KAW. The dialogue is started by a new member, Soona, who shares the struggle she is facing with her adoptive family and hometown friends now that she has decided to search for her roots.

Don't know where to start but here goes. I am drowning. I moved back home to be w/ my a-mom and to start my life over. I guess I need to be around more KADs or something . . . I feel like I am on a whole different planet than these people. [Friends and family are telling me] I should be more "White, not too Korean" & why is it so important to know my roots and take a whole new perspective on my life. I never had the guts to ask for help or support from my fellow KADs . . . I guess being a nurse I always help everyone else and I am always the strong person. But for once in my life, I guess I actually need a little understanding.

I feel like I have been put under a microscope and probed and picked apart until I can't be dissected any more. Does this sound familiar to anyone? I left a tragic situation in Houston, which I said I would never subject myself to again, but I find that I might be happier there than I am here right now. If I open my mouth, then I am told, "Here she goes again. What is your problem? Can't you be happy with your life?" I had to explain to people why I was searching for my b-parents, now I have to explain why I have a difference of opinion. I won't go on and babble any more . . . any advice I could use it about now.

Tim and Dave respond immediately to Soona's cry for help by comparing their experiences to hers and sharing the steps they have taken as a result of their families' disapproval of them searching for their roots.

Oh . . . my . . . God . . . I can relate to this story more so than maybe any other on here. My parents, primarily my mother always told me that I was American now. I was in a 'better' place, why so concerned now about the culture? Be happy being here. We 'wanted' you, your parents gave you up, etc, etc, etc. Even though they would take my brother and I to the camps they had here for the Korean Adopted, I always felt it was just their way of saying, 'here, this is all we

are going to do for you. Be happy going to the camps but, stop being curious outside of camp.'

I feel like a rebel when it comes to my parents. As a matter of fact, my mother and I don't even speak. There are various reasons for this. Abuse being one of them, and the fact that it seems that she doesn't support me whatsoever when it comes to being adopted. I don't think she realizes how important it is for me to be able to have all kinds of adopted and Korean friends. I don't think that she understands the warmth I get when I am with them. The understanding that I have wanted my whole life from people that look like me. She just thinks it is cool to go to Korea Town in Chicago and to these camps here cause the people are so 'beautiful'.

I am babbling and cause this is an issue I could really go on and on about, but I think what I hear you saying is, that you want your parents to love you no matter what, even if it means that you want to get to know all about the heritage, culture, etc about being Korean. I don't feel like my mother loves me at all, only when it suits her too, which is usually when there is family present, or when it benefits the family to talk about me in a positive way. I don't know what I did as a young kid for my mother to hate me the way I think that she does. I am actually in the process of trying to save money and get the hell out of Dodge. I plan on moving to Chicago where it is diverse, big, and new. Fresh start without my mother.

I hope it helped a little to know that you aren't alone in the struggle as far as that goes. I would be happy to correspond with you further on this issue if it would help.

Dave: I really do understand the hard situation that you are in and I also feel for you. I find that for me to seek the very roots of who I am that I must hang out with the Korean community such as church, grocery store and take Korean language class. My ultimate goal is to fly to Korea and attend the 3rd International Gathering in Seoul, Korea where I can meet the other adoptees. I am also hoping to find my blood relatives there. I feel that all of these would be the answers for both of us as well as other adoptees in terms of self-identity. I may not have the answers that you were looking for but I hope that it was helpful to you. I really wanted to share my feelings as your fellow KAD. Please take care and have a nice day.

And as Dave alludes, KAW and other KAD groups and individuals around the world have organized themselves to coordinate gatherings where they can take their cyber relations to the next level. Though the majority of the globally dispersed KADs will not convene at the gatherings, hundreds do make the commitment to attend. Adoptees that

have long been engaged in international conferences, discussions, and movements related to Korean adoption, perceive large gatherings such as these as a vehicle for activism and social change. In response to a discussion thread on self-mutilation and suicide, Bo Ram, a European adoptee proposes an idea for the next KAD gathering in Seoul.

I don't think that we have a 'better' life in a western society. Maybe we have one, maybe not. I'd say I'd had a better life. But we'll never know, right. Anyway everytime I hear stuff like . . . yeah, we have it better here than 'starving' or whatever in our old home country it gets me . . . You know I don't think I would have ever known everything about drugs, HIV, PTSD, depression etc. if I had stayed in Korea .

Hey, what do you guys think about a kind of memorial for all the KADs who didn't make it? There would be an occasion during the 3rd Gathering in Seoul. How many KADs do you guys know who made that sad list?

Sunny Jo: Great idea. Or even better, a public memorial in korea for all the children sent out of the country – in honour of KADs. I think the KAD memorial (for both living and dead KADS) should be in a VERY PUBLIC place in seoul, to remind koreans of all their 'lost children'. Maybe it should have a 'counter' of children sent abroad, kinda like the gunshot boards in the US (counting gunshot deaths, with the number rising right in front of your eyes!) maybe that's what's needed in order for koreans to wake up and care for their own children. It really bothers me that the KADs that korea like to highlight and get the most publicity, are the 'successful' ones, the ones that koreans can be 'proud' of. I think that the rest of us, the non-special ones, and even the ones who have 'failed' in the eys of korea, should be remembered and acknowledged. I think we deserve a public memorial, all of us!

There is a lull period, and Sunny Jo proposes that KADs conceive of themselves as a discrete minority group within the larger Korean ethnic group. She and others agree that many of the mental health problems KADs worldwide seem to be experiencing are the result of their social discrimination and KADs' internalized feelings of inferiority and marginalization. Rather than struggling to fit into the Korean birth heritage or the adoptive White American or European heritages, Sunny Jo calls for a more dignified

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KAD identity which acknowledges KADs' unique culture as well as the political power structures and cultural processes that positioned KADs as perpetual minorities.

I see us KADS as having our own culture, distinct from both Korea and our adoptive countries. We're minorities within both, we're dispersed, but we're still part of OUR OWN culture (with multiple sub-cultures inside). I know for a fact that I am not Korean when it comes to culture, despite my Korean genetic heritage. I am culturally Norwegian but I am not part of the mainstream culture and I see myself as part of but distinct from it. We're still among the very first generation in creation of our culture, so a lot of the path has to be made while walking it. However, our culture includes being sent out of Korea and raised outside our country, the majority of us also outside our culture and race. We've been assimilated into new environments and have been given new names and speak new languages. We're clustered around a number of 'centers' and a few majority languages are used to tie the community together. Anyone else, feel free to add to the definition.

Dave agrees with Sunny Jo that KADs are culturally different, but wonders if recognizing the difference is of any importance. He is optimistic.

Sunny, you ROCK! Can we have a parade! *grin* Seriously, I agree that KAD culture is distinct from that of Korean immigrants and second/third generation . . . etc. generation Koreans in countries outside Korea. That said, can we define and build a culture around the "multiculturalism and heterogeneity" you mention in your post. Will that be enough to give us a "clear sense of identity and cultural anchoring"? I think we can. I think our identity as KADS is enough to provide the foundation for our unique culture. But I get tripped up sometimes when I think of the question do KADS have a unique culture; the sheer diversity of KAD experience – and yet fundamental similarity – is daunting and awesome. Now comes the practical question: how can we fight and organize against KAD appropriation? Aren't we by our presence and advocate for ourselves and community?

A humble but effective demonstration resembling what Bo Ram and Sunny Jo discussed on KAW did take place at the Seoul Gathering, and several articles, memoirs, art exhibits, and demonstrations were inspired as a result of the momentum and social networks generated at this and other KAD gatherings, a testament to the influence of these dispersed pockets of Korean adoptees worldwide.

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Unlike culture camps and motherland tours that attempt to coordinate *an experience*, capture a culture and its people, and manage an interracial adoptive family within the guise of multiculturalism and roots searching, KAW achieves the opposite; it exposes complexity, mythologies, politics, contradiction, and problems. Ironically the chaotic, diverse, and emotional debates that emerge in KAW signify KADs asserting control over how their lives are expressed and interpreted. To this extent, KAW succeeds where culture camps and motherland tours fall short. But what KAW and its members cannot escape is the lure of contriving race, ethnicity, and culture, even if it is with the premise that THEY redraw the boundaries. In the roots searching process, which includes reaching out to and participating in multicultural and transnational communities and programs, KADs experience various degrees of stratified differentiation and exclusion. As a response, or one might argue as a survival mechanism, KADs have found solace and community in cyberspace. And in this semi-contained environment, they have identified their common traits and have started the process of constructing culture and defining a community they can finally call their own.

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CONCLUSION

Subject: Re: [K@W]You're not a real KAD unless:

You're not a real KAD unless:

- 1) You've lost everything you've ever had.
- 2) You've filled out at least 20 adoptee surveys.
- 3) You've been asked, "What are you any way?"
- 4) Someone says to you, "No, what's your REAL name?"
- 5) A Korean says, "What matter you? You no speak Hangul?"
- 6) You wake up in the middle of the night wanting to eat something that smells really bad.
- 7) Someone tells you, "You must be good in math."
- 8) Someone tells you, "Why don't you just go back to China."
- 9) You'd like to find your birth relatives but can't afford to put them on the payroll.
- 10) You've been put on every med a shrink can put you on and your shrink finally pays you not to see him/her.
- 11) You wake up and look in the mirror and say, "Dang, I'm still adopted."
- 12) Your immigration papers say you are an Alien.
- 13) You can't drive worth a shit. Oh . . . sorry . . that's just me.

Alien

Subject: Re: [K@W]You're not a real KAD unless:

Here's one: You wake up one morning and realize that you don't look like anybody else in your family, your school, your town, your community, or your entire central part of the nation.

Eun Jin

I end this dissertation with this comical postscript written shortly after Sunny Jo and Dave's more "serious" post on KAD culture because strangely enough, it captures the main ideas that surfaced from my research. KAD identities and communities are constructed as a result of globalized racism and access to modern transnational flows; KADs' access to transnational flows of information, in particular culture camps, motherland tours, adoptee cyber communities, and Korean and Korean Americans, make

them acutely aware of their minority subject position. It is within the context of overlapping White, Asian American, and Korean racial formations that KADs piece together their identity. As they learn new information about the politics of international adoption, internalized racism, modern Korean women's reproductive choices, Asian Americans, and coordinated gatherings of other Korean adoptees, KADs rethink and reshape their attitudes and behaviors toward their identities, their "grateful salvation," their cultural identity, the practice of international adoption and even their own adoptive family and intimate relationships.

Why another study on racial identity? As this and other studies have shown, constructions of racial identity maintain oppression. Once the dominant and/or colonizing group has succeeded in socializing the subordinate group to first *believe* their version of history, culture, and social order, and then to *reproduce* it actively or passively, assimilation has been achieved and hegemony persists. My research reveals that transnational flows and the globalization of information, ideas, and people have made KAD identities more fluid; their encounters with new and conflicting knowledge and hierarchal systems render their beliefs about cultural hegemonies and racial fixity tenuous.

In chapters 1 and 2, I explore the earliest encounters my informants have of racial differentiation, discrimination, and exclusion. Amerasian informants adopted shortly after the end of the Korean War, were first labeled as "American" or "White," a pejorative when applied to multiracial children because it signified the stigmatized relationships created between Korean women and the occupying White military personnel. Once adopted and placed in the homes of White American families, my informants experienced

a long series of racial and social exclusion because they were racialized as Asian, and therefore became like other people of color. As Asian Americans, my informants experienced many of the same slurs and stereotypes as non-adopted Asian Americans; slurs that degraded them for being Chinese or ambiguously Oriental, stereotypes about their academic prowess, perpetual foreignness, exotic sexuality, a-sexuality, and/or weakness compared to Whites and other racial groups. Some conformed and assimilated as much as possible, others chose to subvert. There was Donald who found pride in his mixed heritage after watching Paul Newman in the movie *Hombre*, Alex who ran away to Chicago's Koreatown at the age of 16 to escape the racism he experienced at school and at home, Betty who nearly poked her eyes out with a marker because she wanted to have blue eyes, and Sujin who sneaked away from her White family at restaurants to see if other Asian people would approach her.

In chapter 3, I investigate the encounters my informants have with Asian and Asian Americans, in particular those of Korean descent. These narratives reveal both acceptance and rejection. Some informants feel empowered and liberated when they meet other Asian Americans and believe that they are accepted despite not having the same social capital that would typically mark them as Asian American. Others felt slighted, judged and excluded by Asians and Asian Americans because they were adopted by White people and were raised with different values, knowledge sets, and appreciations. And then there are those who recognized the marginalized status of KADs within the larger Asian American political movements and local communities, but found the exclusion tolerable and/or far more preferable to the White lifestyle they were raised in.

And finally in chapter 4, I share my observations and participation in three KAD dominated communities; three Korean culture camps, a motherland tour, and a KAD cyber community. All three of these communities represent KADs and/or their adoptive families reaching beyond their immediate locality and accessing people and resources through transnational means to develop a “healthy” sense of identity, family, and community. Though the culture camps and motherland tours were managed and controlled tightly by non-KAD organizers, participants were nonetheless exposed to Korean people, places, and practices that complicated their worldviews and clarified/troubled their perceptions of community, inclusion, and exclusion. In the cyberspace of KAW, KADs let loose their voices, questions, pains, joys, and frustrations. KADs dialogued, debated, and joked back and forth about the overlapping racial formations they are situated in, sharing information and personal testimonies about the politics and human costs of international adoption, and devised plans for working with each other to help support one another and improve the quality of life for future adoptees.

Future Directions

The current economic crisis in the United States, coupled by the presidency of Barack Obama provides inspiration for what research may spin off from this dissertation. The rise and significance of Korean and Japanese manufacturing plants and jobs in the Midwest, are of particular interest to me. Companies like Hyundai, Kia and Toyota have not only out-competed U.S. auto makers, but are employing the very people being laid off my General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. This is ironic since the state of Michigan, where most of my informants were raised and are currently living, was made notorious in

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the 1980s when Vincent Chin, a Chinese American engineer was brutally killed by two laid off White General Motors employees who, like many in the state at the time, blamed the importation of Japanese cars for the slow sales of U.S.-made cars. South Korea, China, Japan, and “the Orient” in general are no longer the developing countries and culturally primitive places they once were in the American imaginary. The Orient hosted the 2008 Olympics, has U.S.-like consumption patterns that are exacerbating environmental and health problems, is buying or loaning U.S. companies out of crippling debt, is producing Samsung plasma televisions and LG flip phones, and also popular movies, movie stars, cartoons, and video games unlike any other produced domestically. The “better life” in America promised to orphaned Korean babies and children may be losing credibility. How does this new posturing of things Asian affect how KAD children and adults perceive of their identity, homeland(s), and the practice of first-world Asian nations exporting children for adoption?

And how differently will the rhetoric of multiculturalism and color-blindness sound now that the U.S. has elected the first African American president who has appointed three Asian Americans to his cabinet, among several other prominent people of color? How acceptable will it be for adoptees to live in an all White or predominantly White community now that the nation appears to be racially integrating at the highest executive levels, right before our eyes? Will these seismic cultural shifts change adoptees,’ their families,’ and adoption professionals’ perceptions about the hegemony of Whiteness? Will the default practice of assimilation and race-evasion now entertain the merits of biculturalism and Asian cultural pride and attachment? Or will the familiar

arguments about the *end of racism* or *reverse racism* rear its ugly head once again, but under a slightly different guise?

I situate my research in various disciplinary subgroups: applied anthropology, critical race studies, and Asian American studies. Through my study of adult Korean adoptees, I showed the complex processes by which interracially adopted Korean Americans constructed their White cultural identities and developed their racialized identities as Asian Americans. By actively participating in and transforming the various Korean adoptee outreach programs I was involved in, I was also able to support my informants as they reconsidered their cultural identities, reclaimed their birth heritage and searched for their biological families. The outcomes of my research compliment other studies being conducted on the impacts of international adoption systems on adult adoptees, adoptable children, and eligible/non-eligible adoptive parents.

The future of KAD research should focus squarely on the solutions to KAD problems as they are defined by KADs, if the research is to have any value beyond the ivory tower: Reforming the international adoption business so that Korean women or families have the resources necessary to stay intact, promoting better and more culturally relevant practices for interracial – international adoptive families, expanding conceptualizations of Asian America to include and validate the cultures of Asian American adoptees, and transforming national and transnational policies and practices that discriminate against adoptees and children of single parentage, mixed racial heritage, and with disabilities.

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Vitals

1. Gender _____
2. May I ask how old you are? _____
3. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
 - ☐ Are you married?
 - ☐ Do you have children?
 - ☐ Please tell me about your educational background.
 - ☐ What do you do for a living?

Adoption History

4. How old were you when you were adopted?
5. Do you know anything else about your adoption, such as where and when you were found?
 - ☐ Do you know if you have any biological siblings?
6. If adopted as a **toddler**: Do you have any memories of Korea?
If adopted as an **infant**: What are your earliest memories of being adopted?
7. Do you know why your parents decided to adopt you?
 - ☐ Do you know why they decided to adopt from Korea?
 - ☐ Why didn't they adopt in the U.S.?
 - ☐ Did you know if they had a preference for a girl or a boy?

Hometown(s)

8. Describe the community you grew up in.
 - ☐ Did you live in the suburbs, an urban area, rural area, etc?
9. How diverse was the community?
 - ☐ Do you remember there being any people of different racial backgrounds?
 - ☐ What groups were considered "outsiders" in your community?
10. If they grew up in a **predominantly White** environment: Did you ever wish you grew up in a more diverse area?
 - ☐ What difference would it have made on your life if you did grow up in a more diverse community?
 - ☐ In what ways were you exposed to Korean culture and people in your hometown?

Parents and Siblings

11. Who is in your immediate family?
 - ☐ If they have **siblings**: Are your siblings adopted also?
 - ☐ If their **siblings are adopted**: Where were they adopted from?
12. Are your parents still together?
13. Where are your parents from?
 - ☐ Where did they grow up?
14. What do your parents do for a living?
15. Did they go to college?
 - ☐ What did they study?
16. How would you describe your parents' income level?
17. What is their religious background?
 - ☐ How religious would you say they were?
 - ☐ How religious are you?
18. And your siblings -- describe your relationship with your siblings?
 - ☐ Did you look up to any of your siblings?
 - ☐ Do you keep in touch with your siblings?

Parent – Child Relationship

19. What values did your parents stress while you were growing up?
 - ☐ What kinds of behavior did they emphasize and discourage?
20. How would you describe your relationship with your parents growing up?
21. What characteristics do you think you get from your mom, and what characteristics do you think you get from your father?
22. Did you feel comfortable discussing adoption-related topics with your folks?
 - ☐ Did they ever initiate discussions about your adoption?
 - ☐ Did they ever ask how you felt living in predominantly White community?
23. Was there ever a time you felt that you were not a part of the family?
24. Describe your relationship with your parents today.

Whiteness

25. What are your parents' ethnic backgrounds?
26. What impact has your parents' ethnicity had on you?
 - ☐ How much of ____ history and culture do you know about?
 - ☐ Are there any particular ____ traditions you follow?
27. Are there aspects of White or European people and culture that you admire or are attracted to?
28. Do you ever feel that you are "White"?
 - ☐ If **yes**: Describe some situations where you feel White.
 - ☐ Do you feel uncomfortable sometimes saying that you "feel White"?

- ☐ If **no**: Some Asian Americans have expressed that they sometimes feel White; can you guess why they would feel that way?
- 29. Have you ever wished you were White?
- 30. Have you ever thought that if you were the same racial background as your parents, life would be easier for you?
 - ☐ If **yes**: Is it because then you would look more a part of the family?
 - ☐ If **yes**: Do you think that it's easier being a White person in America?
- 31. When do you feel not-White?

Asianness

- 32. Do you consider yourself Asian?
- 33. What are some common stereotypes about Asians?
 - ☐ What are the stereotypes for Asian men and Asian women?
- 34. Do you fit any of these stereotypes?
- 35. Can you describe an incident where you were singled out, stereotyped, or discriminated against because you looked "Asian"?
 - ☐ If **no**: Do you think it's fair to say that some or many people in America have been stereotyped and discriminated because they have Asian features?
- 36. Does being Asian ever make you proud?
- 37. Have you ever felt ashamed or embarrassed because you're Asian?

Korea

- 38. Have you ever been to Korea?
 - If **yes**: What was the reason for going?
 - If **yes**: So how was it?
 - ☐ What was it like being surrounded by Koreans?
 - ☐ Did you have any intention of searching for your birth family?
 - ☐ Do you feel differently about yourself after have been to Korea?
 - ☐ How did your family feel about you going to Korea?
 - If **no**: Would you like to go sometime?
 - ☐ If you went, what do you want to do there, what do you want to experience?
 - ☐ Would you be interested in searching for your birth family?
 - ☐ How would the trip affect your family?

Relationships with Korea and Koreans

- 39. How important is it for you to learn about Korean culture?
 - ☐ Why is it important to you?
- 40. Have you tried to reconnect to Korean culture or people (language, organizations, churches)?
 - ☐ If **yes**: How was it?

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- ☐ If **yes**: How supportive have Koreans been in helping you connect to Korea or joining their community?
- ☐ If **no**: What are some reasons why you haven't tried?
- ☐ What has been the most challenging aspect of connecting to Korea and Koreans?

41. Do you think that non-adopted Asians have stereotypes about adoptees, and if so, what are they?

- ☐ How do you feel about that?
- ☐ Do these stereotypes discourage you from interacting with other Asians?

If Single

42. Describe the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the people you have dated?

- ☐ If mostly **non-Asian**: Why do you think most of the people you've dated are _____?
- ☐ If mostly **non-Asian**: Are you attracted to Asian _____?
- ☐ If mostly **non-Asian**: Do you ever feel pressured to date within a certain racial group? If so, which one? Where is the pressure coming from?
- ☐ If mostly **Asian**: Is there a reason why most of the _____ you date are Asian?

43. How would your life be different if you were with a Korean mate?

- ☐ How about another Korean adoptee?

44. What are some of the challenges you have experienced in interracial relationships?

- ☐ Do you think it would be easier being in a relationship with another Asian or minority?

If Married

42. What is the racial background of your husband/wife?

43. Describe the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the people you have dated before you \ married?

- ☐ If mostly **non-Asian**: Why do you think most of the people you've dated are _____?
- ☐ If mostly **non-Asian**: Are you attracted to Asian _____?
- ☐ If mostly **non-Asian**: Do you ever feel pressured to date within a certain racial group? If so, which one?
- ☐ If mostly **Asian**: Is there a reason why most of the _____ you date are Asian?

44. Have you ever wondered how differently your life would be if you were married to a Korean man/woman?

- ☐ What are some of the challenges of being in an interracial marriage?
- ☐ Are there any special concerns you have about having a bi-racial child?

Fitting In

45. Do you ever feel that because you were transracially adopted, you don't completely fit into either the Caucasian or Asian community?

- ☐ Can you give me an example of when you feel this way?

Parenting

46. If they already **have a child**: How has your adoptive experience affected the way you raise your child/children?

- ☐ Has having children changed the way you feel about your roots?

If they **don't have a child**: In what ways will your adoptive experience influence the way you raise your children, if you decide to have children?

47. What advice would you give to couples considering adopting from Korea?

Consent Forms

Interview Consent Letter (Adoptee)

Dear Participant,

My name is Tess Kim, and I am a graduate student at Michigan State University's Department of Anthropology. I am also a staff member at the Korean culture camps in Michigan and have also been very active in workshops and forums concerning Asian American adoptees. As a result of my experiences, I have decided to make Korean Adoption the subject of my dissertation. The basic goal of my research is to explore how society's changing attitudes about race, Asians, and multiculturalism have affected different generations of Korean adoptees raised in predominantly White communities. You have been selected for this interview because you were adopted from Korea, adopted by Caucasian parents, and raised in a predominantly White community.

Your participation in this interview is strictly voluntary, and you may choose at any point to end the interview or to withdraw your interview from the research. The interview will take approximately one and a half hours. Results from your interview and the dissertation may be published or presented at public functions therefore several measures will be taken to protect all research participants' identities to the fullest extent allowable by law. Your name and information revealing your identity will not appear in any published materials and public presentations. In addition, all tapes and transcripts will be safely locked and stored by the researcher.

By signing and dating the spaces below, you are agreeing to participate in Tess Kim's dissertation research.

Signature

Date

By checking the YES space below, you are consenting to have the interview **tape-recorded** strictly for transcription purposes.

___ YES

Thank you very much for your help and your time.

Questions about the research project should be directed to:

Tae-Sun "Tess" Kim
Primary Researcher
Kimtaesu@msu.edu

Dr. Andrea Louie
Research Advisor
louie@msu.edu

Questions about being a human subject of research should be directed to:

Dr. Peter Vasilenko Chair
University Committee on Research Involving
Human Subject (517) 355 – 2180 ucrihs@msu.edu

Interview Consent Letter (Adoptive Parent)

Dear Participant,

My name is Tess Kim, and I am a graduate student at Michigan State University's Department of Anthropology. I am also a staff member at the Korean culture camps in Michigan and have also been very active in workshops and forums concerning Asian American adoptees. As a result of my experiences, I have decided to make Korean Adoption the subject of my dissertation. The crux of my research is investigating the multiple social factors that influence the way Korean adoptees perceive of their identity, their cultural heritage, and their relationship with various racial and ethnic communities. You have been selected for this interview because you are an adoptive parent of a child or children from Korea. This interview will be contributing to my dissertation research project. Results from your interview and the dissertation may be published or presented at public functions.

Your participation in this interview is strictly voluntary, and you may choose at any point to end the interview or to withdraw your interview from the research. The interview will take approximately one and a half hours. Several measures will be taken to protect all research participants' identities to the fullest extent allowable by law. Your name and information revealing your identity will not appear in any published materials and public presentations. In addition, all tapes and transcripts will be safely locked and stored by the researcher. By signing and dating the spaces below, you are agreeing to participate in Tae-Sun Kim's dissertation research.

Signature

Date

By checking the YES space below, you are consenting to have the interview **tape-recorded** strictly for transcription purposes.

___ YES

Thank you very much for your help and your time.

Sincerely,

Tae-Sun "Tess" Kim

Questions about the research project should be directed to:

Tae-Sun "Tess" Kim
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Dr. Andrea Louie
Research Advisor
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Questions about being a human subject of research should be directed to:

Dr. Peter Vasilenko Chair
University Committee on Research Involving
Human Subject (517) 355 – 2180 ucrihs@msu.edu

Parent – Child Consent Form (Korean Ties and Korean Culture Camps)

By signing and dating the spaces provided below, you are consenting to have your child participate in Tess Kim’s research.

Parent’s Signature

Date

By signing and dating the spaces provided below, you are consenting to participate in Tess Kim’s research.

Minor’s Signature

Date

Thank you very much for your help and your time.

Sincerely,

Tae-Sun “Tess” Kim

Questions about the research project should be directed to:

Tae-Sun “Tess” Kim
Primary Researcher
Kimtaesu@msu.edu

Dr. Andrea Louie
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Questions about being a human subject of research should be directed to:

Dr. Peter Vasilenko Chair
University Committee on Research Involving
Human Subject (517) 355 – 2180 ucrihs@msu.edu

Focus Group Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Tess Kim, and I am a graduate student at Michigan State University's Department of Anthropology. I am also a staff member at the Korean culture camps in Michigan and have also been very active in workshops and forums concerning Asian American adoptees. As a result of my experiences, I have decided to make Korean Adoption the subject of my dissertation. The crux of my research is investigating the multiple social factors that influence the way Korean adoptees perceive of their identity, their cultural heritage, and their relationship with various racial and ethnic communities.

A focus group consists of a select group of individuals with similar qualities and/or life experiences. An important function of a focus group is for a researcher to engage the focus group members in a discussion about a particular topic. You have been selected for this focus group because you were adopted from Korea or because you are an adoptive parent of a child or children from Korea. Results from this discussion will be contributing to my dissertation research project and may be published or presented at public functions. Your participation in this interview is strictly voluntary, and you may choose at any point to withdraw your participation from the research. The focus group will take approximately one and a half hours. Several measures will be taken to protect all research participants' identities to fullest extent allowable by law. Your name and information revealing your identity will not appear in any published materials and public presentations. In addition, all tapes and transcripts will be safely locked and stored by the researcher. By signing this consent form, you will also be agreeing to keep the names and identities of the focus group participants confidential. By signing and dating the spaces below, you are agreeing to participate in Tae-Sun Kim's dissertation research.

Signature

Date

By checking the YES space below, you are consenting to have the interview **tape-recorded** strictly for transcription purposes.

___ YES

Thank you very much for your help and your time.

Sincerely,

Tae-Sun "Tess" Kim

Questions about the research project should be directed to:

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