

2012

# Living a Parallel Life: Memoirs and Research of a Transnational Korean Adoptee

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## Recommended Citation

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# **Living a Parallel Life: Memoirs and Research of a Transnational Korean Adoptee**

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Liberal Studies*

*by*

*Mary C. Robinson*

*December, 2012*

*Mentor: Dr. Margaret McLaren  
Reader: Dr. Twila Papay*

*Rollins College  
Hamilton Holt School  
Master of Liberal Studies Program*

*Winter Park, Florida*

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**Project Approved:**

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**Director, Master of Liberal Studies Program**

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**Dean, Hamilton Holt School  
Rollins College**

## **Acknowledgements**

This very personal thesis project has been a journey of self that I could not have embarked on alone. I would like to acknowledge key people in my life that played significant roles in this endeavor.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Twila Papay who drew this narrative out of me, and the first person to reassure me that it was important to write and share. Thank you for opening my eyes to the value of my story.

Next, I must acknowledge Dr. Margaret McLaren who gently coaxed me to always dig deeper into myself and my memories to give a richer and more precious voice to my experiences. Thank you for your encouragement, support, enthusiasm for this project, your loving friendship, and your keen editor's eye.

The support of my dear cohort—Ryan, Matthew, Chip, Mandy, and Carolina—who always encouraged and supported me and came as my cheering squad during my presentation. Your friendships have contributed as much to my education as what we learned and experienced together in classes. I cherish each of you and am honored to be among such a group.

## **Dedications**

The attainment of my undergraduate and graduate degrees came with not just a monetary cost, but also personal costs that affected my family. I could not have undertaken a master's degree without the continued love, support, and encouragement of my life partner and true love Alex. You believed in me when I lacked belief in myself. You made everything possible and I am eternally grateful beyond what mere words can convey. I Love You.

Most especially, I dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Cameron. I hope this work gives you insight as to why I am who I am. I know we have had long talks about my past, which is also your past, and I hope this helps you know some of your own history. I wish I had more of it to give to you, but as I always say, "It is what it is." My past is not joyful or pleasant, but my future is, because you are my future. I love you most of all.

Lastly, I dedicate this thesis project to my five-year-old orphan self and to all Korean adoptees who have found or are still in search of their voice and identity. We are special and our stories need to be heard, speak out.

*In all of us there is a hunger, marrow deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are, and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning, no matter what our attainments in life, there is the most disquieting loneliness.*

Alex Haley (*Roots*, 1976)

150,944 Korean-born children were adopted and left Korea between 1953 and 2006.

104,319 of those children were adopted by Americans.

I am one of those children.

## **Introduction**

This thesis project consists of two parts: a memoir of my experience as a Korean adoptee, and a research paper examining how transracial, transnational adoption affects identity development in Korean adoptees. The memoir, as a first person narrative, gives voice to the research as one example of the findings. The majority of research on Korean adoptees has focused on levels of adjustment within a short time frame after adoptees' placement in their adoptive homes. While the overwhelming majority of the prior research has declared positive and overall satisfactory adjustment for most adoptees, serious flaws exist in the methodologies that do not accurately reflect the experiences of the adoptees themselves. Absent from the research are the experiential voices of adult adoptees only heard as adolescents (or younger) or through the voices of their adoptive parents. A vast majority of the research has muffled the voices of Korean adoptees. By sharing my experience I hope to add to the small but growing number of adult adoptees who are the true expert authorities on the impact of the extraordinary yet personally unique situations that define the Korean adoptee population.

While each narrative is separate and unique, commonalities do surface as thematic to adoptees' lives based on circumstances beyond our control but must nevertheless be addressed. Members of the Korean adoptee community to one degree or another often experience issues of rejection, abandonment, loss, anger, ambivalence, and racism. Multiple aspects of these issues manifest in each adoptee's life to varying degrees, severity, and combinations. The memoir portion of the thesis will include my personal reflections and experiences of my adoption reality along with creative elements such as poetry. The research portion will give a brief review of past research findings as well as

relevant language, the future of research in the field, and the elements that shape identity development in Korean adoptees. The current and future research along with the voices of adoptees can serve to honor and acknowledge the unique identity Korean adoptees have and offer comfort and guidance for current and future families created by transracial, transnational adoption.

### **In The Beginning**

I was born in a dirt floor hut of many dirt floor huts in a village that could be one of many non-descript villages outside of Seoul.

Papers declare that on an unknown date I was abandoned at Suhdaemoon Police Station in Seoul.

A gap in the records of my existence...

On August 2, 1974 I left Suhdaemoon Police Station and was taken to Seoul City Children's Home.

On August 29, 1974 I left Seoul City Children's Home and was taken to St. Paul Orphanage.

Papers list my physical condition as: malnourished, anemic, parasitic worms, and head lice.

On February 18, 1975 I left the orphanage to board a plane for New York, New York, USA to meet my new family.

I have yet to return to Korea...

On a cold New York day in February of 1975, I arrived in this country smelly, tired, and scared. Scared of going somewhere new again. Scared of getting on the really really big metal tube that is supposed to take me in the sky. On a very long, delayed, and rerouted flight aboard a double decker jumbo jet from Seoul, South Korea to New York City, USA, I experienced motion sickness and vomited all over myself and all the clean clothes I possessed in my little bag. Although, I did not have much in clothes or material possessions, exactly two outfits of pants and shirts, a jacket, and a traditional hand embroidered ceremonial *han bok*. Of course I could not wear the han bok so once I had been sick all over both clean outfits, I had no choice but to remain in the last one. While the chaperones and flight attendants did their best to clean me up, the sour smell of vomit remained embedded in my clothes. I also carried the scars of abandonment, emotional trauma, physical ailments, and fear.

Once off the plane and taken toward the many parents waiting for us, their new children, I immediately recognized my new parents and they me. Photographs sent back and forth helped us to pick each other out in the crowd. I ran right away to my new father who scooped me up in his arms and carried me to a waiting car. A new family had just been created. I soon fell asleep and the next time I woke up I was again in his arms being carried into a house. To clean me up, my new mother and sister gave me a bath in a bathtub, something I had not seen before. They told me later it took some convincing on their part to get me into it.

Once clean and dressed in fresh clothes we all sat down to a celebration dinner. My new family was staying with my father's relatives, a big loud Italian family. Italian celebration dinners for them consisted of spicy sausage, marinara sauce, meatballs, pasta,

and bread. To try and give me a taste of my former home, the family had made white rice for me to eat. The smell of the Italian food must have been quite enticing because I ate the spicy sausage and pasta and did not touch the rice. Making the white rice for me the first night would prove one of the few times throughout my childhood that my parents would try to be culturally sensitive to my birth heritage.

My journey only began with the physical plane ride. It would continue through the navigation of strange and new customs, sights, smells, tastes, and emotions. My parents and I would encounter each other's cultures and we would be tested when those cultures clashed. Eventually, though, because of my young age, my birth culture would turn into a distant memory and would become harder and harder to remember and practice until it finally gave way to my adopted American culture.

As I grew up I felt a sense of longing for something missing in my life I could not articulate at the time. Eventually I came to know it was my heritage I missed and needed in order to know myself. I began to question the responsibility my parents had in this matter. Prior to that fateful day in February of 1975, they should have taken steps to not let my culture get lost. Shouldn't they? I always have more questions than answers. In the past I have blamed them for not letting me be Korean, yet, I understand they did the best they could and I forgive them. However, the sense of loss does not diminish with forgiveness.

I always wonder what my life would have been like if my Korean heritage and culture had remained a part of me and become a part of my family. When I stepped off the plane my future was forever changed along with my identity. That plane ride set me on a journey for the rest of my life to find myself in the future.

I am still on the journey and hope it will make a stop back in South Korea. I have not returned since I left. I am fearful, anxious, and excited about the prospect and continuously work to reach it.

### **What's In a Name?**

I was born Choi Soon Kyu. At five years old I became Mary Chimento. Choi is my birth surname, and Mary is the name my adoptive parents chose for me-based on my sister, their bio-kid (my term) playing the Virgin Mary in her Catholic school Christmas play. As a child I did not think much about my new American name or what it implied. But as an adult, I am troubled by it. I have conflicted emotions about my parents changing my identity immediately and officially (on legal documents) to an arbitrary choice, which really had no meaning behind it. It was quite obvious to other people I was Asian; and surely could not have been any more awkward for me to have a non-American name than the one I ended up with.

I quickly became accustomed to my new name and in fact had heard about it in the orphanage from a letter written to me by my new sister. As a young five-year-old child who only heard my new name and no longer heard my birth name, I had no choice but to accept it and respond to it. I had no choice but to adjust to my new surroundings and quickly.

Growing up, my American name with my Korean face actually evoked more questions and comments from people than if I had just kept my birth name. Throughout my school years teachers always did a double take the first day of school and would invariably ask, "How did that happen?" Or they would try and identify my Italian last

name as some odd Asian name. Some people would ask the nationality of my last name, and when I responded Italian, they would usually say, "Are you sure," or they wondered if my mother was Asian. Adoption, especially transracial and transnational, was not at all common in the white middle class area of central Florida I grew up in. The first home I lived in with my parents was in Maitland, in a quiet neighborhood of one-story ranch houses painted in neutral colors of white, beige, and tan. Orange groves surrounded and protected our neighborhood from the outside world, so that we lived in almost an isolated microcosm of reality. Every family in the neighborhood was white, and most of them were empty nesters or with older children. Little five year old me was quite the standout in such an established and mature neighborhood.

While Shakespeare famously said, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/ By any other word would smell as sweet," I cannot help but wonder in my case, if the simple act of changing my name did not actually start the stripping away of my identity. Names in Korea often hold special meaning gifted to the child by its parents. My birth name is all I have left of my birth parents. I had my birth name for the first five years of my life. It identified me. I heard it, responded to it, it was mine and mine alone in the orphanage when I owned nothing else. I arrived at the orphanage with it. I did not leave with it, in essence leaving behind who I was born as.

I did get to choose to retain Choi as my middle name but my parents had pressured me to take Ann as my middle name like my sister. Ann, a good Catholic saint's name to go along with Mary, the ultimate Catholic girl's name. I suppose upon reflection I might have chosen Choi as my first act in an attempt to regain my birth identity and perhaps my first act to push back against its loss altogether. I would not want to change

my name back to my birth name because I am no longer that child, although she represents a major part of who I am now. I feel my use of Mary Choi encompasses my past and present and even some of my future. For me this is one way I honor Choi Soon Kyu's memory and never forget her.

In 2011 I learned from a Korean manicurist that I have been pronouncing my Korean name wrong all these years. I always thought it was pronounced Ch-oy but in fact it is pronounced Sh-ay. I felt very upset and sad I had said it wrong all these years, if only a Korean had corrected me sooner.

### **Language**

When I arrived in the US I only spoke Korean and knew only three words of English taught to me by the nuns in the orphanage, "I am sorry," to be used if I hurt someone. It seems quite curious that is what they chose to first teach me. The orphanage reported to my adoptive parents at the time that I would go around to other kids and hit them (gently) so I could practice the phrase. Of course my parents spoke no Korean, so the language barrier was a real one initially. But, no one in my new environment spoke anything but English and through the magic of television, my five-year-old brain learned English rather rapidly. Unfortunately, with no practice and use of my Korean language, it dissolved into non-existence as my English flourished.

But language continued and still does come up for me from both Americans and Asians. I've had Americans tell me, "Your English is really good." Or they assume I cannot speak English and talk very slow and loud so I am sure to understand them. I think even worse was when Americans would just say random Asian phrases or words to me

like, "*konichiwa*," "*tae kwon do*," "*ni hao*," or "*sayanora*." With the exception of *tae kwon do*, none of those words or phrases is Korean. When I was younger if someone was insulting, intrusive, or disrespectful to me and assumed I could not speak English, I would just go along with it and pretend, cover my mouth with my hand, give a little shy giggle and shake my head no.

On the flip side, though, Asians of all ethnic backgrounds will just start to speak to me in their language and assume I understand them. When I tell them I do not understand, they are insulted to varying degrees. They make me feel as though I purposely act snooty or "American" so I am not embarrassed at associating with them.

Not long ago I found out I actually have a genetic defect and am not equipped to speak English- the little connector piece under my tongue is purposely shorter and therefore I am unable to properly pronounce many English words without a good amount of effort. When I was first adopted I was diagnosed with a speech impediment, but the therapists who worked with me did not know of this genetic issue. I remember countless hours spent to try and say, "pool" and instead always ended up with, "I want to swim in the poo." Even today, I have to carefully think such words out in my head before I speak them. My "impediment" sneaks out in times of stress or extreme tiredness.

I so want to relearn my Korean language and will dedicate myself to it in the near future. Loss of my language was yet a further loss of Choi Soon Kyu. Language is one of the factors that make up culture. Language connects the individuals of a group and helps to signify membership in the group. Word for word translations do not always exist from one language to another and many cultures have words specific to them with special

meanings. Shared language helps to identify others like you. I hope my birth language is just locked away, dusty from lack of use and patiently waits to re-emerge once again.

### **New Family**

Dad...

As a little girl, I worshiped my father just as all little girls do on television. I can still smell his special cologne of Vitalis hair oil and Old Spice aftershave. Punishment and spankings came from him. Actually he beat me, and sometimes for nothing at all. I once received the worst “spanking” of my young life because I had ordered chicken at a fish restaurant. He also shared laughter and affection in his own way, even playing card games or swimming in the pool with me. With the onset of adolescence and the beginning of my struggle to know who I was, my father and I began to have our problems. He never understood why I turned away from God and religion and that I could not reconcile his God of love with the God who let me be thrown away and rejected. He did not know how to help me with my inner struggles. The best gift he ever gave me was two weeks before his death, when he knew he was dying, and told me he was always so very proud of me and loved me from the first day he laid eyes on me. I think sharing those feelings really helped dad to be at peace and while it did not change the past history of our relationship, it did comfort me to hear him finally say those words to me.

Mom...

Such an unmaternal and unaffectionate woman. I often wondered why she had children. Something in her soul ate away at her, but I never found what. I ached for her to mother

me, but found emptiness, rejected a second time. I received no hugs or kisses or soothing words from her, ever. She began to forget my birthday after I turned sixteen. She never remembered my daughter's name. While planning for my wedding she was concerned about what she would wear and asked me to buy her a new dress. She told me I was selfish for building a retirement account. Our relationship never healed or reconciled itself. I can honestly say and without hate our relationship improved greatly when she died because we could no longer hurt or disappoint each other.

Sister...

She promised sisterly love and sharing that never came to fruition. Instead she shared jealousy, lies, and mistrust. We were always locked in a competition for our parents' love. They were hers and not mine, and she reminded me of it often. Even as adults when we did talk to each other, she always said "my mom" or "my dad" when we talked about our parents. After both our parents died, I tried so hard to have a relationship with her and even forget our troubled past. But she never reciprocated and rejected me repeatedly. I could no longer expose myself to such treatment and pain and we have no relationship now. It is for the best.

### Baby Pictures

I do not have any baby pictures of myself. The only “baby” picture I have is one from the orphanage, sent with me to America.



With my head shaved it is not easy to tell if I am a boy or girl. There were two other pictures of me when I was in the orphanage but they have been lost, I remember looking at them and trying my hardest to remember what I was feeling in them.

This one picture I have left is the only and last physical evidence Choi Soon Kyu existed.

My heart used to crack a little every time some one said, “Oh, I get such and such physical trait from my mom,” or, “My dad and I have the same such and such.” I could never say that. I do not know whom I look like and probably never will. Fortunately, my daughter has a reference for her physical resemblances, but on my side they stop with me. On her father’s side, she can see glimpses of herself in his family members.

So, in this picture, my hair is growing in from having been shaved since I arrived at the orphanage with lice. I was also malnourished, anemic, and suffered from parasites called ascaris. Apparently, I was also smaller than most children my age. I lived with twenty-five other children between the ages of four and six and was described as being “lovely, clever, and sociable” and “superior to other children” in singing and dancing. Although I smiled, played well with other kids, and would adjust well to new circumstances according to the orphanage workers, my paperwork also mentions I tossed about in my sleep. A result of nightmares I imagine, since I had them for several years after.

### **Remembrances**

As I tried to settle into my new family and began my transformation into Mary and all things American, little parts of Choi Soon Kyu tried to stay with me. As an older child at the time of adoption, I had intense memories of things from my life in Korea, but they would often surface in my dreams, more accurately in my nightmares. At the time as a young child, I was unaware they were memories. I learned later in my late teens during therapy the nightmares were in fact my memories. My inner self was protecting me by showing the memories in my sleep.

As I mentioned before, the orphanage noted my stressful sleep, and my adoptive parents also told me that for several years after I came here, I had nightmares almost nightly and they always ended in screams and crying. But I never woke up, usually my dad would just hold and rock me until the moment passed. From the nightmares I remember images and small snippets of things. One image came through too well:

Tears in the dream, real tears on my cheeks. Sound asleep. My six-year old body being shaken, resisting being woken up. Voices of concern trying to soothe away the nightmare. I am huddled down small in something and looking up and out of something through a small hole, and everything and everyone looks distorted and huge, and I am just scared and crying but very still and quiet. I feel caged, claustrophobic, trapped. I am too frightened to cry, so I scream and the tears come.

In therapy I finally connected and came to realize those were repeated moments when I received punishment for some innocuous indiscretion and was put into a large woven basket. I watch a hand put the lid of the basket on like a coffin closing, while

another hand pushes my head down. My distorted view is me looking through the weaving of the basket surrounded by darkness.

I would have this nightmare apparently when I was distressed, worried, or punished by my new parents. Old fears and anxieties would cause me to relive the nightmare. To this day I cannot have my head touched and large baskets with lids cause me terror and act as a trigger. I still sometimes have this nightmare during stressful moments in my life, but only very occasionally.

Another vivid memory that appeared in my dreams was going potty. But instead of a toilet, I had to squat over a dug out hole. Holes were dug for this purpose and once full, covered over and a new one dug to replace the full one. I apparently fell into it at some point because in my dream, I cannot go to the bathroom but am suddenly aware of the rising water full of excrement first around my toes, and then creeping up my ankles, until eventually the lower half of my body is immersed in the filth. I remember the nauseating stench. I remember crying at being so filthy.

I also remember a lullaby. I once knew a Korean song I sang for my new American family. I think my Korean mother sang it to me, or maybe the nuns in the orphanage did. I would sing in my child's voice remembering all the words while dancing to the tune.

I no longer remember the words. But the melody stays with me, haunting me as a tiny link almost imperceptible to my first childhood, to Korea.

The melody makes me happy, sad, and nostalgic. I still hum the small part I remember...

### **Hunger Pains**

Other memories surfaced in different ways. I know I suffered from severe hunger as evidenced by my malnourished state when I arrived at the orphanage. But I also remember the acute physical pain of hunger. I am not referring to simple hunger pains from skipping a meal. Chronic and extreme hunger feels like some being within your stomach is eating its way out of your body from the inside out. Your intestines feel like they are being digested. Your body needs and craves food, any food, so badly that you feel like you might lose your mind if it does not get something soon. The intense physical and mental feeling dominates your every movement and awake moment. Frequent episodes of extreme hunger, made me want to make food last as long as possible, even to the point of trying to hoard it. The uncertainty of when food would come again was frightening. To have anything to eat was a blessing, no matter what it was. I can remember the squeak of frog and snake eyeballs between my teeth. I did not like it, but it did not matter, it was food.

The abundance of and easy access to food in America was overwhelming to me and I had a difficult time in my adjustment towards it. About six months after I had arrived in the US, my parents took me to a restaurant for the first time. This incident provided their first understanding of the food deprivation I had suffered:

### **Doggie Bag**

Wearing my favorite pink Polly Flinders dress and white tights with white patent leather maryjanes, I feel so pretty, like a princess. My new mommy and daddy are taking me to a restaurant. I'm so excited, because this is the first time. Everything is so fancy.

Cloth napkins and tablecloths, flowers on the table, so many forks and spoons and knives and glasses. I'm afraid to touch anything. I sit on my hands when I don't eat or drink, so I am good.

I have to pick my dinner from a book called a menu. Too many choices! I ask mommy to pick for me. Everyone gets a different dinner of their own! We don't have to all eat the same thing! Too much food on my plate. Too much on everyone's plate. The waiterman takes all our plates of food and I ask mommy and daddy why he's taking our food. "They throw away whatever we don't finish," they tell me.

I cannot understand what it means to throw away food and why someone would take our food and I cry. There is enough food for more meals. I tell my parents, "In Korea this would feed us for a week, maybe two. Food can't be thrown away. Being hungry hurts. Hunger chews on your insides and hurts." My parents have all the food put in doggie bags and we take it home.

I grew up with a very American diet and rarely ate Asian food. In fact, I only had it once a year when my parents submerged me in their idea of Asian culture to celebrate my adoption day in their own way. Dinner at a local Chinese restaurant provided the cultural experience. The irony that I was Korean was lost on my parents. The doors of the restaurant opened to reveal a dimly lit space with round booths along the walls and round tables and chairs in the center. The smell of plastic mingled with the dishes being cooked and served. Plastic was everywhere—in the placemats, the tablecloths, the seat coverings, the floor to ceiling garlands of flowers, the potted plants and trees. I can still smell it.

This was the one time of year we ate real rice instead of minute rice and encountered, albeit briefly, other Asians. I actually looked forward to this event every

year for the change in food. I did not, however, feel comfortable around other Asians. I had nothing in common with them, and I only saw them once a year. When we went to the restaurant, the people who worked there always treated us very nicely and courteously, but I always sensed they felt sorry for me too— being raised by Caucasians and not by my own people. But even white people made me feel uncomfortable or lesser than them, even though I felt more comfortable as one of them, as a white person.

### **Who's Asian, Me?**

I thought I was white. I grew up so assimilated in whiteness I often forgot I was Asian and not white unless I saw a picture of myself with my new family or caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror. As I went through adolescence, I desperately wanted to actually look white to match how I felt inside and all I saw around me. I begged my parents to let me dye my hair blonde and get surgery to “fix” my eyelids to look like other white kids. I never saw anyone who looked like me on television, the movies, or in magazines. I knew that if I was going to be beautiful, I had to have blonde hair and if not blue eyes then at least not slanted eyes. My father would try to reassure me my Asian face was beautiful and once a year we would watch the Miss Universe pageant on television. Every year dad would cheer on the Asian contestants and vigorously comment how they were so much prettier than all the others. I know he was trying to make me feel better but, honestly, I never believed he believed it and felt he was putting on a show for my benefit. My dad did not show any interest in anything Asian unless it was right in front of me. He even used the term “Oriental” when he talked about Asians. Interestingly,

about five years ago I learned Korean women are the standard of ideal beauty in all of Asia.

I began to seriously hate my face. I never saw myself reflected in anything or anyone in my surroundings. The only toys I had in my childhood were Barbie dolls and I longed to look like her. Back in the mid to late 70s, Barbie did not have an Asian friend. In fact, Asian dolls just did not exist in the marketplace unless they were a collector's item in a series of dolls not meant for play like the Madam Alexander dolls. The only time I saw dolls who looked like me were at Disney World on the It's a Small World ride in the Asian section. Of course other people on the ride always pointed out to my family how much I looked like the dolls, just in case we missed the resemblance.

Even today, I often forget I look Asian. Quite frankly, I do not really feel Asian inside, although I am beginning to; it has been a very slow process. I have to remind myself I am Korean and have an entire culture to relearn separate from my white upbringing. To be fair, though, I cannot and will not take total blame for my assimilated whiteness. I have a white name, no accent of any kind, and was not given opportunities to embrace my birth culture. No wonder I do not feel inherently Asian. As an adult, however, I do have control over my life and I have begun to reclaim and regain my birth culture. But, the fact remains I am Asian, and often times other people remind me of it. Whether through racist comments by ill intentioned people or assumed racial stereotypes by well meaning people, it is usually someone else who points out I am Asian.

It has only been within the last ten years or so that I have begun to think of my Asian self. This is a whole new experience I am still unsure of how to navigate. This sudden change and awareness came as a result of my daughter. Naturally inquisitive,

children ask questions of their parents without the burden of past history. My daughter was no different and asked me for instance why I did not look like my parents. As I tried to explain my adoption to her, her five-year-old mind of course found more questions in each answer I gave her. I realized I actually owed it to her to explore and find out about my Korean culture and heritage because while it is a major part of my identity, by default it also makes up a large portion of hers. She deserves to know. Because I have no answers for my daughter about my Korean family history I am trying to instead provide her with our Korean cultural history so she can proudly claim that part of her identity. We have been hand in hand on the journey.

I discovered poetry could help me to express my feelings when straight prose could not. Poetry allows me a greater sense of freedom to express my emotions without the structural constraints of prose. So, while I do not write rhyming poetry, I do find I can convey myself better through it.

### ***Lost***

*I can no longer see them,  
Bodies without faces  
I can no longer hear them,  
Voices without sound  
I can no longer smell them,  
Flowers without scent  
I can no longer feel them,  
Hugs with no arms  
I can no longer remember them,  
Lost to the past,  
Have they lost me too?*

### **I'm Transracial and Transnational**

My adoption is a “visible” one, which means to look at my family and me together it becomes apparent we do not look related based on visible physical characteristics. Since I am racially Asian and my adoptive parents were racially white or Caucasian, my adoption is transracial. In addition, because I was born in Korea and my adoption placement took me out of my birth country to the country of origin of my parents, the U.S., my adoption is also transnational. Therefore, I am considered a transracial and transnational adoptee. The two do not necessarily always happen together. In fact, black and Native American Indian children adopted by white families in the U.S. are transracial but not transnational adoptions. A child from Russia adopted by a white U.S. family is transnationally but not transracially adopted.

While all adoptions cause challenges unique to each child and family, transracial and transnational adoptions create additional layers to the adoptee's experience. In my example above of the Russian child adopted by a white family, their adoption is not visible, and therefore, the child is not easily identifiable as adopted to those outside of their family. Transnational adoptees placed with their adoptive family at an older age will most likely face the language barrier just as I did. But once the hurdle of language is cleared, to the average outsider the family looks like a biological family, not one created through adoption. In the previous example I gave of the black child adopted by a white family, the black child will most likely face issues surrounding the differences in race between he/she and the family. Although language does not become a concern, the racial, particularly the physical, can cause issues because of the “visible nature” of the family.

As a transnational and transracial adoptee I faced multiple challenges growing up. Because I obviously did not resemble my parents, strangers often asked, “Where did you get her,” or, “Is she yours?” While the transnational Russian child might eventually be asked this question, we automatically anticipated such questions whenever my family and I met new people. Unlike a non-adopted multiracial child, I did not have accessible racial role models to turn to in my parents. The racial confusion I experienced from my childhood to early twenties stemmed from lack of any interaction with other Asians or role models I could identify with. The visible confusion caused by my transracial family to outsiders elicited intrusive and unwelcome comments. The predominantly white cultural environment I was raised in added to the visibility of my difference to the dominant society. As an Asian person, I did not see myself reflected in media outlets, even less than blacks or other minorities. As both transracial and transnational, I stood out as a definitive other separated by not only looks but assumed language barriers, and assumed stereotypes of certain intelligence abilities and personality behaviors. People often viewed me as something completely different than what I was based solely on my Asian exterior.

In the language of adoption the term triad or triangular is often used to describe the relational aspect that exists between the adopted child, birth mother or family, and adopted mother or family. As a transnational and transracial adoptee, additional layers stretch and project the triangular metaphor into a sectioned game wheel of a board game where I am the spinning arrow. Besides the birth and adopted mothers or families, I also have dominant and minority races that play roles in my identity. In addition, the country of my birth figures into my adoption story. Particularly since South Korea initially sent

their orphans (including me) overseas in vast quantities to maintain their Confucianist beliefs of familial bloodlines but now welcome back adoptees as prodigal children. The additional markers of transracial and transnational on an adoptee create identity issues that often compete with and oppose each other, which cause the adoptee distress in their identity development.

***Once Upon A Time***

*Once upon a time I was another child,  
Spoke a different language,  
Ate different foods,  
Had a different family,  
Lived another life,*

*Once upon a time I did not feel disposable,  
Did not question who I am,  
Did not ache from not knowing,  
Did not have nightmares,  
Fit in,*

*Once upon a time no longer exists.*

### **Missing Child**

When I think of myself as Choi Soon Kyu, I often equate her to a missing child and not in the first person. There is a major disconnect between that five-year-old child who became an orphan and myself. Some people have asked how and why she is separate from me now and also why my adoption still affects me. She had an identity through her name and she responded to it, had heard it every day of her life. She had and was part of a family. She had a life of her own. Then something went wrong and she was left at a police station and eventually taken to an orphanage. When she was adopted and had a new name and family was the moment of my origins of who I am now and when she ceased to exist. Choi Soon Kyu vanished the day I became Mary. But Choi Soon Kyu is still missing and what she could have been or the life she would have had remain a mystery that can never be known.

I cannot simply “get over” the fact that I am adopted. I basically experienced a violent action when I was separated from all I had known and delivered thousands of miles away to a completely foreign environment. I have no knowledge of whom I come from or resemble, my family tree ends in a mangled broken branch. I started my existence living one life that was disrupted for reasons beyond my control, helpless and powerless. In one word, my adoption makes me feel disposable. I feel much like a piece of trash or object that has lost its value to the owner. My birth parent(s) had me until I was four years old and decided, for whatever reason, I could be let go. Perhaps (and this is pure conjecture on my part) they felt they could always have another child in the future, or I was an unexpected mistake they could no longer deal with, or they just could not feed

everyone in the household. I do not know the circumstances behind my abandonment. And indeed I was abandoned, disposed of, rejected.

I think for me, the not knowing is what causes the most pain and anxiety. What I do know is I was disposable. I have felt this way for so long and it has affected my sense of self-esteem and worth. I constantly fear those who I have relationships with will feel I am disposable at any moment, and decide I am easily replaceable. I think this may be why I want, actually need, to plan things out and make sure I know what will happen next, I secretly fear the future because I feel temporary. I often wonder if I would feel as abandoned or disposable if I had been adopted as an infant. Maybe if there had not been an attempt to raise me in my birth family that ultimately failed, I would have a better “myth” as they say about my adoption. I could pretend my birth mother was an unwed young woman who could not face her family or society and was forced to give me up but valiantly resisted. But I do not have such a luxury; all I have is the knowledge that I was left like a bag of trash on the curb waiting to be picked up. Once in awhile I like to think of myself as a recycled child, but that does not feel much better since it too has connotations of rejection, tossing out, loss of value or use, and not good enough.

Feeling disposable makes me think I was somehow not good enough as a four-year-old girl. I must have done something so terrible or been such a terrible child to be so easily thrown away. As an educated and logical adult, I know there may have been a reason good enough for my birth mother to abandon me. I do know that at the time, allegedly, mothers were prostituting or maiming their children in order to get food or money. However, as the child who was abandoned, I cannot accept any reason as good enough. Especially as a mother myself now, I would never give up my daughter. I would

prostitute myself or kill if it meant I could keep her and feed her. I can easily think about the situation in an abstract, theoretical manner and come to the realization that abandonment may have been the only solution to whatever my birth mother was facing. On the emotional and personal level, however, I cannot. Perhaps that is a flaw in my character, but the pain I still feel is very real and not eased by theory or logic.

Which leads to the question many people ask, “Don’t you want to find your birth parents?” This question has come up my entire life. School friends were astonished I did not know who my “real” mother was and they would express their sympathy for me. As a young child I wanted to find my bio-mom as I call her, and just ask her, “Why? Why did you give me up?” To get this one question answered is the only reason I would ever want to find her. I need to know why she did it, was it me? The answer would hopefully give me closure, but of course there are no guarantees.

In fact, initiated searches by adoptees often yield little to no results. So as an adult, I have no desire to find her or my bio-dad. I cannot risk another disappointment or rejection to my vulnerable psyche in regards to this issue. And quite frankly, to find and meet them would be more of a disruption to my life not a comfort I think. Except for the single act of giving me up, they have not been a part of my life and have forfeited any rights to me, my happiness, my sadness, my highs or lows, my anything and in return I owe them absolutely nothing.

I did recently contact the agency that handled my adoption, Holt International, to obtain a copy of my Korean file. I have also requested an assessment to determine if a search is even viable. I quite surprised myself I did this and am not convinced I would initiate a search if Holt determines one can be done. I think if anything I just need to

know one way or the other. I secretly hope a search cannot be initiated and would thus provide a small sense of closure.

### **Aren't You Grateful?**

Throughout my life when someone finds out I am adopted, and especially from a (at the time) developing country, if I give any indication of regret, longing, confusion, etc., I'm always asked, "But, aren't you grateful that you were adopted and given such a great life and opportunities," or "Don't you think the alternative, if you had stayed in Korea in extreme poverty would have been worse than being adopted?"

There are a couple of things wrong with such questions. First of all, of course I am grateful for what adoption has given to me, and I am fully aware of how fortunate I am. However, the tone in which it is usually asked is quite often condescending and accusatory. There is so much people do not understand about my adoption situation. Like, I am a product of circumstance who had absolutely no say in *the* major disruptive change in my life. I have also had to deal with a multitude of issues because of my adoption, which the majority of children (and adults for that matter) never have to face or even think about. Secondly, much of what I have accomplished or gained in my life are a product of me and my efforts and hard work. Except for actually being adopted—which yes, I understand was the catalyst—I have been the agent of my outcomes. Everything I have, whether it be material or non-tangible such as security, I have earned and certainly not been given.

While I am grateful I was adopted, a host of other issues and situations have happened to me that have been negative, painful, and should not have to be experienced

by any child. For those incidents of pain, self-hate, shame, and destructive anger, all direct results of being adopted, I am not grateful. These emotional and mental scars run deep and have never healed. And quite frankly, the family I was adopted into did not show me love and affection, except in minor almost begrudging ways. I have no idea why my family adopted me and while it most likely was the best outcome for me it came with a heavy emotional price I continue to pay. I have had constant reminders my whole life from my parents, sister, friends, and even acquaintances about how I should be grateful for my adoption. I am grateful, but how long must the gratitude last? Who determines when my debt is repaid?

### **What Are You?**

Being the rare person of color in schools (especially the private ones), and for that matter in our community, when growing up I was always asked, "What are you?" Now, I understand people have curiosity about what they do not know and that is fine. But to ask *what* I am is extremely rude. First of all, I am not a what. Perhaps reframe the question with some tact and consideration. Something like, "What is your cultural background?" Or, "What is your birth country?" I was asked this question so much throughout my younger years and I often answered sarcastically, "I'm a girl, what are you?" Sometimes the tone of voice asking the question would offend me so much I would not answer at all.

Then there were those people who liked to play the Asian guessing game with me. They would right away ask, "Are you Chinese? Japanese? Vietnamese?" They almost never guessed Korean, which was fine, but at least let me tell you my ethnicity, do not guess and do not assume. Most people just assumed I was Chinese. Even more frustrating,

most people think I am an expert on everything about any Asian ethnicity or culture. Or, they assume all Asian cultures are the same with no differentiations. Up until my late twenties, people also assumed I knew every Asian on the planet. Countless times, someone has said to me, “Oh, when I was growing up in such and such place we had these Chinese neighbors, the Lees—really nice and quiet—do you know them?” No, no, I do not.

It is interesting to me white people do not typically ask each other what they are or what their cultural background is. I guess because as the dominant culture and race, they do not need to because they are not the “other.” The rest of us non-whites have to identify ourselves for them. This was certainly the case for me growing up. Even black and Hispanic kids and adults asked me what I was. It was very uncomfortable as a child to always have to explain who I was when I did not see other kids have to do the same.

Since I grew up in white middle class America with white parents and had no interaction with people of color, mainly because there were not any in the area, I often faced racism in many forms. The horrible thing about racism is it is steeped in power and serves as a weapon of oppression. The oppressive effects of racism serve to oppress so many different things about a certain group or individual it targets. I am not talking about just job opportunities or denying certain tangible things. Oppression also creates a sense of powerlessness; people cannot stand up for themselves, their voice is silenced into submission, or they are denied what they in fact are rightfully entitled to such as respect and consideration.

Based solely on my exterior physical appearance I have, and continue to, face racism on a regular basis. Racism often has two forms, subtle and subversive or blatant

and confrontational. I truly believe the subtle form of racism is more dangerous because it is taken as and considered as normal in society. Subtle racism seethes into and infects the mindset of people and is accepted without question. For example, when people told me my English was good they were in fact being racist. Once a male co-worker told me I was a beautiful Asian woman. There is no reason to qualify my beauty with my race. When is the last time you ever heard someone say to a white woman, "You are so beautiful for a white girl"? It even sounds ridiculous.

I have been asked if I was my daughter's nanny. People have assumed I am an expert at making rice (my partner had to teach me how to make good rice and he is European white). And as they get to know me people have told me they are so surprised I am so outgoing and assertive when I speak. They assume I will be quiet, demure, and submissive—like a good Asian girl. In school, when I struggled to earn C's in geometry and chemistry other students, and the teachers, could not understand why. I should be really good at all the math and science subjects I was told.

Do not get me wrong, blatant racism is awful too, but it is easy to spot those people and often times diffuse their comments and actions. I can remember as a young child, maybe 6 or 7, a man coming up to me in a parking lot and screaming in my face, "You little gook! You killed my son in Vietnam!" I could viscerally feel the man's hate and pain and it scared me. My parents tried to explain to him I was not Vietnamese but it did not matter to him, all Asians had killed his son. I can almost, almost, sympathize with him.

Other blatant racists were just hateful people. As a teenager working as a cashier in a store, a man came through my line and asked me if I should be doing his laundry

somewhere. My friend's sister was friends with the sister of a guy I dated in my late teens after high school. His sister asked their mom where he was, and their mom replied, "Oh, he's out having him some rice." He was on a date with me. In my single days, lots of guys tried to date me because they had "yellow fever." I was basically an item on their dating bucket list to check off. Most of them were honest about it, but some were not. I disliked the feeling of being objectified for my difference or as I later learned fetishized.

Conversely, however, when I began to date boys and men I came to realize I had sexual power I could wield at my discretion. I began to play games with men to make them desire me and then I would choose what, if anything, would happen with them. I often chose to reject them and when I did I gained an odd sense of empowerment from my role as the rejecter and not for once being the rejected one. I never dated or played my game with any Asian boys or men. I could not make myself find them attractive and had always been attracted to any and all other races of men. I am sure I was probably cruel to one or two Asian boys throughout the years but I refused to consider them as datable and avoided them as much as I did all other Asians. I admit I harbored internalized racist thoughts toward other Asians and it helped insulate me against racism I experienced. In my mind was I not one of them—I was white.

Racism has always just been a fact of my life I have had to deal with. Typically when I think it might be getting better, some incident happens to remind me again of how vigilant and aware of it I still have to be. It hurts me most when it touches my daughter. All I can do is to provide her the necessary tools (self confidence, security in herself, love from us) to deal with it and the grace to handle it without lowering herself to a racist's level. Racism will never go away, but how we handle it can have profound impacts.

### **I'm a Banana**

I learned later in life I was a banana. This is a term refers to someone who is Asian (yellow) on the exterior and white on the interior. In other words, I looked Asian but acted, sounded, and thought like I was white. I did not do this on purpose; it was a result of how I was raised. Because I learned English at 5 years old and my Korean language did not interfere with learning it and was eventually lost, I had no accent. So I sounded (and still do) white or American. I wore American style clothes. I ate American foods. I only interacted with white kids and teachers at religious private schools from first through fourth grade. Two Catholic, one Evangelical Christian, and one Baptist school did not provide any racial or ethnic diversity in my surroundings—in fact I was the diversity. I did, however, receive frequent paddlings mixed with lots of prayers for my sinfulness. In fifth grade I attended public school for the first time and even then I was usually the only Asian kid and was made fun of often.

Being and living white was not an intentional practice on my part. I truly had no choice. My parents did not do anything to foster any of my birth culture in me. As I mentioned, only once a year for a celebration they took me to a Chinese restaurant on the anniversary of my arriving in the US. The fact I was Korean and not Chinese either did not make a difference to them or it was totally lost on them as two distinct and separate cultures. It was one of the few times I came in contact with Asians growing up. And I did not really like it. Being around other Asians reminded me I fit with them physically but didn't really belong with them. It is hard for me to admit but for most of my life I was prejudiced against Asian people.

Other Asians made me feel uncomfortable and awkward. I felt ashamed for rejecting them or not seeking them out. But I had nothing in common with them, whatsoever. No language, food, music, customs, nothing. There were no Asian role models on television or in movies for me to admire. The guy in Kung Fu was an egg—a white guy who totally acted like he was Asian for the rest of his life. If I did see the occasional Asian on television or in a movie it was never in a flattering way and often focused on stereotypes. Whenever I encountered other Asians or was around them, I would become so tense and nervous they might approach me. And of course, they always did. I did not make fun of Asians or perpetuate stereotypes of them, but I just could not embrace them as my own people. Quite frankly, other Asians never tried to bring me into the fold either and I think they sensed I was not one of them. I felt no sense of connectedness to any Asian population and mostly felt like a fraud around them. I was a fraudulent Asian and a fraudulent Caucasian. I did not belong to either group and was often rejected by both. Ignoring or rejecting Asians was the easiest survival method for me to employ.

Complete immersion into white culture was my other survival method. I had to assimilate. I would vigilantly make sure to watch white girls and try to act like them through body postures, tossing my hair, and how they spoke and laughed. I would spend hours trying to duplicate the makeup on the fashion models (white) in the magazines. Of course it always looked so wrong on me since blue eye shadow is not complimentary to Asian faces. Mascara was the worst and I would spend whole hours applying it until my lashes looked like plucked spider legs and my eyes were red and watery from the ridiculous application methods. I spent countless hours trying to get my coarse black hair

to feather just like Farah Fawcett's, to no avail. In my late teens I even permed my hair to make it curly.

I begged my mother for Jordache jeans just like the popular white girls at school had; instead I received Sears Roebuck corduroys with deer embroidered on the back pockets. My sister received Jordache jeans, and any other trendy brand names clothing, without question. There was always money to get my sister whatever she needed or wanted to feel pretty and popular. Even when there was no money for anything extra, and barely enough for the necessities, my sister got while the rest of the family went without. I wanted to be her so much, well, maybe not her per se, but white like her.

I altered my personality to be funny and outgoing when inside I really was not that way. I littered my speech with profanities as an attempt to be the polar opposite of any Asian person's behavior. I started to smoke in an attempt to hang out with the cool kids. I pretended to be dumb so I would not be seen as a smart Asian girl. When my parents were informed I was gifted and could enter the program in middle school, I pleaded with them to not make me do it. I did not want anything else to make me the smart Asian girl. I hid my love of reading. At the same time I cried desperate tears if I ever made below an A on any schoolwork. I attributed my good grades to friends as dumb luck. I tried to play sports but failed miserably at all of them. When my ninth grade algebra teacher told me I would make a great math teacher I turned red and was mortified. I was relieved no one else had heard him.

Sitting in classes whenever Asians came up (usually in history or humanities) I always tried to shrink into myself and hoped none of my classmates realized I was an Asian. In high school there were a couple of other Asian kids at my school, but there

were very few of us. I did not seek out their friendship and always avoided them. If I had classes with any of them I never made eye contact or sat near them. I did not want to be identified with and clumped with the Asian kids. Because I was not one of them. They were real Asians, true Asians who lived in Asian families and did Asian things. So I avoided them.

All these things I did or deliberately changed about myself so I could survive the battlefields of school and adolescence. But I knew deep down inside no matter how much I acted white, got the American accent down, or tried to fit in, I never did. I always stood out as the different one whether among the white kids or the Asian kids. I am not proud of how I acted toward other Asian people or to myself. I did not give them or myself a chance to be known. But I honestly felt so conflicted and confused as to who I was, what I was, that I did not know how to be me. To the outside world, I looked like a well adjusted kid who just looked different than most of the people in my surroundings. Inside, however, I felt fractured, splintered, and empty. I always felt a heightened sense of not belonging to any group, because in fact I did not. I was displaced from my “where I should have been” like some outer space alien.

### **Lonely and Alone**

For most of my life I have felt utterly lonely and alone because of my adoption. Since I was geographically isolated from other Korean adoptees, I had no one in my life who could understand or relate to my situation. I did not even know any other adoptees of any race who might understand the adoption aspect of my life. My family did not know how to talk to me about my adoption or how I felt about it, and honestly I tried to hide it

from them so they would not feel bad. I did not want to hurt their feelings and seem ungrateful. But I can remember so many nights crying myself to sleep and just asking over and over again in my head why my mother gave me away and abandoned me. Some times the intense noise of that question consumed my inner thoughts and threatened to annihilate me. Because, as much as I asked the question and as much as it hurt me, there was never an answer. Oh sure, people would tell me how lucky I was for having been chosen by my parents, but this offered little comfort to me. As an abandoned, disposable child, being chosen also means one can easily be unchosen and discarded yet again. I intently worried that if I did something to displease my family I would be abandoned again. It had happened once with a family who had me for a few years, I believed it was not out of the realm of possibility for it to happen again. In fact, it felt very real.

Once, and only once, when I was six, my parents took me to a culture camp put on by my adoption agency, Holt. I remember the excitement at seeing other kids who looked like me, as well as families like ours along with promises from my parents I would see them all again. But I never went to another culture camp, for various reasons, and my parents never contacted or made connections with the other families. So while I knew there were other kids out there like me, I only interacted with them that one time.

My adoptive dad was a very religious man and raised us as Roman Catholics. He always told me to turn to God for answers and God had a plan for me I just did not fully know yet. So every Sunday at church and every night at bedtime I prayed to God. But God never answered, He never gave me a sign, nothing. I asked God almost to the point of exhaustion why my mother had abandoned me. I also asked how He could let me suffer when the Bible said children were special to Him. I asked what His plan was for

me and how being abandoned figured into it. God remained silent and after years of asking I stopped. I lost my belief in my dad's God and felt even more alone.

### *Whispers*

*Faint whispers stir deep in the soul  
From the hush of a lost past  
In the orphan's eyes, mine.*

*The tongue longs for what it lost  
Time shrouds memories in the mist of the past  
Where unmourned loss pierces the heart.*

*Whispers grow louder in sadness  
As the past echoes in dreams  
Eyes no longer see the same.*

*Emotions flood the heart  
The heart loosens its burden  
As whispers still stir in the soul.*

### **Suicide Attempt**

I hate myself. I hate my existence. I hate my face and all my Asian physical features with so much loathing. I am seriously considering taking a sharp knife to my eyelids myself to perform “surgery.” They can’t look any worse than they already do, and even if they did maybe I won’t look so Asian. This whole week has been hell in my family because of my sister, of course. Apparently, my parents discovered she lost her virginity and they are really angry for a couple of reasons. She’s not a good Catholic girl any more, but my parents said now she’s a whore. They also worry she might be pregnant, and they don’t like her boyfriend. Of course she threatened to run away, again. My parents threatened to have her boyfriend arrested for statutory rape since he’s nineteen and she’s not even sixteen yet. The constant nonstop fighting and screaming are unbearable. I should be used to this type of stuff with my family by now, but this time it’s worse than ever.

I try and ignore most of it. But I suggested after a really bad argument about the possibility of my sister being pregnant that she just get a test or go to the doctor to be tested. This sent my dad into such a rage, I think because it meant someone outside of the family would know about what was going on. I received a harsh “spanking” and was knocked into a wall and some furniture. Dad has a way of holding my arm with his left hand so I can’t squirm away from him or get loose while he hits with his right hand. I’m terrified and run to my room upstairs. Hysterical and crying I ask God how He could let such things happen to me. I calm down, I go to the bathroom my sister and I share and find the bottle of Tylenol. I hold it for a couple of minutes and wonder how long it will take for them to work. Will it hurt? Will I feel anything? I swallow the whole bottle. I

think it's a bottle of thirty or forty pills. There's no aspirin in our bathroom since I'm allergic to it.

Mom checks on me and I'm really tired and dizzy and don't want to move, can't move, and I have stomach cramps. She asks what's the matter and I tell her what I did. Instead of trying to make me feel better she immediately starts to yell at me how she can't believe I would do such a selfish and stupid thing, don't I know what's been going on in the family with my sister she said. She finally calls the doctor but doesn't take me to the hospital. I am treated at home. I have to just keep throwing up she says, so I do. I really wish I could just die. It would be so much easier for me. I honestly think my family or anyone else would not miss me and I don't have any close friends. I want to escape my misery. I wish I were thinking clearly, I would have gotten the aspirin from my parent's bathroom. I'm only twelve for God's sake.

Looking back, I suppose deep down if I had wanted to die I would have made sure to take the aspirin.

### **More About My Family**

My adopted family seemed so normal to anyone looking at them. Yet, they were so incredibly dysfunctional that I could not make them up if I tried. I should begin with some background on each of them before I give examples of their dysfunctionality. The youngest of fourteen children, my dad was the only one of his immediate family born in the United States. As a devout Italian Roman Catholic and the youngest child of his family, the responsibility to care for his parents in their old age fell to him. My dad had only a sixth grade education. Physical punishments through spankings and belt beatings

were a normal part of life to him. My mom could not have been more polar opposite from my dad. As the only child of Protestant parents, a German mother and Irish father, she enjoyed a relatively wealthy upper middle class existence. Mom earned a college degree and had a professional job on Wall Street when they met; dad worked as a tailor and a custodian.

Somehow they fell in love and married. They were both in their thirties when they did and had my sister in the first year of their marriage. For several years they lived on and enjoyed the inheritance my mom received from her parents. They lived a lifestyle beyond their means and made ridiculous financial decisions like buying two new cars every two years without fail, no matter how much they still owed on the ones traded in. My dad for the first time in his life did not have to work so hard, especially hard manual labor, and easily fell into the trappings of middle class life. In their mid-forties they decided to adopt a child as a sibling for my sister and to complete their family, so they told me. They did not want a child younger than five so as not to deal with potty training and not more than four years younger than my sister, who was nine at the time. They almost passed on picking me because I was so small and they felt the orphanage might be trying to pass off a younger child as an older one to them. The first few years with my family seemed ok except for the severe spankings and the monumental temper tantrums my sister had. I remember when I first arrived in the U.S. my sister would take me around her school and show me off to her friends like some new doll. When I was eight I began to have chores assigned to me: laundry, making all the beds, ironing the family's clothes, mowing the lawn, and vacuuming. To this day I refuse to make my own bed every morning or to iron anything.

Both my parents told me several times throughout my life they had spoiled my sister to excess and they regretted it. It was not so much that they spoiled her with material things, but they also spoiled her by letting her control every aspect of their lives. Every major decision my parents made—about what type or size of house, what neighborhood to live in, where to take vacations, what types of pets to have, etc.—was based on my sister’s preferences. Smart enough to realize the power she had over my parents, my sister learned manipulation early on and used it often. The incident of when she lost her virginity I previously mentioned resulted in our having to move into a new house in a new neighborhood because she could not face her friends at her school. She also had to have a car exactly on her sixteenth birthday; she could not be seen driving one of our parents’ cars. We once drove (because my sister refused to fly) to Washington, D.C. for vacation, and because she would have to share a hotel room with our great aunt and me she “called off” the vacation, and we turned around and went home.

My sister always “called off” things when she had one of her fits. She called off holidays several times including Christmas. Many times her episodes centered around either her weight or the fact she did not get her way about something. She did not hide her resentment of me at all and I felt the cold emptiness of her words of sisterly love. When I was seven and she was eleven, I accidentally shut our dog in a bathroom cabinet since I had not seen him go into it. Of course the whole family was concerned he was missing and when he was found and my sister realized I was the last one in the bathroom, she smacked and punched me very hard. I could have taken the physical abuse but she kept telling me as she was hitting me that I was a stupid little idiot who could be sent back any time *she* wanted. Of course, as my older sibling my parents saw nothing wrong

in her behavior toward me. I once vacuumed the living room and when I was done you could see the tracks the vacuum's wheels had made. My sister went into a rage and grabbed my arm and dug her nails into it while screaming at me how I had done it so wrong and they could always get another kid who would do it right. She was a master at preying on my fears and did so often.

My parents' money eventually ran out about the time I started middle school. With no education or technical skills, my dad took menial jobs and we had to receive food stamps. Bill collectors frequently called our house. I was not allowed to answer the phone until we could hear the beginning of the message the caller would leave on the answering machine. If it was a friend then I could pick up the phone. I had learned that to not follow the previous protocol would result in a beating; I only needed the one to never answer the phone wrong again. My mom had gained a lot of weight and been diagnosed with diabetes and bi-polar disorder so she could not work. Mom turned her days into paranoid scenarios she would play out in her mind and accused people of trying to disrespect her. A simple trip to the grocery store always ended up a disaster. The deli counter lady was determined to slice her meat too thick and give her the dried up end of it too.

I honestly believe mom's mental illness and her refusal to get professional help or medication was the source of her behavior. I also believe, though, she, like my sister, was a very self-centered and manipulative person. She never mothered us or spent any affection on us. Neither of my parents showed any form of affection whatsoever, no hugs, no loving words, nothing. Mom would constantly tell me about everything wrong with everyone and how she should not have married dad and raised us so wrong.

Conversations with her always left me sad and exhausted. I never knew how she wanted me to respond. She placed too much burden on a girl of thirteen. All I ever wanted was for her to hold me in her arms and tell me how much she loved me. I just wanted her to mother me. She never did.

I always thought my sister would probably grow out of her self-centered manipulative ways as she grew older, but she got worse not better. She tried to convince my parents I was on drugs when I was not. She decided when it was time for me to move out of my parents' house and kicked me out. As she married and had children of her own, she still stayed so attached to my parents even as she fought with them. Even as an adult she called off holidays and we never knew until we sat down to the holiday meal if it would actually happen or not. I do not understand why she had so much power over all of us. I finally had to make a clean and definitive break from her after our parents passed away. I could not expose myself to her toxic hate and jealousy any longer.

### **Momentary Escapes**

She was the best part of my day. I loved being with her, could not wait to see her. I loved her red hair, huge infectious smile, her quirky but graceful awkwardness, and her sense of humor. She always made me laugh and lifted my spirits when they were down, which was often. She never judged me, scolded me, punished me, spanked me, or yelled at me. I always came first with her and I received all her attention while giving her all of mine. She was my refuge, my escape, and my haven. I felt safe with her and I felt at ease. I love Carol Burnett and she was my foster mother. Of course, she was not my foster

mother in the true sense of the term, but she gave me what I could not find in my own home, my own mother, or my sister named Carol.

Luckily I was able to see Carol five days a week at 5pm for an hour, two half hour shows, Monday through Friday. My mother actually suggested I go in my parents' room and watch television with the door shut so I did not interfere with my sister's studies. This began when I had started school myself in the fall of 1975. I started kindergarten but was moved to the first grade due to my test scores and reading ability. Carol, my parents' biological child who is four years older than me, and I attended the same private Catholic school. School was a struggle for Carol yet came naturally for me. I progressed through lessons without any effort and this chafed at my sister causing resentment toward me early in our relationship. So she spent hours of memorization just to keep up with her class, requiring absolute silence and no distractions. I resented being silenced and not allowed to behave as a child. These restrictions were too much for a five year old.

The lure of being placated by having a television all to myself though was a great consolation prize I eagerly accepted. Carol's study sessions would go so long sometimes I even got to eat dinner in front of the television. I bravely agreed to endure such hardships if it helped my sister out. Eventually though, I found myself having dinner this way quite a bit. Once it became a routine, the splendor of it wore off quickly. But then I found Carol Burnett's show and I was hooked immediately. The costumes were lovely, the song and dance numbers were terrific, and the sketch comedies tickled my funny bone. My continuous laughter once got me in trouble for "being too loud while I'm trying to study! Mom! She's doing it on purpose!" So I soon learned to laugh into a pillow to

muffle myself. This pillow technique also came in handy when I would work on perfecting her Tarzan call. I never have gotten it quite right.

Carol Burnett played so many great characters and they seemed like a compilation of all the kooky aunts, neighbors, cousins, teachers, office workers you've ever known. While a lot of comedic actors exist, Carol Burnett was different because she was a physical comic and not afraid to alter her good looks or slim figure. She physically gave one hundred percent of herself when she performed, throwing her whole body and face into her characters. She also performed physical stunts that added an element of extreme ridiculousness and funniness to her characters. I soon found myself imitating some of her classic characters, my favorite being Mrs. Wiggins. I would spend long minutes during and after the show trying to perfect her walk. Knees bent, feet pointed in, butt sticking out, chest sticking out, and filing a fingernail while chewing gum all at the same time and wearing an exceptionally tight skirt. It is much harder to actually do than it looks or sounds. I always waited for Tim Conway's Mr. Tudball character to say her name, "Mrs. Wah-higgins." I usually ended up laughing so hard from these sketches that tears would eventually roll down my face. Shedding tears of laughter felt so much better than for pain.

Carol Burnett would also play Charo's mother on many occasions and I would just lose myself in fits of laughter. Charo was a very sexy woman who was a singer and actress from Mexico, I believe, who was hugely popular back then. She was known for her tight sequined outfits and her "hoochie coochie" body gesturing. But when she would appear on the show with Carol Burnett playing her mother, even she laughed at her own persona. Carol would be in a fat suit wearing sequined hot pants, halter-top, and platform heels. The halter proudly displayed her very long out of shape breasts as they

pendulously swung back and forth. Of course the highlight of the skit was when Carol would hoochie coochie as this aged sexpot. So funny.

My absolute favorite visit, as I came to call the shows, of Carol's was her version of *Gone With the Wind*. I of course had not read the book, being so young, but that didn't matter. It was absolutely funny and charming. I'm pretty sure it's a classic. I really liked when during this show, and all her shows, the actors would always break character and end up laughing at each other because they were so funny. Years later when I did read *Gone With the Wind* and saw the movie, I still saw Carol Burnett with the drapery rod across her shoulders in the green velvet dress.

Carol Burnett never disappointed me and I looked forward to her visits with great anticipation. It must be similar to waiting to see a divorced parent on their weekend visit. I was lucky to always have her show up on time, never run out of things to do or say, and entertain me completely. Carol Burnett was always there for me without questions, conflicts, or interruptions. She gave a lonely child what she needed and craved most. She helped me live through my most difficult childhood moments. I was devastated when her show ended. I felt like a death in the family had occurred. I cried and felt true grief when her own daughter died. I have often thought about writing to Carol Burnett and telling her how much she meant to me then and still does now. But I worry an insignificant fan may hold no specialness for her. And so I just hold her as special in my life. I honor her by remembering her wonderful show and encouraging my own daughter to watch it. But this time I would watch not in solitude but as a shared moment between mother and daughter. I hope we laugh until we cry. If I could meet one famous person from any time period, it would be Carol Burnett; I would choose her over Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, or any

President. She is extraordinary and underappreciated, there has not been or ever will be another like her. I will never forget Carol Burnett and love her until the day I die.

### **Am I My Mother(s)?**

One of the side effects of being adopted for me is motherhood anxiety. I never wanted to have children—or get married—until I met my husband. For some reason, I then had an overwhelming desire to have a child. But I was really afraid I would not be a good mother and I would lose my child literally and emotionally. The fear was paralyzing for me. I did not have a good mother as a role model to emulate and reassure me that I could do it. My birth mother had me for four years and something went wrong and she gave me up and gave up on me. My adoptive mother was cold, distant, and in no way maternal. I worried I would be as bad a mother as my own had been. Based on both nature and nurture, I felt doomed to fail at motherhood.

Just because I am a woman did not guarantee I would have any natural nurturing or maternal instincts. Plenty of women have children who probably should not have. What if I was not a good enough mother and someone with power and authority found out and took my child from me? I feared I would be a fraudulent mother too. So, it turns out I am in fact a good mother but for the first five years of my daughter's life I constantly worried and stressed about if I was good enough so much to the point of paranoia. I began to have nightmares around the time she was four that I lost my daughter or authority figures came to take her away from me. I realized once my daughter reached the age of five, the age I was adopted, my fears lessened slightly. In my mind I rationalized her reaching five as the litmus test of my maternal ability. If I could keep her

with me until she reached five years old then I had a good chance of not losing her to anyone.

Having had two bad mothers has made me work extra hard to ensure my daughter does not experience any of the issues or problems I had as a child. I also did not want my daughter to have an unrequited mother-daughter relationship either. Most of all, I reinforce to her that she was and still is so very wanted. Something I never felt from either of my mothers. I guess the one gift both my mothers gave me was to definitely know what type of mother I did not want to be to my daughter. I think that may also be why I tend to nurture or mother people. I also feel vindicated toward both my mothers that I turned out to be the kind of mother neither of them were or could be. I was able to keep my daughter, give her love and affection, and make her feel completely wanted and valued. I became the mother I wished I could have had.

### **To My Mother**

During my teen years I would often write letters like the one below to my birth mother. I did not know how I should feel about her and felt conflicted for both loving her and hating her.

I love you. I love you for not maiming me or prostituting me like other mothers were doing to their children to get money or food from people in order to survive; for having the courage to let me go; for the amazing life I've had which only happened because of your selfless act in giving me up. I love you because you are my mother.

I hate you. I hate you for abandoning me; for this feeling of being disposable I can never lose; for not trying harder to keep me with you; for not knowing who I am; for not loving me enough. I hate you for not staying my mother.

Because of you I have lived a life of uncertainty. I question God and believe in nothing. I am afraid no relationship will ever be permanent, that a person will tire of me and leave me like you did. I feel unlovable. I feel worthless. If you didn't want me why would anyone else? My biggest fear is I will not be able to keep my own child, I will inherit being a bad mother. I'm afraid to have children because of you.

Because of you I have opportunities I would most likely have missed if you had kept me. I have compassion for the unwanted and unloved. I try harder to make my parents proud and you in case we ever meet.

Because of you I am the only one I trust and rely on. I am suspicious of other people. I hate myself. I hate what I look like. I don't know what I am. I don't know where I belong. I don't know how to trust. I don't know how to be me.

Because of you I don't know my history. I don't know if you were selfless or selfish. I don't know if you loved me. I don't know if you wanted me. I don't

know why my new parents adopted me. I don't know love. I don't know happiness. I don't know anything....

Because of you I do know pain, loneliness, confusion, abandonment, fear, anger, insecurity, uncertainty, rejection, mistrust, and emptiness.

### **I Can't Forgive and Forget**

So many times in this age of self-help books and advice and Facebook I see posts from people about forgiveness. "To forgive is divine," "To forgive heals the forgiver," "To forgive does not mean to forget." Well, I cannot forgive what has happened to me. I cannot forgive my birth mother, or my adopted parents, or my adopted sister. I cannot and I will not. Had I chosen and created the situation(s) I was put into because of my adoption I would take full responsibility and forgive those involved. However, none of the events of my childhood and teen years were of my making or choosing.

To begin with, my birth mother is a theoretical almost abstraction of a person. Since I do not know her, her name, or anything else about her, I cannot forgive the actions of an abstraction. It would be pointless to forgive someone I do not know, only know of. There is also the distinct possibility she may not deserve forgiveness. For all I know she could in fact be a heinous, horrific human being. Although my birth mother might be a truly good and angelic person, it remains equally plausible she might be the polar opposite. I will never know and therefore am unable to forgive.

As for my adopted parents, while I am frustrated they made no attempts to let me grow up with and retain my birth culture, I understand the resources available to them at

the time were most likely extremely limited. What I cannot forgive is how they mistreated me and allowed my sister to mistreat me. I did not deserve a beating for ordering chicken in a fish restaurant. I did not deserve to have my mother's emotional and mental problems dumped on me. I did not deserve to never be hugged. I did not deserve to never be told, "I love you."

Quite frankly I cannot forget my past either. To forget would be to do a dishonor and disservice to Choi Soon Kyu and all that she went through. Even though she was only a five-year-old child, she deserves to be remembered and not forgotten. The physical and emotional traumas she went through allowed me to become who I am now. Without acknowledging her experience and honoring her memory I would not exist. No one would ever ask the parents of a missing or deceased child to forget that child. Choi Soon Kyu the missing child is a part of me and her life had as much value and worth as any child's. To forget her would be tantamount to murder.

So I wish people and society in general would stop harping on the virtues and benefits of forgiveness. Forgiveness does not release the forgiver; it provides a free pass to the one being forgiven. While it is true some bitterness might still exist without forgiveness, why should it necessarily be such a bad thing? To retain the bitterness helps one to not forget and reminds one of past sufferings inflicted by someone else and helps warn against future pain. Like the Jews eat bitter herbs at Passover to never forget, bitterness can be a good thing.

### **Mourning**

Instead of forgive and forget, what I really needed and still need is to be able to properly mourn. I need to mourn the loss of my first life. I need to mourn the loss of Choi Soon Kyu. I need to mourn the loss of my birth family. I need to mourn. I experienced so much loss on a massive scale at such a young age. I was cognizant for much of it. I remember the losses through vivid dreams and phantom feelings like a severed limb. I was never able to give proper rites to Choi Soon Kyu. I never had a mourning period for my heavy losses that will most likely never be recovered or repatriated. Instead, I was expected to rely on a child's innocence and simplicity to forge a new existence. Yet, I received no help or tools to do so. While my loss is in the past not buried it remains deep in my soul as an unhealed wound.

### **Uncertainty**

I have a difficult time with uncertainty. I have felt uncertain most of my life...about everything. I looked Asian but sounded and acted and lived white. I had no idea how to be Asian even though outsiders to our family expected me to be Asian. As I grew older I often felt like the spinning wheel of a game that determined where you landed, how many places to go, what category to pick, etc. I frequently felt where I landed on the wheel was often determined for me by others. At the very least I felt other people's expectations of me, usually based on stereotypes or misperceptions, informed where I landed as well. I sometimes fell right on the line between white and Asian but definitely not either.

My feeling of disposability I am sure adds to my uncertainty. I fear my relationships may at best be temporary and am afraid they must end because I am not worthy to have them or anything else permanently. I now know another major contributing factor to my anxiety about an uncertain future came from my family moving a lot when I was growing up. From the time they adopted me at five years old until I was seventeen we lived in seven different houses. We never lived in the same house for more than two years. It seemed we were always packing and unpacking. There was never time to make neighborhood friends. No time to get to know any of our neighbors. They all felt like temporary living arrangements similar to my temporary living arrangements before my adoption in the orphanage. Attending five schools between first and fifth grade did not help me with my feelings of uncertainty. I could not even make school friendships last more than a year. I had no sense of stability or connectedness to any part of my life.

This feeling of uncertainty makes me anxious and so I make lists, double check plans, plan ahead, take notes, and still am anxious. I learned from a professor that the future is by nature uncertain and this makes most people uncomfortable. For me it can sometimes cause panic. I suppose this may be the reason why I have usually stayed at jobs long term and not been a job hopper. I find comfort in the fact that in my adult life I have lived in the same house for nineteen years. I feel a sense of having roots in this house, we moved in shortly after being married, brought our child home to this house, and have spent holidays, created memories, experienced both sadness and happiness, and made it our own. Most importantly there is continuity and I always know where home is.

### *Going Home*

An unknown language longing to speak,  
 Spices mixed with incense and pollution,  
 An insecure leap of faith,  
 Tastes of the past, new but familiar,  
 Dreams from childhood slumber,  
 Butterflies in the stomach,  
 Tears shed to cleanse the soul,  
 Sweaty palms,  
 Heartbeat races,  
 Arms of comfort,  
 An out of body experience,  
 That feeds the hunger and quenches the thirst of my soul.

Going home unleashes the anger, to face it and release it to the wind,  
 Confronts the fear,  
 Causes anxiety,  
 Causes guilt for those who did not get out,  
 Gives the sweetness of forgiveness,  
 Needs loving support,  
 Breaks the heart,  
 Shows respect,  
 Feels like an unattainable quest,  
 Seems impossible,  
 Humbles,  
 Confuses,  
 Exhilarates,  
 Exhausts,  
 Brings anticipation.

Going home is scary, acceptance, painful, uncomfortable, understanding, spiritual, vital.  
 Recalls what has been lost and what is to be discovered,  
 Fitting in but still a stranger,  
 Answers but more questions,  
 The last piece of identity,  
 Opens the door to the future through a visit to the past,  
 Bridges generations,  
 No longer blames an innocent child,  
 Creates new relationships,  
 Deepens existing relationships,  
 Fulfills a promise,  
 Filled with expectations and disappointments,  
 Collides past with present,  
 Lets the adult hold the missing child's hand, her own.  
 Going home is once in a lifetime that took a lifetime.

### **Balancing Act**

For most of my life I feel like I have been trying to maintain a precarious balancing act. So often I have felt I have not been able to be a good enough white person or an Asian person. Most significantly about this balancing act is that it has primarily been an act, a performance of what people expected of me, of how I felt the safest way to survive, but never who I really was.

One foot firmly placed in Western culture, with all it entails. Barbies, fast food, designer jeans, television, consumption, and waste.

The other foot struggles to fit into Korean culture and all it entails. Tradition, filial piety, customs, kimchi, hanbok, hangul. This foot dangles uneasy and unsure. Barely a toe dips into this world of apparition; there is no solid ground.

Existence depends on denial of Korean heritage. Only physical appearance shatters the masquerade. Navigating schools, grocery store, mall, and doctor's office, wading against a sea of white, often as the only smudge of color.

Asian people discomfort and embarrass me. Someone speaks in an unknown language, assuming understanding, creating an uncomfortable air. Asians in movies and television project stereotyped caricatures and association with them brings shame.

Diligently try to keep both feet in American white society, the familiar and known.  
Racism displaces my footing in that world. Floating in a limbo of nothingness.  
'Whiteness' was a lie, a farce, and 'Asianness' was only a superficial idea.

I long to be grounded somewhere.

### **Are You There, God?**

In 2011, I went to Israel and specifically to Jerusalem. At the Wailing Wall I viscerally felt the faith of those around me praying to God. Some were in tears and others were so intently focused in communing with God. I have never been so jealous in all my life. I wish I had that kind of faith throughout my life; it might have helped me to carry my burdens. I lost my relationship with God and my faith at about the age of eight or nine when I began to doubt and question my belief in God. Actually it was not my belief, per se, but what I was expected to believe based on parochial school teachings and what my parents wanted. So I would try and talk to God at night. For some reason I always felt nighttime was the only time to talk to God outside of church in those days. Most of my one-sided "conversations" with God typically went like this:

God?

Are you there?

Have you ever been there for me?

If you're a kind god why did you let all these things happen to me? I'm just a kid.

Why did you do this to me? Mothers are supposed to love their kids more than anything, not get rid of them. I would have been good and not complained about being hungry.

It's so hard looking Korean here. Everybody is white and treats me like a weird animal they've never seen. I don't fit in.

Something is missing in my heart and it really hurts. I don't feel any love and mom and dad hardly laugh or hug or love.

I do not know if I can believe in you just cause I'm supposed to. I want to believe in you, but its really hard.

I need you and don't know where you are.

Aren't kids special to you?

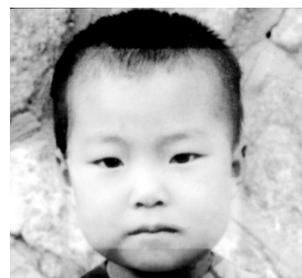
Did you forget about me too?

### **Why?**

So why do I write this memoir now? I never thought my story would be of interest to anyone, but apparently it might be. While I did write here and there during my life, I threw it all away and did it only for momentary catharsis. Is this memoir a catharsis? I cannot affirm that yet. I do know since my adopted parents are both deceased and therefore writing the truth about them and our family has proved much easier now than if they were still alive. Their absence allows me the freedom of honesty. While my sister is alive, as far as I know, I can no longer concern myself with her feelings since she has never considered mine. I suppose I write this to preserve my story and experience in my own voice, not in diluted data sets.

Had I attempted a memoir earlier in my life I do not think it would have resonated as authentic for me or enabled me to express it as in depth as I have. In my young adult life I did not have the benefit of my motherhood experience to draw real life parallels and comparisons to my two mothers. Had I attended college at a traditional age after high school, I doubt I would have taken women's studies courses, which have helped me to look beyond positivistic research and data to truly see what is hidden speaks louder than what is revealed. I would not have been able to articulate as well what my experiences did to and for me. I also held a much more ambivalent attitude toward my adoption experience mixed with anger. I could not have written from a place of sincere honesty about what I felt and continue to feel about my adoption and life experience. While the raw emotions of my experiences have not changed, how I view them in relation to the whole of my life and how I understand them now could only come with maturity.

So is my story interesting? The reader must judge. Have I accomplished anything with my story? Yes, I have preserved for my future generations what I have experienced so they know where they come from, a gift I give them that I did not have. Also, if just one adoptee reads my story and can find comfort through recognition of a similar experience they had then it will have all been worthwhile. And most importantly, I do it to honor Choi Soon Kyu; I owe her at least this.



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### Identity Matters:

#### How Transracial and Transnational Adoption Affects Identity in Korean Adoptees

This research companion to my memoir will focus on the body of research in the field of Korean adoptees studies with my emphasis on identity development research in Korean adoptees. The body of research began in the 1960s and focused primarily on psychological and physical adjustment and outcomes of adoptees with emphasis on empirical data that did not reflect the lived experiences of the adoptees. The focus of research then shifted in the 1980s to include ethnic identity development and began to marginally incorporate voices of young adoptees while still heavily relying on parent observations and responses. Again, however, the data was not contextualized as a reflection of the adoptees' experiences. Brodzinsky contributed greatly to adoptee research with his conclusions about loss and grief that adoptees experience and deal with throughout their lives. Since the 2000s the research has begun to incorporate and draw from the narratives and lived experiences of adoptees' as a necessary element of data and findings with an emphasis on the unique identity development of Korean adoptees.<sup>1</sup> Current advances in the field of Korean adoptee studies are quite promising and take in to account the multidimensional aspects of Korean adoptee identity that include but are not limited to gender, sexual orientation, social class, and race. Analysis of past research uncovers flaws and misleading outcomes about adoptees in the presented data, but at the same time offers insight into the type of research necessary for future scholarship. An historical overview of Korean adoption policy, both in South Korea and the United States,

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<sup>1</sup> I fully disclose and acknowledge that I am a Korean adoptee and therefore the subject matter is quite personal for me. The feelings and experiences I encountered, however, are not isolated to just myself, and indeed many issues I faced due to my Korean adoptee status are not only experienced by other Korean adoptees but also appear in findings in the research data.

will serve as a contextual background for the institution of Korean transracial adoption. A brief review of terminology will provide the reader with a necessary vocabulary of the subject. More recent scholarship projects include two by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, Joy L. S. Hoffman, and John D. Palmer offer the most promising and necessary direction of Korean adoptee research, which allows the lived experiences and individual narrative voices of adoptees to inform the research more accurately. Identity development in Korean adoptees is directly affected, both positively and negatively, by how adopted parents address race and birth culture, socialization and environment, and the presence of same race role models and interactions with other Korean adoptees. These factors and processes are not finite and in fact evolve with the adoptee throughout his/her life as he/she lives new experiences that continue to shape their identity.

While all families have their issues and challenges, families created through adoption have additional layers in their family dynamic as a result of the adoption, a significant factor absent in biological families. Adoptees are particularly impacted in families formed through transracial and/or transnational adoption and experience even more complexities to their makeup. Adoption itself generally brings with it issues of abandonment, rejection, adjustment, negative self-esteem, and identity confusion for the adoptees that may be experienced to varying degrees and at various points throughout their life. Transracial and/or transnational adoptees experience the same issues but in addition may also encounter racism, longing for birth country, heightened identity confusion due to racial socialization within a dominant race different from their own, and lack of cultural or ethnic knowledge, which all complicate the prior issues. Korean adoptees represent one of the largest transracial and transnational adoptee populations

worldwide. With a history that began in the 1950s, the Korean adoptee population served as the test group for transracial, transnational adoption practices in Western countries, particularly the United States. My own experiences from my memoir will agree with or contradict the research findings. In no way, do I intend to suggest that my experience, whether in agreement or not to the research, speaks as a generalization for the entire Korean adoptee population. Indeed, the variety and uniqueness of each adoptee's experience adds to the rich tapestry of our population.

Scholarly research in various academic disciplines, including psychology and sociology, has historically focused on the level of positive adjustment of Korean adoptees within their newly formed family and social environments. Positive adjustment was measured by the existence of behavioral or emotional problems, learning ability or disability, social interaction, and academic achievement. The issue of how the adoptees' identities were developing and being affected by their transracial and transnational status was often overlooked or only explored on superficial levels that did not extend beyond adolescence. Most significant of the majority of prior research is the lack of the adoptees' voices in the data with little to no follow up when they reached adulthood. Researchers relied mainly on responses from adopted parents of their perceptions of their children and how well adjusted they were. Even the language of some of the research studies is problematic and does not provide insightful findings to the actual experience of the adoptees. Issues of race, culture, and individual adoption myths converge on the Korean adoptee in often opposing and conflicting ways that create painful and confusing identity journeys that researchers are only now beginning to acknowledge as a life long process.

To discuss any aspect of Korean adoptees' experiences, such as identity development, adoption, etc., requires an historical overview of the origins of international Korean adoption and how it became institutionalized. Without at least a rudimentary knowledge of the historical and cultural (both Korean and American) context of Korean adoption, one cannot begin to understand the myriad issues that directly and specifically affects Korean adoptees on multiple levels of their individual identity development. Indeed, historical timing and the attitude toward orphans and about adoption of Koreans figured prominently in international Korean adoption practices. In 1953 the aftermath of the Korean War resulted in approximately 100,000 orphans that also "brought disintegration to the traditional family system[,]...devastating obliteration and very limited social infrastructure, [with] parentless children...crowded into some 500 shelters and orphanages that were developed through foreign aid organizations in the South. Many [orphans] overflowed onto streets to scavenge and beg for their survival."<sup>2</sup> Korea divided into two countries that both plunged into severe unemployment and poverty. The worst affected victims were children.

Korean children became orphans because of various reasons. One group was the many bi-racial children born to Korean mothers and Western soldier fathers who then left Korea when the war ended. Other children were orphaned when both parents died as casualties of war. Some children were lost from their parents as a result of the war and still other children's parents due to sheer desperation and poverty gave them up. Within Korea itself, Confucianism served as the country's compass for moral and traditional

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist, M. Elizabeth Vonk, Dong Soo Kim, and Marvin D. Feit, Eds. *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2007), 5.

behavior, which directly impacted orphans and domestic adoption. Confucian morality makes unwed motherhood a social stigma. In addition,

Confucian ideology further impacted the idea of adoption within Korea. “The family culture of Korea, both systematically and substantially, has not allowed nonrelated adoptions, but has been sticking to adoptions within the paternal kinship.” But even adoptions within the paternal kinship are not frequent, and when they do occur, there is an emphasis on matching physical characteristics so that the child will be able to “pass” as the adopted parents.’ Furthermore, the demand and preference is for male infants. Because bloodlines and pure lineage are of such importance to Korean people, domestic adoption is stigmatized with the shame and illegitimacy of the mother. The Korean nation further supported unwed mothers’ illegitimacy by not offering adequate or tangible social welfare structures... Illegitimate children did not qualify for aid from the state, resulting in an absence of governmental financial support. The lack of state funding makes the government’s position toward orphans clear. By not offering autonomy or economic assistance, these women and children were systematically denied social welfare, emphasizing their illegitimacy further. The support from the government was nonexistent, resulting in women seeking out aid from private and predominately Christian organizations. Many of these women found themselves confronted with few other alternatives to international adoption.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Confucian ideology remained central to Korean attitudes toward orphans and domestic adoption well into the late 1980s. The international, especially American, acceptance and desire for Korean orphans solved Korea’s social problem with no disruption to its Confucian beliefs. The Korean government even encouraged foreign adoption of its children when “[i]n 1961... a special law, Extraordinary Law of Adoption for the Orphan Child” was promulgated.<sup>4</sup> In essence, Korea did not want her orphan children.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 176-177. It should be noted that immediately after the war, Korea did not have the economic resources to provide social services, *but* as it regained economic growth and stability it still did not change its policies to assist its orphans.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.

Scholars agree that over 150,000 Korean born children have been adopted overseas, with at least 100,000 of them adopted by Americans.<sup>5</sup> The American acceptance of Korean born children for adoption stemmed from several reasons. In the 1950s and 60s, Korean war orphans received “great sympathy and support...from the international community, especially from many U.S. charity organizations such as Save the Children’s Fund, World Vision, Compassion, Church World Services, and Catholic Charities.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, “adopting an Asian child is generally seen as a humanitarian act...likely to elicit social praise for adoptive parents ‘saving’ a homeless or abandoned child.”<sup>7</sup> My own devoutly Catholic parents, like many other adoptive parents, saw the act of adopting a Korean orphan as a kind of missionary work. Based on our relationship, the missionary idea of rescuing a poor third world orphan is the only conclusion I have been able to surmise as to why my parents adopted me.

In the 1970s and 80s war orphans “were replaced by babies of out-of-wedlock pregnancies, products of modern industrialization....”<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously in the U.S., the easy access and prevalence of reliable contraception methods, legalized abortion via the *Roe v. Wade* case (1973), and broader social acceptance of single motherhood created a shortage of adoptable babies.<sup>9</sup> The reliable and efficient process of Korean adoption also made it popular among Americans. In contrast, “adopting a domestic child-of-color

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce Sacerdote, Richard M. Lee et.al., Wun Jung Kim, Tobias Hübinette, and Bergquist et.al to name a few. Some estimates put the number as high as 200,000. The exact number cannot be calculated since “an unknown number of children [were] privately arranged....” Bergquist, *International Korean*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Bergquist, *International Korean*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>8</sup> Wun Jung Kim, “International Adoption: A Case Review of Korean Children,” *Child Psychiatry and Human Development* 25.3 (Spring 1995), 143.

<sup>9</sup> Bergquist, *International Korean*, 10. Prior to this period (the Korean War), the U.S. “[f]or much of the first half of the twentieth century, [practiced] exclusion [as the] dominant theme in the history of Asian immigration to the United States. U.S. legislation historically marked various Asian peoples—Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, South Asians, and Filipinos—as strange, dangerous, and inassimilable. These differences were codified in the U.S. immigration laws, for example, which by 1924 had virtually banned Asian immigration to the United States.” 28-29.

[could] trigger criticism and charges of ‘stealing’ a minority community’s most precious resource...”<sup>10</sup> In addition, “the stereotypic perception of Asians as quiet, trouble-free, responsible and achieving people may also have contributed to the increase[ed] popularity of Korean children.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the “model minority.” The reciprocity between Korea and Western countries, the United States in particular, mutually fulfilled the needs of both countries under the guise of saving the poor orphans through a supply-demand model. Indeed, a sense of commodification permeates the practice of Korean adoption.<sup>12</sup> A transaction occurred that did not always benefit the adoptee for most of the institution’s existence. Unfortunately, many Korean adoptees “still have suffered a sense of being abandoned or cut off from their original family, culture, and roots...[m]any adoptees have carried burdens, and sometimes the burdens, though full of great treasures, were heavy.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1988, South Korea showcased itself on the international stage as host of the summer Olympics. What South Korea did not anticipate was the harsh international criticism, especially from the U.S. surprisingly, about the mass export of its children as it put on a modern and prosperous display.<sup>14</sup> In an immediate response to the criticism, South Korea delayed the departure of adoptees scheduled around the games.<sup>15</sup> As a long-term response, the South Korean government discouraged international adoption and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>11</sup> Kim, Wun Jung, “International Adoption,” 143.

<sup>12</sup> I should state here that this is not just my personal biased opinion. Indeed Jodi Kim points out “one of the most troubling ‘costs’ of transracial adoption: its literal saturation with the logic of consumption and the marketplace. The very existence of transracial adoption, and the various options and choices that are afforded prospective adoptive parents, bring up disturbing questions of ‘supply’ and ‘demand.’” Jodi Kim, “An ‘Orphan’ with Two Mothers; Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Politics,” *American Quarterly* (2009), 862.

<sup>13</sup> Bergquist, *International Korean*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> The U.S. attack is surprising given that they were by far the main beneficiaries of “exported” Korean children.

<sup>15</sup> Kim, Wun Jung, “International Adoption,” 144.

encouraged domestic adoption as well as set deadlines, which have not been met, to eliminate international adoption.<sup>16</sup> Public “losing face”<sup>17</sup> on an international scale has led the South Korean government to not only provide for its orphans but to atone for the wrongs it inflicted on the 200,000 plus current adoptees.

In 1997, the South Korean government established the Overseas Korean Foundation, whose main goal was to address the global diaspora of Korean adoptees. Indeed, the South Korean government has gone so far as to welcome and embrace adoptees back to the motherland, give special recognition and acknowledgment to the diaspora of adoptees as its long lost children, and encourage adoptees to return for extended stays. In 1998, then President Kim Dae Jung made “an unprecedented public apology” to Korean adoptees followed by “legal recognition as ‘overseas Koreans,’ which *legitimized* their membership in the ‘global family of Korea’ ...”<sup>18</sup> The adoptee population that once burdened and then shamed South Korea suddenly figured prominently as “a tragic symbol of the nation’s historical suffering...and as a guarantee for a bright future for a global Korean community seen as a huge extended and dispersed family, *isan kajok*.”<sup>19</sup> As an adoptee, when I discovered the history of Korea’s attitudes toward its orphans, I felt an additional sense of rejection and abandonment. Not only did my birth family not want me, for whatever reason, but my birth country did not want me either. For adoptees, the pain of rejection and abandonment is all too real and to add

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>17</sup> The idea of shame culture that also permeates Asian cultures, with Korea as no exception, that considers any “loss of face” or embarrassment or sign of weakness as unacceptable.

<sup>18</sup> Bergquist, *International Korean*, 117; my emphasis. This also included dual citizenship for adoptees. I take issue with the fact that the South Korean government felt the need to formally “legitimize” adoptees as Koreans since we are Koreans regardless of whether an institutional entity acknowledges it or not. Should we feel that prior to our legitimization in 1999 that we were false or non-Koreans?

<sup>19</sup> Tobias Hübinette, “The Adopted Koreans-Diaspora Politics and the Construction of an Ethnic Identity” (paper presented at the First World Conference of Korean Studies, Academy of Korean Studies, Seongnam, Korea, July 18-20, 2002).

another source of it aimed at them is disheartening. For many adoptees unable to find their birth families, Korea acts as an alternative that can still connect us physically to our origins.

In any field or subject specific language and terms are necessary as identifiers for discussion among those who either practice in or comprise the field. The subject of transracial and transnational Korean adoption is no different. To better understand the subject a clear definition of recurrent terms proves helpful and indeed necessary. To begin with the overwhelming majority of Korean adoptions are transracial. “Transracial adoption is defined as ‘the joining of racially different parents and children together in adoptive families.’”<sup>20</sup> Other examples of transracial adoption have included American white parents who adopted black or Native American children. Such adoptions are considered domestic, within a country or nation, transracial adoption. White parents have almost exclusively adopted Korean adoptees thus these adoptions are transracial. Korean adoptees, however, are also transnational in that they are Korean born and then adopted by American or other Caucasian nationality parents. Black Americans adopted by white Americans are not transnational adoptees; a shared country exists between the parents and child. Transnational adoptees are not necessarily transracial. For example, a Russian child adopted by Americans shares a racial commonality with his/her adopted parents. Transnational adoption often comes with issues of cultural difference that include language, traditions, dress, and food, some of which can to an extent occur in transracial adoption as well, food being one example. Transnational adoptees, however, may not

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<sup>20</sup> Richard M. Lee, “The Transracial Adoption Paradox: History, Research, and Counseling Implications of Cultural Socialization,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 31 (2003): 712.

have to deal with instances of racism up front because of their racial similarity to their parents and the predominant racial make up of their social environment.

International Korean adoptees are both transracial and transnational adoptees. Primarily because of the transracial nature of their adoption status, Korean adoptees are also members of highly “visible” adoptions. Visible adoption refers to the obvious physical “racial difference between adoptive parents and their adopted children,” which “are more apparent and immutable” than in non-transracial adoptions.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the different racial characteristics physically embodied by the adopted child and their parents signify to those outside of their family the adopted character of the family formation. This visible aspect of transracial adoption is significant because it occurs beyond the control of the adoptee and often draws unwelcome attention to them that raise questions of their identity not only racially but within their families. For example, during my childhood people often asked my white parents where they got me from. I explore the visible nature of my adoption more in my memoir section “What Are You?” The visibility of transracial Korean adoptees often brings to the surface encounters of racism, both by others and internalized by the adoptees themselves.

The transracial and transnational status of Korean adoptees directly affects their identity formation and development, and is further influenced by their ethnic knowledge, or lack of, by their birth culture, enculturation and acculturation, and self-esteem. Identity “gives us a sense of who we are” and “arises out of the social experience of interaction

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<sup>21</sup> Sara Docan-Morgan, “Korean Adoptees’ Retrospective Reports of Intrusive Interactions: Exploring Boundary Management in Adoptive Families,” *Journal of Family Communication* 10 (2010): 137; Lee, “Transracial Adoption Paradox,” 712.

with other people.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, “[o]ur identities must be confirmed by others, for we cannot be something if others never tell us we are that thing. For example, a person can believe he is a priest, but if no one ever tells him or treats him as a priest, he cannot have the identity of a priest.”<sup>23</sup> For transracial, transnational Korean adoptees, there exists a very real conflict between their minority status race and their socialization within a predominantly white environment.<sup>24</sup> The conflict arises because adoptee children “reflect a simple identification with [their] parents; they uncritically take on the behaviors and ways of their mothers and fathers” who are most often white.<sup>25</sup> The adoptees believe themselves to be white, because they are raised as such, but receive constant reminders by others that they in fact are not white.

Ethnic knowledge “is defined as the Korean adoptees’ knowledge that certain role behaviors and traits, values, styles, customs, traditions and language are relevant to their ethnic group.”<sup>26</sup> Raised as ethnically white with a lack of their Korean ethnic knowledge, Korean adoptees understandably often identify as white. Korean adoptees often lack enculturation, “the process of being socialized to conform to the values, beliefs, and behavioral standards of one’s ethnic culture,” in this case their birth ethnic culture.<sup>27</sup> Instead, Korean adoptees experience acculturation or “adapting [them]self to the broader social environment,” a white environment.<sup>28</sup> In addition, their “identity work is

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<sup>22</sup> Nam Soon Huh, “Korean Children’s Ethnic Identity Formation and Understanding of Adoption” (PhD diss., State University of New York at Albany, 1997), 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> Lee Kang Woon, “Socialization of Transracially Adopted Korean Americans: A Self Analysis.” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 3.1 & 2 (Fall 2004/ Spring 2005): 80.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 79; “The sociologists Peter and Brigitte Berger state that socialization is ‘the process through which an individual learns to be a member of society.’”

<sup>25</sup> Huh, “Korean Children’s,” 8.

<sup>26</sup> David C. Lee, “Ethnic Perspective-Taking Ability and Ethnic Attitudes in Development of Korean-Born Adoptee Youth” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2000), 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

complicated [by] isolat[ion] from other Koreans or Asians thus increasing” identity confusion for the adoptees.<sup>29</sup> I personally experienced geographical isolation from other Korean adoptees and in fact other Asians or any people of color in my childhood years. The issue of ethnic knowledge for Korean adoptees has been found to directly influence their self-esteem. A working definition of self-esteem “is defined by the self-acceptance, self-worthiness, and respect one gives to himself or herself” and “refers to how one evaluates himself or herself overall, regardless of racial or ethnic affiliation.”<sup>30</sup> Adoption brings issues of abandonment, loss, and rejection that Korean adoptees face that impacts their self-acceptance and self-worth that then becomes further complicated through racial and ethnic confusion. Even if adoptees had ethnic and racial knowledge and pride as Koreans, it is still suppressed within the social environments they grew up in as not the accepted norm, and therefore relegates them to a lesser or other status. Most significantly, “adoptees have learned experientially and intellectually that their parents have privileges as White persons that they do not have...[and] part of the White privilege is its normative status; it is unnamed and unchallenged.”<sup>31</sup> For the adoptee, the confusion lies in the fact that they are surrounded by, observe, and to some extent are beneficiaries of White privilege but only within the context of their adoptive parents. On their own, adoptees may expect to continue to receive White privilege but society denies it to them based on their racial difference.

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<sup>29</sup> Jill C. Cole, “Perceptions of Ethnic Identity Among Korean-Born Adoptees and Their Caucasian-American Parents” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1992), 19.

<sup>30</sup> David C. Lee, “Ethnic Perspective-Taking,” 6, 23-24; “According to Rosenberg, high self-esteem may mean that one thinks he or she is ‘very good,’ or just ‘good enough.’ That is, one may be content with the perceived self and not necessarily consider himself superior to others. Simply put, the individual feels that he is a person of worth and is usually confident about succeeding to overcome inadequacies. In contrast, low self-esteem implies self-rejection, self-dissatisfaction, and self-contempt. Such an individual wishes he or she were different but not necessarily because of his or her ethnic or racial affiliation.”

<sup>31</sup> Etsuko Fujimoto, “South Korean Adoptees Growing Up in White America,” in *Readings in Intercultural Communication* (McGraw Hill, 2002), 271.

The separation from one's family and birth country can best be described as an act of violence for the child who experiences it. The pain of separation along with the knowledge that they were given up, abandoned, or rejected, whether adoptees have memories of it or not, does not lessen the validity and impact of such feelings. For adoptees placed at an older age, such as myself, the accompanying memories heighten the feelings of loss and abandonment. Indeed, many deaths have occurred; the death of a family as it once existed, the first identity a child had, and the loss of country. It is imperative that adoptees have the opportunity to mourn in their own way and when they are ready in order to fully acknowledge the severe losses they have suffered. In 1992, Brodzinsky (further supported and developed by Lifton, Verrier, and Russell) first addressed the effects of loss and grief on adoptees and how it could impact their identity development and sense of self. Because adoption is a result of loss through abandonment, it is more complicated even than death or divorce for a child to deal with.<sup>32</sup> The sense of loss for adoptees stems from the "realization that to be chosen by one family means one must be given away."<sup>33</sup> If the adopted family then tries to impress on the adoptee that they are their only family then the adoptee is "forced to participate in the fiction... that their adoptive parents are their only parents, and accept that their birth heritage is disposable."<sup>34</sup> Instead, adoptees need the opportunity to mourn and express their grief for what they have lost. The grieving process "emerges at crucial points during an adoptee's life such as marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of adoptive parents and... renewed grieving [can] complicate developmental tasks during various stages of [the adoptee's]

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<sup>32</sup> Joy S. Hoffman, "How Lived Experiences Affect Ethnic Identity Development for Transracial Korean American Adoptees: Implications for Higher Education Practice" (PhD diss., University of Missouri, 2011), 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

lifespan.”<sup>35</sup> Huh’s research echoes Brodzinsky’s in that “[a]doptees may be uncertain about the permanency of their relationships. Adoptees may also have difficulty dealing with loss and grief if they are not encouraged to mourn their loss...[and] Since adoptees cannot fully understand their loss during childhood, they need to grieve repeatedly as their understanding of adoption grows.”<sup>36</sup> I still have not had a mourning period or ritual over the loss of my former self, a self separate from who I am now. I explore various aspects of loss due to my adoption in several sections of my memoir including “What’s In a Name?,” “Language,” “Missing Child,” and “Mourning.”

As mentioned previously, there is a body of research that currently exists on the topic of Korean adoptees. Knowledge has been provided on some aspects of the lives of Korean adoptees that is useful and provides a starting point in understanding the lived experience of the adoptees. However, the majority of prior research falls short of fully giving voice to the population at large of adoptees, a result that often silenced adoptees’ narratives. It should be noted here that while I may have my own biases on this subject, researchers have also concluded that serious flaws in past research exists and need to be addressed.<sup>37</sup> As Lydens addressed in 1988:

Furthermore, many of the studies on transracial adoption have serious theoretical and methodological shortcomings. The concept of adjustment has been used as a measure of successful adoptive placement in many studies, yet the definition of adjustment varies widely and is largely measured subjectively. In some cases,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 39-40; Indeed, my own identity journey did not begin in earnest until the birth of my own child. I knew she would have questions about herself at some point that would reach a dead end with me if I did not try and discover who I was.

<sup>36</sup> Huh, “Korean Children,” 23.

<sup>37</sup> Almost all the researchers on the subject after the mid-1980s, including Lydens, Yoon, Hoffman, and Lee to name a few, agree that there were serious problems in older research in both definitions, methodology, and data gathering that did not address properly the issue of identity for Korean adoptees. I would, however, like to acknowledge that prior research did have some benefits including the foresight that the very unique population of transracial, transnational Korean adoptees would need and deserve attention for matters in adjustment, development, race, and identity. Regardless of the shortcomings of the prior research, at least the dialogue was started.

parents make the determination of “successful adjustment.” In these instances, parents may perceive successful adjustment as their own feelings of satisfaction with the placement rather than the assessment of the adoptee’s positive psychological development. The child who is experiencing the adjustment is seen from the parent’s perspective.<sup>38</sup>

Often parents measure adjustment, whether successful or not, based on learning ability or disability, the presence or absence of violence, disobedience, and emotional problems. As discussed further below, adoptees frequently suppress sharing with their adoptive parents struggles they face outside of the home or their feelings about their adoption. Thus, the Korean adoptee is rendered almost invisible. A very real possibility exists that “[t]here may have been bias inherent in asking parents to respond to their success as parents” in previous research studies on transracial Korean adoptees.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the term “satisfaction” often used in older studies as measured by and determined by the adoptive parents proves problematic, and even borders on offensive. A satisfaction rating, often used in reference to products or services, implies an impersonal and commodified tone applied to a child.

The second major flaw of prior research in Korean adoptee studies is the methodologies and measurements used. In the 1990s this problem in the earlier research was pointed out

The main criticism to be made about many, though not all, transracial and intercountry outcome research is that the methodologies and measurements used so far have largely been too structured and reliant upon tests. This approach, which is derived from the physical sciences, does not allow older adopted people, in particular, to share their experiences and to define their conditions, instead of having it defined for them...[T]ests...generally provided little opportunity to

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<sup>38</sup> Lois Adele Lydens, “A Longitudinal Study of Crosscultural Adoption: Identity Development Among Asian Adoptees at Adolescence and Early Adulthood” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1988), 36.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

qualify meaning and were inadequate to record the respondents' quest for an answer to such questions, as "who am I?"<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, the ability to apply a standardized measurement to issues of identity that take into account race, adoption, and experiences proves problematic. Prior measurements failed

...because key issues surrounding the concept of racial, ethnic and social identity ha[d] been defined prior to carrying out exploratory qualitative studies to generate theory based on the perspectives and experiences of adoptees. [Additionally] previous research merely attempted to find the level of ethnic identity, self-esteem, and child's adjustment separately, there are critical limitations to understanding the dynamics of how these factors can impact on the transracially adopted child's psychological adjustment. In other words, there has been no attempt to identify relationships among factors through specific data analysis.<sup>41</sup>

These criticisms by Yoon and others<sup>42</sup> served as the turning point in Korean adoptee studies highlighting the importance and need of qualitative methods through adoptee narratives and standpoint epistemology for the research.<sup>43</sup> The adoptees' lived experience is the knowledge that must inform the research.

The 1994 Minneapolis Search Institute study was the "largest ever undertaken in the U.S. of adoptive families, covering 715 families, placed by agencies in four mid-Western states, who adopted infants between 1974 and 1980."<sup>44</sup> A major fault of this study was participants were 12 to 18 years of age and only 173 were Asian and most of them Korean. The "mostly" Korean Asian participants represented only one-fifth of the 881 participants. In the broader sense, this number is only reflective of 0.17% of Korean

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<sup>40</sup> Yoon, D.P. "Psychological Adjustment of Korean-Born Adolescents Adopted by American Families" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1997), 4-5.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Including Richard M. Lee and Lois Lydens.

<sup>43</sup> Borrowed from the field of feminist research, standpoint epistemology can and should be applied to Korean adoptee research. Standpoint epistemology is defined as "a unique philosophy of knowledge building that challenges us to (1) see and understand the world through the eyes and experience of [Korean adoptees] and (2) apply the vision and knowledge of [Korean adoptees] to social activism and social change. [S]tandpoint epistemology requires the fusion of knowledge and practice. It is both a theory of knowledge building and a method of doing research—an approach to knowledge construction and a call to political action." Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy, *Feminist Research Practice* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 55.

<sup>44</sup> [www.nationalcouncilforadoption.com](http://www.nationalcouncilforadoption.com)

adoptees in the U.S. More research must be conducted and made available to adoptees to participate in to gain a better understanding of the total population's experiences. Existing studies are representative of only a small fraction of the Korean adoptee community and therefore the possibility of a minority speaking for the majority is a concern. In order for the Korean adoptee community to gain rights as a collective group for purposes of birth searches, access to records, and resources in both Korea and the countries of their adoptions they must be heard collectively so as not to support only the interests of the few.

Additionally in the Minneapolis study, the respondents are adolescents, so were they able to properly articulate what they wanted to convey? While this study found the majority of Asian children to be "normal" in areas such as self-esteem, attachment, family dynamics, psychological health and racial identity, the researchers focus on the positive numbers and ignore those children that are not having "normal" or "above average" experiences. If 53% of Asian children had high self-esteem, how can we ignore the 47% who did not? This statistic seems relatively evenly divided, yet the study focuses on those children that reinforced its "positive" findings. The overwhelming highest negative finding (22%) in the study pertaining to the Asian children is almost completely ignored. Adoptee statements such as, "I wish that I was a different race than I am,"<sup>45</sup> cause only mild concern and barely a mention by the researchers. Racial confusion due to assimilation expressed by adoptees is a valid concern that warrants further attention by researchers. The previous sentiment is extremely significant and goes to the heart of the point that transracial and transnational adoptee status does matter for adoptees in their racial and self-identity development. The silencing of adoptee voices in

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

past research did not present an accurate depiction of their lived experiences and often gave results expected by researchers and parents.

Emergent themes of gratitude toward and shielding of adoptive parents further supports the idea that adolescent adoptees are not able to fully express the problems they face. Modern Western attitudes toward the adoption of children from third world or developing countries such as post-war Korea have been “widely perceived...as a way of rescuing a non-White child from [their] miseries.”<sup>46</sup> As Hübinette explains, the “result is that adopted Koreans are expected to be loyal to their adoptive parents and assimilate fully to their host cultures.”<sup>47</sup> This line of reasoning confirms the impact on self-image in adoptees, “If a minority social group is considered undesirable or inferior by the group that is perceived as dominant, feelings of embarrassment or shame might be incorporated into the individual’s social identity, potentially resulting in the development of a negative self-image.”<sup>48</sup> Adoptees seen as rescued “poor orphans” who should be grateful to their Western white parent rescuers, can harbor a sense of devaluation that lowers self-esteem. Based on statements by adoptees and as expressed in my memoir section “Aren’t You Grateful?” many adoptees feel overwhelmed by unspoken expectations of gratitude that pressure them into silence about their feelings. Suppression of their true emotions and struggles in order to comply with the implied obligation of gratitude harms adoptees’ emotional and identity development.

Basow et al. conducted a web-based survey study of 83 adult Korean adoptees in 2006 and included psychological well-being to examine self-esteem. Basow and her

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<sup>46</sup> Hübinette, “Adopted Koreans-Diaspora.”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Susan A. Basow, Elizabeth Lilley, Jamila Bookwala, and Ann McGillicuddy-DeLisi, “Identity Development and Psychological Well-Being in Korean-Born Adoptees in the U.S,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 78.4 (2008), 473.

colleagues came to the important discovery that “mothers of Korean adoptees engaged in less frequent cultural socialization practices than did...Chinese adoptees, perhaps because Chinese culture is more prevalent...as well as more visible in the U.S. than is Korean culture. This is another reason to focus specifically on the psychological well-being of Korean-born adoptees.”<sup>49</sup> Within the United States, Asian culture most often is synonymous with Chinese culture with no distinction afforded the various other Asian ethnicities present such as Japanese, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Korean to name a few. Additionally, “adoptees from Korea have fewer cultural socialization experiences with their birth culture than do adoptees from other Asian cultures, such as China and Vietnam.”<sup>50</sup> Although Basow and colleagues’ study is not without its self-admitted limitations, it does provide an encouraging starting point for future research as to the significance to focus on Korean adoptees’ specific cultural needs, such as: opportunities for Korean cultural and ethnic social experiences and recognition as a distinct group within Korean culture.

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute’s September 1999 study, the Gathering, and its published findings in June 2000 offered the first forum for Korean adoptees’ voices to express their experiences. The study consisted of almost 400 adult Korean adoptees who met in Washington D.C. for the first Adult Korean Adoptee Gathering. Although the 400 adoptees only represented 0.38% of all Korean adoptees, it was indeed a larger scale study than most previous studies. A survey was sent to attendants of the Gathering prior to meeting in Washington D.C., but only 167 responded, representing 0.16% of the total 104,000 plus adoptees in the U.S. alone. This study does

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 474.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 478.

acknowledge the validity of the adoptees' lived experiences as valuable research data. Narratives are considered within a contextual framework that better explains and puts into perspective the quantified data. Adoptees' experiences are given primacy as a knowledge base for the design of the research study. Significant to the study was the age of all respondents to the survey, a mean of 31 years old, and therefore adults, where as the Minneapolis study focused exclusively on adolescents.

During childhood 36% of research study respondents viewed themselves as Caucasian and did not identify as Korean-American. In adulthood, however, 64% of the respondents identified as Korean-American.<sup>51</sup> This shift in self-identification can most likely be attributed to maturation and life experiences on the part of the adoptees, absent in childhood or adolescence. As some of the adoptees stated: "I felt different and alienated and alone;" "I felt like I didn't belong;" "I was embarrassed and understood very little about myself. I wanted to be with people like myself."<sup>52</sup> Clearly these statements are signs of identity confusion based on the conflicting face adoptees saw in the mirror versus the faces of their surroundings. 70% of respondents also faced racial discrimination, while also being stereotyped as smart, shy, passive, or exotic. A sad effect of racial discrimination caused some adoptees to "deny my Korean part" or "hate my Korean heritage."<sup>53</sup> No matter how much an adoptee is in denial of their Koreanness, they cannot escape it, primarily because they receive constant reminders of it from others.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Madelyn Freundlich and Joy Kim Lieberthal, "The Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees: Adoptees' Perceptions of International Adoption," The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, June 2000.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Hoffman's research agrees with my conclusion. Indeed, "[a]doptees were forced to examine their identity because others emphasized it...[and] Adoptees rarely found themselves in environments where they did not

Indeed, the racial otherness of Korean adoptees in contrast to the predominant white societies they were raised in impacts their identity because they cannot hide or change it, no matter how well assimilated they become as honorary whites. As Fujimoto points out, within the U.S. Asians as a group continue to be perceived as foreigners and

Korean adoptees are also subject to this racist ideology, because it is the product of physical foreignness more than anything else, and the adoptees' bodies—just as all Asian bodies—signify an antithesis to “Americanness.” [Additionally], [f]or Asian Americans, physical differences as racial signifiers have been a salient site of struggle, because it is precisely their bodies that mark them outside the circle of “American.”<sup>55</sup>

Embodied physical, and therefore implied ethnic and cultural, aspects of self directly impacts adoptees' sense of identity because it permanently exists as an outward marker regardless of whether the adoptee embraces or denies it.

While comparisons and similarities have been made between transracial Korean adoptees and multi or bi-racial and non-adopted Asian children in regards to racial and cultural identity, the situations are in fact not similar. The transracial Korean adoptee does not have the benefit of their family unit as a mirror of their physical characteristics like the other three groups. Multi or bi-racial and non-adopted Asian children have the advantage of interacting daily with those similar to them in racial and cultural backgrounds. Even the multi or bi-racial child can directly see who they derive from. Whether or not the multi or bi-racial and non-adopted Asian child embraces and participates in their cultural backgrounds, they have the option and readily available resources in their family members. The vast majority of Korean adoptees, particularly in the past, did not have such easy access to their racial or cultural peers. In addition, the

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stand out. In this context, self-discovery and identity exploration were not only natural processes; they were continuous sometimes painful, and often perplexing.” Hoffman, “How Lived,” 97-98.

<sup>55</sup> Fujimoto, “South Korean Adoptees,” 268, 273.

Korean adoptee does not grow up with their cultural traditions, language, or other cultural elements since they do not share that with any of their family members. For the Korean adoptee, there is a very real sense of racial and cultural isolation within not only the social communities they live in but their own families as well. So to make such a comparison is quite erroneous and lessens the extraordinarily unique experience of Korean adoptees.

Although some adoptive parents take a “color blind” approach to raising their Korean-born children, it can prove detrimental to the child’s identity development causing later racial confusion and internalized racism.<sup>56</sup> A major flaw of the “color blind” approach is the message that the birth culture is not significant or special, or a source of pride, much less an integral part of the self. More recent (since the late 1990’s to present) research on Korean adoptees’ identity development has focused on the importance of the adoptees’ voices through their narratives and the level of cultural and ethnic knowledge, experience, and comfort they have with their birth culture. Even as early as 1978 William Chartrand found “an area of major concern...[a] majority of the families, advocating the primacy of a ‘human identity,’ are denying the importance of racial identity and attempting to minimize its impact.”<sup>57</sup> The fact remains that the Korean adoptee still bears the physical markers of racial and cultural difference to their social environment regardless and in spite of being raised “color blind.”

The “color blind” ideology does not help Korean adoptees when they return to Korea and interact with Koreans. Indeed, Koreans and other Asians often express pity for

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<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that the “color blind” approach can also yield positive outcomes.

<sup>57</sup> William Roger Chartrand, “Applications of Selected Components of a Correspondence Theory of Cross-Cultural Adjustment to the Adjustment of White Families who have Adopted Older Children From Korea,” *Dissertation Abstracts International* 39.9-A (March 1979), 5749-A.

Korean adoptees. Adoptees often face “conflicting interpretations of whether or not [they] are Korean and, if they are, then *how* they are so”<sup>58</sup> or even if they are Korean enough. Encounters between non-adopted Korean Americans and Korean adoptees often result in discomfort at the very least by both parties and even rejection of the adoptee by the non-adoptee. Interestingly, Korean adoptees account for 15% of the total ethnic Korean population in the United States;<sup>59</sup> however, they often face alienation from that population. Language often surfaces as a delineating factor as to whether an adoptee is Korean enough. My own encounters with non-adopted Koreans often result in expressions of pity and sympathy toward me from them when they discover I am adopted and was raised by whites. Lack of language proficiency on my part creates a tangible divide between non-adopted Koreans and myself as well. I discuss this issue in my memoir under “Language” and have come to realize that for me, as an older placed adoptee who spoke fluent Korean, it adds to my heightened sense of overall loss.

The Gathering also conducted group discussions, consisting of six groups that averaged fifty respondents divided by birth years ranging from 1952-1978 and one additional group of the spouses and partners of respondents. Each group was assigned a facilitator and a note taker. Open discussions among the groups encouraged and yielded significant data. Groups focused on the impact of early experiences on adoptees’ lives, discrimination, and identity among other subjects. One common theme that emerged, shared by almost all the adoptees, regardless of the profoundness or depth of their memories, was the sense of loss adoptees felt when they left Korea. Another topic of commonality was the feeling of abandonment by birth mothers. Abandonment issues

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<sup>58</sup> Bergquist, *International Korean*, 118.

<sup>59</sup> Hübinette, “Adopted Koreans-Diaspora.”

caused “long term effects on their relationships, with mistrust being a common issue.”<sup>60</sup> Additionally important and common themes that emerged from the group discussions were: gratitude toward adoptive parents; prejudice and bias toward other Asians; shielding/protecting adoptive parents from discrimination being faced by adoptees; and abuse.<sup>61</sup> As discussed earlier, the issue of gratitude for adoptees can negatively impact their self-esteem and identity development. As previously mentioned and discussed in my memoir, I, too, felt the burden of gratitude toward my adoptive parents and could not have considered this project while they were still alive. In addition, the physical abuse that I experienced, as I discuss in “New Family,” “Suicide Attempt,” and “More About My Family,” made me feel unworthy of love and unimportant; I felt insignificant and like a nothing. My conflicted emotions toward my family, at the same time my saviors and my punishers, lessened my view and value of myself.

While the Gathering used focus groups and encouraged open discussion, it can be assumed that not all participants were able to voice their experience on each topic. The Gathering also had the constraint of fixed time periods, such as time allotted for group discussion and the length of the Gathering itself, for adoptees to express their experiences fully. Personality types of participants most certainly affected their full participation as well and should not be overlooked in addition to the comfort level of participants to share deep-seated emotions with relative strangers. For many adoptees The Gathering was also their first time among so many other adoptees and offered an opportunity to at last have

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<sup>60</sup> Freundlich, “The Gathering.”

<sup>61</sup> Bergquist, *International Korean*, 37. One of the worst cases of abuse occurred in 1957 when Edith Ott was indicted of second-degree murder of her twenty-two month old adopted Korean daughter. While this case might be extreme, the physical abuses adoptees suffered to varying degrees is all too real. In the early years of Korean adoptions in the U.S. there existed an apparent lack of screening of prospective parents as well as adequate follow up by social services in the homes after placement, resulting in unknown and unreported abuses of adoptees.

“a sense of belonging—to be with others like themselves....”<sup>62</sup> Although I did not attend The Gathering, or even know about it at the time it occurred, the first time I met another Korean adoptee was one of the most emotional and powerful experiences of my life that validated my own adoption experience.<sup>63</sup>

The instantaneous and deep connection to the other adoptee that I felt was intensely personal, reciprocal, and unspoken. Although realistically a stranger, our immediate relationship was one of the most intimate I have ever had. To meet, speak, and share with someone who truly understood my experience for the first time in my life was overwhelming and joyful. What I had suspected when I first began (2009) research on Korean adoptees and identity development proved true when I met Jodi. Although our adoption stories were very different, we shared emotions and experiences that were direct results of being Korean adoptees. Experiences of racism, not belonging, mourning, abandonment, and others were paralleled in our lives and we found each other shaking our head in agreement and understanding as the other expressed particular instances. Our voices echoed each other. Although not family, but members of an extremely unique community group, I felt real kinship toward another human being for the first time in my life. Here was another person who actually did “know” and truly “understand” the tempest of feelings, emotions, thoughts, and anxieties I harbor. The connection between us and sharing of our stories created for the first time in my life a sense of calm and peace for me. I was no longer alone. This is why adoptees’ narratives as data are so important to the field. Our voices can no longer remain muted.

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<sup>62</sup> Freundlich, “The Gathering.”

<sup>63</sup> I recently met my “adoptee twin,” as we call each other, Jodi in the summer of 2012 in New York City at NCORE (National Conference on Race and Ethnicity) during a pre-conference workshop that my office held for early attendants. I wish I had met her or another adoptee sooner in my life than at the age of 42.

In 2009, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute published an important research study focused entirely on identity development in transracial, transnational Korean adoptees. The study is significant because it focuses on adult transracial, transnational Korean adoptees, how identity develops in those adoptees with special attention to issues of race, ethnicity, and adoption, it relies on the adult adoptees as the experts on the subject, and it is a larger scale study, than previous ones, that included 179 respondents. This Donaldson Institute study clearly defined the importance of identity development for Korean adoptees because of their unique situation. The study provides one of the best comprehensive literature reviews of the field.

One important point given more attention as central to adoptees' identity development is the issue of disempowerment. Indeed, it must be remembered and taken into consideration that "adoptees are the most disempowered members of the adoption triad, 'having generally had no opportunity to participate in the decisions that have so powerfully shaped their lives and their identities.' [T]his absence of power in early life may extend into adulthood. In particular, adoptees' transition to adulthood may be complicated by societal views that perpetuate the view of them as adopted 'children.'"<sup>64</sup> In other words, adoptees find themselves in a complicated situation that exists beyond their control but forces them to participate nonetheless. I would add that for Korean adoptees a triad is too simplistic to describe the relational aspect of our experiences where we are placed in the disempowered role. Beyond the birth and adoptive mothers or parents, we also have had to and still do contend with the government of South Korea and

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<sup>64</sup> Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, "Beyond Culture Camp: Promoting Healthy Identity Formation in Adoption," 2009, 90; The adoption "triad" refers to triangular relationship between birth mother/parents, adopted mother/parents, and the adoptee child.

its policies toward us, as well as both Korean and Caucasian societal acceptance or rejection of us.

Daniel Palmer's 2011 book *Dance of Identities* focuses specifically on the issue of race on the development of Korean adoptees. Palmer expresses early on in the book that "the transracial adoptee identity is obtained without the adoptee's consent. While White cultural identity can be considered an acquired one, both the racial and transracial adoptee identities are forced upon the Korean adoptee."<sup>65</sup> Palmer's important contribution to the field of transracial, transnational Korean adoptees is a developed theory of identity for adoptees. Palmer's "dance of identities" theory finally expresses the multiplicity of identities that adoptees experience throughout their lives precisely because a variety of external factors impress themselves upon adoptees. As a Korean adoptee Palmer draws from his own experiences for his research in addition to the thirty-eight respondents' narratives, much like Joy Hoffman does in her study. The acknowledgment and discovery of pre-adoption lives is also an important issue for adoptees that Palmer addresses as first expressed by Hall in 1990

[C]ultural identity belongs to the future as much as to the past and is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being"...Far from being grounded in a mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.<sup>66</sup>

I have come to the realization that in order to move forward in my future, I must know and draw from the past lived experience that already existed for me prior to becoming an orphan. The life I had as someone's child is an important element of my identity, and while it may be lost to space and time within the deep recesses of my memory, it remains

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<sup>65</sup> John D. Palmer, *The Dance of Identities* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>66</sup> Bergquist, *International Korean*, 259.

significant for me to rediscover it to fully become myself now. It is the origin of who I am and who I am becoming. In order to move forward and know where one is going, one must know where they have been.

Joy S. Hoffman's 2011 qualitative study marks a pivotal shift in Korean adoptee research, even more noteworthy than the two Evan B. Donaldson Institute studies, in that not only does she focus exclusively on the voices of adoptees; more importantly she incorporates her own narrative as a source of knowledge. Hoffman draws on past research; particularly Brodzinsky's important 1992 study, but clearly defines the narratives of adoptees and her own as the basis for study. The data Hoffman collects does not appear in graphs, with questionable results of vague and unrelated measurements. Instead, Hoffman "explore[s] how lived experiences affect ethnic identity development of transracial Korean American adoptees raised by White parents...."<sup>67</sup> It could be argued that as adoptees, themselves Palmer and Hoffman are biased researchers. While a valid argument, I would counter that Palmer and Hoffman's research greatly benefits precisely *because* they are adoptees. As adoptees, Palmer and Hoffman possess a level of understanding of the adoptees' experiences that a non-Korean adoptee researcher could not begin to have. An immediate trust can be established between the researcher and participants, particularly by the incorporation of the researcher's own narrative with those of the participants. In addition, by understanding the importance of and utilizing the adoptee's narratives as the basis of the research, Palmer and Hoffman give full authority to the adoptees as experts on the subject.<sup>68</sup> As the experts of the field, the adoptee

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<sup>67</sup> Hoffman, "How Lived," abstract.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 9; "[B]ecause of my personal connection to this subject as a transracial Korean American adoptee, I was motivated to conduct a study that considered my experiences and the experiences of other transracial Korean American adoptees to demonstrate that our stories matter."

participants in Palmer and Hoffman's studies expressed that they in fact navigate identities "in-between" different racial and ethnic categories and also multiple identities that included race, culture, and adoption.<sup>69</sup> While Hoffman's study was small with only twelve participants and therefore unable to speak for the entire Korean adoptee community, it does echo current research. Palmer's thirty-eight respondents and the sixty-one respondents in Tuan and Shiao's 2011 book *Choosing Ethnicity, Negotiating Race* echo many of the sentiments expressed by Hoffman's respondents, which suggests that commonalities of experience exist within the Korean adoptee community. The larger studies by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute also share similar results. It is promising that researchers are constructing their studies to center on adoptee narratives as the primary knowledge source as the basis for research.

Transracial and transnational Korean adoptees are a unique group within the adoption community. The overwhelming majority of these adoptees have been removed from their birth country of Korea and placed overseas into white dominant societies, particularly in the United States. Raised as culturally white surrounded by white privilege as the normative societal model, Korean adoptees remain outside of dominant culture based on their embodied physical differences. Even if the Korean adoptee is raised with a colorblind approach, both white and Korean societies regularly remind her that she is in fact a person of color who is different that is neither white nor culturally Korean. Unaccepted by both whites and non-adopted Koreans as one of them, Korean adoptees experience repeated rejection. Rejection first experienced from their birth mothers/families and their birth country. Korean adoptees often face challenges of isolation from other Korean adoptees, loss of cultural traditions such as language, lack of

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 100,163.

racial or cultural role models, and racism. Identity development for Korean adoptees is not static and continues with lived experiences throughout their lives. Many Korean adoptees have come to embrace a multiplicity of identities interconnected to each other that defines them at different moments in their life. As Daniel Palmer theorizes, Korean adoptees experience a “dance of identities” that adjusts to the rhythms, tempos, and emotions they experience. Importantly, adoptees’ voices and lived experiences are now accepted as the authority on the subject. Silence cannot protect or heal adoptees from emotional pain, offer comfort, nor erase what we have survived, so we must be heard. My own narrative adds to the growing voice of Korean adoptees and the sound is bittersweet.

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