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# Feeling It: Understanding Korean Adoptees' Experiences of Embodied Identity

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*This paper examines the ways in which transnational Korean adoptees experience identity as an embodied subjective process that is simultaneously contested and objectified by social perceptions of their bodies in their adoptive countries and South Korea. To analyse these lived experiences, I draw primarily on embodiment theories such as Budgeon's [(2003). Identity as an embodied event. Body and society, 9, 35–55] sociological concept of 'body as event' and Csordas' [(2002). Body/meaning/healing. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan] cultural phenomenological view of the body not as an object but as a 'subject of culture'. To analyse processes of (re) embodiment, I draw on Ahmed's [(2007). A phenomenology of whiteness. Feminist theory, 8, 149–168] concepts of 'space' and 'whiteness'. Based on ethnographic data in South Korea and semi-structured interviews with 22 adult Korean adoptees, this paper demonstrates how Korean adoptees' embodied identities are lived in relation to racialised experiences of belonging and Otherness.*

*Keywords: Racialisation; Embodiment; Belonging; Other; Racism; Transnational Adoption; Transracial Adoption; Inter-Country Adoption; Adoptees*

I always forget that I'm Asian, like Asian, not just Korean, just like *not White*. You know I always forget, like everyday and then I'll wake up and look in the mirror and I'll be like, '*Oh yeah, I'm Korean*', like that's the face that stares back at me. But I leave, I leave my bathroom, I leave my house and then I forget that I'm Asian again. (Hee Su)

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As the above quote illustrates, social perceptions of identity based on race can disrupt and challenge subjective views of one's own identity. For the Korean<sup>1</sup> adoptees I spoke to, such as Hee Su, this subjective experience of a white identity due to being culturally socialised in their adoptive countries in white adoptive families is contested by the fact that they are not socially perceived as racially white, and instead become 'Asian' despite their cultural upbringing. This experience of being perceived differently to how one identifies is certainly not unique to transracial and transnational adoptees (Ang 2001; Han and Hsu 2004; Vasta 2013). Indeed, there is extensive sociological research on the racialised experiences of people who are socially ascribed a racial or ethnic minority status or what Harris (2013) refers to as being 'minoritised'. Similar to other racial minorities, Korean adoptees and other transracial adoptees (e.g. Hübinette and Tigervall 2009) also experience processes of racialisation. Racialisation can be broadly described as the ways in which race as a social and cultural construct becomes meaningful at different times and in different places (AAA 1998; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Related to but also distinct from racialisation, racism describes social phenomena within a 'racialised social system' (Bonilla-Silva 1997: 467) that 'maintains or exacerbates avoidable and unfair inequalities in power, resources or opportunities' (Walton *et al.* 2013: 75). The racism experiences that Korean adoptees recounted in this study are part of this broader narrative, which resonate with the experiences of other racial minorities, albeit distinct in their own ways depending on how they are socially inscribed. Having said this, I argue that Korean adoptees experiences do highlight a particular embodied experience in which one's subjective sense of self is continuously disrupted, not only through others' perceptions but also by the racialised body one inhabits. Hee Su's observations about her body in the mirror and the body she inhabits reflect a process of both being and becoming in which she is confronted with shifting racial and ethnic boundaries about what it means to be alternately not/Asian or Korean and not/White.

In reference to previous phenomenological work (see for example, Merleau-Ponty), Murphy (2008: 198) refers to this tenuous state of being as the 'lived ambiguity of human embodiment, its simultaneous existence as both subject and object'. Indeed, as Hee Su's experience illustrates, this indeterminate feeling between who Korean adoptees feel they are and what their body reflects back to them is experienced as bodily work. Importantly, these experiences are not easily separated as subjective and objective experiences; instead, it is the 'lived ambiguity' or the bodily experience of simultaneously being both subject and object that adoptees are faced with when embodying and re-embodiment identity. In her work on young women's embodied identities in northern England, Budgeon (2003: 52) draws attention to the processes by which women 'do' embodied identity, not as 'effects of representation but sites of production'. This positions identity as a 'process of becoming' and the body as integral to that process rather than as object or representation (2003: 50). The Korean adoptees I interviewed and lived alongside during my ethnographic work in South Korea experienced their identity as an ongoing process that is lived in and through

the body and one that is always contextually situated. Specifically, their experiences of 'otherness' occurred alongside efforts to (re)embody a white identity in their adoptive countries and then in South Korea, efforts to embody a Korean identity they could 'feel'.

The central purpose of this paper is to examine these processes of embodying and re-embodying identity by engaging with Korean adoptees' experiences in their adoptive countries and South Korea. I situate this analysis within a theoretical framework that draws on the anthropology of experience (Turner and Bruner 1986) and phenomenological approaches (Ahmed 2007; Budgeon 2003; Csordas 2002; Thomas and Ahmed 2004). The findings presented draw on ethnographic data conducted in Seoul, South Korea, and individual semi-structured interviews. The following section situates the present study within previous research on adoption and identity and shows how an embodied identity approach extends this research by examining processes of identity negotiation as bodily processes.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Identity*

Earlier studies on adoption and identity drew on psychological frameworks (Brodzinsky and Schechter 1990; Kirk 1964) focusing on adoptees' identity formation in relation to levels of psychosocial adjustment and behavioural and mental health outcomes. While adoptees experience psychological difficulties for a number of reasons, these clinical studies have tended to reinforce views that identity crises and difficulties adjusting in terms of behaviour or personality development are natural to 'being an adoptee'. While useful for understanding a particular aspect of some adoptees' experiences, this approach has tended to dominate adoption literature, thus providing a limited portrayal of adoptees. As an alternative to this psychopathological focus, since the 2000s, there has been increasing anthropological and sociological research conducted on transnational adoption that explores issues of identity and belonging using theoretical approaches such as critical race theory (Park Nelson 2007), postcolonial theory (Hübinette 2003), cultural hybridity theory (Gray 2009) and symbolic interactionism (Williams 2003) (for a review, see Willing *et al.* 2012). Significantly, this more recent work has also been conducted by scholars who are also transnational adoptees (e.g. Hübinette 2003; Bergquist 2006; Willing 2006; Park Nelson 2007; Walton 2009), whereas previous work has been dominated by adoptive parents (Willing *et al.* 2012).

This paper builds on this more recent research by emphasising that adoptees' identities need to be understood and emerge out of the complexity of lived experience from the perspectives of adoptees rather than from others speaking on their behalf. It also supports a post-structuralist approach towards identity as something that is individually experienced as well as culturally constituted. Kondo (1990: 48) has referred to this process as 'crafting selves' which considers identity 'not [as] a static *object*, but a

creative *process*' thus also including a sense of agency (original emphasis). This is reiterated by Bruner (1986: 12) who argues, 'selves [ ... ] are not given but are problematic and always in production'. Others have argued that it is equally important to understand how identities are also grounded and experienced in concrete ways, not just as fluid and changing (Noble and Tabar 2002; Lien and Melhuus 2007). This paper supports these positions by understanding Korean adoptees' identities as simultaneously grounded and experienced as stable even as their identities are contested and subject to change. Building on these positions, this paper aims to extend our understanding of processes of adoptees' identity negotiations as simultaneously situated and in process by drawing on phenomenological approaches that focus on identity as an embodied experience, not only as an abstract representation of self. As Budgeon (2003: 37) argues, we need to understand 'how it is that the body is implicated in the formation of identity'. This paper aims to do this by using the lived experiences of Korean adoptees to understand how identity is experienced and *felt* through the body as a process of (re)embodiment.

### *Experience and Embodiment*

Phenomenological approaches have been used in anthropology 'to understand more accurately and more fully a diverse number of cultural and experiential phenomena' (Desjarlais and Throop 2011: 89). It was developed in response to addressing 'ideological trappings' (Jackson 1996) and bringing anthropology back to the empiricism of people's everyday experiences as they are lived. The concept of embodiment, which is broadly defined as 'the bodily aspects of human beings and subjectivity', has been particularly influential because it emphasises the body as the primary site through which experience is lived (Desjarlais and Throop 2011: 89). Specifically, embodiment examines how people make sense of the world in relation to others through interpersonal and intersubjective encounters as lived experiences within particular socio-political and cultural contexts. As such, phenomenological approaches have also informed anthropological theories of experience. Turner and Bruner (1986: 12–13) conceptualise experience as something that is '*lived* through' and 'charged with emotion and volition' in all its richness and vivacity (original emphasis). For this paper, such an approach values lived experience as an entry point to understanding how Korean adoptees articulate or make sense of their identities through the messy complexity of their experiences. A focus on experience is not meant to 'attribute an indisputable authenticity to [ ... ] experience' (Scott 1991: 787). Instead, by placing emphasis on lived experiences – which are always first and foremost subjectively positioned in a particular historical and socio-cultural context – we can begin to understand what it is about the actual experiencing of something that is so integral to the ways Korean adoptees embody identity.

Therefore, in order to deepen this understanding of lived experience and identity as in process, I also use a cultural phenomenological understanding of the body as a useful way to think about the experience of embodied identity. Cultural

phenomenology considers the body to be analytically meaningful as well as culturally meaningful because the self/body exists subjectively situated in a cultural world as it experiences the world (Csordas 1994, 2002). As Csordas (1994: 14) points out, lived experience is a bodily experience, which emphasises the 'intersubjective and social nature of bodily experience'. He explains that in everyday life, 'our bodies are not objects to us. Quite the contrary, they are an integral part of the perceiving subject' (2002: 84). Based on this premise, experience is lived through the body as it interacts with the world in an immediate way that is at the same time, culturally mediated. In other words, people do not experience the world by consciously objectifying the world around them even though at the same time, how they experience the world and how they act is formed by the way their thoughts and behaviours are socially and culturally structured. This is similar to what Bourdieu (1977: 89) describes when he talks about the 'dialectic of objectification and embodiment' as 'the em-bodying of the structures of the world, that is, the appropriating by the world of a body thus enabled to appropriate the world'. The body is at once immediately experiencing the world by its presence and engagement with the world while also being structured by a particular social and cultural framework that is learnt and acquired over time.

Overall, a phenomenological framework situated in anthropological theory is useful as a way to more directly engage adoptees' lived experiences because it offers a way to try to understand 'what that embodied identity actively is' (Katz and Csordas 2003: 284). It is useful because it begins with the premise that 'the body is not an *object* to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the *subject* of culture, or in other words, as the existential ground of culture' (original emphasis) (Csordas 2002: 58). Indeed, just as our bodies are not experienced as objects, our identities are also not experienced as objects. However, what happens when an embodied identity is disrupted and the body and self are objectified? How is this experienced and how can one's experience of identity be (re)embodied? I draw on Ahmed's (2007) concepts of 'whiteness' and 'space' to understand how Korean adoptees' experiences as 'white' are interrupted by experiences of Otherness. Ahmed (2007: 150) primarily examines what whiteness 'does' 'as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space'. In other words, she argues that a world made 'white' (e.g. through colonialism) creates spaces in which certain bodies that are able to 'inhabit whiteness' (2007: 153) can feel comfortable (e.g. whiteness made invisible), whereas 'non-white' bodies are made to feel 'uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space' (2007: 157). I use these concepts to demonstrate that through experiences of Othering in which their bodies are racialised as Other, Korean adoptees' identities are forcibly objectified in such a way that their own bodies become 'other' or 'strange' to them. They not only 'take up space' in the spaces they inhabit, they also 'take up space' within their own bodies. This makes them strangers to others as well as themselves. I argue that this creates an 'out-of-body' experience that necessitates a process through which they can (re)embody identity. Overall, I draw on this theoretical intersection of experience, embodiment

and Otherness to examine how Korean adoptees' identities are experienced through processes of (re)embodiment, not only through the ways identities are represented.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

This paper draws on a study, which aimed to understand the lived experience of transnational adoption by engaging with the experiences of adult Korean adoptees who were adopted from South Korea into non-Korean adoptive families in other countries. The study involved semi-structured interviews and ethnographic work in Seoul, South Korea. I received ethics approval from the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee (#H-203-0406).

In terms of participant recruitment, a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was used to distribute information about my research. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants through adoptee organisation groups based on the likelihood that they would be interested in discussing issues related to identity, belonging and adoption. Snowball sampling was also used by asking existing participants or people in the author's own adoptee networks to ask other adoptees they may know who might be interested in participating. This sampling method was used because adoptees are difficult to access if they are not already part of an adoption group. Therefore, I also acknowledge that most of the participants are clearly those who had already expressed a certain amount of interest in adoption and identity issues evident by their willingness to take part in the study or their participation in adoptee networks. This is not a representative study and so the participants in this study are not meant to encompass the experiences of all Korean adoptees and certainly not all transnational adoptees.

Overall, 22 interviews (19 female, three male) were conducted from May 2006 to December 2007 with adoptees who were 19–39 years old and who were adopted to Australia (10), the USA (8), Sweden (2), Switzerland (1) and Canada (1). As far as the participants knew from their adoption records at the time, all have two Korean birth parents except for one participant whose birth mother is Korean and birth father is Black American. Most of the participants were born in the 1970s to late 1980s. Those that were adopted during this period usually were not bi-racial since the majority of bi-racial adoptions occurred following the end of the Korean War (Hübinette 2006). Most of the participants were raised by white parents in predominantly white areas. Because the majority or approximately one-third of over 170,000 Korean adoptees were adopted to the USA (Selman 2002; Hübinette 2006), this is also reflected in the participant group. Additionally, the research project initially focused only on Korean adoptees in Australia in order to examine their experiences within the Australian context. However, new research at the time described similar shared experiences of identity and belonging among Korean adoptees in different adoptive countries (see for example, Bergquist *et al.* 2007; Park Nelson 2007). Additionally, based on the

**Table 1** Participant Information.

Participant name	Adoptive country/state	Sex	Age	Age at adoption	Returned to South Korea
Alyson	USA/Connecticut	F	23	6 months	No
Amanda	USA/Michigan	F	25	8 months	Yes
Amy	Australia/NSW	F	28	9 months	No
Anne	USA/Massachusetts	F	21	11 months	Yes
Brea	USA/Wisconsin	F	20	2 years	Yes
Erin	Australia/WA	F	26	4 years	Yes
Hanna	Sweden	F	31	4 months	Yes
Hee Su	Canada	F	24	4.5 years	Yes
Katie	USA/Hawai'i	F	23	3 months	Yes
Kelly	USA/Missouri	F	39	5 years	No
Louise	Australia/NSW	F	19	4 months	No
Marah	USA/Colorado	F	24	3 months	No
Marie	Sweden	F	37	1 year	Yes
Matt	USA/Arizona	M	23	3 years	Yes
Mia	Australia/NSW	F	20	6 months	Yes
Natacha	Switzerland	F	36	5 years	Yes
Nate	Australia/NSW	M	24	6 months	No
Pia	Australia/WA	F	22	3.5 months	Yes
Sarah	Australia/NSW	F	22	4.5 months	Yes
Steph	Australia/NSW	F	26	7 months	Yes
Todd	Australia/NSW	M	21	4 months	Yes
Young Mi	Australia/NSW	F	22	5 months	Yes

interviews I had already conducted with Korean adoptees in Australia, it emerged within the data that it would be important to examine experiences of identity and belonging in South Korea as well. Therefore, I made the decision to include Korean adoptees from other countries in order to include a more diverse range of Korean adoptees' experiences. Because the invitation to participate was open for a longer period of 10 months for Korean adoptees in Australia, the majority of participants (10) were from Australia. Finally, all participants were given the option of using their actual name or a pseudonym. Therefore, pseudonyms have been used when interview participants chose not to identify themselves using their actual names. For participant information, refer to [Table 1](#). All information is accurate at the time of the interview.

### *Interviews*

Depending on the geographical location of the participants, they were given the option of taking part in an e-mail or face-to-face interview. This approach was used to include Korean adoptees in countries other than Australia or those who lived in other parts of Australia. Yet, even when participants could have completed a face-to-face interview, a few chose to be interviewed over e-mail because they felt they could express themselves better in writing and so e-mail was a medium that they felt more comfortable using.

The interviews were divided into five different topics, each with a set of questions to guide the discussion. The discussion topics explored (1) what Korean adoptees felt was significant or not about 'being an adoptee', (2) their experiences of belonging and 'difference' in their adoptive country and South Korea, (3) experiences with accessing birth information and conducting birth family searches, (4) perceptions of cultural and ethnic identity in social interactions, and (5) their previous or current involvement in adoptee organisations or events.

For the e-mail interviews, I used the method of computer-mediated communication (Markham 2005). Participants were asked to respond to each topic and received a small set of questions focusing on that particular topic. Upon receiving the responses to the first set of questions, I reciprocated with additional questions that addressed their specific experiences. Then, after the first topic was sufficiently discussed (when the participant did not have any other experiences to discuss that related to the topic), I sent the next set of questions concerning subsequent interview topics, and so on. This approach aimed to simulate the kind of dialogue present in face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

For the face-to-face interviews, questions were also organised into topics in order to achieve coherency in the interview. However, flexibility in both the face-to-face and e-mail interviews enabled the discussion to take slightly different directions that were particular to the experiences of each participant. The duration of the e-mail interviews depended on the amount of time participants dedicated to each question and the overall depth of discussion. Many of the interviews extended over several months. Conversely, the face-to-face interviews lasted about an hour.

Finally, for all of the interviews, I used an 'empathetic' interview approach (Fontana and Frey 2005) that helped to establish rapport and provided a more conversational feeling that encouraged personal narratives. My own subject position as a Korean adoptee was important to the participants, including whether or not some of them decided to participate in the research. Participants often asked me about my own experiences. In this context, my own embodied identity as a Korean adoptee, made evident through the process of sharing our lived experiences, whether represented through text or through speech, facial expressions and emotions (Markham 2005), served to blur the lines between researcher and participant. However, as a researcher, I was also conscious of the hierarchical boundary that remained even while it was also negotiated and blurred.

### *Ethnography*

The initial findings from the first interviews with Korean adoptees in Australia (May 2006 to March 2007) highlighted the need to understand Korean adoptees' immediate experiences of identity and belonging in South Korea. In order to explore this in more depth, I was awarded a fieldwork grant from the School of Humanities and Social Science at the University of Newcastle. This resulted in participation opening to Korean adoptees in other countries (March 2006 to December 2007) as well as

ethnographic research conducted in South Korea between July and October 2007. In 2008, I made a subsequent trip to Seoul during which I attended the Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (GOA'L) annual conference and 'The Gathering', a week-long conference for Korean adoptees organised by the International Korean Adoptee Associations.<sup>2</sup>

For my fieldwork in South Korea, I conducted research at KoRoot, a guesthouse in Seoul. KoRoot, or 뿌리의 집 (ppuriui jip), which means literally, 'House of Korean Roots', was founded in 2002 and is registered as a non-governmental organisation (KoRoot 2013). It provides affordable accommodation, language support and resources for Korean adoptees who come back to South Korea. Moreover, it provides a sense of belonging and community for adoptees. Before arriving at KoRoot, I received permission from the director of KoRoot, Reverend Kim Do Hyun to stay there during the course of my fieldwork. My purpose was to live alongside other adoptees staying at KoRoot while sharing our stories in order to understand the kinds of daily cultural negotiations, challenges, frustrations, joys and emotions experienced while living in Seoul.

While immersed in this adoptee community and using methods of participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews, I was able to gather in-depth field notes and acquire additional insights concerning the ways adoptees experience their identity, this time in the context of South Korea. As a Korean adoptee and a university researcher, I was both an 'insider' and an 'outsider'. My insider status helped me to understand and relate to other Korean adoptees through our shared experiences, while my outsider status was also a reminder that I was primarily there to gather data for my study. This experience was also expressed by Sandra Patton (2000: 9), a white American adoptee and anthropologist, 'In interviewing adoptees, there was none of the traditional 'danger' for me of *going native*, because, as I learned, I was already "one of the people", though true to form, also always an outsider, also an academic' (original emphasis). Additionally, because of the living situation and my position as a woman, I was more likely to spend more time with and develop a closer rapport with other female adoptees. The bedrooms were separated by gender and frequently, more intimate discussions occurred in these spaces as they were much more private than the main communal areas.

### *Data Analysis*

As with all qualitative research, data analysis and data collection are a simultaneous process. In the process of conducting the interviews, other topics generated by the participants emerged that were not originally covered in the interview schedule. The interview schedule was initially informed by a preliminary literature review in order to provide a flexible guideline for the semi-structured interviews. Constructivist grounded theory acknowledges that even more classic forms of grounded theory are not purely inductive and 'that a lack of familiarity with relevant literatures is unlikely and untenable' (Charmaz 2014: 306). Therefore, this approach was used as a way to

provide a conceptual framework to inform the open-ended questions rather than to prescribe predetermined categories. For example, it is assumed in the literature that 'being adopted' is central to adoptees' identities. Rather than presuming this was the case, I used an open-ended question, 'What does the word, "adoptee", mean to you?' Because of the semi-structured approach (Minichiello *et al.* 1995), further questions were asked based on what the participants said about their particular experiences.

Ethnographic notes were taken each day over the three-month period as well as during the subsequent trip (three weeks) with more comprehensive writing completed at the end of each day. This included rich descriptions of interactions, behaviours, emotions and events that were experienced on a daily basis. The ethnographic data were comparatively analysed through multiple readings to identify similar patterns and any contrasting findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to further understand the participants' experiences from their perspectives.

To analyse the interview data, I used an interpretive framework based on the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). Preliminary analysis was initially conducted using a priori themes from the semi-structured interview schedule. Through subsequent readings, other themes emerged from the data using inductive coding. Interview data collection ended once saturation was achieved, that is when 'gathering fresh data no longer spark[ed] new theoretical insights, nor reveal[ed] new properties of these core theoretical categories' (Charmaz 2014: 213). Specifically, saturation occurred when thematic comparisons within and across individual interviews did not reveal new understanding of key categories. Key categories that emerged from the data included belonging, difference, experiences of racism, knowledge of Korean heritage, whiteness, Koreanness, embodying identity, experiences of being adopted, choice/control over adoption and connections with other Korean adoptees.

### **(Re)embodying Identity**

#### *Feeling White*

In this section, I analyse the ways in which Korean adoptees experienced identity as bodily work. Here, I focus mainly on interviews conducted with Korean adoptees who were raised in white adoptive families in countries where the majority<sup>3</sup> population is white. Based on their socialisation in their adoptive families and their lived experiences in a broader social and cultural context that marks 'non-white'<sup>4</sup> bodies as 'different' and 'other', Korean adoptees simultaneously embodied a white racial identity and a white cultural identity while also being confronted with the fact of their 'non-white' bodies. In other words, Korean adoptees are socialised as 'white' through a 'kinning' process (Howell 2003) that embeds their racial and cultural identity as 'white'. Their cultural upbringing within their white adoptive family makes them culturally similar to their adoptive family's cultural background. However, this experience of 'feeling

white' is interrupted by experiences of Otherness, which racialize them as 'not white' and culturally Other through an isomorphism of race and culture (see Gupta and Ferguson 1992). In the following discussion, I argue that this creates a process in which Korean adoptees are constantly (re)embodying a 'white' identity, which is disrupted by experiences that force them to become aware of their racialised 'Asian' body.

In their adoptive countries, Korean adoptees talked about experiences of being white. Alyson said that she 'always associated with typical, white America' because she 'grew up in a mostly all-white suburb in Connecticut and rarely had a chance to interact with many other Asians, never mind minorities'. Similar to Hee Su's experience described at the beginning of this paper, Amy commented, 'I haven't been around Korean culture and Korean people much at all and *that* contributes to why I forget that I am Korean or that I look Korean ... I don't see Korean'.

However, the fact that their bodies are not white made it difficult to maintain this feeling of being white. When adoptees like Amy talk about not 'seeing' Korean, this does not mean that other people do not see them as 'Asian'. In fact, for the Korean adoptees I interviewed, their experiences of racism mirrored their ascribed racial 'difference' back to them. This experience of disruption between how they see themselves and how others see them resulted in the perceived need to over-perform their white identities. For instance, Brea commented that she feels 'very white American' at home, but when she is among her peers, she said, 'I tend to act white so I don't stand out'.

Butler's (2004) theory of performativity is useful for understanding how identity is performed. Drawing on gendered identity, she explains that identity is 'a kind of doing, an incessant activity' that is often performed 'in part, without one's willing' (2004: 1). She adds that to say that it is often unconsciously performed is not to say that it is thus 'automatic or mechanical' (2004: 1). Instead, it is something that is performed intentionally even when not always being fully aware. For adoptees, the need to perform whiteness, to 'act white', was often an exhausting and unrelenting experience. For Louise, even when she did not feel the need to 'prove herself to anyone as such' she said, 'Because I went to such lengths to do so in the past, I find that it is hard to reverse what I've accomplished already'. In terms of embodiment, the relationship between self and body is so intimately entwined that as Alyson commented her 'ethnicity is an afterthought almost'. Drawing on Csordas (2002), their identities and their bodies are not experienced as objects, nor is there an artificial separation between self and body. For Alyson, while others may objectify her body as 'Asian', her experience as white is more than just the stereotype of being a 'banana' – white on the inside and yellow on the outside (Gray 2009); it is the feeling of having embodied not only a white cultural identity but also a white racial body.

Nevertheless, despite being so good at 'passing' (Park Nelson 2007) and effectively performing a white identity, the adoptees I interviewed discussed the ways in which their sense of self as 'white' was continually disrupted and contested through experiences of racism in their adoptive countries. Nate said he 'always felt like [Australia] was my home but ever since the racial tensions, I just feel a bit displaced'. Likewise,

Amanda explained, 'Any ambivalence about my identity really stemmed from growing up in an all-white community [in the US] and their ignorance to communities and cultures outside that sphere'. As Budgeon (2003: 38) points out, 'the body that we experience and conceptualise is always mediated by constructs, associations and images which work to enjoin a particular relation between the self and the body'. For Amanda and Nate, their experiences of having embodied an identity that feels right for them is disrupted by others' perceptions of who they are or who they must be based on their racial appearance.

I argue that these experiences of 'otherness' in their adoptive countries mediate a particular experience of identity through which the experience of Otherness (e.g. racism) acts as a disjuncture, which necessitates processes of (re)embodiment. I refer to this disjuncture as an 'out-of-body' experience because their experiences of Otherness force adoptees to temporarily become aware of their bodies as objectively 'non-white' despite their subjective experience of embodying a white racial and cultural identity. This 'out-of-body' experience is, at the same time, a bodily experience.<sup>5</sup> Their experience of being objectified is still felt *through* the body. Ahmed's (2007) concept of the racialised body being 'stopped' and becoming 'out-of-place' is useful. This experience of Otherness is not only stressful, 'it makes the "body" itself a "site" of stress' (2007: 161). For adoptees, an 'out-of-body' experience is a distressing and painful experience that often comes as a surprise given their embodied sense of self as white. Due to the visceral disruption of an out-of-body experience, adoptees engaged in renewed attempts to (re)embody a white identity in order to regain a sense of comfort and familiarity; this often happened by acting white. Yet, this frequently proved to be a fruitless endeavour because regardless of their efforts, the social perception of their bodies as racially Other meant that the possibility that they could experience racism again remained. Hee Su described the feeling of looking 'Asian' but feeling 'white' as if she were 'wearing a Halloween costume that [she] could never take off ... the zipper is broken ... [the mask] is melted onto [her] face'. Again, drawing on Ahmed (2007: 163), their non-white bodies could not fully and comfortably inhabit the white spaces in which they live because 'to be not white is to be not extended by the spaces you inhabit', whereas to be white is to have that 'naturalised' and 'invisible' extension between self and others like you. The next section discusses how Korean adoptees sought to find a space that was consistent with their bodies, where they could (re)embody a meaningful Korean identity or, using Ahmed's (2007) term, to be in a space that 'extended' their bodies in relation to a 'likeness' to other bodies.

### *Feeling Korean*

Having discussed how Korean adoptees experience an embodied white identity, this section analyses how Korean adoptees tried to (re)embody a Korean identity. Many adoptees go back to Korea in order to become more familiar with the place where they were born and where their bodies (and others) say they are from (Kim 2010). In Korea, Korean adoptees are often confronted with state discourse that draws on

notions of shared 'blood' to 'renaturalise adoptees as Koreans based on metaphors of biogenetic kinship' (Kim 2010: 175). However, this imagined natural connection to a Korean identity not only overlooks the stigma of 'bad blood' associated with being disconnected from a Korean patrilineage, it also underestimates the cultural loss of a familiar Korean identity that is individually meaningful (Kim 2010). Therefore, what it means to be Korean and the extent to which this is even possible is far from a straightforward process. For Korean adoptees in this study, especially those who were adopted at an older age, being back in Korea made them realise how they used to be or might have been if they had not been adopted. They talked about having to re-learn everything as an adult and imagined how they might have been as a child who could speak Korean fluently and who knew how to act in culturally appropriate ways. Even for adoptees I interviewed who were adopted when they were under one-year old, the enormity of what they had lost was also felt. For the adoptees who had returned to Korea, it was enough to just be in Korea where they could absorb all the sights, smells and sounds and begin to 'feel' Korean. In this sense, they began to (re) embody a Korean self that they once had prior to adoption by making it into something that resonated with how they see themselves in the present. By drawing on experiences from fieldnotes and semi-structured interviews with adoptees in South Korea, this section aims to demonstrate how Korean adoptees try to embody a Korean identity that they can feel.

As discussed in the previous section, Korean adoptees feel 'white' due to their upbringing in a white family. Therefore, when Korean adoptees go back to Korea, it can be a confronting experience in which they are assumed to be culturally Korean based on their racialised bodies but do not feel Korean. In this sense, they are not initially Othered as Korean as they are in their adoptive countries; instead, they are 'included' as Korean from the outset until their behaviours and language difficulties reveal them to be otherwise. Initially though, the sense of being confronted with Korea and experiencing *being* there in person was described by adoptees I spoke to during informal conversations and interviews as 'intense', 'extreme', 'powerful' as well as 'comforting'. These complex emotions convey the power of being in Korea, which Matt said, 'does something' to you and what Katie described as 'a life-changing experience'. They explained:

I can't describe it that well, but there's something about just being there physically and seeing it. Seeing with your own eyes where you came from, standing there with your own feet, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching. All of that does something in helping me discover a little more about myself. (Matt)

I think it really would be a life changing experience to be in the country that you were born in, to feel it and to smell the kimchi on the streets ... You know and just to say that you've gone ... I think the feeling that you get just by being here sometimes it's very different you know. (Katie)

It is this inexplicable feeling of being completely immersed in Korea and the powerful effect it has on you when you are there that adoptees found difficult expressing but did

so quite eloquently. The way in which Matt and Katie described this experience draws attention to the significance of bodily experience. The simple act of being in Korea meant that Korea became enlivened, through the body. It became something real that they could feel rather than an identity confined to words in their adoption papers or located in other people's stories about Korea. As Anne explained, 'Right now, I think it's ... about experiencing things for myself, just purely experiences of being here in Korea'.

When I spent time with other adoptees, we would do all of the usual tourist activities during the day like shopping, eating street food and visiting Korean palaces and temples. Yet, these were not simply tourist activities as a tourist; more significantly, these activities were part of the process of embodying a Korean identity by becoming more familiar with Korean history and cultural practices while living in Korea. Consuming Korean food, wearing clothes that were fashionable in Korea and the experience of being among other Koreans in a crowd were all efforts to live and breathe Korea. On a hot summer day, it literally felt like we were soaking it up and sweating it out, eating kimchi and chilli in most meals and walking around Seoul in the intense humidity. Importantly, these acts of consumption happened alongside the shared experience of being with other adoptees (Bergquist 2006; Walton 2009).

Overall, the bodily presence of 'being in' Korea and 'sensing it' through being immersed in the sights, sounds and smells of everyday life helped to make a Korean identity something real, something palpable. For some who were adopted at an older age, like Natacha, the bodily memory of being in Korea before adoption was something that was felt or 'remembered' through the body. Natacha was five years old when she was adopted to Switzerland. She was 31 years old when she first went back to Korea. She explained that she still has memories, but not memories she had always cognitively associated with Korea. It was through trying foods she used to eat that triggered those bodily memories or as she put it, 'a sense of sensitivity that *I think* are coming from my Korean roots actually'. She described this feeling of an embodied Korean identity as if her 'genes are still alive'. Even though she had been disconnected from Korea for so long and she feels her cultural identity is Swiss and French, she continues to feel that physical feeling of being connected.

Because of cultural differences and linguistic challenges, there were of course many occasions when adoptees experienced feelings of cultural exclusion, especially during social interactions when they had to explain that they could not understand or speak Korean or did not understand a particular cultural nuance. However, being in Korea was more than just trying to 'pass' as Korean or to perform a Korean identity; it was about making a Korean identity an intimate part of who they are, something that is felt, experienced and known through the body by the simple yet powerful act of being there.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have argued that to understand Korean adoptees' experiences of identity, it is important to understand identity as an embodied process. By drawing on Korean adoptees' experiences, I have tried to demonstrate how identity is something that is worked through, known and felt through the body. For the Korean adoptees I spoke with, their bodies were often experienced as contested sites of belonging, inextricably entwined with how they understood and experienced their identities. While these experiences were subjective experiences, they were also situated within a broader social context that limited the extent to which they could fully embody a sense of self that was consistent with their racialised bodies.

Many of the Korean adoptees I spoke with had so effectively embodied a white cultural identity that they also embodied a white racial identity to the extent that they 'forgot' that their bodies were not white. Therefore, despite being shining examples of cultural assimilation, their 'non-white' bodies prevented them from being seen and accepted as fully assimilated, based on a hegemonic view of national identity (e. g. as Australian, American, Swedish, etc.) as being synonymous with a white racial and cultural identity (Hage 1998). These experiences of 'difference' in their adoptive countries support Vasta's (2013: 211) argument that a shared sense of belonging 'remains meaningless in the face of racism and exclusion by the majority cultural group and by its institutions'.

I have also argued that because of these experiences of 'difference' (experiences of racism in their adoptive countries), adoptees also engage in processes of (re)embodiment. Their experiences of racism directly challenged their embodied identity as white, resulting in a temporary 'out-of-body' experience, during which they were made acutely aware of their perceived Otherness. They were then forced to find ways to (re)embody a white identity, which often happened by renewing efforts to act white or by seeking out other ways to embody an identity that resonated with their sense of self. For many, this meant returning to South Korea to try to (re)embody a Korean identity that they could feel, simply by *being in* Korea and experiencing the place for themselves. Yet, this often proved to be difficult because the inverse happened, whereby their bodies were seen to belong as 'Korean' (if they were not perceived as multi-racial), that is, until cultural and linguistic barriers revealed their 'otherness' in various social interactions.

Overall, the diverse experiences presented here serve to highlight the lived contradictions involved in everyday negotiations and contestations of identity through the lens of embodiment. By understanding adoptees' experiences of identity in this way, we can move beyond previous limitations in the literature of primarily understanding adoptees' identities in terms of identity formation or only viewing return trips to the birth country (e.g. Korea) as something that arises out of an innate need or longing. Instead, I have tried to demonstrate that the process through which identity is experienced or the 'process through which understandings about self and body arise' needs to be understood by viewing the body as central to

those experiences (Budgeon 2003: 35). This views the body as an event, something that is 'continually in the process of becoming – as multiplicities that are never just found but are made and remade' (Budgeon 2003: 50).

Taking this approach also highlights the indeterminate, ambiguous and arbitrary construction of racial, ethnic and cultural boundaries (Bashkow 2004). Korean adoptees challenged what it means to have a white identity in a non-white body, not simply as something that is conceptualised as such but as something that is felt. In their adoptive countries, their racialised bodies as 'non-white' disrupted their lived experiences as someone who feels white, both culturally and racially. In South Korea, their racialised bodies as Korean served to foster a sense of belonging and yet linguistic and cultural barriers prevented them from feeling 'fully' Korean. In both contexts, their racialised bodies failed to mirror their feelings of identity. However, as some adoptees reflected, their goal is not to find a 'complete' self; instead, it is about embodying an identity that is meaningful for them and learning to live with and accept that complexity. It may be as Mol (2002) proposed that the body is indeed multiple, as opposed to 'fragmented' or incomplete, and that it is possible for multiple versions to co-exist. Rather than wrestling with the feeling of being 'white' in an 'Asian' body or trying to feel Korean despite a different cultural upbringing, it is about the difficulty and necessity of embodying an identity that feels comfortable in a space that supports that.

## Notes

- [1] I use 'Korean adoptee' to refer to people who were adopted from South Korea to other countries. There is no intercountry adoption programme from North Korea. Similar to Kim's usage (2010), I sometimes refer to South Korea as Korea for stylistic reasons rather than for political reasons.
- [2] Due to limited funding, I was unfortunately unable to spend additional time in South Korea.
- [3] I use the word 'majority' to refer to those predominantly in positions of power who also have the privilege of being represented as the norm, rather than only the numerical majority.
- [4] I am aware of the contested use of the term 'non-white', which uses white as the standard to which all 'others' are judged. However, I use this strategically in the paper in order to draw attention to Korean adoptees' experiences of 'white' as representing the dominant culture in which they grew up, which is also primarily associated with a white racial identity.
- [5] It is important to point out that although the disjuncture of self and body was created by an objective representation of their body as 'non-white', this paradox of simultaneously being confronted with an 'out-of-body' experience and being forced to (re)embody an Asian body is always a subjective bodily experience, albeit one that is situated within a broader social and cultural context that moulds and impacts on those experiences. This 'out-of-body' experience is not the same as seeing the body and mind as separate, rather it demonstrates how there can be a subjective whole body experience of 'out-of-bodiliness'.

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