Embodying Multiple Selves

Korean Australian Adoptees’ Experiences of Being and Belonging

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This essay is situated in an Australian context and analyzes color blindness, multiculturalism, and racism to locate adoption discourse within both national and global contexts. With almost fifty years of multiculturalism policies, Australia is one of their “longest-standing adopters,” with policies that emphasize civic integration and have been viewed as “politically stable” relative to policies in European countries such as Germany.\(^1\)

Although Banting and Kymlicka argue that multiculturalism policies are not necessarily in retreat, a “discursive retreat from the word ‘multiculturalism’ . . . and rising xenophobia [in Europe] . . . has certainly had other effects” that may impact multiculturalism policies in the long term.\(^2\) Despite its merits, Australian multiculturalism continues to wrestle with tension between universality and particularity, resulting in what Hage calls “misinterpellation.” Within this tension is an inherent contradiction between aspiring toward a color-blind or “postracial” society and recognizing “difference.” This contradiction makes it difficult for adoptees from Korea\(^3\) to talk about experiences of racism and to openly critique the social impact of racial difference in Australian society. Furthermore, it can silence adoptees’ feelings about loss of their Korean selves and about denial of their claims as Australians and transnational subjects.

Research on transracial and transnational adoption within the social sciences has demonstrated that racism is a key issue among nonwhite adoptees who are adopted into white families in Australia and other Western nations.\(^4\) Nevertheless, the social significance of race and experiences of racism are still reported as topics that white adoptive parents
with color-blind racial attitudes and low regard for the importance of ethnic-racial socialization continue to minimize, avoid, or deny when socializing their children.\(^5\) This aversion to talking about or acknowledging the social significance of race is consistent with research about broader issues of color blindness and denial of racism in countries where multiculturalism has been embraced politically and in popular discourses about its identity.\(^6\)

This essay begins by exploring how the emergence of transnational adoption and discourses of “good” adoptive parents and altruism intersect with broader “postracial” discourses that advocate a form of color blindness called “racelessness.”\(^7\) That exploration provides the necessary background for the essay’s focus, which is to analyze adoptees’ experiences of identification and contested belonging, using the concept of misinterpretation\(^8\) and a phenomenological framework to understand their sense of self as transnationally adopted people. Drawing on interviews with adult Korean adoptees who were adopted to Australia, I make three arguments in this analysis. First, “postracial” color-blind approaches that deny the social significance of race, such as “racelessness,” also deny adoptees’ experiences of racism, thus marginalizing their experiences in favor of a cultural approach to adoption that focuses on celebrating the adoptee’s birth culture. Second, tensions between race and culture and between universality and particularity affect adoptees’ sense of self through a process of misinterpretation. Third, processes of identification experienced by transnational adoptee raise ontological questions about multiple selves. I conclude this essay with a call for a more radical ontological acceptance that refuses to choose one state of being over another and instead allows for the coexistence of multiple ontologies.

The Research Design

The research used for this essay is based on nine interviews, conducted in 2006–7, with adult Korean adoptees who were adopted to white families in Australia. Seven women and two men between the ages of twenty and twenty-eight were interviewed.\(^9\) The gender disparity can be explained by disproportionate numbers of girls and boys adopted. According to statistics, 148 girls and 56 boys were adopted from Korea to Australia in 1990–91.\(^10\) As far as the interviewed Korean adoptees in Australia can ascertain from their adoption records, all of them have two parents in Korea.

I used a semistructured interview guide to cover such topics as the
relative significance of “being an adoptee,” as well as experiences of belonging and “difference” in Australia and Korea, of ethnic and cultural identity in everyday social interactions, and of accessing adoption records and searching for Korean family members. As I drew on constructive grounded theory and analyzed the interview and secondary data, coded themes emerged about color blindness, difference and sameness, identity, belonging, and racism. Pseudonyms were used for participants unless they chose to be identified by their actual name. To date, research on Korean adoptees by academic “insiders” within that population is still in the minority in Australia and globally, and my research as a Korean adoptee and scholar contributes by adding rich insights.

From Exclusion to Multiculturalism: Immigration Policies and Transnational Adoption

In an Australian context, policies that address racial, ethnic, and cultural difference have ranged from exclusionary and overtly racist to assimilationist, integrationist, and multicultural. A notable shift from past exclusionary policies was signaled by the end of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 (commonly referred to as the White Australia policy), and in the 1970s, the Australian government began to develop policies that addressed ethnic and cultural diversity as an issue of cultural integration, gradually moving toward a multicultural approach with a focus on the right to maintain cultural identities. The turn toward multiculturalism policy was a significant step toward cultural recognition, compared to an exclusive focus on assimilation.

However, a common thread connecting the almost fifty years of Australian multicultural policies is the continued orientation of the explicitly acknowledged and supported cultural diversity to an imagined “core” national identity as white and “Anglo.” In the Australian government’s 2003–6 multiculturalism policy, under former prime minister John Howard, cultural diversity was to be respected as long as it was “productive diversity” (economically viable) and contributed to the cohesive “harmony” of the nation, defined by a common Australian identity. This policy draws attention to the “contradictions... between a society’s diversity and the more unitary population agendas of the nation state.” As such, some scholars have questioned “whether there is any real difference between ‘integration’ and ‘multiculturalism.’” A process of color blindness also exacerbates the racial privileging of whites and specific struggles
of minorities as exemplified by the Howard government’s decision to institute Harmony Day. To further explain the lack of fundamental change at the heart of policies addressing cultural diversity, Alana Lentin argues that the racial has been relegated to the “backwards past” and replaced with the cultural as symbolic of the progressive future, without fully addressing the racial. Consequently, to be “color-blind” (i.e., purporting to not notice racial difference) is associated with a progressive “postracial” future, in which race does not matter. Color blindness therefore becomes a moralistic question, while also buffering white adoptive parents. In this context, “thinking culturally about difference is the default position for not talking about race and avoiding the charge of racism.”

The recognition of cultural differences is more progressive in the sense that it moved away from trying to completely exclude and ignore those differences both in multiculturalism policy and in approaches to transnational adoptive families. However, cultural difference has become a proxy for racial difference without clearly confronting and engaging with underlying issues that inform contemporary social relations and racial inequalities. In Australia, the ongoing impact of its colonial history and the systematic genocide of Indigenous peoples is pushed to the periphery. The favored approach is to superficially celebrate cultural diversity and use it as an example of Australia’s openness and success as a multicultural country. Conversely, not only is mentioning race and racism associated with a past that is behind “us” (read as white and politically progressive), but the word racism has been associated with and confined to a small cohort of the population (white and politically conservative).

This conversational shift has influenced other sectors, such as education, where talking about culture is viewed as safer, more comfortable, and less likely to disrupt the status quo than talking about race. However, culture can still be essentialized in similar ways to race, by slotting people into defined static cultural categories or taking a more “color-blind” approach, through which cultural differences are ignored based on the assertion that everyone should be treated the same. Both approaches make it difficult to talk about race and racism, either by focusing only on cultural differences or by flattening any kind of difference to focus on sameness.

Transnational Adoption in Australia—a Historical Perspective

The tensions between “postracial” idealism and the very real experiences of racism and systemic inequalities are reflected in transnational adoption discourse. Transnational adoption emerged as a practice in Australia
around the same time that measures were being taken to remove the more explicit forms of racial discrimination in Australia’s immigration policy, with the end of the Dictation Test in 1958 and into the 1960s and 1970s. The first transnational adoptions to Australia began as a result of a number of global and local factors, including wartime separation and displacement of children from their families. Influential changes within Australia included changes to domestic adoption policy and law reform, as well as the introduction of new reproductive technologies, such as female contraception.27

Particularly in the context of the Korean War and the Vietnam War, child “rescue” narratives began to dominate adoption discourse. Those narratives were based on a dichotomy between the positive (mostly economic) attributes of Australia and other Western countries, which were reinforced by narrow negative portrayals of Vietnam and Korea as simply war-torn and poor.28 Although I am certainly not contesting that both countries were devastated by the atrocities of war or that children who were highly vulnerable suffered greatly as a result, I am drawing attention to the simplistic dichotomy between “good” and “bad” countries and “good” (suitable) and “bad” (unsuitable) parents as a justification for the adoption of children.29 As Forkert demonstrated through a historical analysis of Australian domestic adoption, a representational shift in the Australian domestic adoption context in the early 1900s began to portray adoptive parents in a more favorable light by re-presenting adoption as “sentimental adoption” and focusing on “love,” rather than economic support, as the binding tie between nonbiological kin.30 This significant attitudinal shift toward adoption and adoptive parents within domestic contexts presented prospective adoptive parents seeking to adopt children transnationally in a favorable light, demonstrated in the report *Overseas Adoption in Australia.*31

Around the time that transnational adoptions started to overtake domestic ones, Australia’s immigration policy began to support increased openness to racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, which gradually extended beyond immigration policy, to a concern with recognizing and integrating cultural diversity through multiculturalism policy. This call for increased openness to migration and to Australia’s existing diversity was reflected in a 1973 parliamentary speech by Al Grassby (previous minister for immigration), in which he used tropes of the family to evoke acceptance of cultural diversity.

The concept I prefer, the “family of the nation,” is one that ought to convey an immediate and concrete image to all. In a family the overall attachment to the common good need not impose a same-
ness on the outlook or activity of each member, nor need these members deny their individuality and distinctiveness in order to seek a superficial and unnatural conformity. The important thing is that all are committed to the good of all.32

Emphasizing that the Australian nation, if viewed as a “family,” need not all be the same to be united as one, Grassby highlighted the importance of openness toward ethnic and cultural diversity. This integrationist framing of the nation as composed of people who are different but united as one arguably influenced subsequent multiculturalism policies that focused on “unity in diversity.”33 It signaled a call to recognize Australia’s multicultural present and future.

If we also understand transnational adoption within the context of the development of multiculturalism policy, the “openness” that predominantly white adoptive parents were seen to demonstrate by adopting Asian babies into their homes and creating families that were not based on biogenetic ties contributed to a positive representation of adoptive parents. As Hübinette argues, “In this era of decolonization, antiracism, and civil rights movements—reinforced by left-liberating ideology prescribing multiculturalism—international adoption quickly came to be perceived as an antiracist and progressive act.”34 In this context, I argue, adoptive parents were considered not only “good” and altruistic but also, by extension, not racist, due to a conflation of morality with racist attitudes (i.e., the idea that well-meaning good people in general cannot also deploy and reproduce racist actions, language, etc.). This strong moralistic positioning of adoptive parents as unquestionably “good” as well as “antiracist” is reinforced through a discourse of “love.”35 As recent research of Australian adoptive parents demonstrates, adoptive parents expressed that “desires to adopt were founded upon various notions of the love they had for ‘any’ children and their love for, or at the very least, sense of openness towards, ‘other’ people and cultures rather than infertility alone.”36 Because notions of love rather than emphases on biogenetic connections had become the “glue” that binds adoptive kinship, love trumped attention to racial and cultural differences between adoptive parents and adoptees. For the adoptive parents who were interviewed for that research, “issues of race and difference were marginalized in favor of luck, love for culture and the maintenance of power differentials as invisible.”37

Therefore, within adoption discourse accompanied by a multicultural turn that celebrates culture while masking race, love not only acts to bind adoptive families but is also “blind.” Because of the obvious racial differ-
ences between adoptive parents and adoptees, the idea of being “color-blind” to those differences is not practically possible. However, by focusing on culture instead of race, as reflected in Australian multiculturalism, and by focusing on the child’s birth culture mainly through consumption (e.g., food) rather than engaging issues of race and racism, adoptive parents are able to take a “racelessness” approach while still recognizing cultural difference, albeit in ways that “require minimal risk or meaningful interaction within Korean cultural contexts.”38 As Arlo Kempf explains, “racelessness” refers to:

The denial of the relevance of race and . . . acts as midwife for discursive safe spaces in which the silencing of issues concerning race proceeds in service of the claim that it is possible and even moral, to not see it.39

Within transracial families, the common adage that love is color-blind, despite the racial differences between adoptive families and adoptees, is upheld as a moral position to take. As Willing and Fronek found in Australian adoptive parents’ perceptions of adoption information sessions held by government departments, any potentially negative association with adoption, including topics such as racism, was often seen as deterring access to adoption rather than as a critical issue that many transnational and transracial adoptees face.40 In the education sessions, some of the adoptive parents did not accept it when “love was said not to be enough.”41 Consistent with a postracial outlook, “racism was readily dismissed as an issue of the past, not relevant to adopted children, despite the contemporary Australian political climate concerning refugees, asylum seekers and First Australians.”42 The combination of an apolitical love (i.e., adoptive parents simply love other people’s children) and a postracial moral stance serves the best interests of adoptive parents, because they are able to unproblematically claim someone else’s child as their own by focusing on love as the ties that bind, while ignoring the global racial politics and inequalities that inform transnational adoption.

Critically, this aversion to talking about racism, the active dismissal of racism’s contemporary relevance, and the replacement of discussions of race with discussions of culture in Australian society more broadly all inform the extent to which race and racism are taken seriously as issues that many transracial adoptees face. Moreover, if issues of race, such as experiences of racism, are presented as undermining the idea that love is blind and is what binds the family (particularly in the absence of biogene-
tic ties), not only is it difficult for adoptees to talk about racism as a lived experience, but “race talk” can be seen as a direct challenge to those adoptive ties. Furthermore, as I argue in this essay, race denial or cultural recognition within Australian multiculturalism, which is also reproduced in adoptive families, affects adoptees’ sense of self and sense of belonging in Australia.

Processes of Misinterpellation

In this section, I turn to theoretical concepts of interpellation and misinterpellation, to examine the tension between race denial and cultural recognition as evidenced through Korean adoptees’ experiences of being and belonging.43 For Ghassen Hage, the concept of misinterpellation describes a process whereby someone’s subjective positioning is read by or interpellated by someone else in a way that contradicts how the person being “read” understands that positioning.44 Specifically, the person who is misinterpellated is denied universality through the process of specifying presumed nonuniversality. For example, research about transnational transracial adoptees’ everyday experiences of discrimination in Sweden show that their racialized otherness (read as nonwhite and therefore non-Swedish) takes precedence despite their being culturally Swedish.45 Their racialized bodies challenge the imagined racialized homogeneity of who can be Swedish. Similarly, experiences of misinterpellation in a multicultural Australian society draw attention to the deeply embedded assumptions about who is allowed to feel that they unconditionally belong in Australia. For transnational transracial adoptees in Australia, their right to vacillate between different identities is denied in the process of being misinterpellated. At stake for adoptees, I argue, is not only their right to vacillate between Korean, Australian, Korean Australian, adoptee, or other identity categories but also a deep embodied sense of being in the world.

A discomforting scenario described to me by an interviewee named Mia illustrates the process of being misinterpellated.

The other night when I was going out, a [white] lady at the tram stop said to me, “Wow, you have beautiful eyes! What’s your orientation?” It made me feel really uncomfortable, but I think that sometimes people don’t understand how it can feel being asked such personal questions. I feel that it emphasizes the fact that we “look different.” Isn’t Australia supposed to be a multicultural country? I don’t go ’round asking Caucasians what their orientation is.
According to Hage, to be misinterpellated is to be racially “interpellated as belonging to a collectivity” and then to discover unexpectedly not only that your imagined belonging to that collectivity is denied but that you were never considered to belong to the collectivity imagined as the universal “we” and, instead, are marked as belonging to the universal “them.” Mia believed that her “difference” within a multicultural country like Australia should be the norm and, therefore, just “like everybody else,” yet she was marked as racially “different” by the white woman’s comment about Mia’s eyes.

The sense of injustice that Mia’s experience evoked and her interpretation of it draw attention to tensions within Australian multiculturalism. If Australia’s national image has been officially reconstructed by government policy as a “multicultural nation” rather than a “white nation,” the fact of cultural diversity as core to what it means to be Australian should be the standard norm. However, as I discussed earlier, the construct “culture” has simply replaced the construct “race” as a way of describing “difference.” Not only is this new description ineffective for challenging racial hierarchies that continue to privilege those categorized as “white,” but it also masks a privileged white Anglo cultural dominance within Australian society. The “multicultural nation” is still the “white nation,” with an imagined white Anglo core that defines how “cultural diversity” or “them” is incorporated into the “we’ of the nation.” In other words, as Ahmed describes, “racial difference, already construed as ethnic difference, is redefined in terms of cultural diversity, that is, in terms that erase any distinctions between groups.” However, a new focus on “cultural diversity,” which tries to cover up the social relevance of race through a “racelessness” approach, does not make racial difference any less relevant in social interactions, nor does it make those group distinctions any less distinct. As Mia experienced, her body was read as “not white” by the white woman on the tram, which was misinterpellated as “not us.” Other examples of being misinterpellated include questions or comments that suggest someone must be from somewhere other than “here,” based on a particular racialized attribute. In an interview, Hannah explained that being asked where one is from brings up different negative feelings of being patronized or perceived as “a little stupid” or “inferior. Mia’s and Hannah’s observations suggest that in a presumably postracial context, noticing racial difference is directly at odds with Australia’s multiculturalism and, by extension, “racist,” due to a tendency to conflate racialization with racism.

However, noticing of racial difference and being asked to locate perceived difference were not always interpreted by interviewees as negative or unsettling experiences. For example, Young Mi explained,
If I have to identify myself for practical reasons, like curious people, I just say. I don’t have a problem with telling people I’m Korean or Asian. It’s pretty straightforward for me.

Nate similarly said,

Oh yeah, people ask and I just tell them straight up that I was from South Korea and I’m adopted, so I’m Korean by blood but I was raised in Australia. It’s more just a fact. If they’re curious, they’re curious.

For Young Mi and Nate, people noticing their racial difference and asking their origin was not an issue. For others, like Hannah and Mia, pointing out their racial difference made them feel like their sense of belonging to a multicultural Australia was being contested.

Another Korean adoptee, Pia, explained in an interview that when she was growing up, her parents always told her to respond to questions about her origin by saying, “I am Australian.” As a result, she said, “I never felt Korean or wanted to be identified as being Korean.” About visiting Korea for the first time as a nine-year-old with her mother, Pia said, “I remember saying to Mum that I didn’t like it in Korea because I didn’t stand out.” In Korea, Pia’s presence among other people who looked like her made her invisible compared to her experience of being marked as “different” in Australia.

Pia’s conflicting feelings support Hage’s observations that people perceived as “different” or “not white” who do not like being asked about their origin because it marks them as “different” may also be offended by not being asked, because it ignores their “difference.” He explains that the main issue in the process of misinterpellation is the freedom to vacillate between categories of universality and particularity, and the categories themselves are not necessarily contentious.

When people aspire to integrate in a new cultural group, or choose to continue to be part of group they were born into, they do not just fear being particularized and having their universality denied, and they do not just fear being universalized and having their particularity denied. They fear both, and being “fixed” in both. That is, they fear not being able to have a space where they can vacillate at will between the universal and the particular.
Similarly, for Korean adoptees, the key issue at the heart of such encounters is not necessarily the denial of universality but the potential denial of both the universal and the particular. This universality may shift meaning depending on the context: in Australia, it might be the desire to be accepted as unquestionably Australian; in Korea, it might be the desire to be accepted as unquestionably Korean. In both contexts, it is also important that adoptees can be regarded as unquestionably fitting into both those categories of belonging, so the categories need to be flexible enough to include multiple belongings. Pia explained,

＞＞＞ After going to Korea, I realized it was okay to be more than one “thing” and that . . . embracing my Korean heritage is not pushing away my Australian upbringing. Before the trip, I really didn’t see it was possible for my “Korean” and “Australian” identities to coexist. Pia’s realization that she does not have to choose between Korean or Australian but can be both reflects the need to vacillate between different identities.

As Amy adamantly stated in an interview, it is also important to have the ability to vacillate without being defined and confined by bounded identities.

＞＞＞ I don’t always think of myself as just Australian, but I don’t think of myself as Korean Australian. Like, I hate, I really actually hate that hyphenated Korean-Australian or Malaysian-Australian, or—what is it?—Greek-Australian, you know. I hate that. I hate the stereotyping of people into something, because I suppose when you go Korean-Australian, it automatically gives someone a reference or a stereotype to bring up, and maybe that’s not always the case . . . , you know, for that individual person.

Rejecting a self that can be easily categorized as one thing, Amy contended that hybridized identity markers, represented by a hyphen to describe people’s identity as more than one thing, are another form of “knowing” someone and potentially stereotype them based on that knowing. Amy's perspective is similar to that of other people with transnational identities that resist a simple hyphen. For example, Carruthers argues that Turkish Australians in Sydney challenge the hyphen through the use of digital media and technologies that enable instantaneous connections with Turkey.54
Through these connections, he explains, the ethnic minority status of “Turkish’ on the head of the hyphen in Turkish-Australian” is contested, and these transnational connections open new ways of being “Turkish” that are not locally bounded or marginalized as an “ethnic minority community” in multicultural Australia.55 Rather than Turkish being an identity tacked onto another identity or an identity contained in relation to an Australian national identity, argues Carruthers, “Turkishness is far more sophisticated and uncontainable than the ‘symbolic ethnicity’ one might expect to find on the other end of a hyphenated multicultural identity.”56

The experiences of the interviewees I have cited challenge official Australian multiculturalism policy that seeks to “include” cultural difference while still maintaining a distinction between the universal “we” as Australians and the particular “them” as cultural difference. For transnational adoptees, a sense of self or being in the world needs to allow for vacillating between identities, rather than viewing identity as, for example, Korean or Australian or even Korean Australian. The multicultural approach to “cultural difference,” which tends to involve celebrating and consuming material culture or what is imagined to be culturally representative, contributes little to understanding more complex modes of being and belonging.

Embodied Identities and Ontological Questions

In this section, I argue that the experience of misinterpellation raises ontological questions about transnational adoptees’ existence in the world, which is much more than moving between or the addition and subtraction of different hyphenated identities. At stake for transnational adoptees is not only the need to vacillate in a process of identification between identity categories (e.g., Korean, Australian, Korean Australian, adoptee) but also the ability to feel a deep embodied sense of being in the world. First, I briefly explore this process of embodiment by drawing on phenomenological theories. Then, I propose that the conflicted senses of self and belonging may be understood as an ontological matter.

Because Korean adoptees in the present study were socialized into white families, many have embodied a white racial identity.57 Objectively, Korean adoptees know they are not white, but one does not experience the world or one’s self simply through a cognitive lens. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work on phenomenology and perception argues, both psychological and physiological explanations of the body “treat the body as an objective body, and thus get the experience wrong in a fundamental way.”58
Rather than a Cartesian duality between consciousness and the objective body, the central premise of Merleau-Ponty’s work maintains, “to be conscious is to be embodied.”59 Korean adoptees’ feeling white or wishing that they were white does not arise out of a separation between a conscious imagining of the body as white and an objectified body as not white. Instead, it arises from a bodily knowing, a sense that a white body matches with their perception of the world to which they have been socialized to feel they belong. In an interview, Erin explained her feelings about her sense of belonging.

I wanted to be like everyone else I knew. I became racist out of my own fear to accept who I really was and couldn’t handle being around other Asians or even being referred to as Asian. When I started going to university, I became friends with other Asians and finally started to accept who I really was.

Wanting to be recognized as being the same as other white people she knew growing up, Erin developed a negative understanding of her Asian appearance, as a form of internal racism. Only when she started to become friends with people from Asian backgrounds at university did she begin to develop a more positive association with “being Asian.”

Many Korean transnational adoptees do not walk around consciously aware of their body as objectively Asian in appearance, which makes experiences that mark their body as different even more surprising and potentially traumatizing. They interact with the world with the “bodily schema” (Merleau-Ponty) or “skills” (Heidegger) they have learned as people who are culturally Australian, and they thus bring the world into being through their bodies as they interact with and in the world. When they experience an incident that interrupts their embodied sense of being in the world, they become aware of their “otherness.” In Martin Heidegger’s concept of “being-in” the world, “unless something goes wrong, our skillful know-how usually is entirely inexplicit.”60 Thus, to be identified as Other, represented only by their objectified body, serves to disrupt transnational adoptees’ embodied sense of being in the world.

If we take experiences of racism as an example of when adoptees are misinterpellated, it is not just a problem of contested belonging or a question of their identity; it also raises deep ontological questions of their sense of being in the world. Oliver J. T. Harris and John Robb describe ontology as “a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is: what kinds of beings, processes, and qualities could potentially exist and
how these relate to each other.”61 For adoptees, these experiences of misinterpretation allude to a different sense of being in the world prior to their adoption. Before they were adopted, they once existed as a different kind of self in their country of origin, and then, through a Western process of adoption, that self was cut off—they were given new parents, a new name, a new identity as Australian, and, ultimately, a new sense of being in a different reality.

A Western form of adoption that remakes the adopted child through “kinning” processes does not allow for multiple ontologies to coexist.62 Sarah’s reflection on her sense of self describes this ontological struggle.

If I was to be acknowledged as Korean, ideally I would like that to not involve any reference to adoption, but to [Korean] being a legitimate part of my heritage. I want to have the cultural literacy of a Korean who has grown up in Korea with a Korean family. In short, I want to be an “authentic” Korean.

Acknowledging that some people find dichotomies like “authentic/nonauthentic” or “real/fake” offensive, Sarah explained, “I don’t mean it that way.” Her desire to be read as “authentic” may reflect a desire for her sense of her preadoption self to exist in the same “authentic” way as her sense of self in Australia—a life, she added, that she would “never exchange or wish away.” She reflected that due to the adoption process that cut those ties, to exist as someone who existed prior to adoption and, at the same time, as someone who was adopted is an “issue that can never be resolved and a want that can never be fulfilled.” Sarah’s self as she was in Korea is still a part of her sense of self as someone who has grown up in Australia. However, because she was adopted, the possibilities of that life in Korea and what it could have been continue as an imagined sense of self rather than as an “authentic,” realized self.

Despite the disjuncture that the adoption process creates between different ways of being in the world, the existence of multiple ontologies comes to the forefront particularly when accessing adoption files or when going to Korea.63 Steph explained that going back to Korea and finding out information about herself before she was adopted to Australia helped to bring that previous self to life. She said that it was important “even just finding out the time I was born and that my mother went to the clinic with her sister. I have an Aunty.” Such information is evidence of who adoptees were prior to adoption, and through a process of discovering more about
that life, the preadoptive and adoptive worlds come to coexist in unexpected ways.

This deep ontological sense of being in the world is more than just having different identities. The experiences and perspectives of adoptees like Sarah and Steph signify a desire to be two selves at once. However, this idea of multiple ways of being does not fit within a particular adoption framework that does not allow for multiple selves, let alone the existence of multiple mothers and fathers without distinguishing them in reductive ways (i.e., birth mother, adoptive mother). Like Todd, who said his sense of belonging is as “Korean adopted” rather than as completely Australian or completely Korean, Sarah conceded that the tension between her Korean self and Australian self “seems to be another unavoidable and unresolvable part of being an adoptee.” To understand adoptees’ experiences of being and belonging, we need to understand it in terms of processes of identification and to regard these processes as arising from a deep ontological question about who adoptees are in the world.

Conclusion

Multiculturalism policies that focus on the inclusion of cultural difference without fully engaging with the history of race and racism and their contemporary significance will continue to favor a core white identity to which adoptees are marginalized. Against systemic whiteness in Australia, wherein those in positions of power are predominantly white and viewed in “neutral” terms as “Australian,” other groups, including Korean and Asian adoptees, are judged as only partially worthy of inclusion and to be stripped of complex differences, with even “celebratory” expressions of different identities set and constrained within a subordinate relationship to power. Transnational adoption discourse is situated within this broader multicultural context of tense yet invisible processes of selective inclusion and erasure. Consequently, there is a tendency for adoptive families to avoid discussions of race, racism, and such difficult issues as the global politics and inequalities of transnational adoption. Aversion to these important issues significantly marginalizes adoptees’ experiences as racialized subjects in countries such as Australia and as transnational subjects whose lives and sense of being in the world were replaced with different lives. Experiences of misinterpellation, most notably during racist incidents as observed in this analysis, highlight complex processes of
identification that require the ability to vacillate between different identities that engage both universal and particular ways of being.

Ability to vacillate, while necessary, can also be experienced as an uncomfortable space, particularly in situations requiring the misinterpreted subject (Korean adoptees) to “pull him/herself together . . . to maintain their sense of togetherness in the face of others.”64 For adoptees, this act of pulling oneself together again can raise ontological questions of their sense of being in the world, in terms of their selves prior to and after adoption. Rather than viewing adoptees’ sense of being in the world as separating two selves or including one self at the expense of another, I propose that those selves can coexist, even as they remain blurred and unresolved. As Harris and Robb point out, “an emphasis on the blurred boundaries between ontologies is also a far more accurate description of phenomenological experience.”65 In a multicultural society, the ability to vacillate between multiple identities is required. Also required is “a space that allows for a multiplicity of realities to coexist together . . . a space which allows for a multiplicity of ontologies.”66

In resisting dominant modes of recognition and belonging, racialized subjects in multicultural societies can refuse to be translated or interpolated into any one category to suit a limited celebratory multiculturalism only allowing “difference” to exist so long as it does not threaten the “we” toward which the “difference” is oriented. As Hall argues, “We need to be able to insist that rights of citizenship and the incommensurabilities of cultural difference are respected and that the one is not made a condition of the other” (Hall’s italics).67 Similarly, adoptees can refuse to choose one self over another or to subsume a preadoption self under a hyphenated identity (e.g., Korean-Australian-adoptee) to suit a celebration of adoption as an example of the success of a “postracial” multiculturalism (e.g., “rainbow families”). Required instead is a more radical acceptance of belonging that allows for the coexistence of multiple ontologies, not only multiple identities but also multiple ways of being in the world.

NOTES

2. Banting and Kymlicka, 592.
3. For stylistic purposes, I use the designation “Korea” to refer to South Korea throughout this essay.


9. Interviews were conducted over e-mail over several months or in person, depending on participants’ geographical location or format preference for talking about their experiences.


19. Harmony Day, held on March 21, was started under Howard in 1999 to focus on celebrating cultural diversity, masking that the day is the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.


30. Joshua Forkert, “‘Lacerated Feelings and Heart-Burnings’: A Historical Background to Adoption in Australia,” in Cuthbert and Spark, Other People’s Children, 23–36.


37. Willing and Fronek, 1138.


40. Willing and Fronek, “Constructing Identities.”

41. Willing and Fronek, 1138.

42. Willing and Fronek, 1139.


44. Hage, “Affective Politics.”


47. Hage, 122.

48. Lentin, “Replacing ‘Race.’”

49. Hage, White Nation; Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 95.


52. Hage, “Affective Politics.”

53. Hage, 117.


57. Jessica Walton, “Feeling It.”


59. Käufer and Chemero, Phenomenology, 100.

60. Käufer and Chemero, 60.


63. Walton, “Feeling It.”

64. Hage, “Affective Politics,” 126.

65. Harris and Robb, “Multiple Ontologies,” 671.


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