Turning the white gaze: counter-storytelling as a decolonial praxis of transracial and transnational adoption

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Candidates' Declaration

I declare that the thesis entitled *'Turning the white gaze: counter-storytelling as a decolonial praxis of transracial and transnational adoption'* and submitted for the degree of Master of International Development is the result of my own independent research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis (or any part thereof) has not been submitted for a degree to this or any other university or institution.

Signed:

Samara James

Date: 12 June 2023

Abstract

The 'rescue-saviour' narratives about transnational adoption that once served as comforting are treated in this thesis as manufactured myths. Myths that have erased the nuance and complexity of transnational and transracial adoptee experiences and identity by appropriating and normalising adoptees as both 'pitiful orphans' (children in need of rescuing from poverty, conflict, or inadequate care in 'developing' countries), and 'honorary whites' (perfectly assimilated minorities), with their adoptive parents, communities and adoption organisations often seen as 'benevolent saviours' (with adoption as always and only a 'good' thing).

I have titled this research, 'Turning the white gaze', drawing from my own process of getting out from and attempting to stare down the white gaze that surrounds, influences and has taken hold of my heart and mind (also described by some adoptees as coming out of the 'white closet' or 'adoption fog'). This is a journey of rediscovery and examination; unpacking how white colonial imaginations, narratives and discourses of nationalism, Christianity, racism, sexism and classism, relate to and shape an adoptee's identity and reality. Like many transracial and transnational adoptees, I am caught between identities, families, cultures, nationalities and languages.

This research is not only personal, but also political – and attempted through a decolonial reflexive lens. Beginning with an examination of how we are classified into different worlds, and the longings, illusions and contradictions that arise from living in multiple worlds, using a critical reflexive ethnography: unpacking the narratives that have characterised and normalised my experiences growing up in Australia as an adoptee of colour, how returning to Korea led to more questions than answers, and how contemplating parenthood reopened old wounds about family-making, identity and belonging.

In this, I also draw on a narrative style juxtaposing between my lifeworld and linking this to literature and analysis at the same time. As Nadarajah (2022, p.158) points out:

> The process of the paper is a reflexive encounter with the ontological and epistemological journey of the term 'coolie'; and the way it is contesting, negotiating and constituting its own transoceanic connection to its identity'

Here, I work through the words "orphan" and "adoption"; and likewise, my experiences will be compared and critiqued against broader adoption literature, before linking to other narrative and creative productions from South Korean adoptees, seen as forms of self-determination and a move towards a decolonisation of the concept and lived experiences of adoptees.

Contents

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

Intercountry adoption is often a contentious issue and has sometimes become highly politicised in Australia (Fronek and Tilse, 2010; Murphy et al., 2010; Quartly, 2012) and other countries (Kim and Smith, 2009). From a history of child abuse, trafficking, forgery and corruption, we are now witnessing a decline in intercountry adoption, with countries like the Netherlands who have entirely suspended their transnational adoption programs after an investigation revealed systematic abuses and illegal adoptions (BBC, 2021). Whether this signals the collapse of the international adoption industry or not, research and critiques of adoption need to continue, as the end of transnational adoption does not mean the end of the adoptee experience or the need to interrogate the (ir)rationalities of family-making industries that encourage the break-down and removal of children from one family, to provide ways to make another—a perspective missing in the literature and what the research seeks to explore.

As an adopted Korean, I had always accepted my adoption as only a 'good' thing and something I always thought I would do for another orphaned child by becoming an adoptive parent. However, when I began to investigate South Korea's adoption program, my understanding of adoption (and of myself) began to blur as I uncovered the apparatus that is the transnational adoption system: from human rights issues with forged and erased identities to the trafficking of children, and the exploitation of 'third-world' single mothers, sustained by an unregulated multi-billion dollar for-profit adoption economy - also known as transnational adoption industrial complex (Joyce, 2013). At this time, the circumstances of my adoption came into question, and now, as pro- and anti-adoption advocates, including adoptees

themselves, fight to maintain or dismantle the practice, I wonder what that means for past, present and future orphans and adopted people.

As a researcher and adoptee, this raised significant questions about orphanhood and adoption: did we need rescuing? What does a better life mean, and by whose standards? South Korea is one of the world's strongest economies, so why do they need Western families to care for their children? Given that Korea has the lowest fertility rate worldwide, why are they sending so many children overseas? Is adoption really about finding families for babies or about finding babies for families? What happens to children if intercountry adoption is dismantled? Will a social welfare system take its place? From adoptive families, adoption agencies, child welfare groups, humanitarian organisations, and government, adoption discourse remains caught in the dichotomy of pro- and anti-adoption. I look to academic research to see how adoptees unpack these questions, but their voices are missing from the literature.

I have chosen to deploy a decolonial methodology in my research to uncover and centre the voices of adoptees themselves, whose lived and living experiences will be treated as a form of expertise that speaks to the nuance and complexity of adoption; and draw attention to where they are positioned within patriarchal-colonial-capitalist systems of power. The research will begin with a reflexive exploration of the longings, illusions and conflicts I embody as a Korean adoptee, as a critical reflexive ethnography. I will then unpack the narratives that have characterised and normalised my adoption by comparing my experiences of growing up in Australia as an adoptee of colour, returning to Korea as a 'gyopo', and the reopening of old wounds as I contemplate notions of family, identity and belonging; critiqued against broader adoption literature and other narrative and creative works from transracial and transnational adoptees, viewed as expressions of self-determination.

1.2 Literature Review

International adoption (also referred to as transnational adoption or intercountry adoption) is argued to have begun between South Korea and the West following the Korean War. Sometimes named the "Quiet Migration", it has sent more than 200,000 Korean children overseas. The expansion and growth of the international adoption industry over the past 70 years has been grounded in raced and paternal narratives that promoted adoption as humanitarianism, social justice, and a moral imperative to remove children from their natal homes and families (often from the 'developing' world) and to place them with adoptive (primarily white) families in Western countries (Joyce, 2013). These narratives have continued to normalise and characterise adopted children as "pitiful orphans", adoptive families as "benevolent rescuers", and adult adoptees as "perfectly assimilated migrants" (Park Nelson, 2016). These are reproduced in national narratives in both South Korean and American mainstream media (Donnell, 2019) to portray their respective countries in such self-congratulatory terms that it "obscures the dark side of their histories, problematically glorifies American militarism, oversimplifies assimilation as a signifier of positive adoptive placements and tokenises adoptees as exemplary embodiments of multiculturalism" (Park Nelson, 2016). These narratives can also be attributed to an overrepresentation of adoptive parents' perspectives and adoptees as perpetual children in academic literature rather than adults with individual agency (Scarvelis, Crisp and Goldingay, 2015; Walton, 2012)

Race, ethnicity and culture are critical pillars of adoptee identity formation (Hübinette, 2007; Walton, 2015). However, many adoptees negotiate complex realities from the transracial nature of their adoptions. This is conceptualised by Lee (2003) as the 'transracial adoption paradox', which speaks to the 'contradictory' experiences that adoptees embody from being treated as both a racial 'minority' and as part of the white 'majority' culture. Or in other words,

adoptees embody race in both visible, invisible or 'hyper(in)visible' ways (Gustafsson, 2021) – a social position that generates a different experience to other migrants, as the pervasive influence of whiteness is often internalised to the point that adoptees come to view themselves as, or aspire to be 'white' (Hübinette, 2007; Walton, 2015).

This paradox could be linked to a broader theory around the politics of colour blindness: the extent adoptive families, friends, peers, and institutions reject, dismiss, avoid or silence the racialised and racist experiences adoptees face; and where adoptees are left to feel an obligation (often unwittingly) to resist, reject or deny their racial differences to protect against stigmatisation, objectification, alienation and marginalisation in their white majority adoptive families and communities (Park Nelson, 2016). A rejection that has a double-sided effect, as many adoptees go to great lengths to reunite with their birth families and natal cultures (Docan-Morgan, 2014; Koskinen and Böök, 2019; Son, 2019) but also feel 'inauthentic' or as an 'outsider' with people of the same ethnicity, culture or race (Hübinette, 2007), generating a second layer of non-belonging. A topic that deserves to be further researched or examined in academic literature (Nguyen, Marijane Hsiao-ling, 2015) and something I seek to explore.

1.3 Theoretical framework

I position my work within decolonial theories, drawing on the work of Anzaldúa (1987, 1996, 2015), Lugones (2007, 2010), Mignolo (2012), Moraga and Anzaldúa (2021) and Nadarajah (2007, 2015, 2021, 2022); whose research aims to disrupt the continued influence of Western hegemony in social theory. Drawing from this as both an adopted Korean and 'insider' researcher, I will challenge Western adoption ideology and the pervasive influence of whiteness that shapes and characterises adoption through the use of 'decolonial reflexivity' - a process of looking at yourself and where you are located on both sides of colonial conquest

and decolonial insubordination – to contribute to the decolonial praxis of transnational adoption. Like the broader practice of social science, it has privileged the questions, experiences, and pieces of knowledge from Western perspectives at the expense of their 'non-Western subjects' or counterparts (Moosavi, 2023).

I combine the decolonial framework with adoptee-centred research: Dobbs (2011), Donnel (2019), Gustafsson (2020, 2021), Higgins and Stoker (2011), Hübinette (2004, 2004b, 2005, 2007, 2009), Joyce (2013), Kim (2010), Mckee (2019), Oh (2015), Park Nelson (2016), Walton (2012, 2015). Inspired by Australian Indigenous and Feminist standpoint theories, where one's social position and 'embodied knowledge' (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) can be deployed in research as the 'subject/knower of inquiry' (Smith, 1999) to re-draw epistemological boundaries and include groups traditionally excluded from the production of knowledge (Kokushkin, 2014), at the site of constant struggle, reflection and debate (Harding, 2004); an ongoing project waged against dominant patriarchal-colonial conceptual frameworks and practices of the social sciences (Coburn, Stewart-Harawira, Moreton-Robinson, and Sefa Dei, 2013).

1.4 Methodology

At this intersection of the personal, political, and cultural, I will use a critical reflexive ethnography, drawing on the work of scholars and ethnographers such as Anzaldua (1987 and 2015); Behar (1996); Nadarajah (2007); Nadarajah et al. (2016, 2022); who approach critical reflexivity in their work to promote epistemic plurality through the crossing of disciplinary, cultural and linguistic borders. Critical reflexive ethnography is a qualitative research method that is not only analytical of issues of power, knowledge, and position but also transformative as it embraces multiple perspectives against

dominant discourses seen as being the 'right' way to think, see, talk or act about a particular situation in society; beginning with your own episteme and knowledge forms.

For Nadarajah, Burgos Martinez, Su, and Grydehøj (2022), the authors subject their approaches to self-criticism through critical reflexivity to position island studies scholars within the colonial praxis of island studies (the very systems they seek to destabilise): "It is less about changing what island studies scholars see than it is about asking them to be aware of how they see. It is less about relitigating the old questions of 'What is an island? Why do islands matter?' then it asks, 'Who is seeing islands, and from where?" Like Nadarajah et al. (2022), I will deploy critical reflexivity to locate Western hegemony in adoption and within myself. Furthermore, I seek to uncover and re-position the voices of adoptees in academic research to share our standpoints as experts in our lives. Drawing on Anzaldúa's (1987) borderlands epistemology, transnational adoptees will be perceived as afforded a particular perspective from our 'hybrid identities' and from being exposed to the arbitrary nature of all social categories and the longings, illusions and contradictions that arise from living in two worlds.

In this, I also deploy Anzaldúa's (1987) and Behar's (1996) narrative style, juxtaposing my lifeworld and linking this to literature and analysis simultaneously through critical discourse analysis. I will blend my lived experience with broader research and creative expressions by other adoptees as a form of 'humanistic anthropology'. Like Anzaldúa (1987), the act of writing assists in understanding and expressing the complexities of identity formation and the development of decolonial selfhood. A type of vulnerable writing also inspired by Ruth Behar's (1996) 'vulnerable observer' where an intersubjective, 'Self-Self ethnography' can be explored beyond the insularity of Western adoption ideology, a form of anthropology that is lived and written in a personal voice in hopes that it will lead toward greater depth of understanding to attain "the most profound ethnographic empathy possible".

Chapter 2. A Brief History of Transnational Korean Adoption

2.1 Orphan theology

In the 1950's, during a time of intense social upheaval, international adoption came to South Korea; spearheaded by Bertha and Harry Holt, an evangelical couple from rural Oregon, who adopted eight Korean War orphans before beginning their own ad hoc adoption services. Adoption became inextricably linked to Christianity, with numerous Christian agencies joining the Holts, and instituting a specific brand of Christian adoption and an 'orphan theology'. Adoption tapped into powerful metaphors in many evangelical churches, as many followers viewed themselves as being adopted by God; adoption became a way for conservative Christians to show their faith and do 'the Lord's work' and spread the gospel by 'saving children in both body and soul' (as every orphan was seen as a potential born again Christian). Adoption also provided a way for evangelical churches to get involved in social justice, by helping poor people without challenging or changing their stances on the other social issues such as abortion; which adoption also served as a solution to longstanding debates over who would raise the children (Joyce, 2013).

Much is written about how South and North Korea took dramatically different social, economic, political (and cultural) paths following the end of fighting in the Korean War in 1953. One of which was international adoption, which began with primarily mixed-race Amerasian and Eurasian babies of Korean mothers and U.S or British soldiers – who, like 'mail-order babies' - were chosen based on age, racial makeup and physical appearance by primarily white, Christian fundamentalist adoptive families (Joyce, 2013). The Holt's ad hoc adoption service would then transport children to the U.S. on chartered missionary flights, taking Korean children by the planeload from a poorly understood Korean warfront to their new adoptive countries. The conditions were so poor that many children did not survive the plane

ride, from being 'stored and possibly stacked in cardboard boxes with holes in the end', which some have perceived as 'modern slave ships' (Hübinette, 2004). The Holt's ad hoc adoption service has now evolved into one of the largest and the longest-standing international adoption agencies in the world, whose 'success' has been attributed to disregarded minimum standards, speedy adoption procedures (Herman, 2002), and the overuse of proxy adoptions to provide children to adoptive families whom other adoption agencies rejected; some who later had evidence come out against them for child abuse and in some cases murder (Joyce, 2013). Adoptee and Professor Arissa Oh (2015) criticise South Korea's motivation for establishing international adoption, calling it "Korea's race-based evacuation", a way to uphold ethnonationalism ideas about racial purity, and an opportunity to get rid of mixed-race children. According to Joyce (2013), international adoption also served a geopolitical purpose, as South Korea was able to build alliances with wealthy Western nations who wanted Korean war orphans, which had now gained worldwide popularity, first from conservative Christian movements, joined later by the "left-liberals who saw international adoption as a progressive, multi-cultural, anti-racist act of rescuing destitute children from the miseries of the 'third-world', and a way to create so-called rainbow families" (Hübinette, 2004). According to Donnell (2019), Korean orphans were a token of the war. They used to help produce national narratives that were so "self-congratulatory that it obscured how the United States [and other Western receiving countries like Australia] are implicated in the traumas and violence that created the orphans that are supposedly in need of rescue in the first place".

This formed the beginning of a system - built by foreign individuals and agencies who had a sense of ownership over Korea's children and who came to wield considerable geopolitical influence. In 1945 there were 38 orphanages in Korea. By 1957, this had grown to 482, which held nearly fifty thousand children. By 1967, more than seventy thousand children were listed

as living in more than 600 institutions in South Korea (Joyce, 2013). Funded by foreign aid agencies, who were not interested in supporting the 10 million families impacted by the war, but rather only interested in the placement of children into orphanages intended for adoption, where no attempt to contact surviving biological parents or other extended family was made (Kim, 2010). According to adopted Korean and adoption scholar Tobias Hübinette (2004), this not only became the blueprint for international adoption worldwide, but it is even possible to say that it was also the blueprint for modern Western aid "as so many of these practices—including sponsoring, fostering and adopting of children, the setting up of hospitals and orphanages, and educational and technical assistance—were tested in Korea for the first time."

The war is over three decades later, and South Korea has become a leading global economy. However, despite their economic transformation to 'first-world' status, the number of 'orphans' continued to grow, and the adoption industry was booming, with approximately 220,000 children adopted overseas, generating an estimated revenue of 3.3 billion dollars. A paradox that did not go unnoticed. In 1988, while South Korea hosted the Olympic games, an international spotlight was also shone on the adoption industry, which brought attention to the enormous human cost and sacrifice to South Korea's economic growth, and one of their big industries "devoted to child welfare, that takes a market approach of supply and demand, with adoptive parents as consumers and children as commodities" (Raleigh, 2018). South Korea was criticised as a "baby-exporting nation" by the international community, including from North Korea, who accused them of "selling Korean offspring for profit to Westerners" (Park Soon Ho, 1994). In response, South Korea's government announced efforts to reduce the number of children sent overseas, and adoption subsequently dropped to 4,191 in 1989 and 2,962 in 1990 but continued in the thousands well into the early 2000s, and South Korean

children continue to be adopted overseas today. At its peak in the mid-1980s, 8,837 children were sent overseas from South Korea for adoption, averaging 24 children per day (Oh, 2015). Comprising the largest global child displacement in history, more than double the Chinese adoptee diaspora (FPIF, 2010). This was when I was born.

Chapter 3. Growing up in white Australia

3.1 'We don't see colour'

After a long period of racially restricted immigration under the White Australia Policy (one of Australia's first acts of Parliament from 1901 to 1970s), Australia was embracing multiculturalism as a diversity and integration policy (Koleth, 2010). Multiculturalism generated significant debates, uncertainties and promises in Australia (Lee and Yiping, 2008), which postcolonial scholars Mackenzie, Mwamba and Mphande (2017) argue, continued reproducing forms of racial exclusion and inclusion. According to Mandisi Majavu (2016), "The rhetoric about multiculturalism serves to manufacture the illusion of a post-white Australia policy, and thus hide the normative whiteness that shapes the everyday life in Australia". Or in other words, "a more indirect and less blatant racist discourse centred around a colour-blindness" (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), which can be perceived as part of the broader system of white supremacy that also denied Australian Indigenous people's citizenship until 1967 and forcibly removed entire generations from their children (Ndhlovu, 2013).

Multiculturalism also underwent a significant paradigm shift under the Prime Ministership of John Howard. A move away from multiculturalism that Uptin (2021) describes as not a dismantling but rather a skilful reconfiguration that shifted the language and philosophy of government (Stratton, 2011). Being Australian was reimagined as a 'common origin' (Bonilla-Silva, 1999), positioning white Anglo-Celtic Australians or 'whiteness' as normative and non-

whiteness as non-normative. These ethnonationalist narratives shaped the criterion for who did and did not belong in contemporary Australia and laid the ground for what came next (Moreton-Robinson,2015; Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo,2010). I was in primary school when Pauline Hanson and the One Nation party first entered the political landscape in Australia. Spouting white victimhood and far-right politics, Hansen benefited from and helped shape the normalisation of racism and xenophobia in Australia and changed the boundaries of what can be acceptably said in public discourse. She triggered national debates, culture wars and Asian hate in Australia – claiming she was warning [white] Australians their lives and livelihoods were in danger of being 'swamped by Asians' and rallied against multiculturalism, Indigenous rights, and so-called political correctness and reverse-racism. Pushing the narrative, 'it is OK to be white' – a phrase now commonly used by white supremacists (Udah and Singh, 2019) and a sentiment that permeated the town I grew up in.

Growing up in regional Australia, in an all-white town, and in an all-white family, my sister and I stood out in a sea of white Australians. It was obvious that we were adopted, and it was obvious how people felt about us. Thomas Park Clement, an adopted South Korean to the U.S., who also goes by 'Alien' – referring to the designation he found on his immigration papers – finding it more and more befitting... "Alien as in 'alienated'... because I did not fit into the white neighbourhood I grew up in. Someone even tried to petition the neighbourhood to keep us from moving in because of me" (Kim, 2010). My parents attempted to reassure us by saying they 'didn't see colour' and loved us like their biological (white) children. Unfortunately, I learned early on that colour-blindness is not a cure for racism, as I witnessed Hanson's anti-Asian rhetoric spread among my classmates, community and family. I recall a memory from visiting the local pub when two men threatened to run me over with their car as soon as I stepped outside; none of my friends or family noticed and later dismissed me, 'I am sure they

didn't mean it'. Adopted South Korean to Australia, Tom Sorrell shares, "I've been called a chink, a gook, a charlie... I have been told to "go back to where I came from"... I have been beaten to the point of being unconscious for being Asian and having a nice phone, and ironically, on a separate occasion was accused of stealing people's phones because I was Asian and had a nice phone... In the past year alone, I have been spat on and sneered at and had to wonder whether I had done something wrong, or whether it was because of, well… what I suspect it was because of. My whole life, I have been taught that to be an Asian man is to be lesser, and that to be spat on, trod on and degraded is par for the course. Suck it up, princess." (Sorrell, 2021).

From an early age, I knew that no matter how culturally Australian I felt, I would never be considered a 'real' Australian. I turned to my parents for reassurance, 'you're a citizen', my parents would say as they pointed to my framed citizenship certificate on the wall. 'Anyone that says you're not Australian show them that'. I asked them if they thought Australia would ever have an Asian Prime Minister, to which they paused before answering quietly, 'No'. I was Australian but not – Korean but not – a family member but not. An ambiguous and isolating state where you don't fit anywhere, belong anywhere or feel safe anywhere. I sought peace and protection by blending in as much as I could with my all-white friends, who accepted me for not being a 'real' Asian. Which meant avoiding anything 'Asian' at all costs, knowing that how I looked and how I behaved were constantly being judged. I wouldn't eat sushi, wear glasses or even be close to another Asian person. I blended in so well that my identity blurred into an unconscious state where I acted white, talked white, and thought I was white. I knew something had happened when I did not recognise myself in photos. When realising I was the Korean person, I would feel shock, horror, embarrassment and anxiety well up within me – a kind of body dysmorphia where how you look and how you feel do not match. Simon, a South

Korean adopted to Sweden, talks about this disconnect when some Asian students joined his school, "I became shocked, as they look like me, and then they are immigrants! I became depressed, and it felt as if I woke up one day and found out that I was a beetle!" (Hübinette and Andersson 2012). In Simon's encounter, he too is describing a recognition of something that had never been understood or spoken about within his adoptive family. Like many other adoptees, including myself, we had internalised a white bodily self-image. We had become what Park Nelson (2016) calls "white Asians" or "Invisible Asians".

South Korean adoptee Gustafsson (2021) says this experience is borne from a "transnational adoption paradox", where transracial adoptees negotiate a "hyper(in)visible" social position of being treated as both racial minorities in society and as members of the majority culture (racially White and ethnically European) by those closest to them. Park Nelson (2016) discusses how the paradox of "hypervisibility and total invisibility" are two types of racism faced by racialised groups. They operate as "hypervisibility: negative racial stereotypes imposed upon people of colour" and "invisibility: discriminating through ignorance by not noticing difference at all and ignoring the needs of communities with culture-specific practices, desires, and requirements." Racism for transracial adoptees that contribute to the construction of an (impossible) white identity and dismisses the reality that transracial adoptees have "non-white bodies" that are constantly made significant in everyday interactions, from violent aggression to curious questions (Hübinette and Tigervall, 2009; Park Nelson, 2016). Adopted South Koreans, Brett and Daveaux share some of the common yet confronting questions adoptees get asked all the time: "who is your real mother?", "what was your name before this?", "why didn't your first parents want you?", "what was it like in the orphanage", "do you want to know where you came from?", "how much did you cost?", "what is it like to be adopted?". An anonymous South Korean adoptee also shared, "...a grocery clerk

asked my mom how she would feel about me meeting my biological mom." (Brett and Daveaux, 2017) Like many adopted people, I learned to answer these questions on autopilot, regurgitating my lines like a 'good' adoptee, giving the answers you learn are acceptable, while disassociating from the interaction and ignoring the tension that builds up inside to please, to protect, to hide – trapped in what Gloria Anzaldua, calls 'Borderlands': a vague and undetermined place, created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. Its inhabitants are the prohibited and forbidden:

> *"Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead: in short those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal". Gringos in the U.S Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who aligns with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger."* Anzaldua (1987, p25)

3.2 Adoption – a fairy tale ending?

According to my adoption paperwork, I was born in Kangwon-do, South Korea (a province rather than an exact location). I am unsure how I got there or what happened on the day of my birth. The story I do know, though, is my adoption story - the one my adoptive parents told me over the years about how I joined their family. My adoptive parents often describe my adoption process as a 'type of pregnancy' that takes longer than nine months, which took three long years in my case. My adoptive parents flew to South Korea with a group of adoptive

parents, all eager to meet their new children. When they arrived, they visited my foster mother's house, where we met for the first time and again throughout the week before flying home together to Australia. They do not know my birth story or what happened to my biological mother, but my foster mother told them I came into her care the day after I was born. "You were such a happy baby... and she seemed lovely... I think they loved and cared for you", my adoptive parents said about my foster mother and her family. During that week, my parents spent time with my foster family and me, allowing us to bond while exploring Seoul and partaking in Korean cultural activities, including sightseeing and eating live seafood. On the plane ride back to Australia, I seemed happy and calm, sleeping and smiling at everyone. Thirty years later, we still gather to hear this story and how magical the experience was.

Some adoptive families celebrate the anniversary of these homecoming experiences, such as Margaret Schwartz, an adoptive parent who declared 15 September 2005 the first International 'Gotcha Day'. According to Karen Molie, adoptive parent of Emmanuel Thanh Sang, who was adopted from Viet Nam to the U.S., "Gotcha has become entrenched in adoption-speak, there are 'Journey to Gotcha' blogs, and 'Happy Gotcha Day' cards, banners, keychains—even crowns—available for sale on the Internet" (Moline 2014). 'Gotcha Day' surfaced with 11,400,000 results on Google and appeared to be used to celebrate the adoption of children and pets. For adoptee and writer Liz Latty, her family called this anniversary her 'Special Day'. "Our Special Day celebrations always included the retelling of the sweet tale of our arrivals, a small gift, and a special meal or dessert in our honour. I remember lovingly wrapped presents of longed-for books, shiny lip glosses, new CDs, and all-you-can-eat dinners at the local Olive Garden. I liked feeling as though I had something akin to a second birthday. It made me feel different in a good way—like I got more than other kids to make up for the feeling that I somehow had less or was missing something everyone else

just naturally had... At the same time, I felt acutely aware of how happy my mom and dad were on my Special Day, and how sometimes my feelings didn't quite match up. Sometimes I would feel disconnected from the party, as if some other ghost girl were being celebrated as I watched. A girl who had one family that loved her, one family she belonged to, one name, one home, one story that began on that cozy January day and stretched on into happiness forever after. I would watch this girl celebrate with her family, watch them celebrate together, and I would feel hollow, empty in comparison. Eventually, as I grew into my teen years and my identity began shaping itself in part around this absence, I would come to an understanding that for my parents, my Special Day holds within its memory unbridled joy and relief—finally. But that, for me, it holds something far more complicated." (Latty, 2016).

Adoption narratives have been heavily constructed around the fairy tale ending, 'happily ever after', which has inadvertently delegitimised the trauma and grief in adoption that adoptees and their biological families are left to process without acknowledgement or support. For South Korean adoptee and artist Mila Konomos, Gotcha Day is moreso Erasure Day, "...it takes a tragedy and coats it with euphemism... it's almost like you're celebrating the fact that your daughter has lost everything. It's as though you're celebrating the death of a crucial and vital part of who she could have been... I understand why parents practice it, and I think the heart behind may be right. But the implementation of the good intentions is misguided" (Konomos, 2010). For Liz Latty (2016), it is about the pervasive need for the fairy-tale, heart-warming narrative in our collective consciousness, but warns against it "most of us agree that modern-day fairy tales have set us up for failure when it comes to beauty standards and romantic relationship expectations, but what about family-making?". Celebrity mums like Angelina Jolie and Madonna may make adoption look like fairy tales. However, these expectations can have detrimental consequences for adoptees, as shown by writer Joyce Maynard, who terminated

the adoption of two girls from Ethiopia two years after adopting them, "At the age of 55, with you can say either huge idealism or ignorance, I believed that I care for and make life okay for any child. And I missed doing that. My children were long gone and so I sought out an easily found two sisters who were of an age that was not going to make adoption easy for them. And I went to Ethiopia and I brought them home. And certainly did so with an utter, absolute resolution that I would be their mother forever.... But it wasn't okay—it wasn't okay for them. They needed something that I wasn't giving them. Among other things, a father, other children, a more regulated home life and I came to realise, and it's not a choice that a lot of people can understand" (WBUR, 2013).

Maynard's case also highlights that, legally, adoptive parents can change their minds and terminate adoptions anytime. In the adoption world, the adoption breakdown is called "disruptions", and some adoptees have lived through more than one. Disrupted adoptions have resulted in adoptees becoming homeless or bouncing around the foster care system. In some cases, adoptees have been put back on aeroplanes and returned to their birth countries, such as Adam Crapser, who was abused and abandoned by two different sets of adoptive parents in the United States before being deported back to South Korea as an adult – and forcibly separated from his wife, children and friends in the U.S four decades after his adoption. Adam recalls, "My whole life I was told… that I need to stop worrying about Korea... that I need to quit crying about all these things, about the orphanage, and about my birth mom, because I'm American. That's what I was told, that I'm American". Adam was deported because none of his guardians had filed for his U.S. citizenship. Despite his adoption paperwork and U.S. 'birth' certificate, he was still seen as an 'illegal alien' of the United States (Kim, 2019). According to Hellen Ko, Chief counsellor at Korea Adoption Services, adoptees have their Korean identity relinquished upon adoption. However, as U.S. citizenship was also

not granted automatically in the adoption process before 2000, adoptees have become undocumented people in both the U.S. and South Korea. Which for adoptees such as Phillip Clay, deportation was a death sentence. Mr Clay, who was adopted to the U.S. and deported back to South Korea twenty-nine years later, who "could not speak the local language, did not know a single person and did not receive appropriate care for mental health problems, ended his life, jumping from the 14th floor of an apartment building north of Seoul". Nobody knows exactly how many adoptees grow up undocumented due to this negligence or lack of oversight. However, it is estimated by an advocacy group, Adoptee Rights Campaign, that 35,000 adult adoptees in the United States may lack citizenship (Choe, 2017).

According to Donnell (2019), the fairy tale 'happily ever after' narrative is what underpins the 'good' and 'grateful' adoptee trope. For Konomos (2010) "...I personally think it can, although unintentionally, teach the adoptee that he or she should feel only grateful, happy and excited about his or her adoption. I think it can inadvertently communicate to adopted children that they are not allowed to feel angry, hurt, sad, upset about their adoption". All my life, I have had to be stoic. To be strong and not feel pain, to perform and please others, but there were times when it burst out, and I've sobbed, shook and broken down. I would try to tell people I was struggling, but they would stare at me confused, frustrated and sometimes angrily, 'You should be grateful'. The reality is that although many adoptees are well-adjusted, many also struggle with trauma-related mental health issues and are twice as likely to have problems with drug abuse and four times more likely to attempt suicide than non-adoptees (Keyes, Malone, Sharma, Iacono, and McGue, 2013). Which Gair (2008) links to – a disconnect between what adoptees are expected to feel and what they actually feel, the general invisibility of the adoption experience and not being able to talk about their experience, feelings of powerlessness and lack of ownership over their own stories, there are also

questions about the impact of intergenerational trauma. Experiences that have not been explored or addressed in research and how adoption institutions may be implicated. Issues that Park Nelson (2016) says contradict the adoption narrative and "potentially threaten adoptive family systems and relationships, the multimillion-dollar transnational adoption industry, and paternalistic relations between the United States and the nations that supply adoptable children."

Chapter 4. Returning to Korea

4.1 The complex embrace

There is no way to describe yourself as an adoptee to Koreans. The most practical term to use is 'gyopo'. The term holds a negative connotation and describes native Koreans who permanently reside in another country as those who have lost their 'roots'. David Kang, director of Korean studies at the University of Southern California, says although the term is derogatory, there is also this tribal focus of the word that means our 'Koreans who happen to be living overseas in another country'... "It's this very atavistic view of Koreans as our blood overseas, almost..." (Wiggin, 2010). After WWII ended Japanese rule, Koreans have taken pride in 'pure' bloodlines. With a nationalistic slogan, 'one family, one blood', and a strong collective identity in a culturally homogenous society. As an adoptee-returnee-gyopo, many Koreans embraced me like I was returning home and wasted no time connecting me with my native country, culture and people. However, this embrace, like my sense of self, was radically conflicting.

I was a Korean, but also a foreigner, a non-white Westerner and gyopo, and like other gyopos, my cultural missteps were not received well. I could not understand each and every comment,

but I recall some of the ones that were said to me in English. Drinking in a bar and talking with the other expats, Korean men would often angrily approach me, reprimanding me for talking too loudly or at all. On the street, people would rip cigarettes out of my mouth, telling me that I looked like a prostitute, but worst of all, I was met with hostility for not being able to speak Korean and, in my case, being adopted to Australia was not a reasonable explanation. According to Kang (Wiggin, 2010), many South Koreans expect gyopos to possess considerable cultural and linguistic competency. As a result, he said, "The number of culture clashes and the number of taxi drivers yelling at these kids is legendary." Lee Kyung-eun, Director of Human Rights Beyond Borders, says this reflects the public assumption that "language is engraved in Korean people's DNA, regardless of their social upbringing" (Kim, 2021).

As a not-so-typical-Korean and a not-so-typical-foreigner, I lived mainly in a confusing culture-shock-filled state. Embraced by a motherland that was excited, disappointed and confused to meet me all at once, and unlike the [white] Western expats, as a gyopo, I was not given the same concessions to adjust to Korean society. To Koreans, I was a Korean, and not acting as such meant I was a 'bad Korean' and cultural traitor. Dr Byoung-chul Min, one of the leading intercultural English educators in Korea, observes that if a foreigner is non-Korean-looking and behaves in non-Korean ways (especially for white foreigners), that is completely acceptable; however, gyopos who look Korean and behave in "non-Korean" ways, may be a target for discrimination (Min, 2004). Ann Babe, an adoptee-returnee in Korea, makes sense of this another way, "I think that Korean culture is beautiful in the sense that they are so strongly committed to one another, but they are also community-oriented to a fault... they do not allow people to be individuals as much as I think is necessary" (Wiggin, 2010). Once again, I was pressured to assimilate to belong but from the opposite angle.

It could be said that the importance of being perceived as a 'Korean' links to Chaemyoun[1], the Confucian concept of 'face', which not only influences Korean behaviour and thinking but is also seen as an indication of a person's reputation, influence, dignity and honour. It is "the appearance people want to present to others, regarding their status and roles, especially gender roles, in family and society" (Yang Sun Geun, 2002). Koreans go to great lengths to 'save face' and disguise their social, financial and academic status, especially if they are in a shameful situation, such as being adopted and unable to speak Korean, which meant I was a 'bad' Korean. On the other side of the coin, I also was not seen as a 'real' Westerner. This was reflected by my salary at the English language school I worked at, as expectantly, some of the student's parents complained that they wanted their children to be taught by a white foreign teacher, not a gyopo. To protect their reputation, the school asked me to hide my gyopo status and pose as a student graduate of the school – my English skills could then be attributed to the school's abilities which could also serve as an aspiration for their children under my tutelage. Of course, this meant avoiding speaking with parents at all costs.

Chaemyoun ('face') is also considered a large part of why the uptake of domestic adoption in Korea is low and Korean couples who do adopt often do so in secret. Some couples fake a pregnancy for nine months to align with the arrival of their adopted child or even strategically move to a new place so they can integrate into new communities as a fully formed family. This can be legally re-enforced by South Korea's birth registration system, which allows children to

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[1] Face (Chaemyoun)
The concept of face (known as chaemyoun in Korea) is central in influencing Korean behaviour and thinking. This is the quality embedded in most Asian cultures that indicates a person's reputation, influence, dignity and honour. In South Korea, the perceptual lens of chaemyoun is taken especially seriously. It gained new importance during the hardships of the 20th century as people had to learn to control their rage and frustration under a mask of stoicism. Today, chaemyoun (face) holds more importance as "the appearance people want to present to others, in regard to their status and roles, especially gender roles, in family and society". By complimenting a person, showing them respect or doing something to increase their self-esteem, you give them face. Similarly, people can lose face and save or build face. Therefore, individuals in Korea usually act deliberately to protect their self-worth and perception among peers (Yang Sun Geun, 2002).

be registered several weeks after birth (rather than being automatically registered at the hospital), allowing adoptive parents to register adopted children as if they gave birth to them (Peterson, 2017). As for older children, children with disabilities or those (like me) who have birthmarks, we were often sent overseas as our perceived defects meant we were unlikely to be adopted domestically in Korea. "They thought the devil marked you" my adoptive parents told me, describing how they received a photograph of my birthmark from the adoption agency, checking if they were okay with a 'marked' child. I used to wonder if it was why I was given up for adoption. Whether my mother believed it was a bad omen. I have since removed it, hoping my mark would go away, but I can still see the faint outline of it.

4.2 Locating the birth family

When I first moved to Korea, I wasn't sure if I was ready to locate the birth family. How do you know whether you want to unlock the biggest mysteries of your life? How do you know if you are ready for it? For me, it was a curiosity, but for my Korean friends, they seemed determined to make the reunion a reality with an almost feverish determination. This is what really propelled the search for my birth family, and despite not really understanding what that would mean or preparing for what may happen, I agreed to do the search. Ann Babe breaks down the attitudes toward gyopos into three types. She described the first as "a person that's older who is sort of angry about you being a Korean but not being fully Korean." There are the "people who seem flummoxed and simply incapable of grasping your background" but then there are also those who are "very friendly and helpful" but sometimes "overbearing when they try to convert you or reform you" (Wiggin, 2010). My Korean friend (and employer) was this third type. As an older sister figure to me in Korea (or unnie) she took me under her wing and introduced me to Korean life; eventually the reunion between myself and my birth family

became her personal mission. My adoptive parents were concerned about me locating my birth family. I knew they didn't really want me to do it. My mother used to watch movies about adoptees reuniting with their birth families and choosing to stay and live with them, as if they were horror movies, "you would never do that would you?" she used to ask me. I had always promised I wouldn't but when I asked for my adoption paperwork, I felt like I was betraying them in a way.

My paperwork was scarce to say the least, a piece of paper with my parents' names, dates of birth, the name I was issued by the adoption agency, and the province I was born in, translated into English that only led to dead-ends and we exhausted most of my options quickly. Leanne Lieth, founder of Korean Adoptees for Fair Records Access, explains "Access to our Korean records is dependent upon whether the adoptee knows that there are duplicate or original records in Korea, that those records may have additional information... and that the adoptee has the will and tenacity to investigate across continents and languages with the often uncooperative and hostile Korean international adoption agencies... An arbitrary process that is inconsistent and can drag out for years" (Dobbs, 2011). According to Dobbs (2011), "there are no laws sealing or regulating adoption files, which are technically agency private property. The agencies could burn the records if they wanted." Eventually, my friend convinced me to go on a Korean reality TV show where adoptees can make a public plea for any information that may help to locate their families. Say your Korean name into the camera, she said... I had never used it before. "My name is Kim Soo Im... If you have any information about my biological family"... the rest was a blur. Before I knew it, we had found them.

After declining to film the reunion on air, we drove to meet my birth family. I had no idea what I was walking into, or even where we were. I didn't expect to have family, I thought I was an orphan but when I walked in the door, I was taken aback to see almost 20 relatives – mother,

brother, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents who were all crying inconsolably. I didn't understand. My friend was so excited and I was completely at a loss for how to react. I didn't have any questions prepared; I think I was still in a state of shock. All I could think was, why couldn't I have stayed here? Why are they crying when they abandoned me? My friend did the introductions in Korean, and it was only then I realised, she wouldn't be able to bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps between us. I struggled to understand most of what was said, but a few things came through. I looked like my father who had died a few years earlier. I guessed by my mother's age, that he may have been in his 40's at the time. They couldn't explain to me how he died exactly, but I inferred by their hand signals it was something to do with the chest – I hope it isn't hereditary. I was told that I have two siblings (who were also put up for adoption) and I was the last of the three children to reunite with the family. My brother was there, but he didn't say anything to me that day. Apparently, he could speak English, but I guess chose not to. I have no idea what he was thinking or what his story was. My sister wasn't there, when I asked where she was, the reply was "she's gone". I couldn't figure out what 'gone' meant. Was she missing? Was she dead? My birth mother pleaded with my friend to tell me that she regretted putting me up for adoption and that she tried everything to undo it. My friend looked so overjoyed, but I wasn't sure what to say, I couldn't understand. I thought she didn't want me; I was told I had been abandoned after birth. I was prepared for rejection but regret, despair, shame, longing I didn't know what to do with. I sat there silently for what felt like hours, then the family asked if I was staying to re-join the family and take care of my mother. Everyone was looking at me expectantly. It was at this point I felt something shut down inside me, and I told them that I was going to go back to Australia. My birth mother asked if I would sleep over that night and let her hold me. I declined. I wanted to enter that world, but I didn't know how. It's something that still haunts me. This part of my life had been closed for over 20 years, and for those moments when I opened it again, I didn't

know what to do. I had never felt so useless, so I closed it again as quickly as possible and I haven't spoken to them again. This was 15 years ago.

Behar (1996) who talks about 'roots' and 'routes', asks how do you return to a home that is lost? How do you reckon with what you uncover? What are you really returning to? What does it offer? Digging through old paintings, I find a self-portrait from when I was a teenager. Half human and half tree, floating above a dark ocean. My roots are exposed and I'm crying the sea of tears that I'm floating above. If I was trying to replant my roots, I was experiencing transplant shock. I didn't know how to process what had happened. Returning to my office, I find a large box of dried squid. "It's from your family, they really must love you" my friend exclaimed. I am still at a loss to what dried squid means or how I was meant to respond. What a cruel irony, I had spent my life trying to blend in with my peers in Australia, trying to belong as an Australian. It was all I ever wanted, until that moment, when I wished I could have been Korean enough to understand what my family was saying and the meaning and context behind it. It feels like I've locked myself out of that world.

4.3 A birth mother's love

According to Joyce (2013), for single pregnant women living in South Korea, life was much like the 'baby scoop era' in the United States and Australia between the 1950s and 1980s. Single mothers faced being disowned by their families and shunned by society, which is why many single pregnant women were being sent to ubiquitous maternity homes (referred to by some mothers as 'baby farms'), where their children would be secretly adopted. As Korea industrialised with "astonishing speed and horrifying efficiency" (Hübinette, 2004), women's economic roles began to change radically, but the social norms that governed their lives did not. This meant that in an intensely conservative sexual culture that makes it near impossible

for single mothers to keep their children (Joyce, 2013), adoption became "an institutionalised way of dealing with poor and illegitimate children" (Kim, 2010) and a way to 'save face' and "regulate, control, and discipline women's reproduction at a time when women were no longer living the traditional lives that their mothers did" (Hübinette, 2004), touted as a way for women to have a 'fresh start'. However, as Donnell (2019) posits, "the transnational adoption industrial complex is not a "natural" mode of reproduction. It is an assemblage informed and driven by militarism, imperialism, citizenship, and the commodification of children under the guise of rescue and love".

Joyce (2013), in her ground-breaking work on 'The child catchers: Rescue, trafficking, and the new gospel of adoption' shares the story of 'birth mother', Hyong-sook Choi, a founding leader of KUMFA (Korean Unwed Mothers Families Association), to show how difficult it is and what you are fighting against in adoption practice. Choi describes a strong stigma against single mothers and "illegitimate" children, where they are seen as "immoral" and "irresponsible", reflecting a public attitude toward single mothers, who are criticised as being "unmarried women seeking an excuse to give birth". Like Choi, several mothers had told Joyce (2013) that they were consigned to the rank of "birth mother" or worse, "breeder". This was emphasised by maternity homes, adoption agencies, and family and friends who constantly reminded them of the discrimination they and their children would face from family, employers, schools and broader society, which one mother describes as "cutting off a mothers' arms and legs". In Choi's case, she fought to reclaim her child from the adoption agency and described the significant barriers she faced, including imposed delays. Other mothers told Joyce (2013) that they were made to pay fees in the thousands, produce letters from their parents or the paternal father giving permission, or provide proof of jobs and apartments. In one case, a mother had to apologise to the American adoptive family expecting her child (Joyce, 2013).

According to Dobbs (2011), "some parents were tricked into leaving their children with orphanages as temporary care, only to find that the orphanage had given their child to an adoption agency without their knowledge or consent".

Adoption agencies justify adoption as a way for single pregnant Korean women to uphold Confucianism and the strict family hierarchies and expectations of filial obedience that define womanhood and family lineage through marriage. Danish Korean adoptee Tobias Hübinette (2004) criticises this justification "as a self-orientalising image of Confucian thinking and bloodline clannishness," calling it a shallow coercion tactic. From this perspective, Confucianism appears shorthand for institutionalised patriarchy, the social, economic, and legal structures that discriminate against single mothers and their adopted children. According to Peterson (2017), this extends to Korean citizenship laws. As children born without a Korean man to claim paternal lineage could not exist legally or socially as Korean citizens. This is why many single mothers (nearly 70%) chose to relinquish their children to the state, as they would then have rights and access to public services, education, and employment as Korean citizens rather than live as undocumented persons. This is only one part of the story, as 96 per cent of unmarried women undergo abortions for unplanned pregnancies, despite abortion being illegal in South Korea until 2020. According to recent surveys conducted in Korea, more than 90 per cent of single mothers wanted to keep their child if their circumstances and society allowed. Peterson (2017) calls this "the tragic irony of a mother's love", shown by the fact that relinquishing a child for adoption may be "the most tangible and compelling evidence that Korean birth mothers loved and wanted their children — against an impossible set of choices facing her".

Chapter 5. Breaking embodiments

5.1 Adoptees re-writing the script

Since the early 2000s, adoptees everywhere have been reaching out to each other and forming adoptee-led movements and networks worldwide. Starting with the second generation of adopted Koreans (my generation) who were now adults and returning to Korea to meet each other and piece things together. Adoptee, writer and activist, Kim Stoker, refers to this as 'the first gathering', where "adoptees were for the first time, coming back to Seoul at a stage in life when you are willing to question things about who you are and where you came from before you are too settled down into a career or marriage and had children". Stoker describes how "so much came out about race and identity, gender and family along with systemic questions around adoption... Whatever your journey was about or whatever you did during your time there, just being there bonded people" (Crisp and Gustafsson, 2019). They were creating new spaces for belonging away from established frameworks of race, citizenship and nationality, forging kinship ties and challenging social hegemony by giving platforms for activism that allowed adoptees to retell their histories as "acts of refusal to maintain the status quo of the happy, grateful adoptee" (McKee, 2019).

Adopted Koreans have now become an undeniable part of the cultural landscape in South Korea. They are recognised as a cultural minority by native and overseas Koreans (Park Nelson, 2016) and in broader social fields. South Korean adoptee-returnee, Kim Stoker, overserves this change, "It has been very interesting to see this evolution over the past 20 years in Korea and what is permissible to be labelled as Korean. In the past, as an adopted person who could not speak Korean, you were not treated as a 'real' Korean. That is not the case now. Now people realise there are many different ways to be Korean, and people are more accepting of adoptees being Koreans" (Crisp and Gustafsson, 2019). Adopted Koreans (no longer invisible

and silent children) are challenging the broad (often colonial) practice of adoption by articulating what has been systematically erased, lost, obscured and overcome through the construction of "quasi-public representations of themselves for themselves and broader audiences" to developing identities that are continually performed, negotiated and contested (Kim, 2010).

The dialogues with adoptees have also led to the forging of bonds with other minoritised groups in Korea, "there were these natural alliances as social outliers... and adoptees as non-standard variety Koreans, found a connection with other Koreans who were also marginalised in Korean society such as single parents choosing to raise their children, mixed-race Koreans or LGBTQIA+ Koreans" (Higgins and Stoker, 2011). The adult-adoptee presence and grassroots activism in South Korea has seen a significant shift in South Korean attitudes towards adoption. A practice that most Koreans defended in the past is now being questioned in South Korean society, which is supporting adoption reform. Stoker shares, "There is more critical thinking about what it [adoption] was in the past and what produced the adoptees that are now adults." Some of which can be attributed to the highly publicised cases of deported Korean adoptees such as Adam Crapser (the first South Korean adoptee to sue the South Korean government and adoption agency 'Holt Children's Service' over fraudulent paperwork and screening failures) and Philip Cray (who passed away by suicide) (Kim, 2023). Bringing critical attention to people in South Korea, who also show more tolerance and acceptance of adoptee voices when it comes to being critical of adoption as a decades-long system. According to Higgins and Stoker (2011), "...in Western receiving countries, there has also been a slight shift, there is a bit more nuance and sophistication when looking at power dynamics [within adoption systems]... Of course, you still see the typical reactions such as 'you're

ungrateful', but at the same time, you also see the defending of a critical voice from adoptees" (Crisp and Gustafsson, 2019).

Danish Korean adoptee Maja Lee Langvad (2014), in her search for answers, like many adoptees, discovers instead the apparatus of adoption itself and the unnatural way 'orphans' are manufactured. She writes in "Hun Er Vred" (which translates to "She is Angry" in English), "...adoption these days seems more like a matter of finding children for parents rather than finding parents for children; that is how a phenomenon such as child harvesting emerged. Adoption agencies wouldn't have to pay anyone to convince vulnerable parents to give up their child for adoption unless the demand for children exceeded the supply... She is angry that the demand for children exceeds the supply... She is angry about transnational adoption being a modern form of colonialism" (Langvard, 2014). I am angry that transracial and transnational adoptees serve as a visible reminder of "the legacy of Western imperialism" (Donnell, 2019). I am angry that adoption relies on the subordination of our birth mothers who are "often working-class women, teen mothers, abandoned single mothers, sex workers, and victims of rape" (Kim, 2010). I am angry that an aggressive, profit-driven adoption industry continues to carelessly extract children from their families, cultures and countries, "to satisfy the needs of infertile white middle-class couples" (Hübinette, 2008). I am angry at the rampant misinformation about the 'orphan crisis', with most of the estimated 150-210 million children classified as 'orphans' having parents or extended family they could have stayed with if adequately supported.

Adoption can be seen as a rights issue from this perspective. "It is about women's bodies and their reproductive labour, about the social and economic value not only of children but also of maternity... What does it mean that the mother must give up and be given up, and how is this related to the increasingly globalised traffic of women?" (Eun Kyung Min, 2008). Tammy

Chu considers this against a whole history of sexual slavery of Korean women that remains unacknowledged — conceptualising a shared genealogy between the Korean' comfort women' that served occupying Japanese military forces, the contemporary sex workers that service U.S military soldiers, and the over 200,000 South Korean children who were put up for adoption (Donnell, 2019). Donnell (2019) also compares adoption and "bride buying", describing how "both institutions rely on the reproductive labour of women in marginalised socioeconomic positions; and are built on the commodification of people for the means of family making".

Chu also asks how Koreans are implicated in this history: "Koreans also played a part in these women being abducted or forced into prostitution," arguing that in a colonial setting, parts of the colonised population must comply with the coloniser's agenda. Crasper directs accountability to the South Korean government, "the (government) knew that children procured for adoptions were not being (properly) protected, that their human rights were being violated — they should have done something about it, but they didn't..." (Kim, 2023). The same can be asked of Australia, which since colonisation, has a long and painful history of government sanctioned forced adoption that resulted in the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the forced adoptions of children from unwed mothers between the 1950s and 1980s. Despite differences, the Australian Government's formal apology to people affected by forced adoption or removal policies and practices highlights the importance and sensitivity of this issue in Australia, which is yet to be recognised for the thousands of international adoptees in Australia, despite the call on national governments to take action to prevent and eradicate illegal and illicit intercountry adoptions that may violate the prohibition of abduction, sale of or trafficking in children and the prohibition of enforced

disappearances; led by a coalition Voices Against Illegal Adoption (VAIA) and UN rights experts (United Nations Human Rights, 2022).

5.2 I too was colonised

I had nightmares for most of my childhood: stranded in a dingy while the ocean raged around me or being left behind as the whole town disappeared. Reoccurring dreams that had minor variations but ultimately ended up the same. I was always left behind, scared, forgotten, alone and abandoned. The dreams were so vivid that I used to sleepwalk. Sometimes I would even dream while I was awake. My parents told me that my nightmares were part of the ordinary stresses and strains of growing up but given that 30 years later, I still have a habit of waking up panicked and sometimes screaming, I feel something is lingering in my subconscious. Something stuck that I keep reliving.

The other night, I had a new dream — one about my biological parents. I was in the ocean, but the sea was calm this time, and my father and I were diving for pearls. We did not have any equipment, just free-diving as deep as we could go (a manifestation from my adoption paperwork as my father was a pearl diver). Once finished, we headed home, where my mother was preparing food in the kitchen. We helped her before sitting down together, eating, laughing, and admiring the treasures that we had found. This is the first time I had a dream like this, but apparently, they are common for adoptees. Homes describes this as your 'ghost kingdom' (Gunsberg, 2017), which holds significance for owning your own life narrative and represents the unspoken bond between the birthmother and her baby before relinquishment. I wonder why I am having these now. Maybe it was an attempt to articulate loss, a way to guide myself as I wade through the confusion, anger and longing.

Like many adoptees, I share a sense of irretrievable loss. I had always accepted being adopted as a fact of life. However, now, after a million tiny awakenings, I find myself looking for something to hold onto as I grieve everything I have lost and will never know. Having a connection to my birth family might not guarantee answers to all my existential questions, but maybe I could have been a more complete person. Adoptee and filmmaker Deann Borshay Liem explains in Haruch (2014), "I feel like I was denied the chance to be a Korean person... If I hadn't been adopted, I would have been a productive person. I'd probably be married and maybe have five kids. I may not have gone to college, but I would have been productive. And I wouldn't have spent so much time trying to come to terms with my identity." Reflecting on the countless years I spent trying to understand where I belong, I realise I have been trapped in a cycle. Spending most of my adult life leaving one home in search of another, with nothing but a suitcase and hope, recreating my first journey from Korea to Australia and displacing myself over and over, looking for somewhere to belong, to call home, but never finding it.

Behar (1996) talks about 'routes' and 'roots', "is going or not going somewhere the essence of freedom? Or the consolation prize for those who don't have roots anywhere?". For the most part, I feel well-adjusted, but I think this is to forget, not to heal, and every so often, the things I try to suppress overcome me; images of uncles throwing knives at a drawing of an Asian person while my sister and I huddled in the corner; overhearing people asking my parents' how could you love them?'; the look of fear and death in my sister's eye when she told me that she danced with the devil and could never stop dancing; the touch of my birth mother's hand when she asked me to stay, and the look on her face when I pulled away. I can no longer hold in my screams. Now back at home, the closest to my hometown that I have been in over a decade, the memories of why I left home in the first place are flooding back – making it too

painful to stay, but also drawing me in to face the reckoning that I have been starving myself of.

What began as a story of displacement has become a kind of awakening. I have spent my life looking at myself and the world through a distorted, white gaze. A gaze that dispossessed me of an identity, from understanding my place in the world. A lens that positioned whiteness as the norm and the centre where everything revolved. White Australianism was my desire, my impossible goal. Whiteness shaped the borders of my imagination, expression and self-acceptance. For Diana Albrecht, turning the white gaze is "to finally identify and wholly live as a Korean adoptee... to get rid of the shame I held towards my Asian-ness and finally forgiving myself for the multitude of ways I responded to that shame (i.e., assimilation, erasure of Asian-ness, internalised racism)" (Albrecht, 2020). For Ryan Gustafsson, turning the white gaze is the inside job of anti-racism "being adopted is really entangled with my capacity to historically recognise forms of discrimination and trust what I was feeling was valid... and there's this people-pleasing part of my personality which part of being adopted means, don't take up too much space, don't point something out. Otherwise you become the problem rather than people recognising that there is a problem." Adam Goodman responds by encouraging adoptees to find their voice, "speaking our truth and admitting things that might be embarrassing is a courageous act... that inner work is tough. It's wrapped up in all our other issues. The inside job, of how have I been racist in my thinking and action. What does being anti-racist mean? What can I do to be anti-racist? Which is also wrapped up in our white adjacent feelings and white guilt by proxy. If I talk to my parents about my experiences as a person of colour and the racism I experience... How will they react? Are they going to be defensive? Then it comes up against feelings of, are we good enough? Are we going to be

abandoned again? People pleasing fits into those ideas of fear of abandonment, so we try to be people pleasers, so we aren't abandoned again" (Crisp and Gustafsson, 2020).

With the Black Lives Matter Movement drawing attention to oppression and systemic racism and with anti-Asian racism once again resurfacing from the covid-19 pandemic, a new and urgent call to take ownership of myself and to confront questions about what it means to be an adoptee of colour in a culture that silences through colour-blindness and what Moraga calls "racism structurally executed through patriarchy". I ask myself, what racism have I internalised? What are my responsibilities as a white-adjacent person of colour? Do I have the right to call myself Asian-Australian, Korean-Australian, or a woman of colour? I do not know how to start answering these questions yet, but as I witness Asians, including adopted Asians, being attacked in the street, blamed for the 'China-virus', and as my friends and family wear MAGA hats and regurgitate Trumpisms and repurposed Hanson rhetoric, arguing that racism doesn't exist and that 'all lives matter', I realise that although I was raised under a white gaze, I am not white, nor am I separate from this.... and that I too was colonised.

Turning the white gaze (or, as some adoptees describe, coming out of the 'white closet' or 'adoption fog'), I find a new perspective, a new empathy, a new consciousness. I turn to Gloria Anzaldúa, a self-described chicana dyke-feminist, tejana patlache poet, writer, and cultural theorist, who declared:

> "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice... I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (Anzaldua, 1987).

A "new mestiza consciousness" born from racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollenisation. An "alien" consciousness at the Borderlands for people caught in the margins, without a language or an identity. I draw on the work and narrative style of Nadarajah and

Behar, amongst others who speak of this space from where we try and articulate that of which we have come to know to reflexively re-assess. As Nadarajah (2007, p. 126) says, citing also Paul Ricouer (2006);

> So, it is the culturally mediated and historically situated self which finds itself in a continuously changing world of meaning – a sort of a modified phenomenological process, in which hermeneutics itself is a bit of problem. It is as Ricouer might describe as "a movement in which each cultural figure finds its meaning not in what precedes it but in what follows: consciousness is drawn out of itself and ahead of itself in a process in which each step is abolished and retained in the following one" (Ricoeur 2006).

A consciousness where you can challenge, resist, and articulate the dominance of one culture over another and explore multiracial and multicultural identities and experiences. A space that adoptees occupy - as non-standard-variety Koreans, Australians and Korean-Australians, who are forging a type of decolonial self-hood, one that "converges around expressions of nonnormative, unnatural, and alien origins and is based on shared histories of displacement rather than on naturalised solidarities of blood, ethnicity or territorial belonging" (Kim, 2010). Defining a living identity, one "outside of constructs we are given, that transcend the binaries of birth- and adoptive-country nationality" (Donnell, 2019) that are continually performed, negotiated and contested despite prejudices, conflicts and marginalisation against the same history. A structural process of change that begins with the inside job of breaking embodiments:

> "The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian – our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before

inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (Anzaldua, 1987).

This resounds for me as an adoptee, Korean and an Australian. As a daughter, sister, aunt, wife... As someone with three names: the one I was assigned at birth, the one I was given, and the one that represents the life I did not live. Two countries: the one I reside in and the one I'm disconnected from. Three mothers: my birth mother, my foster mother and my adoptive mother. And three families: the one I was born into, the one that raised me and the one I'm hoping to create.

Turning the white gaze: counter-storytelling as a decolonial praxis of transracial and transnational adoption examined a small portion of the transnational Korean adoptee experience – using a decolonial framework to locate and share the lived experiences of adoptees in research. A reflexive account that shares my journey of getting out from the 'white gaze' and looking at the world through a new lens. I drew inspiration from those standing witness through their creative works, scholarship and activism, to create healing and justice for what has been silenced, obscured or lost. Those providing light in the dark, guiding my way out of the 'adoption fog', and into third spaces for adoptees. Where racial and cultural hybridity and fluidity can be embraced and the binaries of Western adoption ideology and ethnonationalism can be broken and disembodied - a space for transnational and transracial healing, acceptance and belonging. A place that I now call home.

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