

ADOPTees AS “WHITE” KOREANS: IDENTITY, RACIAL VISIBILITY AND THE POLITICS OF PASSING AMONG KOREAN AMERICAN ADOPTees

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RACIAL VISIBILITY, INVISIBILITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Racial Identity in America

The strict enforcement of race-only identity in a racist, white-dominated society has contributed to the development of multiple strategies for survival among non-white persons (or more correctly, persons identified as racially non-white in dominant discourses). For persons with white or almost-white phenotype, one of these strategies is “passing” or “passing for white.” With passing, an individual can use their racially ambiguous or white appearance in conjunction with culturally ambiguous or white behavior to disappear into the white majority, thereby escaping racialization and negative association with their minority racial group. For persons with non-white cultural heritage, the price of passing is imagined to be high, and an accusation of racial passing is certainly pejorative.¹ For instance, in James Weldon Johnson’s novel, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the biracial African American protagonist who passes for white ultimately despairs of his choice to trade away his African American heritage and identity, despite the fact that this choice may well have saved his life in the violently anti-Black and anti-miscegenationist social milieu of the American South.²

While the legal structures that encouraged passing have largely disappeared, cultural penalties for race mixing and racial ambiguity remain high. The continuing racial segregation in American society ensures that interlopers who cross the color line can look forward to ostracism and isolation. Individuals with hybrid identities are pressured to “pick a side,” usually assumed to be the most visibly obvious race (consider the general public rejection for Tiger Woods’ claim of a mixed race Caucasian, black and Asian “Cablasan” racial identity in favor of identifying him as black). Whites and non-whites alike have taken up the politics of passing. In the current cultural moment, the practice or perception of passing or trying to pass is also often equated with a lack of cultural authenticity or pride in one’s racial and/or ethnic identity.³ Contemporary slurs of “apple,” “oreo,” or “twinkie” applied to individuals who are perceived to be racially Red, Black or Yellow, but who are thought to act “too white,” underscore the cultural price of (supposed) assimilation of non-white individuals into dominant American societies.

Currently, “colorblindness,” imagined as the more “innocent” side to the phenomenon of passing, has taken firm hold in contemporary American society and politics. The ideology of colorblindness has its appeal in the seemingly benevolent repositioning of race as a social (rather than a biological) construct, and the recognition of race itself as the act around which racism occurs. Following this line of reasoning, if we do not recognize race (which as a social construct, can be just as easily removed from or maintained within society), there will be no racism. Not surprisingly, colorblindness has great appeal among whites who have not experienced racial discrimination and seek a low-investment approach to solving America’s race problems, and who do not want to continue to operate as the villain in white-dominated American race relations. While colorblindness frequently figures in neoliberal discourses under the guise of racial justice (often quoting Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech), the insistence that race as a category that is “not real” ends up concealing current and historical inequalities that are unresolved in our (still) very racist society. With the refusal to accept or recognize race as a significant and historically grounded difference among people, the burden of passing shifts from a decision of the racialized individual to an expectation enforced by family, community or the general public instead. Where passing involves the self-denial of a racialized identity for an individual, colorblindness denies racialized identity for anyone.

Certain theorists have articulated more nuanced formulations of “colorblindness.” Gilroy⁴ imagines a reality of “against race thinking” and Darder and Torres⁵ conceptualize a Marxist ideology based on class rather than on race, encompassing a deracialized—but not colorblind—future. Both these formulations condemn the use of race as a primary mode of identity. Like their neoliberal counterparts, these theorists argue that the use of race as a category of identity only further reifies race as a “real”—rather than a socially constructed—state, and tends to ignore other bases for discrimination, such as class. On the one hand, these theorists account for historical and institutional racisms and differentiate themselves from “weak” or liberal multiculturalists by acknowledging the continuing importance of equality and social justice in light of these historical injustices. On the other hand, these theorists do not include an analysis of how this type of “against race thinking” intersects with whiteness as a dominant discourse and with the neoliberal concept of colorblindness—which, as a popular, dominant ideology of racelessness, is also an artifact of white privilege.

Most non-whites in America must navigate racializations within dominant discourses of society and cope with stereotypes about their racial/social/cultural group. In a society with a low tolerance for hybridized identities, individual and social strategies of passing and colorblindness obscure the richness and complexity of multilayered racial and ethnic (not to mention class, sexual, and gender) identity. In my work involving Korean adoptees, I seek to recognize these complexities, while incorporating an analysis of the very real processes of “passing,” “colorblindness,” and “racial visibility.” I note that adoptee subjects navigate their multifaceted identities (in a society that enforces categorized or non-existent racial and ethnic identity) using any and all social and cultural tools at their disposal. Among these tools is the choice to claim one or more racial and ethnic identities in order to cope with socially enforced visibility or invisibility for people of color.

Authentic Visibility, Real Invisibility

Paradoxically, two of the main problems for racialized groups of people are hyper-visibility and total invisibility. For the hyper-visible, racial stereotypes associated with negative characteristics (such as inassimilability, unintelligence, laziness, deviousness, etc.) prevail. For the invisible, society discriminates through ignorance by not noticing difference at all, and by ignoring needs of communities with culture-specific practices, desires and requirements. I argue that these racisms are linked and operate in tandem. The racism of hyper-visibility operates with the racism of invisibility by insisting that visible characteristics of individuals can be used to determine cultural knowledge and group identity/loyalty, ignoring the actual cultural nuances and lived characteristics of specific groups of people. The persistent and general understanding that all Asian peoples in America are Chinese or Japanese (and certainly are foreigners), and the perception that American Indians are feathered reservation-dwellers lingering on the edge of extinction, are two such examples.

The tendency towards absolute racial categorization (with no real possibility for hybridity) along with adherence to persistent racial stereotypes leaves many people of color with limited choices about how to express racial and ethnic identity. Without an understanding that racial visibility and invisibility are two sides of a single oppressive ideology, it is impossible to see that neither is necessarily a good choice. Racism is not necessarily only the condition of having no choices, but also of having only bad choices. However, this is the paradigm within which many American people of color must operate. This has led to arguments for and against racial visibility and invisibility as being "liberatory."

Ostracism among one's "real" racial group notwithstanding (though I certainly do not consider this reality to be trivial), passing carries many social benefits—which often translate to economic advantages. Certainly, one does not have to look hard to realize the many advantages of whiteness in a society dominated culturally, socially, and economically by whites. We know all too well the advantages in earnings, lifespan, and social access that are associated with whiteness. In his seminal research on stereotype threat (the psychological internalization of perceived dominant stereotypes by persons in the stereotyped group), Claude Steele acknowledges that one way to escape stereotype threat is to dissociate oneself from the stereotyped group.⁶ Historically, this option is especially feasible for persons with hybridized identities, whether they are racially, ethnically or culturally mixed. In the strictest sense, passing is only possible for those with phenotypes close enough to a norm of whiteness so as to not cause question. Incidentally, as the American historical understanding of "whiteness" has become inclusive of "darker" phenotypes (with the inclusion of Irish, Southern, and Eastern Europeans), this type of passing has become possible for darker-skinned mixed-race people. However, passing also requires sufficient proficiency in the cultural practices of the dominant society to camouflage one's own differences from the norm. In exchange for passing, one can expect entry into dominant societal discourses, freedom from minoritization, and presumably, from acts of discrimination and from racism itself.

As dominant American society becomes both racially more hybridized and socially more colorblind to racial difference, passing has become more and more possible even for those who

do not have “white looks.” In a strange twist of history, racial colorblindness has become a legal and moral imperative for many Americans. As passing becomes easier for more people of color and more accepted in dominant society, both the expectations to pass and benefits for passing have increased. Thus, passing invisibly into dominant American society has potentially become part of a nationalizing project whereby primary identification is with the American nation, instead of with a specific racial or cultural group.

In addition to giving rise to neoliberal understandings of racial unity and justice-through-colorblindness, the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s also gave rise to racial identity movements. Among other goals, these movements sought to heighten the visibility of people of color beyond negative racial stereotypes. Identity-based activism had—and continue to have—enormous positive effects on American society, transforming the social, political and academic landscapes. And despite the rise of colorblind agendas, these struggles for social justice continue. These historical and contemporary movements of self-defined racial visibility give communities of people of color platforms from which to speak, in order to demand equality, justice, and recognition of difference.

Mechanisms for defining what constitutes a “race” or “ethnicity” are integral to the establishment of racial or ethnic identity—including unambiguous ways for marking identity borders. In many ways, the claiming of racial or ethnic identity is only possible through the dialectic process of defining who or what is outside the boundaries of that identity. Often, these considerations are based on the concept of authenticity. The confounding question is: who has the authority to decide who is in and who is out, who is authentic and who is not? Ironically, by seeking acceptance through visibility, identity-based movements may tend to exclude those perceived to be outsiders. We are cautioned by scholars such as Vincent J. Cheng to have a thorough understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of claims on cultural authenticity because “...the search for genuine or authentic native voices will serve only to provide us with a feel-good liberal and multicultural glow—while in actuality merely recycling tokenism and nostalgia.”⁷

Though the politics of passing, visibility, and racial identity are very real, I focus instead on another, just as potent, reality: heterogeneity and the authenticity of complicated identities. While the group I discuss, Korean American adoptees, is often depicted in absolutely racial terms (as “Asians”) or in absolutely raceless terms (as “Americans,” or as “humans”), I approach adoptees as people who navigate both sets of ideologies, who are engaged in endlessly complicated conversation with dominant discourses that would seek to categorize adoptees neatly when their so-called “real” identities.

LOCATING AND DISLOCATING WHITENESS IN KOREAN ADOPTEES

Adoption from Korea to the United States has been ongoing since 1953. Korea has historically been a prolific sending country in transnational (adoption of children born in one nation

by parents of another nation) and transracial (usually adoption of children of color by white parents) adoption. More than 200,000 Korean-born people have been adopted outside Korea, over half having been adopted into the United States. The vast majority of these persons were adopted into white families.

In 2003, I began collecting the life stories of adult Korean adoptees as oral histories. Over the course of four years, many of the 73 adult Korean adoptees who recounted their life histories to me spoke about their experiences of whiteness and passing in their white families and communities. All subjects were audio-recorded with their consent, and the recordings were used in conjunction with observation notes to construct examples of adoptee responses for this research.

Embraced and Informed by Whiteness: Korean Adoptees in Colorblind America

White Family, White Community

In her article "Brown-Skinned White Girls" about women of African descent who self-identify as white, Frances Winddance Twine summarizes four necessary conditions for the construction of a white identity among a population visibly coded as non-white. These are: 1) isolation from other non-whites⁸ (though this is debatable in her example, since a number of her subjects were living with their non-white mothers); 2) "racially neutral" environments that have colorblind interpretations of family and community;⁹ 3) an ethic that privileges individualism¹⁰ and; 4) high priority placed on the material achievements of a middle class existence.¹¹

In many ways, Twine's theories can be applied to Korean adoptees as well; most are in family and social environments that fulfill Twine's conditions. Among my subjects, most were placed into families that are entirely or predominantly identified as white; both adoptive mothers and fathers of most of my subjects are white, and adopted siblings, if present, are the only other people of color in the immediate family. In their white American families, the Korean adoptees I interviewed tended to be "raised white,"¹² possibly because of a lack of interest in the birth culture of the adoptee, certainly because of the lack of available parenting models that privileged cultural modeling of another culture over the parents' own, and because of the powerful role of whiteness as a race-neutralizing human identity.

As members of families that are generally identified as white, Korean adoptees are often assimilated into the family as white and subsequently assimilated into racial and cultural identities of whiteness. One adoptee remarked, "When I was growing up, of course, the only people I saw were white." Because of acculturation to whiteness through rearing, many Korean adoptees find easy access to "white" privileges and life options, both because of a general support for white identities and a lack of support for non-white ones.

The practice of transracial adoption works to both highlight and erase race in adoptees. While most adoptees can never escape the reality that they are one of the few—if not the only—person of color in their adoptive families (and often in their communities), white parents and even entire communities often work to erase racial differences using a number of strategies. This might be accomplished by instilling value for a “weak” multiculturalism (which celebrates difference but does not address a history of racism and imperialistic injustice), by downplaying racial incidents, or by enacting racially homogenizing ideologies.

For Korean adoptees, the ambiguity of Asian American racializations is compounded by racial ambiguity within adoptive families that use the trope of colorblindness¹³ to smooth over racial differences within the family and to conform to a normative construct of family defined by blood ties and physical resemblance between parents and children. While most families continue to acknowledge the racial difference within their adoptive families, these differences can be wiped away by the claiming of a single culture and national identity (usually white American culture) by adoptees and their families. The tendency to conflate culture and race in mainstream American society¹⁴ supports this privileging of cultural sameness over racial difference. Additionally, the emphasis on sameness in family supports familial and social concepts of racial neutrality and colorblindness.

I also argue that individualism is a quality that is valued in mainstream American society, and especially in adoptive families, which have most likely approached child acquisition with much decision-making and deliberation. Many adoptive parents tell adopted children, “I chose YOU!” in order to make adopted children feel special despite their lack of biological relations to the family. Though there are surely good intentions in this particular parenting strategy, unbeknown to parents, this can be construed by adoptees as a very one-sided choice; most adoptees understand very well that they had absolutely no choice in their family placement—certainly no more than biological children have to be born into a family.

Using Twine’s logic, the conditions necessary to create a white identity, regardless of phenotype, are in place for most Korean adoptees. That they would develop white identities while in white families could be seen as predictable, even unavoidable. Vincent Cheng notes, for better or for worse, interracial/cultural “...adoptions make a radical mockery of any notions of an authentic identity. Children adopted as infants...have almost no experience of their birth parents and of the culture of their birth parents.”¹⁵ This was true for most of the Korean adoptees who spoke with me: a white identity was part of their personal history.

Adult Korean Adoptee Racial Identities

Since Korean adoptees are indoctrinated into whiteness as children, it should come as no surprise that they would continue to live with this identification as they get older. Several adoptees with whom I spoke mentioned whiteness prominently in their social and family histories; many discussed having identified as white and having only considered dating white partners, initially. However, in my conversations with Korean adoptees, it became clear that these white identities do not always last a lifetime. For most of my informants, white identity de-

creased after leaving home and becoming independent as adults, though this process often proved complicated and difficult.

Many adoptees felt that the development of a non-white identity, though culturally rewarding, carries a high price, including coming to terms with one’s own lack of Korean cultural knowledge and experiencing rejection or dislocation within the family. A late-emerging Asian or Korean identity seems to be a phenomenon common among Korean adoptees; many of my informants began to question or reject their white identity in their late twenties and early thirties.

For many Korean adoptees who identify as white throughout childhood, the social pressure to re-identify as non-white is often realized during dating and college years. This corroborates Twine’s findings; her subjects experienced breakdown of white identities as a result of “reality checks” with dating and immersion in a more racially diverse environment in college.¹⁶ Many adoptees who experience this realignment of identity are traumatized by the change, but also see its benefits in terms of their sense of ethnic pride.¹⁷ However, it is important to note that Korean adoptees who self-identify as white do not necessarily ever stop using this identifier; conversely, this analysis is not meant to suggest that all Korean adoptees necessarily develop white identities.

An emerging Asian or Asian American identity can be particularly risky for adoptees who have previously expressed a white or culturally white identity. For many adoptees, changing identities is a painful and confusing process that their families may not be able to understand. One informant stated:

The sad thing about it is that once you take the lid off it, you can’t go back. It’s a can of worms. In some ways I wish I could be so ignorant again; you know that ignorance is bliss. My mom knows that there is something terribly wrong in our relationship on a gut level, but she doesn’t know what. She’s blinded by her privilege. I try to engage her and understand that whiteness is about being totally blocked off and not having to look at anything you don’t want to, and I keep bumping my head against this, and it’s impermeable. It’s an obstruction I can’t get through.

In this example, the informant feels isolated from her mother because of the racial exploration she has undertaken as she has gotten older. One of the major contradictions faced by Korean adoptees comes from the fact that they tend to be raised white, but are then told, upon reaching adulthood, that they are *not* white by those inside or outside the family. An adoptee recounts:

I did identify as white. I remember asking my mom when I filled out my college form what to put. She said, “Well you’re ASIAN.” But that totally flies in the face of what I’ve been told...if I’m raised white then I’m supposed to be white. As a good liberal college student, then race doesn’t matter, and I’m going to mark white. But then I found out that other people

didn't know that I was white [*laughs*]...it gets complicated because other people actually look at you. So then I have to think about what I'm marking on those boxes and I started changing it every semester, and that does not sit well with people.

Here, the Korean adoptee informant pays a social price for making choices about racial identity and then changing her mind. Even though Korean adoptees are well versed in enacting whiteness, they are sometimes reminded that they are **not** white, at least not biologically or visibly, by those around them. Unlike the white ethnics that they may try to emulate, for Korean adoptees, identity-switching is much less acceptable in a practical sense—because racial changelings are more threatening than ethnic ones, given that race is a more meaningful identifier in everyday life than ethnicity.

This contradiction has been named the *Transracial Adoptee Paradox* by research counseling psychologist Richard M. Lee. He describes the paradox as the contradiction felt by non-white persons adopted by white parents as, "...racial/ethnic minorities in society...perceived and treated by others [inside the family]...as if they are members of the majority culture."¹⁸ Lee's research objectives query the psycho-social development of these individuals, paying particular attention to identity building and psychological adjustment in the adoption experience. This paradox may become a problem when adoptees have to transition from racial invisibility within white families and communities that do not recognize a racial element of their identities to the visibility of "the real world" where race is recognized and adoptees must cope with more obvious forms of racialization. One adoptee recounts:

Going to college, I was getting really depressed. Just not dealing with my emotions and all the anxieties I had; it was all happening at the same time. I'd called home and said, "I don't know what to do. I feel like I want to kill myself, I'm so depressed right now. I've been crying for all day long and I don't know what to do. I think I need to leave or something." I said, "Mom I feel really suicidal and I'm so depressed." I just remember the conversation was really short. She said, "Oh, you'll figure it out, it will work out, you'll figure it out, it's okay."...We just said bye; I called my brother and said, "I just don't know what to do." He listened. But I decided I just needed to drop out. I came back home. I started trying to explain to my parents that I feel like I'm having issues with being Asian. People look at me like I'm Asian. People look at me like I'm a foreign exchange student. I don't know. There's a lot of issues, that's when I started realizing that I was very very different and people saw me and they didn't see who I really was.

In the complex racial reality of transracial adoptees, the "real world" is represented broadly by a racist dominant society if and when transracial adoptees encounter racist language or forms of racial discrimination among strangers and peers, or in institutional settings such as work or school. However, the racial rules of the "real world" are also enforced by the racializing tendency to consider categories of race and ethnicity bounded and impermeable; Lee's paradox operates with an assumption that transracial adoptees contend with the bounded

identity categories of either "white" or "non-white." Miri Song suggests this impermeability is compounded by the enforcement of dominant society, wherein the act of "opting out" of one ethnic or cultural group can only be achieved by successfully "opting into" another group, which leaves little flexibility for individuals to exist in a space in between groups.¹⁹ She goes as far as to cite research that suggests mixed-race people suffer with identity crisis and low self-esteem.²⁰ The dissonance of claiming an identity not supported by others (the social consequences of being "wrong" about your identity, such as what happens when a person checks "white" when he or she *really* is Asian) is of primary concern to many adoption researchers.²¹ The fear is that an acculturation to whiteness may not prepare Korean adoptees or other transracial adoptees to live in a racist society, and that these survival skills are best learned from parents of the same race as the child. In addition, other people of color may exert social pressure on transracial adoptees to suggest that adopting a white identity is symptomatic of poor identity development or denial of one's "true" self. While well-intentioned, these renderings of the "real" racial identity of transracial adoptees are often just as ignorant of transracial adoptee life-experience as is the supposedly racially ignorant and isolated white family.

At the same time, pressure to "be more Asian" within Asian American communities, the Korean adoptee community included, can be high for Korean adopted adults. So many Korean adoptees have the experience of being "raised white" that one mark of maturity among adoptees is to revert to or discover one's "roots." This journey of discovery often includes travel back to Korea, searching for birthparents, self-education about Korea, Asia and/or Asian America, and sometimes, the rejection of white family and friends. Korean adoptees may be responding to these pressures if they seek to move away from culturally white identities as they mature.

However, for some Korean adoptees, just as the incentives to accept a white identity in a white family are powerful, the consequences of rejecting such an identity can be grave; I have found that adoptees sometimes see the act of challenging this white identity as threatening to continued inclusion in their white families. This is consistent with the aforementioned racial ambiguities enforced within many adoptive families in order to achieve normative familial sameness by de-emphasizing racial differences. If family harmony is dependent upon adoptees' understanding and agreement that race doesn't matter, the insistence that racial difference *does* matter can upset this balance, sometimes in extreme ways.

In contrast to the race-neutral positions cast for Korean adoptees by parents or the race-positive positions cast by some adoption researchers and members of communities of color, many of the Korean adoptees I spoke with expressed a profound sense of racial "in-betweenness." Considering the competing social pressures to identify as white (usually among family and close friends) and as Asian (in larger social contexts among groups that do not identify the adoptee as Asian and/or adopted) it is not surprising that Korean adoptees feel divided.

Flexible Racial Boundaries, Mobile Racial Hierarchies

He handed out this thing where you were supposed to put your name, your age, your race-slash-identity. As a knee-jerk reaction, I put 'Korean.' Then 'sort-of.' I am 32 years old and I still don't know.

Most of the informants with whom I spoke had identified as white earlier in life, when they lived with their parents, and had an epiphany of sorts sometime during adulthood, in which their racial designation shifted away from white. Some experienced this as adolescents, some as young adults, some not until they were in their thirties. Not surprisingly, I found ambiguity among adoptees as they were transitioning and questioning their racial and cultural identities. For many, the price of changing racial and cultural identities (from white to Korean or Asian) was high. Most eventually chose identities that were Asian or Asian American. However, many remarked that even this identity did not entirely fit their life experiences. One subject said: "I'm not claimed by the people I am most comfortable with and I am not comfortable with the people I look like." Another remarked: "...as an adoptee, you're always going to be in between, you're not Asian enough and you're not white enough." In a more complicated rendering of this idea, a third adoptee remarked on the stark contrasts between her white and Korean identities:

Minnesota is profoundly white; it doesn't get any whiter than this, except North Dakota, and I'm from a town near the North Dakota border—the population and the ignorance and the white privilege that comes with that. But then I think what is the alternative?...I can move to California or Hawaii...but then I think, I can't even make it to the grocery store...I can't even make it to King's [*a local Korean restaurant*], because then I have to be profoundly Korean.

Later she continued with these thoughts about her condition of in-betweenness:

I really struggle with feeling fraudulent...that's a thing...I have a really hard time hanging out with people who were raised Korean, because I have such tremendous feelings of insecurity about that. I get in these situations of racial starkness...if everyone is starkly Korean, then I feel really white. If I'm with my family, I feel really not white. It goes in degrees, depending on the cultural consequence, because if I'm not white, then I must be Korean and that doesn't take me very far either. Right now I feel very not white and very white at the same time...that has to do with cultural competence and it's the chameleon thing, like who am I standing next to...These days, the only people I feel completely comfortable being around are my Korean adoptee friends because I don't feel fraudulent.

Though the position and experience of in-betweenness²² is commonly mentioned among Korean adoptees, dominant ideologies outside adoptee communities seek to regulate Korean adoptee identity more rigidly. Resistance to any Korean adoptee self-concept that complicates simple identity categories takes many forms, all of which attempt to pigeonhole adoptee iden-

tity into either "white" or "Asian/Korean" categories. This response echoes the experience of many mixed-race individuals and second-generation immigrants who also want the freedom to exert choice in their identities.²³ Korean adoptees have much in common with both groups—both as highly assimilated immigrants because of their immersion in white American society at a young age and as individuals who are often mixed in their cultural and national identification.

Because of their age and their awareness about whiteness as a problematic identity in their lives, many adoptees in my research expressed some rejection of the whiteness that they had embraced as younger people. These rejections were filled with painful realizations of what was lost to gain their whiteness, and what is lost in rejecting whiteness. Many equate whiteness with a deeply held ignorance about the perspectives and experiences of non-white people and about difference in general. Some reported experiencing a profound sense of internal conflict because, although they understood well how such ignorance was produced and maintained, it was painful for them to confront.

When specifically asked what whiteness means to them today, as adults, Korean adoptees offered a variety of responses, including some explanations that focused on contradictory access to the benefits of white privilege, some that equated whiteness with ignorance, and some that rejected whiteness altogether. Though the adoptees with whom I explicitly discussed whiteness acknowledged that they had some access to the privileges of whiteness, their statements showed that their experiences of white privilege were complicated by encounters with racism within whiteness and by partial, rather than full, access to the privileges of being considered white.

In navigating Asian American roles, the role of the model minority may have special appeal to Korean adoptees. Some adoptees see the position of being the "best of the worst" as an alluring one, holding the prospect for adoptees as people of color to co-exist in their largely white world. The racially neutral position of many white families and social circles would not allow adoptees to acknowledge that a model minority position enacts an inferior racialization, only that it is far better than a negative Asian racialization, or the racializations of other people of color groups.

The ambivalence expressed by some Korean adoptees about their racial identities in their conversations with me appeared to be related to the pressure many adoptees felt to "pick a side." Limiting adoptees to the choice of white identity or Asian identity leads many to seek a "third space" where the complex realities of adoptee racial and cultural identity can be more easily rendered. This space of racial ambiguity expresses itself in two major sites: Korean adoptee communities and race-neutral communities, often of or around adoptive families.

In Richard Lee's concept of the transracial adoptee paradox, he describes a familial space where race is not recognized, and a space outside the family where the rules of racial engagement are much harsher.²⁴ Adoptive families develop race-neutral values in order to minimize the obvious biological differences within their families, but I argue that in contemporary American society, many transracial adoptees can increasingly choose to stay within a race-

neutral space. Expanding on his concept of the race-neutral family which Lee applies to the individual adoptee subject, I suggest that the practice of transracial adoption has contributed significantly to the development of race-neutrality as a moral imperative extending beyond families to their communities, becoming significant even at a national scale.²⁵ Many adoptees who contributed oral histories discussed their extended families, churches, schools, and towns as having similar race-neutral values.

Drawing from Omi and Winant's concept of *racial etiquette*, where "[e]verybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification...[r]ace becomes 'common sense'—a way of comprehending, explaining, an acting in the world,"²⁶ I suggest that there is a specific racial etiquette to transracial adoption, wherein the white communities tend to politely overlook the racial difference between the white majority and the adoptees themselves. Some community members may follow this etiquette of denying racial difference because of obligation to adoptive families who are enforcing a race-neutral ethic. Some may have overarching beliefs in the importance of colorblindness as a solution to America's race-relations problems. Either way, I argue that transracial adoptees can remain racially invisible even outside their adoptive families. Because of high acculturation into white society and comprehensive understanding of white social and racial rules, adoptees often make it easy for those around them to look past their race, which in turn enforces the correctness of colorblind racial etiquette among non-adoptees in their communities. Certainly, many adoptees see any acknowledgment of their race as racist or at least uncouth. These cultural demands of adoptees and adoptive families to maintain colorblind perspectives feeds back into their communities and helps to maintain the racial invisibility preferred by some adoptees.

However, some Korean adoptees have found communities consisting of other Korean adoptees can offer a more comfortable environment. Fellow adoptees are able to readily recognize adoptee differences from both the white racial majority and from Asian and Korean American communities. It is in these adoptee-centered communities that many adoptees are able to express cultural and racial hybridity without feeling pressured to pick a single racial identity. One adoptee remarked:

The other day when I was feeling really in despair about the whole whiteness thing, I think it has to do with identifying myself in terms of negations...you're not white, you're not Korean and that's how it always is. That's why it's so affirming to be around other adoptees, because for one time you can refer to yourself in the positive, you know, linguistically. Because I'm always negating myself otherwise.

Other adoptees echoed this informant's experience of being at home around other adoptees. The development of a Korean adoptee identity, which is neither culturally Korean nor culturally white, functions for these adoptees as a remedy for feelings of in-betweenness. When I asked when she began to identify less with being white, one informant explained how the development of a Korean adoptee identity marked an advance towards a positive expression of identity for the first time:

Really, it would have to be when I started meeting other Korean adoptees. The word minority would be tossed around, but I didn’t like that because that would mean you are less. People of color... that wasn’t used enough to feel like that was something I could claim. When I met other Korean adoptees, I could feel some pride. Before that, I still wouldn’t have said I was white as much as when I was younger, but I still had no other language to use.

Unfortunately, these Korean adoptee communities almost always exist outside mainstream communities and other adoptive communities. Adoptees seem to recognize that the identification with the “third space” of Korean adoptee communities is sometimes still too “Korean” for colorblind communities. Referencing the precarious position adoptees find themselves in when trying to break free of white identities, another adoptee stated, “We know not to congregate [with other Korean adoptees]. It’s too conspicuous,” as if the mere act of being seen with other adoptees or other Asians would be threatening to white family and friends.

Consistent with assimilationist understandings of Korean adoptee adjustment, designations of “well-adjusted” or “happy” are sometimes conflated with “white” while opposite designations of “bitter” or “angry” are associated with “Asian.” Though racial unrest is not always articulated as the primary reason for feelings of dissatisfaction with being adopted, it is often inferred. In these cases, heightened consciousness around being a person of color, an Asian American, or a Korean adoptee can incite accusations of ungratefulness, poor adjustment, or mental instability.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, the binary understanding of Korean adoptee identity politics has been used to mobilize adoptees against one another. A recent and striking example of the polarizing tendency in Korean adoptee communities took place in 2006, when an American adoption agency, which has a long history of facilitating Korean adoptions, responded to a legislative proposal in South Korea which advocated for the end transnational adoption from Korea. The agency initiated a letter-writing campaign directed at South Korean legislators, soliciting Korean adoptees to express support for continuing transnational adoption from South Korea. A letter addressed to Korean American adoptees stated:

Some of you may have already heard about this proposed legislation... One of the driving forces behind this legislation is the fact that Korean officials are only hearing from adopted Korean adults *living in Korea* currently who had *negative* adoption experiences and who support ending international adoption in Korea. We felt that there was a need for Korean officials to hear from voices of *other* adopted adults when the timing was right.... many [Korean] officials see adopted Koreans still as “poor orphans,” as one put it, and continue to apologize for the fact that they

were adopted, when in fact they are leading *productive and satisfied lives*.²⁷ (emphasis mine).

The letter, which was written by an agency director who is not a Korean adoptee, was sent and signed by agency workers who are Korean adoptees in order to use their appeal to other adoptees to further the cause of the agency. That the agency, which has both a financial and a moral stake in the continuation and success of Korean adoption to the United States, opposes the end of transnational adoption from Korea is not surprising. However, the tactics it chose to use writes the race-aware (those adoptees living in Korea) and race-neutral (“concerned friends” of the agency who are living in the United States) script onto adoptees as happy versus angry and uses divisive techniques to pit so-called happy (“productive and satisfied,” presumably grateful) adoptees against so-called angry (those with “negative adoption experiences”) adoptees.

Gratefulness is a quality that has always been a prerequisite for admission into white American society for people of color. Embedded in the demand for grateful American people of color is the strong maintenance of whiteness as hierarchically superior to all other races. Using this logic, any non-white person allowed to be elevated to a position of whiteness should be grateful. The accusation of ungratefulness is both common and disturbing when launched at Korean adoptees. This charge almost always refers to adoptees’ ungratefulness for their own adoptions, which historically is almost always into white families. Inferred here is the ethnocentric assumption that any person adopted from Korea (or any poor country that sends its children to rich countries for adoption) should be grateful for their adoption since the American quality of life is obviously higher than that of Korea. Those who accuse adoptees of ungratefulness are attempting to enforce the colorblind racial etiquette of transracial adoption by accusing the adoptees themselves of breaking the rules of etiquette. Any adoptee who is ungrateful, especially if racial difference is the basis for personal problems experienced by individual adoptees, is disrupting the more harmonious norm of colorblindness—a norm that denies racialization as a potentially divisive and threatening characteristic for people of color in America

Ungratefulness among Korean adoptees potentially threatens adoptive family systems and relationships, the multi-million dollar transnational adoption industry, and paternalistic relations between the United States and peripheral adoption-sending nations. So, for grateful Korean adoptees, becoming and remaining white (equated with becoming and remaining American) fulfills an important nation-building function of transnational adoption. As the stakes are high in maintaining Korean adoptees as culturally white and grateful, there is little tolerance for adoptees who express interest in Asian, Korean, or in-between identities.

Despite efforts to regulate Korean adoptee identity as either angry-Asian or grateful-to-be-white, many Korean adoptees respond to being placed in the either/or position by staking a claim to the in-between space. While adoptees do express frustration at being neither here nor there, neither American nor Korean, neither white or Asian, Korean adoptee identity occupies any and all of these identities as well as any number of hybridized identities between them.

As I research and fraternize with Korean American adoptee populations, I note much difficulty in the community because of mistaken-identity pigeonholing tied to stereotyping and racialization. While the strategies among Korean adoptees are quite divergent, the will to self-define and the dissent against dominant definitions of identity based on common racializations are clearly evident. Though every racialized group has a different history of racialization in America, Korean adoptees are resisting racial assumptions, socializations, and categorizations thrust on them through dominant discourses of law, policy, media representations, and family. While this resistance is contentious and the social price for it may be high, its evidence in my work with Korean adoptee oral histories is apparent. This group, pressured into incomplete identity binaries (Asian or white, Korean or American) that often collapse into identities of non-choice (as in, "You *think* you are Asian or white, but clearly, you are not!") undermines the process of forced racialization by consistently using strategies that subvert racial categorization to reinvent their images as infinitely more complex.

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- 1 Miri Song, *Choosing Ethnic Identity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2003), 68.
- 2 James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (Boston: Sherman French & Company, 1912).
- 3 Song, *Choosing Ethnic Identity*.
- 4 Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000).
- 5 Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres, *After Race: Racism after Multiculturalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).
- 6 C.M. Steele and J. Aronson, "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69 (1995): 797-811.
- 7 Vincent J. Cheng, *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 27.
- 8 Frances Winddance Twine, "Brown-Skinned White Girls," in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 220.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 227.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 225.
- 12 Phrase borrowed from Twine, "Brown-Skinned White Girls", 218.
- 13 Hawley Fogg-Davis, *The Ethics of Transracial Adoption* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 9.
- 14 Song, *Choosing Ethnic Identity*. Song discusses the politically correct tendency to emphasize culture over race in contemporary British society on page 18 and I would argue that the substitution of culture for race operates similarly in American society.
- 15 Cheng, *Inauthentic*, 70.
- 16 Twine, "Brown-Skinned White Girls," 230, 233.
- 17 Richard Lee, Hyung Chol Yoo and Sara Evans, "Coming of Age of Korean Adoptees: Ethnic Identity Development and Psychological Adjustment," in *Korean-Americans: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Ilpyong J. Kim (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International Corp., 2004).
- 18 Richard M. Lee, "The Transracial Adoption Paradox: History, Research and Counseling Implications of Cultural Socialization." *The Counseling Psychologist* 711-44 (2003): 711.
- 19 Song, *Choosing Ethnic Identity*, 56.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 21 Bagley 1993, Feigelman 2000, Freundlich and Lieberthal 2000, Hollingsworth 1997, Verslius-den Bieman and Vehulst 1995, and others.

- 22 This strategy is also identified as “partical identification” by Miri Song in *Choosing Ethnic Identity*, 58, though she claims this as a position between dominant culture and one’s own community, suggesting this is a position of ambiguity between a “real” and “convenient” identity.
- 23 Song, *Choosing Ethnic Identity*.
- 24 Lee, “The Transracial Adoption Paradox.”
- 25 Adam Pertman, *Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming America* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
- 26 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 1994), 60.
- 27 E-mail message to the author, August 10, 2006.