

Abstract

To be a floating signifier: A study of the transracial experience seen through adopted Korean life narratives

Since the end of the Korean War between 150-200,000 Koreans have been adopted into 15-20 different Western countries. Up until recently, governments and organisations, and groups and individuals variously involved with international adoption were the only ones who spoke for and represented the adopted Koreans who were subalternised and deprived of their voice and agency. As a result, the group was invisibilised in migration and diaspora, and race and ethnicity studies, overlooked by Asian and Korean overseas communities, and under-researched by Asian and Korean studies scholars. A Western neo-colonialism perceived international adoption as a rescue mission, and as a left-liberal progressive act and a way of creating a multicultural family, and a Korean ethno-nationalism utilised the adoptees as physical bonds with Western allies and made claims on them as part of its diaspora policy. For the adoption agencies, Korean adoption was marketed as the flagship of international adoption, while adoption researchers represented the group as the most ideal transracial adoptees in terms of psychological resilience and ethnic assimilation.

It was not until the end of the 1980s when adopted Koreans started to organise themselves and reach out to each other, that the group for the first time was able to speak up and speak out about their own experiences and make themselves heard of in the public. From the mid-1990s, there has been a veritable explosion of adopted Korean autobiographical works creating a cultural field of its own and encompassing such diverse genres like novels, plays and poems, performances, art works and paintings, comics and children's books, and documentaries and films. These auto-ethnographic life narratives make it possible for the first time to listen to the voices of the adopted Koreans themselves beyond what has been previously written and said on the group.

The purpose of this study is to try to understand the transracial experience by examining a corpus of adopted Korean autobiographical texts. Drawing upon a social-constructivist understanding of subjectivity, and postcolonial, queer and feminist theories of hybridity, performativity and intersectionality, the point of departure is that the adopted Koreans have been subjected into a white self-identification, while they at the same time always risk being racialized into Oriental stereotypes, minoritised into non-white immigrants, and essentialised into Korean nationals. Furthermore, the group as a whole is often infantilised and proletarianised as adopted and orphaned children, and feminised and homosexualised as ethnic East Asians. The study starts by reviewing previous research on adopted Koreans, theories of subjectivisation and methods of reading memoirs as body narratives. After a background to Korean adoption, Western neo-colonialism and Korean ethno-nationalism, and the adopted Korean movement, the study goes through the four principal identifications (Whiteness), imaginaries (Orientalism), discourses (Immigrantism) and interpellations (Koreanness) which adopted Koreans usually encounter and are navigating between, and looks at how these intersect with issues concerning class and age, and sexuality and gender, by citing and interpreting excerpts from the self-narratives. At the end, an attempt is made at conceptualising the transracial experience by the way of comparisons with other hybridised in-between groups like bi- and multiracial, and bisexual and transgendered people.

Keywords: international adoption, adopted Koreans, body narratives, subjectivity, transraciality

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Adoption, diskriminering och etnisk identitet

Projektet avser att undersöka hur vuxna adopterade och adoptivföräldrar i Sverige upplever och förhåller sig till diskriminering, samt hur detta påverkar deras livskvalitet och formande av etnisk identitet. Adopterades och adoptivföräldrars erfarenheter av diskriminering ses i projektet som ett medel för att studera hur exkludering utifrån ett "utländskt" utseende verkar i praktiken i dagens svenska samhälle, samt hur individuella aktörer påverkas av och svarar på denna. Adopterade och adoptivfamiljer är den mest ideala gruppen att studera för att undersöka frågor om diskriminering i dagens svenska samhälle, eftersom adopterade växer upp i svenska familjer, och följaktligen kan betraktas som kulturellt svenska. Den etniska aspekten handlar här uteslutande om utseendemässiga särdrag såsom hår- och hudfärg. Adopterade räknas visserligen som "helsvenskar" i många avseenden, men det har ändå visat sig att dessa liksom andra grupper med utländsk bakgrund kan bli diskriminerade, exempelvis på arbetsmarknaden eller inom bostadssektorn.

Adopterade kan därför i vissa skeden i livet tänkas identifiera sig med en "icke-svensk" etnicitet trots en "helsvensk" uppväxt, vilket kan bidra till förståelsen för hur etniska identiteter uppstår och förändras. Detta projekt vill också bidra med en kunskap om och förståelse för adoptivföräldrars roll och erfarenheter av diskriminering och etnisk identitet, något som aldrig tidigare blivit belyst inom forskningen. Därför undersöks även adoptivföräldrars erfarenheter av särbehandling gentemot familjen och sina barn, vilka förhållningssätt de har till barnens etniska ursprung, och med vilka strategier de hanterar det faktum att barnen har ett annat etniskt ursprung. Adoptivfamiljens roll bör inte underskattas när det gäller adopterades upplevelser av diskriminering och formande av etniska identitet. Svensk adoptionsforskning har hittills främst koncentrerat sig på unga adopterades anknytning till adoptivföräldrarna och integration i det svenska samhället. Svensk etnicitetsforskning har främst fokuserat på att studera grupper i samhället med utländsk bakgrund som tydligt särskiljer sig kulturellt från majoritetsbefolkningen. I detta projekt möts dessa två forskningsfält på så sätt att etnicitetsforskningens intresse för diskriminering appliceras på vuxna adopterade och adoptivföräldrar. Projektet belyser därmed hur sociala och kulturella faktorer, och inte bara psykologiska och medicinska, medverkar till de psykosociala problem som kvantitativ forskning visat är överrepresenterade bland gruppen vuxna adopterade.

Projektet för samtidigt in adopterade och adoptivföräldrar som studieobjekt inom etnicitetsforskningen, med utgångspunkten att deras upplevelser kan bidra med insikter i hur diskriminering verkar i samhället gentemot svenskar med ett "utländskt" utseende. Detta möte mellan två olika forskningsfält medför ett perspektivskifte inom adoptionsforskningen genom att projektet fokuserar mer på vuxenlivet än på uppväxten, och mer på samhällets ansvar än på individens roll. I förlängningen medför detta en ökad betoning på det svenska samhällets skyldigheter gentemot alla svenska medborgare med ett "utländskt" utseende.

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