

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

- a presentation of a postdoctoral research project

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### Specific goals

This postdoctoral research project aims at qualitatively examining and analyzing autobiographical texts written by adopted Koreans. The adopted Korean self-narratives have been published in several different Western languages within the last two decades in the form of books and anthologies, articles in newspapers and magazines, and as Internet texts. The purpose is to try to understand the ethnic subjectivisation of Korean adoptees by focusing on the different ethnic identifications and interpellations expressed within the works. The goal is to be able to conceptualize what it means to be a transracial adoptee in general living in a predominantly segregated and white dominated setting contrary to most other non-white minorities in Western countries. Through the development of a theory of transraciality, and by the way of comparisons with other hybridized in-between and marginal groups like bi- and multi-racial, and bi- and transsexual people, this study may help to explain the feelings of extreme bodily discomfort and physical alienation and severe psychic injury and violence which according to the life narratives seem to be so prevalent among adopted Koreans. Ultimately, given the high preponderance and overrepresentation of suicide cases, mental illnesses and alcohol and substance abuse among Korean and other transracial adoptees which quantitative adoption research has found and indicated in leading adopting countries like the U.S., Sweden and the Netherlands, this study may also help to explain such results and outcomes beyond the dominant pre-adoption and bio-genetic explanation models.

### Research overview

A history of more than half a century of continuous and uninterrupted international adoption from Korea lies behind this research project. Ever since 1953 when the Korean War was suspended with an armistice agreement, more than 150,000 Korean children have been sent away for adoption to 15 principal host countries in the Western world, and still over 2,000 children leave Korea every year to nine different receiving countries. The group constitutes the absolute or relative majority of all transracial adoptees in every country affected by international adoption from Korea, and is in many regions and cities also fully dominating the ethnic Korean or even East Asian presence. This child migration from Korea is in a comparative perspective absolutely unprecedented in modern history both in its gigantic demographic scope, in its long-lived time span, and in its wide-ranging geographic spread. It was in Korea that the practice of international adoption was born in the first place, and the adopted Koreans constitute an estimated one third of all international adoptions that were carried out globally from the mid-1950s and until the mid-1990s when the country's top position as the number one supplier of transnationally adopted children was taken over by countries like China, India, Colombia and Guatemala (Pilotti 1993; Weil 1984). After the end of the Cold War and as a consequence of globalization, international adoption is today also rapidly on the increase with perhaps 30,000 placements a year compared to 15,000 in the 1980s (Kane 1993; Selman 2002). This contemporary demographic explosion makes the issue of international adoption and transracial adoptees all the more relevant to study.

Official statistics from the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare state 156,242 international adoptions having taken place between 1953-2004, although up to 200,000 are sometimes

mentioned to include numerous unaccounted private adoptions (Hübinette 2005a). Among these 104,319 are American cases, constituting at least one third of all international adoptions in the country and close to one tenth of the entire Korean-American population. International adoption actually dominated emigration from Korea to the U.S. between 1953-59, and as the number of Koreans migrating to America has decreased substantially during recent years, the 2,000 Korean children who are brought to the country annually today again represent half of all immigrants from Korea. The 46,564 adopted Koreans in France, Germany, Switzerland, England, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Sweden, Denmark and Norway represent an estimated half to one out of three of all transracial adoptees on the European continent. France harbors 11,090 Korean adoptees, altogether 8,288 have been placed in Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg, the so-called Benelux region, while 23,604 can be found in the three Scandinavian countries of Sweden (8,953), Denmark (8,571) and Norway (6,080). In Scandinavia, the group constitutes half (Denmark and Norway) to one fifth (Sweden) of all transracial adoptees, besides being the largest East Asian minority, and it totally dominates the ethnic Korean presence in and migration to the region as there are very few Korean immigrants living in Northern Europe apart from the adoptees. Sweden with its almost 50,000 adoptees from over 100 different countries, is proportionally the leading adopting country in the world and, in absolute numbers, the second only after the U.S. The Scandinavian-Americans are remarkably dominating international adoption as well, and naturally also adoption from Korea as an estimated 15-20,000 or 15-20 percent of the adopted Koreans in the country have been placed in the very Scandinavian-like state of Minnesota where the group constitutes more than half of the ethnic Koreans living there. Lastly, there are 5,547 adopted Koreans dispersed throughout Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where they again make up a substantial part of the transracial adoptees in those countries, and there are altogether less than a hundred adopted Koreans in Ireland, Finland and Spain, and in Greenland, Iceland and the Faeroe Islands. The vast majority of the adopted Koreans has been adopted into middle and upper class families, and has accordingly grown up in white suburban, countryside or small-town communities and neighborhoods, where most of them are still living as adults. It is important to remember that this geographic and socioeconomic background makes the group completely different from more or less all other urban-, family- and community-based Korean, Asian and non-Western diasporas living in today's multicultural Western societies.

Qualitative research on adopted Koreans has been conducted ever since the first children arrived in their host countries in the 1950s, and the vast majority have been studies based on small samples of children or adolescents, and very often with adoptive parents as the main informants (Bagley 1993; Feigelman & Silverman 1983; Gildea 1992; Halifax 2001; Kim Dong Soo 1976; Kim Wun Jung 1995; Koh 1981; Lydens 1988; Maury 1999; Mullen 1995; Reader 1996; Rørbech 1989; Simon & Altstein 1987; Valk 1957). Scholarship on the subject of international adoption in the leading adopting regions of North America, and Northern and Western Europe tends to focus indiscriminately on the adoptees' psychosocial adjustment and attachment to the adoptive family, and assimilation and acculturation to the host culture according to normative models of development and progress, and most researchers are either in medicine and social work, or psychologists and psychiatrists. As a result of these disciplinary and methodological limitations, the outcomes of the studies have almost without exception been interpreted as "positive" as the majority of adoptees rapidly changes culture and language, attaches to their adoptive families and identifies primarily with white society, thereby developing a positive self-esteem according to the normative standards set up. The politically sensitive issues of race and ethnicity are mostly minimized and ignored, and reported incidences of discrimination and racism are often downplayed and denied, as a color-blind approach is generally favored when conducting research on adopted Koreans. The deviant prob-

lems that have been identified in the form of psychological and social difficulties are frequently pathologized and medicalized and attributed to a combination of pre-adoption and genetic factors.

My research project instead relates to the quantitative adoption research that started to come out from the 1990s in the Netherlands and in the U.S., and above all most recently in Sweden, based on large statistical cohort studies of thousands of adult transracial adoptees (Björklund & Richardson 2000; Hjern 2004; Hjern & Allebeck 2002, 2004; Hjern, Lindblad & Vinnerljung 2002; Hjern, Vinnerljung & Lindblad 2004; Hübinette 2003; Lindblad, Hjern & Vinnerljung 2003; Österberg 2000; Rooth 2001; Slap, Goodman & Huang 2001; Tieman, van der Ende & Verhulst 2005; Versluis den Bieman & Verhulst 1995). Especially the Swedish quantitative adoption studies, by far the most extensive ever conducted on transracial adoptees in any Western country due to unique possibilities in Sweden of conducting population register studies, can also be seen as the most scientific ones up to date of assessing the outcomes of international adoption. The adult transracial adoptees were checked up in population registers and compared to equivalent control groups among both native Swedes and non-Western immigrants. The results show that transracial adoptees of Sweden have substantial difficulties to establish themselves socio-economically in terms of level of education and labor market achievement in spite of being adopted to couples predominantly belonging to the Swedish elite as it is estimated that 90 percent of the adoptive parents belong to Sweden's upper and middle classes. Furthermore, epidemiological studies show high levels of psychiatric illness, addiction, criminality and suicide compared to the control groups. The most disturbing finding is a record high odds ratio of 5.0 for suicide compared to native Swedes, in an international perspective only comparable to the staggering suicide rates registered among indigenous people in North America and Australia.

Finally, my research project is above all a part of the new multidisciplinary academic field of Korean adoption/adoptees studies, which deals with the question of the recent emergence of a specific adopted Korean community and identity (Bergquist 2000; Bergquist, Vonk, Kim & Feit, 2007; Choy & Choy 2003; Eng 2003; Hübinette 2004; Hyon 2004; Kim Eleana 2000, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Lee 2004; Lee, Yoo & Roberts 2004; Meier 1998; Palmer 2001; Park Nelson 2005). These studies differ from the previous ones in their non-linear and non-static approaches to identity development. Furthermore, these studies also focus on adult adoptees and issues of race and ethnicity, instead of emotional and behavioral adjustment and acculturation during childhood and adolescence, and to be a transracial adoptee is seen as a lifelong and always changing process rather than being a static state.

### Project description

Recently, there has been an upsurge in academic studies examining previously forgotten and unrecognized identifications and experiences transcending antithetical and binary opposites of white/non-white, male/female, hetero/homo and the like. Words like borders and margins, terms like new ethnicities and hybridities, and prefixes like bi- (e.g. biracial), inter- (e.g. intersexual) and trans- (e.g. transgender) often turn up in this exciting and fascinating research trend challenging essentialist theories and notions, and biologized identities and collectivities. Based on a poststructuralist understanding of identity development, this research trend takes place at the intersection of postcolonial, feminist and queer theories. My research project sets out to examine one of these hitherto neglected and under-researched groups, namely the close to 160,000 Koreans who since the end of the Korean War and during a period of over half a century have been adopted to over 20 different Western countries.

The adopted Koreans have up until now more or less been overlooked and invisible in Asian and Korean studies, in migration and diaspora studies, and in race and ethnicity studies. For many years, governments and organizations, and groups and individuals variously involved with international adoption were the only ones who spoke for and represented the adopted Koreans who were more or less deprived of their voice and agency. In this regard, the adopted Koreans can well be likened to subalterns, as they up until recently could not speak for themselves, represented as they were as mute physical bonds by supplying and receiving governments and as grateful rescue objects by adoption agencies. Furthermore, a Western multiculturalism perceived international adoption as a left-liberal progressive act and a way of creating an antiracist family, and a Korean ethnonationalism utilized the adoptees as physical bonds to Western allies and made claims on them as part of its ethno-racial 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 perfect transracial adoptees in terms of normative adjustment and assimilation.

It was not until the 1990s when adopted Koreans started to organize themselves and reach out to each other internationally, that the group for the first time was able to speak out about their own experiences and make themselves heard of in the public in a more pronounced manner. From the mid-1990s with the breakthrough of the Internet, there has been a veritable explosion of adopted Korean autobiographical works creating a subcultural field of its own and encompassing such diverse genres like novels, plays and poems, performances, art works and paintings, and documentaries and films. These previously subjugated self-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 my research project is therefore to try to understand the adopted Korean experience and the ethnic subjectivisation of Korean adoptees by reading and interpreting a selected corpus of these autobiographical works, focusing on the ethnic identifications and interpellations expressed in the texts.

The autobiographies have been published within the last decade in connection with the emergence of a global adopted Korean movement, and have been taken from journals and magazines, and books and anthologies, or from Internet homepages and listservs, as the adopted Korean movement is very much a virtual community. There is a strong presence of texts written by American adoptees, as issues of race and ethnicity seem to be more in focus in the U.S. than among European adoptees where instead adoption-related issues are more prevalent. Some texts have been published in journals belonging to Korean friendship associations mainly catering for adoptive families, and a few are taken from publications by governmental adoption authorities and from adoption agency magazines. Others are contributions to anthologies or papers from conference proceedings, but most are various kinds of publications coming from adopted Korean self-help and affinity groups. I will read the texts related to issues concerning ethnicity and race, as well as class, gender, sexuality and age, by citing and interpreting excerpts from the self-narratives. I have decided to analyze the texts by using a combination of Judith Butler's performativity theory and Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity as the theoretical framework. The queer theorist Judith Butler (1990, 1993), whose works mainly focus on the categories of gender and sexuality, and the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) examining the asymmetries of race and ethnicity, are two of the most important and influential poststructuralist scholars. These poststructuralist conceptualizations of identity and subjectivity draw eclectically and multidisciplinary on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism, Derridean deconstruction and a Foucauldian understanding of power. Butler's performativity theory views identity formation as a result of a complex interaction between identifications and interpellations, and Bhabha's hybridity theory argues that new

subjects and spaces have arisen out of the colonial encounter. For Butler and Bhabha, subject formation or subjectivisation takes place on the level of the body regardless of anatomical features and bodily “facts”, and the subject comes into being by entering the social order through the acquiring of language, and sustains its subject position or subjectivity by the way of an endless repetition or iterability. It is this fluidity and multiplicity of identities or subject positions, which I will emphasize in my research project on the adopted Korean subjectivity.

### Significance

As the adopted Koreans make up by far the largest transracial adoptee group in the world, I consider my research project to be a way of understanding what it means to be a transracial adoptee in general in any contemporary Western society, in light of the fact that international adoption is nowadays rapidly on the increase. I also argue that it is necessary to examine the situation of transracial adoptees given the high overrepresentation of suicide rates, mental illnesses and social problems among adult transracial adoptees as established in quantitative adoption research, beyond the dominant models which want to explain such results with genetic defects, low IQs, separation traumas, and attachment disorders. Finally, this research project may also contribute to reformulating new understandings of categories like Whiteness and Orientalism, and offering new and valuable insights into the situation of a marginalized diaspora growing up with white parents and white families, and residing in predominantly white communities and white neighborhoods, contrary to the vast majority of other voluntary migrants from Korea, Asia and the non-West living in Western countries.

### Preliminary results

I have presented a paper and published an article, which can be seen as some kind of a synopsis for the book. In a paper presented at the *1st National Research Conference of Cultural Studies in Sweden* and at the *14th Nordic Adoption Council Meeting and 1st Global Adoption Research Conference* in 2005, and in a forthcoming contribution to the anthology *Asian diasporas. New conceptions, new frameworks*, I argue that the adopted Korean subjectivity is characterized by a transracial subject position in the form of a white identification and a continuous performance of Whiteness after having grown up in a white family and by living in wholly white surrounding (Hübinette 2005b, 2005c, 2007). My main argument is that the adopted Koreans have been fully acculturated and socialized into a self-identification as white in spite of having a non-white body. I also argue that this identification with and performance of Whiteness is always interrupted, questioned and disturbed by contradictory, unstable and repeated passings and transgressions. This transracial subjectivity and ethnic instability leads to severe physical alienation and psychic violence, and I argue that this finding may help to explain the high frequency of suicide rates, mental illnesses and social problems among transracial adoptees.

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