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Review

Critical Adoptee Standpoint: Transnational, Transracial Adoptees as Knowledge Producers

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Abstract: Drawing on Asian adoptee-authored research, this article conceptualizes a critical adoptee standpoint. It underscores the significance of adoptees as knowledge producers and offers new insights into family dynamics, racialization processes, and adoptee personhood. Through three conceptual themes derived from adoptee-authored research, it illuminates the intersectional power dynamics shaping adoptees' lived experiences and challenges traditional adoption narratives. This approach repositions adoptees as agentic subjects who have cultivated a group consciousness that transcends traditional boundaries of belonging. While focused on Asian adoptees, the essay ultimately calls for broader recognition of adoptees' contributions to adoption discourse and a more comprehensive understanding of a critical adoptee standpoint in both academic and advocacy settings and among the broader adoptee population.

Keywords: adoption; transracial adoption; adoptee; race; family

1. Introduction

> "I do consider myself to be uniquely ethnic in a way that other ethnicities are not. . . I would consider that I'm racially Korean, and my citizenship is the United States, and I'm probably culturally white, but ethnically, because of that mix, I am kind of, Korean adoptees have their own ethnicity, really. I'm not a hundred percent sure what that means, but I think it means that we're going to interpret things differently, and different things are going to mean something kind of unique to us as Korean adoptees."
>
> Korean adoptee man, age 46 (interview with author, May 2016)

Over the past 70+ years, transnational, transracial adoption to the US has become normalized as a form of family-making. When international adoption was first institutionalized in the late 1950s with adoption from Korea, however, it was anything but normal. After all, Korean transnational transracial adoption began during a time of anti-Asian immigration policy restricting who could become part of the national family and same-race matching procedures dictating who could become part of adoptive families (Kim and Park Nelson 2019; Laybourn 2024). The "family" carries cultural and symbolic meaning in shaping society, and the creation of families via Korean adoption defied the taken-for granted assumptions undergirding family as a social institution and as an ideology in shaping racial meanings. As the Korean adoptee alludes to in the above quote, Korean adoptees inhabit a particular social location, which generates a unique lens to interpret their position in society and the power relations undergirding that position, especially regarding race, citizenship, culture, and group meaning-making.

Due to early narrative framing of adoption as humanitarian rescue and adoptees as objects of rescue (Oh 2015; Pate 2014), Korean adoptees and transnational adoptees more broadly have been discounted as adoption authorities. Although cohorts of Korean transnational, transracial adoptees have since reached adulthood and created a body of adoptee cultural production (Adolfson 1999; Arndt 1998; Bishoff and Rankin 1997; Borshay

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Liem 2000; Tomes 1997; Trenka et al. 2006), adoptive parents and adoption professionals continue to be viewed as the experts on the adoption experience. Moreover, adoptees are perceived as less credible (Gustafsson and Merritt, forthcoming; Merritt 2024). This devaluing of adoptee knowledge continues even though many adoptees are adoption professionals and researchers with formal training, credentialed expertise, and lived experience. If we understood adoptees as producers of knowledge (Gustafsson 2022) and centered adoptee-authored adoption research, what new insights might we glean about family, race, and national belonging? With adoptees as knowledge producers, how then does our understanding of adoptee personhood also change?

Transnational, transracial adoptees' position as "outsiders within" creates the condition for a distinct adoptee standpoint. "Outsider within" refers to the "ambiguities of belonging, yet not fully belonging" experienced by "individuals who occup[y] the edges between groups of unequal power relations" (Collins 1986, p. 66). This is not an "individualized category of personal difference" but rather a critical consciousness of being on the margins of intersecting systems of power (Collins 1986, p. 75). In theorizing outsiders within as a concept foundational to black feminist thought, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) notes that one's awareness of how their individual experiences are reflective of a collective social location shaped by group-based oppression can lead to oppositional knowledge. Outsider within knowledge production is not simply a construct for individual self-discovery or individual uniqueness; rather the standpoint it reflects illuminates taken-for-granted hierarchies of power. Almost 20 years ago, the seminal adoptee anthology asserted an adoptee positionality in titling its collection of works, *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* (Trenka et al. 2006).

Since then, a body of scholarship by adoptees has grown, continuing to examine critically topics such as adoption, family, identity, and nation-building. In this article, I draw upon published research by Asian adoptee scholars to conceptualize a critical adoptee standpoint. Due to the history of Korean transnational, transracial adoption as the first formalized international adoption program to the US, the majority of work included is Korean adoptee-authored. Though Asian adoptees are not a monolith, given their distinct position within intersecting systems of race, family, immigration, and citizenship, there are themes within their analysis of personhood, family, race, and national belonging. In this article, I outline three conceptual themes within adoptee-authored adoption research that disrupt traditional adoption and adoptee narratives by elucidating adoptees' unique position at the intersections of multiple hierarchical power relations. I give particular attention to the emotional investments underlying traditional constructions of family, adoption, and adoptable orphans. By outlining a critical adoptee standpoint, I reposition adoptees as knowledge producers. I also argue that Asian adoptee adoption researchers' critical examination of their family and subject formation is itself a form of contesting Asian adoptees'—and, by extension, Asian Americans'—presumed honorary white position and broader assumptions of assimilation.

2. Background

Historically, adoption practices were guided by race-matching or the belief that children and families should look "as-if begotten". Children and parents were matched according to race, ethnicity/culture, religion, temperament, and physical features (Herman 2008). A family created through adoption was therefore shrouded in secrecy and shame, as biological procreation was not only seen as the legitimate form of family-making but also an imperative for enacting heteropatriarchal norms.

Race-matching practices evidenced assumptions of shared biogenetics in defining family. However, additional types of adoption existed that demonstrated other underlying beliefs governing the role of the family. From 1854 to 1929, there were "orphan trains" that delivered children from densely populated East Coast cities to families across the West. These adoptions were a response to the poor character and delinquent behavior that urban life was presumed to instill. From 1958 to 1967, the Indian Adoption Project extended

the civilizing project of Indian boarding schools (1869–1960s) into white American homes. In this case, white Christian families adopted Indian children to assimilate them into US culture. These very public adoption movements positioned white American, Christian, heterosexual couples as uniquely qualified to instill the proper values, character, and work ethic in classes of adoptable children, who were constructed as morally and/or culturally deficient. Adoption certified who could remain within the nation as members of the national family and under what terms.

When adoption from Korea began in the 1950s in response to the aftermath of the Korean War, it confronted some of the longstanding beliefs surrounding adoption, family, and national belonging. Adoption from Korea both operated within these frameworks and shifted them. As SooJin Pate (2014) argues, Korean adoption was remade to reproduce the heteropatriarchal, white norms of family making and, by extension, the US's national character. Pate (2014) details the practices and processes in Korea that served to "whiten" Korean children to make them adoptable, including introducing them to a western diet, western table manners, western toilet habits, and Christianity. This whitening continued through the early decades of Korean adoption as social work best practices recommended that white parents assimilate their adopted Korean children without regard for their ethnic background (Scroggs and Heitfield 2001). Furthermore, Korean children's position as adoptable orphans in need of rescue tethered adoptees to a position of gratitude. Adoptees could never be anything other than pitiable children in the public imaginary of who adoptees are, and as children, they are always in a subordinate position within the—adoptive and national—family. Thus, Korean adoption contributed to the US's geopolitical dominance, ideologies of racial liberalism, and racialized social structure (Graves 2020; Park Nelson 2016).

Korean adoption also reified the legal construction of whiteness as citizenship, as evidenced in how Korean children came to be in the US, particularly in a time of exclusionary Asian immigration legislation. Traditional narratives of Korean transnational, transracial adoptees presented them as exceptional nonimmigrant immigrants who, to expedite immigration, were categorized as "immediate relatives" to white adoptive families (Kim and Park Nelson 2019). Rather than objects of unfamiliarity, as adoptable orphans, this category of Korean children became objects of filiation. Where Asian bodies had previously signified foreign threats to American culture and the national body (Lee 2015), Korean adoptable orphans were not ascribed with those same feelings of fear, distrust, and disgust. In order to maintain an ideology of family that produced the expectations for shared racial group membership among family members and a racialized national family, "immediate relatives" recast adoptable orphans within the boundaries of love as members of the nuclear and national family.

Eleana Kim and Kim Park Nelson (Kim and Park Nelson 2019) identify the "immigration privilege" transnational adoptees benefited from due to their proximity to whiteness via their white adoptive parents; however, it bears emphasis that it is white adoptive parents' citizenship rights that are ultimately being privileged. Whiteness as citizenship bestows a range of material and psychological benefits (Haney López 2006). As I argue elsewhere (Laybourn 2024), Korean adoptees' exceptional status crafted through special legislative concessions was granted as an extension of white adoptive parents' citizenship rights, not as benevolent acts on behalf of adoptees themselves. Further evidence of who or what is being privileged in these legislative acts is how Korean transnational adoptees' travel from Korea to the US is conceptualized simply as family unification. Their migration is constructed as separate from Asian immigration stories, instead told as an American family story.

As Korean adoption became institutionalized, Asians in America were undergoing an ideological transformation. In prior work (Laybourn 2021), I detail how Korean adoption solidified (East) Asian model minority racialization. Japanese and Chinese Americans' educational and economic attainment may have been "proof" of their assimilation into white society writ large, but Korean adoption integrated Asians into the intimate realm

of white American family life (Laybourn 2021). Part of model minority racialization was that Asians were quiet and docile and, as such, did not demand the full range of rights and privileges afforded to (white) citizens. Korean adoptees personified this racialized position as they were conceptually constructed as objects in need of rescue, who symbolized American benevolence, Western superiority, and the centrality of the white family in conferring citizenship. Adoption into white families made Asian Americans' presumed honorary white position concrete in a way that socioeconomic indicators could not. Korean transracial adoption demonstrated the assumption that Korean children could and would assimilate into white families.

Although Korean adoption defied some of the expectations around race, family, and nation to maintain existing hierarchies of race, ethnicity, family, nation, and immigration, Korean children and Korean transnational, transracial adoption were refashioned to adhere to existing racial meanings governing family. Concerted efforts by the US government, military, media, and social workers emphasized Korean adoptable orphans' suitability for integration into pre-existing ideas of the American family and US geopolitical dominance (Briggs 2003; Graves 2020; Oh 2015; Pate 2014). This included framing transnational adoption into white American families as providing a "better life". Evidence of that better life has largely relied on the perspective of governments, adoption agencies, adoption professionals, and (white) adoptive parents. However, in the 1990s, a wave of Korean adoptees began authoring their own stories through video memoirs, documentaries, anthologies, and other personal writings, bringing in a more nuanced and critical analysis of adoption (see: Kim (2000) for a discussion of "Korean adoptee auto-ethnography"). In the following years, research by Korean adoptee experts from a range of academic disciplines systematically analyzed questions regarding racial, ethnic, and cultural identity development, adoption policy, socialization, citizenship, media representation, gender and family, and inequality (Bae 2018; Brian 2012; Gustafsson 2021; Laybourn 2018, 2021, 2024; Laybourn and Goar 2022; McGinnis et al. 2009; McKee 2019; Meier 1999; Park Nelson 2016; Palmer 2010; Pate 2014; Prébin 2008, 2013; Raleigh 2018).

The growing cohort of Korean adoptee scholars coincided with the burgeoning interdisciplinary field(s) of Critical Adoption Studies comprising scholars in psychology, social work, literary studies, and ethnic studies, among other disciplines. Traditional adoption research in psychology and social work took a developmental and clinical approach. By and large, adoption professionals and adoptive parents shaped the field with early research on transnational, transracial adoption focusing on adoptees' successful psychological adjustment and assimilation. In contrast, Critical Adoption Studies drew upon critical theories, such as feminist theory, critical race theory, and postcolonial and decolonial theories, to examine adoption as an institution embedded within multiple, intersecting systems of power, privilege, and inequality. Furthermore, many of these scholars were also participating in engaged scholarship. In 2007, a Critical Adoption Studies section was formally organized at the Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS) annual meeting, emphasizing adoption as a distinct field of study integral to the Asian American experience. This acknowledgment was a departure from the historic marginalization of Asian transnational adoption within scholarship on Asian American history and Asian immigration history. Many of the scholars within AAAS's Critical Adoption Studies section are adoptees themselves, whose research interrogates questions about empire, racialization, and Asian America. I draw upon Critical Adoption Studies research to conceptualize a distinct adoptee standpoint, to which I now turn.

3. Three Conceptual Themes in Adoptee-Authored Adoption Research

Drawing from Asian adoptee-authored adoption academic research published from 2000 to the present, I conceptualize a critical adoptee standpoint. A critical adoptee standpoint illuminates themes in adoptees' group knowledge stemming from their social location on the margins of intersecting systems of power. For the purposes of this article,

I highlight three themes from a critical adoptee standpoint as demonstrated through published Asian adoptee-authored research.

3.1. Rewriting Narratives of Family

Traditional adoption narratives frame adoption as a benevolent act joining adoptees to their "forever family". This interpretive framing relegates the birth family to a past that has been overcome or, at least, definitively ended. In this formulation, only the Western, usually white family, can provide the care, resources, and cultural−moral values to parent "forever" effectively. The implied message is three-fold—birth families are unfit caregivers, birth countries are in the past, and adoptees should be grateful to be incorporated into their loving adoptive families. In fact, adoption has often been framed as family-making forged through love, and in this conceptualization, love is thicker than blood and the substance that makes adoptive family ties "real". Ironically, adoptee origin stories often underscore birth parents' immense love for the adoptee as the reason motivating relinquishment, although, ultimately, it is adoptive parents' love that brings adoptees into a life worth living. This framing relies on and extends the family metaphor that creates racialized national families and geopolitical relations between non-Western nations who are "little brothers" reliant on care from their US "big brother". A critical adoptee standpoint, however, allows adoptee researchers to interrogate the family metaphor, revealing the inequities inherent within these conceptualizations of family.

Adoptee-authored research identifies how the traditional focus on "love" as the mechanism that creates adoptive families is a form of symbolic violence (Myers 2014) that further reifies biological, heteronormative families as "real". Specifically, Kit Myers (2014) details how, in attempting to make transracial and/or transnational adoptions legible through "linear narratives of completeness and finality for the adoptive family" (p. 176), adoptees' past and future identities are rendered irrelevant. In these narratives, adoptees become "real" or become like "real" families because they belong to one nuclear family, one mother and one father, one nation, and one race.

Adoptee-authored research, however, denaturalizes the link between race and family. Whereas transracial transnational adoption, particularly of Asian children, was purported to mimic families with shared biogenetics, adoptee-authored research outlines the challenges of this logic in a racialized society (Laybourn 2024; Pate 2014; Walton 2015; Williams Willing 2004). Gustafsson (2021) theorizes an adoptee "hyper(in)visibility" that shifts depending on the context but maintains adoptees' illegibility under dominant racial logic. The transracial adoptee is hypervisible by outsiders as a non-white member of a white family, yet rendered invisible by family members when their racialized experiences are unacknowledged. Transracial adoptee hyper(in)visibility complicates the assumptions of Asian adoptees' assimilation into whiteness. On the one hand, although Korean transnational, transracial adoption violated the race-matching norms of the adoption practices and the assumptions of shared biogenetics in constituting "family", Korean children were whitened to maintain the racial meanings held within ideas of family. On the other hand, Asian adoptees' hypervisibility as non-white and the differential treatment it produces illuminate the racial hierarchies implicit within the family metaphor.

Adoptee-authored research outlines the presumed and experienced costs of breaching the interpretive framework of the family by voicing their perspective of shared family experiences. Adoptees report not speaking up because doing so would disrupt the unspoken agreement of racial sameness within their family and/or hurt their adoptive families' feelings (Chang et al. 2017; Docan-Morgan 2011; Laybourn 2024). Adoptee silence, particularly around racism but also feelings of loss or critiques about adoption as an industry, as family disruption, and/or as unequal power relations, is necessary to fulfill the notions of the "forever family" where love is thicker than blood. Adoptees' silence can be (mis)read as an enactment of adoptee gratitude and unintentionally advance a perception of adoption as unquestionably beneficent. However, it is the threat of being unheard that leads to adoptee

self-silencing, an epistemic violence that is founded in repeated, common experiences of being unheard, silenced, and/or disbelieved (Gustafsson and Merritt, forthcoming).

Adoptee-authored research also demonstrates how this love-based conceptualization of family demands an effect of gratitude (Chang et al. 2017; Docan-Morgan 2011; McKee 2019). Kimberly McKee (2019) argues that when adoptees do not perform gratitude and/or happiness, adoptees kill joy. She writes, "Adoptees kill joy when they fail to adhere to the adoption fantasy—where adoptive parents save the orphan from poverty and degradation" (2019, p. 11). By calling out the violence of adoption and challenging adoption as a system, adoptees kill the joy of adoptive parents, adoption agencies, and governments. Moreover, adoptees' advocacy, ranging from adoption reform and/or ending international adoption to birth family rights, "sabotages the potential futures of adoptable children" (McKee 2019, p. 11).

A critical adoptee standpoint on family is significant because it denaturalizes the racialized assumptions undergirding family, namely that family is predicated upon shared racial group membership and unsettles "love" as a neutral force in family formation. A critical adoptee standpoint highlights the embedded hierarchical power relations in the nuclear and national family. Whereas adoptees may have experienced epistemic violence that led to self-silencing in their personal lives, as adoption researchers, adoptee-authored work refuses to allow previous strategic silences to legitimate that violence. Instead, by critiquing the interpretive frame of adoption as a family forged through the affective bonds of love and voicing their racialized experiences, adoptees not only fail to perform the correct effect but they also fail to stay in their place as children in the age-authority hierarchy of the family.

3.2. Rewriting Narratives of Adoption

Traditional adoption narratives focus on the act of adoption as a form of humanitarianism, separating it from the broader geopolitical conditions that made children and families vulnerable to separation and displacement. Ahistorical, depoliticized retellings celebrate adoption as solely altruistic and wholly beneficial to orphaned children, reifying beliefs in Western dominance and non-Western nations' inability to govern themselves effectively. Furthermore, these approaches understate the West's responsibility in creating the conditions precipitating nations' political instability, separation of families, and dislocation of people from their homeland. Adoptee-authored adoption research, however, interrogates whose interests are being served by transnational adoption to the US and resituates adoption within global hierarchies of power and nation-building. Although adoptee-authored research is not the only research that critiques adoption as humanitarianism (see: Graves 2020; Kim 2010; Oh 2015; Varzally 2017; Woo 2019), adoptee-authored research's critical lens on adoption practices moves adoptees' defiance of the expectations of adoptee gratitude from the personal realm of demeanor and deference to the public−professional realm of knowledge production. Importantly, a critical adoptee standpoint challenges the assumptions that non-white immigrants can and want to assimilate into whiteness.

Research examines how Korean adoption and, then later, Vietnamese adoption were extensions of US imperialism. SooJin Pate (2014) characterizes the humanitarian response after the Korean War as militarized humanitarianism or "the ways in which humanitarianism has been appropriated and used by the military to service its own purposes" and "the process in which military personnel become seen as humanitarians" (Pate 2014, p. 34). Ensuring the welfare of Korean children became a way for the US military to save face, considering their failure to secure a clear victory during the Korean War. Facilitating the care of Korean orphans served to reassign perceptions of military personnel. As a form of militarized humanitarianism, Korean adoption is no longer about the best interests of Korean children but the best interests of the US government and military.

Tobias Hübinette (2007) conceptualizes transnational adoption as forced migration. As coerced migrants, adoptees are robbed of their agency. Hübinette writes of adoptees, "They are instead represented as mute physical objects by supplying and receiving gov-

ernments, as grateful rescue objects by adoption agencies and adoptive parents, and as model diversity posters by adoption researchers" (2007, p. 137). In this conceptualization, international adoption cannot be humanitarianism. Instead, Hübinette clearly calls out the harms of adoption itself and adoption meaning-making. McKee (2019) extends the critiques of adoption as humanitarianism by outlining the "transnational adoption industrial complex" as a global industry commodifying children's bodies. Rather than a humanitarian response in the best interests of the child, international adoption is a capitalist practice that is market-driven (Condit-Shrestha 2018; Raleigh 2018). Because international adoption to the US is overwhelmingly from the global South, Bergquist (2004) makes the connection that adoption is an extension of neocolonialism whereby wealthier Western nations exploit their power relations, extracting resources from subordinate nations. By linking macrolevel structures and ideologies to microlevel interactions, the critical adoptee standpoint identifies adoption as the process through which children become adoptable orphans (Laybourn 2024), commodified and objectified to uphold transnational systems of unequal power relations.

The inquiry into whose interest is being served through transnational adoption continues in the examination of adoption practices. Park Nelson (2016) and Pate (2014) highlight how, in the earliest years of Korean adoption, adoption standards of foreign children were relaxed with detrimental effects. Proxy adoptions were a common practice whereby adoptive parents signed a power of attorney to the adoption agency to complete the adoption on their behalf. Proxy adoptions circumvented the need for adoptive parents to obtain home studies by licensed social workers, assess their preparedness for parenting, and travel to Korea to finalize the adoption. Proxy adoptions took significantly less time to complete, ensuring that white adoptive parents had their desires for adopting children satisfied in a timely manner. Furthermore, in some cases, individual acts of Congress were granted to meet white adoptive parents' desire to adopt (Park Nelson 2016). These policy exceptions demonstrate that adoptive parents' interests were prioritized over the adoptee's well-being (Laybourn 2024).

Continuing critiques of transnational adoption as humanitarianism is adoptees' precarious legal status. There are an unknown number of transnational adoptees who are undocumented due to policy oversight in ensuring transnational adoptees' legal US citizenship. Work by Kim and Park Nelson (2019), Laybourn (2024), and McKee (2019) detail how undocumented adoptees and deported adoptees demonstrate the limitations of adoption as a humanitarian act that grants a "better life" to adoptees. This notion of a "better life" is rooted in beliefs of the superiority of Western nations, the Global North, and white culture. Rather than enjoying the full rights and privileges of citizenship and belonging in their adoptive countries, undocumented adoptees highlight the boundaries of "adoptable orphan" (Laybourn 2024). Adoptable orphans are children under the authority of American couples. Accordingly, they fail to exist as persons needing their own independent status. White adoptive parents have the privileges of their whiteness extended through honorary acceptance given to their adopted children; however, those privileges do not extend into adoptees' adulthood.

Even as white adoptive parents attempt to lobby on behalf of adoptees without citizenship, there are limits to the benefits their whiteness affords when advocating for undocumented immigrants. Transracial adoptees may have acquired access to resources through their white parent(s) that improve or are presumed to improve their opportunities and life trajectories, what Waring (2023) terms "white privilege by proxy", particularly in the form of immigration privilege; however, the failure of white privilege to secure undocumented adoptees' citizenship is less a reflection of the limits of the benefits of whiteness and more a reflection of the durability of racial hierarchies that position nonwhites as outside the boundaries of belonging. The concept of "proxy privilege" (Liu 2017) becomes useful here in explaining the limitations of Asian transnational, transracial adoptees' honorary whiteness. Proxy privilege refers to contextually, temporally, and spatially-specific privileges that people of color (and white women) are granted when

in physical proximity to a white person, specifically a white man (Liu 2017). Although these privileges may feel transferable, they are limited by their proximity to whiteness and constrained by stereotypes ascribed to their group. Accordingly, undocumented adoptees' attempts to extend their legibility as objects worthy of rescue by invoking their position as adopted white family members, who are part of a class of exceptional or nonimmigrant immigrants, are largely unsuccessful, particularly given deep-seated beliefs of Asian foreignness (Kim and Park Nelson 2019; Laybourn 2024; McKee 2019).

A critical adoptee standpoint on adoption provides new conceptual frames to understand adoption as a nation-building practice and the resultant subordinate subject-formations of adoptees. This is valuable in rehistoricizing adoption within its social and political contexts. Importantly, Asian adoptees' critical adoptee standpoint highlights the impossibility of Asian assimilation, particularly given deported adoptees. Deportable Asian adoptees are penultimate "model minorities" in that they have an intimate familiarity with white culture, have (forcibly) relinquished ties to non-white culture and communities, and are integrated into white communities. Yet, they remain rejected from full inclusion into the national body. Asian adoptees' honorary whiteness is granted at the whims of upholding the white supremacist power structure and cannot be invoked for their own benefit. A critical adoptee standpoint is also significant for demonstrating the connection between adoptee advocacy being done on the ground and adoptee knowledge production within the academy; both are important to cultivating a group consciousness that joins adoptees to one another and positions adoptees as a group in opposition to more powerful groups.

3.3. Rewriting Narratives of Adoptee

Traditional adoption narratives frame adoptees as perpetual children, who benefit from the better life afforded by being raised in (white) Western families. Who adoptees are as adults has typically been of little consequence, as evidenced by the ongoing issue of adoptee citizenship rights. The infantilization of adoptees robs adoptees of their agency and the authority of their lived experiences, solidifying nonadoptees as experts in adoption policies, practices, and outcomes. The infantilization of Asian transnational, transracial adoptees contributes to stereotypes that characterize Asians and Asian Americans as culturally inferior, "forever foreigners", and "other" (Tuan 1998; Wu 2002). These stereotypes contribute to the exoticism and fetishism embedded in anti-Asian racism. Ironically, whereas it is the act of removing adoptable orphans from non-Western "backward" nations and moving them forward into Western progress that brings adoptees into existence under the auspices of "forever families", to remain legible, adoptees are forever frozen in our imagination as children. As the adage describes, children are to be seen and not heard. However, Asian adoptee-authored adoption research presents adoptees as adults, examining their interests, desires, and who they are separate from their service to upholding ideas of family, race, and nation. It is in this work that we see a critical adoptee standpoint of self-definition and self-determination.

A large body of adoptee-authored research outlines adoptees' ongoing identity development and cultural reclamation (Baden 2002; Baden et al. 2012; Beaupre et al. 2015; Brian 2012; Hübinette 2004; Kim et al. 2010; Kim et al. 2013; Laybourn 2018; Palmer 2010; Williams Willing 2004). Reynolds et al. (2016) demonstrate that there is not a "clean break" separating adoptees from or making irrelevant their pre-adoption history as traditional adoption perspectives presumed. Rather, many adoptees express curiosity about their birth countries; some return and others imagine possible alternate lives they could have had. By resituating adoptees within their pre-adoption personhood, adoptees are no longer extracted resources remade into useful objects but situated subjects. In their qualitative analysis of Korean adoptee writing reflections, one key finding that Kim et al. (2017) identify is how adoptees interpret adoption as loss. This includes acknowledging ambiguous loss, "a situation in which there is an uncertain or unclear loss of a person or relationship" (p. 243). The understanding of the losses inherent in adoption contrasts traditional narratives that frame adoption solely as gain. Adoptees' perception of adoption loss revives adoptees'

pre-adoption history, restoring their origins to their birth families, birth countries, and birth cultures. Rather than simply individual self-discovery, adoptee scholarship collectively highlights the underlying assumptions about adoptees as objects of desire, disconnected from self, community, and history, instead demonstrating adoptees as agentic.

Furthermore, this process of recognition challenges the assumption of linearity in moving from birth family, culture, and nation (the past) to adoptive family, culture, and nation (the present and future). Shannon Bae (2018) details how adoptees who return to Korea and unwed mothers in Korea forge a solidarity movement rooted in a shared "radical imagination", "the "ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might be otherwise" (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, p. 3, as cited in Bae 2018, p. 301). Adoptees go back to their birth country to create a different future—not only for themselves and current unwed mothers—but for others as well. In this return, adoptees give meaning and value to that which adoption devalued—their homeland, their pre-adoption life, unwed mothers, and community with other adoptees. In doing so, a critical adoptee standpoint of self-definition destabilizes the beliefs underlying a global hierarchy that positions the West as the sole creator of a generative past, present, and future. By going "back", a critical adoptee standpoint transgresses the ideas of a Western conceptualization of time and "forward" progress.

While adoptees' decision to return to their birth country and/or seek out birth family could imply a rejection of white self-identification, some adoptee-authored research more directly examines adoptees' self-definition. For example, Hübinette (2007) explicitly rejects the romanticized notion of adoptee hybridity and assimilation as an achievement or a possibility. Hübinette writes, "I go against dominant normative adoption ideology where the acquiring of a white self-identification is the primary goal of international adoption itself, conceptualized as attachment and assimilation, and even idealized as a blessing" (p. 154). Reynolds and colleagues (Reynolds et al. 2020) research on name reclamation details how adoptees' reclaiming of their birth name is part of "a unifying and integrating process" of identity development that contributed to respondents feeling more "authentic identity" (p. 89). The researchers note, "the realization and acceptance of being Asian, Korean, adopted, an immigrant, a minority, and moreover an individual positioned in a disadvantaged status was often connected to this process of discovery" (Reynolds et al. 2020, p. 88).

Rather than approaching adoption as "a discrete past action that happened *to* adoptees", adoptee-authored research demonstrates how it becomes part of "an ongoing process of becoming that happens in community with other adoptees" (italics in original, Laybourn 2024, p. 145). The community component becomes key as adoptees may have been part of a category of similarly situated adoptable orphans as defined by governments and adoption agencies but were often not a group unto themselves. An adoptee group consciousness—consciousness of connections to one another and consciousness of the group in relation to other groups—has continued to develop over time as adoptees find one another (For a detailed history of the beginnings of the Korean adoptee community, see: Eleana Kim 2010. Though not an adoptee, Kim's work takes a critical adoption studies approach to outlining the conditions facilitating a global Korean adoptee community).

The realization, acceptance, and repositioning of oneself within systems of power is explored as a developmental process in Branco and colleagues' (Branco et al. 2022) adoptee consciousness model. This model identifies several key touchpoints that can precipitate "adoptee awareness of oppressive structures and practices in adoption to include heightened awareness of the adoptee's intersecting identities" (Branco et al. 2022, p. 19). Through ruptures that challenge the status quo, experiences of dissonance, and exploring paradoxes in adoption, adoptees move from an individual awareness of adoption to group consciousness and then collective action. Not all adoptees will move through each touchpoint in the adoptee consciousness model, and it is not a linear progression with a predetermined outcome.

A critical adoptee standpoint that values adoptee self-definition and self-determination is significant for three reasons. First, adoptee self-definition demonstrates the fallacy of

assimilation assumptions as Korean adoptee immigrants move outside of the whiteness that their transnational, transracial adoption was purported to grant them. Although a common finding in Korean-adoptee-authored research is Korean adoptees' self-identification with whiteness during childhood and/or adolescence as a reflection of their familial relationships and proxied privilege (Liu 2017; Park Nelson 2016; McKee 2019; Laybourn 2024; Brian 2012), adoptee-authored research repeatedly finds that adoptees develop an adoptee consciousness about their distinct social location within intersecting systems of power. Most adoptees report coming to understand the inaccuracies of their own prior identification with whiteness or as white and, as part of that process, develop a racial and/or ethnic identity as Korean, Asian, Korean adoptee, and/or a person of color. A critical adoptee standpoint of self-definition and self-determination rejects the tokenism of honorary whiteness.

Second, adoption was meant to sever adoptees from multiple forms of community. Severance facilitated adoptees' integration into their adoptive families and was meant to cultivate an identity of belonging within their new nations, cultures, and families. Adoptee self-definition and self-determination are significant in forming "the inhabiting of adoptee as an ongoing, shared social identity and taking account of its everyday meaning is a reworking of how adoptees were supposed to identify as family members, immigrants, and adoptees" (Laybourn 2024, p. 133). Through the ongoing reworking of adoptees as a social identity, they demonstrate their own self-defined personhood. The adoptees' collective identity reflects their unique social location.

Third, taken together, what a critical adoptee standpoint accomplishes is prioritizing adoptee desire. This is transformative because it centers adoptees as agentic subjects. Laybourn (2024) and Myers (2019) directly investigate adoptee desire as separate from and intertwined with adoptive parent desire. Importantly, both outline how adoptees enact their own desire to create an adoptee community and integrate pre-adoption histories, an act that abandons the expectations of an adoptee effect of gratitude.

4. Conclusions

By taking adoptees seriously as knowledge producers, I identify a critical adoptee standpoint that provides a language to describe adoptees' patterned lived experiences, permission or validation of feelings that were previously dismissed, silenced, or interrogated, and a conceptual frame for understanding those experiences. The three themes highlighted in this review are not meant to be exhaustive but rather demonstrate the significance of a critical adoptee standpoint in providing new insights on family, race, citizenship, and adoptee personhood.

Extant literature identifies transracial adoptees' "insider" position and the "transracial adoption paradox" it produces whereby adoptees are "racial/ethnic minorities in society but are perceived and treated by others, and sometimes themselves, as if they are members of the majority culture (i.e., racially White and ethnically European)" (Lee 2003, p. 711). Given ideologies linking race and family and family and nation, Korean transnational, transracial adoptees in white families were ideologically constructed as white and often treated with "proxy privilege" (Liu 2017). In certain cases, adoptees reaped "White privilege by proxy" (Waring 2023) via material benefits their white parents attained due to their white privilege (ex., immigration privilege). However, it is through adoptees' attempts to reconcile their "insider" positions to whiteness, family, and the nation with their continued "outsider" treatment as presumed foreigners that a group consciousness has formed (Laybourn 2024). I submit that this collective consciousness contributes to a critical adoptee standpoint. Through Asian adoptee-authored research's interrogation of adoptees' social location on the margins of intersecting systems of power and patterned findings that adoptees cannot access the full rights and benefits of national belonging, broader assumptions about Asian Americans' assimilation are challenged. Further, by investigating and publicizing critiques of the "better life" that adoption was presumed to provide and advocating for social change (e.g., adoption reform and legislation for undocumented adoptee immigrants), Asian

adoptee researchers defy constructions of Asian Americans as model minorities. Whereas transracial adoptees could capitalize on their proximity to whiteness, a critical adoptee standpoint uses the insights gleaned from their family formation and social location to problematize assumptions embedded in the racialized social structure.

While this article draws from Asian adoptee-authored research, the three themes selected were meant to capture general themes within a broader critical adoptee standpoint. Given the specific sociopolitical conditions of other waves of transnational, transracial adoption and from other countries, there will be unique themes specific to those adoptee populations that help elucidate the distinct intersections of systems of power as they enact group-based oppression. Transnational, transracial adoptees from Latin America, Africa, and Southeast and South Asia will have insights reflective of the racialization processes particular to their social location. Although the US is the top receiving country, the US is also a sending country of international adoptees. Future research might capture the contours of a critical adoptee standpoint from US adoptees in other international contexts. Finally, while the full range of adoptee-authored work was outside of the scope of this paper, an examination of academic, nonacademic, and on-the-ground advocacy would provide a more complete assessment of a critical adoptee standpoint.

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