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Author/s:

Gustafsson, R

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Ryan Gustafsson
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Theorizing Korean Transracial Adoptee Experiences: Ambiguity, Substitutability, and Racial Embodiment

Abstract

This article articulates a critical phenomenological account of the being of the Korean transracial adoptee, through an analysis of three fundamental inter-related experiences. First, I argue that adoptee being is marked by epistemological ambiguity, or the impossibility of knowing and the ambiguous value of any knowledge gained. Second, the arbitrary sense of one's place and identity contribute to a sense of substitutability among adoptees. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body schema, I then argue that for the Korean adoptee, racial difference is inscribed in the body schema as absence. The article ends with a discussion of the complexities of racial embodiment that underpin adoptees' identifications and experiences of belonging and place, and which result in what I term 'hyper(in)visibility.'

Keywords

adoptee, transracial adoption, Korea, embodiment, identity, phenomenology, racialization, body schema, Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity

Korean adoptees remain the largest cohort of transnationally adopted persons. It is estimated that upward of 180,000 South Korean children have been adopted to Western countries since the end of the Korean War (1950-1953), with the majority adopted to white families in the United States, and the remainder to Western Europe and Australia. Korean adoptees currently constitute approximately 7 percent of the Korean American population (Park Nelson, 2016: 130). Korean transnational adoption has occurred in waves in the context of enduring – if 'forgotten'¹ – war, militarism, and state-building.² The first adoptions took place in the aftermath of the war and were viewed by both the U.S. and South Korean governments as a means of averting 'what was perceived as a public relations and humanitarian 'crisis' – an estimated one thousand 'mixed-blood orphans' (E. Kim, 2007: 502).³ As Park Nelson notes, 'these adoptees have become iconic in Americans' understandings of Korean adoption and adoptees' (2016: 41): the abandoned and impoverished war orphan or 'waif of war' in need of rescue by benevolent and humanitarian Christian Americans (Oh, 2015; Pate, 2014).

However, those adopted prior to 1962 constitute only 4 percent of the Korean American adoptee population (Park Nelson, 2016: 41). As Kim explains, after the Korean war the adoption program ‘quickly transformed into a surrogate welfare system for full-Korean children’ (2007: 502). By the 1980s, children sent for adoption were categorized as ‘illegitimate,’ the majority born by young single mothers working low-wage factory jobs (H. Kim, 2007: 140). In 1985, the so-called ‘peak year’ of adoption, 8837 children were sent overseas. The vast majority of these children, and children adopted since, are children of single mothers (H. Kim, 2015: 59). Since the mid-1950s, the number of adoptees who were children of single mothers is estimated at more than 120,000 (H. Kim, 2015: 59). As Park Nelson argues, transnational adoption, which began as a putatively temporary solution during a time of crisis, soon became a ‘national custom’ (2009: 5).

Alongside the persistent presumption that the adoptee is the ‘natural’ outcome of orphanhood or synonymous with it, the image of the triangle⁴ (Tugendhardt, 1992) has also dominated Western understandings of adoption in general. Composed of the adoptee, birth parents, and adoptive parents,⁵ the adoption triangle and has been the primary focus of earlier adoption research, largely conducted by practitioners and academics in psychology and social work. However, the adoption triangle runs the risk of naturalizing the figure of the adoptee, individualizes the adoption story, and obfuscates the social, historical, political, and legal conditions which have led to its emergence. The adoption triangle occludes any critical interrogation of the social and political processes that have rendered the child ‘adoptable,’ as well as prevailing discourses of humanitarianism and charity, multiculturalism,⁶ ‘colour-blind’ attitudes, and the presumed ‘benign exoticism’ (Laybourn, 2018: 32) of Asian children. Moreover, it occludes a consideration of the function and pivotal role of institutions including adoption agencies, charity organizations, maternity homes, and orphanages.⁷

Recent critical adoption scholarship has begun to examine the historical, social, political, and discursive contexts within which Korean transnational adoption practices have flourished, in South Korea and Western receiving countries (Hübinette, 2005; E. Kim 2010; H. Kim 2016; Oh, 2015; Park Nelson, 2016; Pate, 2014). Several studies have sought to understand Korean adoptees’ subject formation (Eng, 2003; Hübinette, 2007; Yngvesson, 2002, 2013), kinship (E. Kim, 2010) and experiences of racialization (Hübinette, 2007; Park Nelson, 2016; Walton, 2015). Notably, since the early 2000s adoption research has included studies authored by Korean adoptees themselves (eg. Goode, 2018; Hemmeke, 2015; Hübinette, 2005; Laybourn, 2018; McGinnis et al., 2009; Park Nelson, 2016; Walton, 2015). This article draws on and contributes to this body of work by offering a theoretical account of

Korean adoption, informed by the phenomenological tradition. While this study in no way purports to exhaustively cover the various experiences and positions that adoptees undergo, inhabit, and negotiate, it identifies three fundamental inter-related experiences⁸: epistemological ambiguity, substitutability, and racial embodiment.

Phenomenologists hold that consciousness is fundamentally intentional; that is, consciousness is always ‘consciousness *of* something’ (Husserl, 1967: 13; 1970: 171). Experience is at once expressive and the ‘outcome’ of the dynamic interplay or intertwining of the embodied self and the givens of the world. For Husserl, we are beings oriented toward a historical and cultural world shared with others. A phenomenological approach aims to understand the subject’s life-world (Husserl, 1970) or the subjective, experiential world of meaning. This lived, experiential world is grounding with respect to scientific or theoretical cognition. As such, the analyses in this paper are driven by the phenomenological insight that lived experience is to be explained, not explained away; in other words, not rendered ‘false’ by intellectualist thought.

In addition, this paper takes a Merleau-Pontian and critical phenomenological approach to understanding adopted Koreans’ experiences. Emphasizing the primacy of perception and the body, Merleau-Ponty argues that ‘the world is not what I think, but what I live; I am open to the world, I unquestionably communicate with it’ (2012: lxxx-i). For Merleau-Ponty, I perceive or have a world because I am a body enmeshed in it; the body is ‘the vehicle of being in the world’ (2012: 84). That is, I have a world and am part of it in a ‘deep’ sense: I participate in the world and am intertwined with the things in it. We are embodied, relational subjects that find ourselves in concrete historical situations with others; we are thrown into and immersed in a social world which constitutes ‘the permanent field or dimension of existence’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 379). Importantly, critical phenomenology⁹ draws on classical phenomenology but stresses how perception remains tethered to the social, historical, and political contexts within and against which meaning is achieved. Critical phenomenology accounts for and theorizes how social structures, relations, and discourses help to shape, maintain, and/or restrain lived experiences, and hence provide the ineluctable milieu within which we understand our selves and form our identities. As such, this article foregrounds Korean adult adoptees’ lived experiences of their bodies, world/s, and identities, while also critically analyzing and remaining attentive to the social and historical contexts from which their experiences cannot be meaningfully divorced.

The first section traces the role that social, legal, and institutional processes play in the development of adoptee subjectivities, insofar as these form the context or milieu that

both facilitates and restrains self-knowledge. These processes contribute to adoptees' experiences of epistemological ambiguity, or the impossibility of knowing and the ambiguous value of any knowledge gained. Second, I claim that the arbitrary sense of one's place and identity contribute to an existential sense of substitutability. Finally, this article discusses the complexities of racial embodiment that underpin adoptees' identifications. I argue that for the Korean adoptee, racial difference is inscribed in the body schema as absence. I claim that this accounts in part for Korean adoptee experiences of 'hyper(in)visibility.'

Epistemological Ambiguity

The adoptee is a product with a complex history of production. In order to be rendered adoptable, the child must have orphan status – it must be established that at least one parent has legally relinquished the child, or that both parents have died, departed, or are otherwise incapable of raising the child (E. Kim, 2007: 520; H. Kim, 2016: 96). As Kim points out, this means that 'an orphan in the legal sense, was not necessarily a parentless child; in fact, a considerable number of children available for adoption have at least one living parent' (2016: 96). It is also important to note that 'the relinquishment of a child to adoption did not *always* require the informed consent of the birth mother,' since the law allowed legal guardians, grandparents, or relatives with custody to finalize the adoption (H. Kim, 2016: 6). In order to facilitate the potential adoption of a child, adoption agencies had to in effect create orphanhood administratively.¹⁰ Until 2008, South Korea used the patrilineal family registry (*hojuk*) system, which listed the male family head of the household, along with his wife and dependents.¹¹ In the case of adoptees, an 'orphan *hojuk*' had to be created, which listed the child 'as a family head of its own,' with 'solitary lineage' (E. Kim, 2007: 521). As Eleana Kim explains,

In the context of Korean law, [the child] becomes a person with the barest of social identities, and in the context of Korean cultural norms, she lacks the basic requirements of social personhood – namely, family lineage and genealogical history (2007: 521)

This becoming-bare of the child, which is also the becoming-adoptable of the child, hence entails a legal and social severance or detachment from natal parents, siblings, and relatives. This process is at once fabrication and extraction, making and unmaking, the production of a transferrable object with deliberately opaque origins. The potential adoptee is

assigned a case number and given a file that provides an account of their natal parents' backgrounds and the circumstances leading up to relinquishment. Yet agency files have also been known to include deliberately inaccurate or misleading information; in some cases, files provide no identifying information. Moreover, it is often the case that the name on the orphan *hojuk*, the document that serves as the precondition of Western subjecthood, is made up. Kim notes how adoptees' Korean names are often 'made up by orphanage directors or adoption agency workers,' and, 'like their names, their birth dates and places are also subject to uncertainty, especially for those who were foundlings' (2010: 89-90). Adoptees' Korean names generally reflect the bureaucratic, institutional processes that produced and facilitated the adoptee-as-object.

This provides a brief sense of the numerous barriers to finding and ascertaining the accuracy of adoptees' information, but also the scale of disorientation adoptees face when attempting to do so. Indeed, it is important to note that the institutional processes mentioned above form part of the historical and social context within which adoptees attempt to forge 'knowable' or legible individual life-histories. With few possibilities for corroborating new information, or verifying the scarce details provided in their agency files, first generation as well as younger adoptees seeking information are left to navigate a terrain of uncertainty and unknowability: on what can I rely to orient myself? What facts are most likely to be reliable? Of what can I be certain? What paths do I pursue? What of my preadoption history is possible to know? In this sense, seeking information on one's 'roots' or 'origins' cannot be equated with seeking genetic information. Although some adoptee activists in the United States have relied on the 'strong cultural currency of the gene' (Wegar, 1987: 86) to petition for open records, to cast adoptees' search for knowledge as solely reflecting genetic essentialism¹² further masks the complex and often unknowable histories that led to the very production of the adoptee. Indeed, the origin of which the Korean adoptee can be most certain may well be one's 'beginning' as the head of one's own family via the construction of orphanhood.

Kimberly Leighton (2005) notes how questions of self-knowledge are foundational to adoptee identity. Drawing on Foucault's claim that the modern injunction is to 'know thyself,' Leighton shows how the satisfaction of this moral obligation is 'both the *work* of the subject and *evidence* or proof of one's subjectivity' (2005: 166). Self-knowledge is the work that the modern subject must perform, and this performance, in turn, serves to constitute the subject as intelligible and legitimate. This injunction underlies claims that presume the naturalness of being curious about one's origins: 'If I were you, I would want to know.' These claims can sometimes serve to pathologize the adoptee who has no wish to visit Korea

or embark on a birth family search, for instance. For Leighton, an adopted identity is one ‘based on the desire to know’; this is paradoxical, since performing the desire to know ‘at once entails both the *capacity* for knowledge and the *absence* of knowledge’ (2005: 169, 166). Moreover, this absence of knowledge regarding ancestry is, as Wills points out, compatible with neo-liberal opportunities for self-invention (2016: 204). This positions the adoptee at the dizzying intersection of the modern injunction to ‘know thyself’ and the neoliberal imperative to ‘make oneself.’ These dual demands can be psychically exhausting.

Epistemological ambiguity stems from not just the absence of knowledge, but the impossibility of knowing and, relatedly, the ambiguous value or status of any knowledge gained. As such, it does not rely on what Leighton calls the ‘authenticity paradigm,’ the notion that there is a ‘true nature’ for the adoptee to discover in order to be complete or ‘healed’ (2018: 37). To be an adoptee involves a questioning that is unanswerable and hence unending, but which is nevertheless pursued. This does not mean that information gained, with regard to birth family or circumstances leading to relinquishment, is insignificant. On the contrary, it is crucial; to find information can allow a (re)writing of one’s past or cause a shift in self-understanding. Yet this ‘ambiguous gain’¹³ does not necessarily result in an end to adoptees’ questioning concerning their identity. Indeed, the object of knowledge is always opaque: what is important to know? What would that knowledge ultimately be able to achieve? What kind of ‘work’ or ‘labor’ would that knowledge perform? This ambiguity with regards to the value (and not just the accuracy) of any knowledge gained, is a key aspect of Korean adoptee experiences.

Substitutability, or What can a ‘Gift’ Give?

The production of the transnational adoptee, as outlined above, involves the erasure and fabrication of a (empty) past and the creation of a being with ‘solitary lineage’ who may then be absorbed into a Western family ‘as if’ born to them. That this administrative process is required, however, illustrates the measures that must be taken in order to produce the potential adoptee as object for circulation. The adoptee bears the trace of their pre-history, or the social and historical conditions that led to them being placed in *this* family, in *this* country, with *this* name. This sense of arbitrariness, the force of the accidental, and the contingent nature of one’s presence and belonging can lead to an experiential sense of substitutability. Alongside ambiguity, substitutability is a dimension of Korean adoptee lived experiences that arises through the interplay of embodied self and meaningful socio-historical

context, which a critical phenomenological approach allows us to analyze. I use the term ‘substitutability’ because it conveys transferability, taking the place of another, or being a stand-in or proxy, which does not efface what or ‘who’ came before.

In an interview with anthropologist Barbara Yngvesson, Jaclyn Aronson, adopted in 1983 to the United States, comments on her pre-adoption history as follows:

For me, I often see Hyo Jin as the little girl who never got the chance to grow up past eight and half years. I don’t know if her growth was stunted when I became Jaclyn Campbell Aronson or when she stopped being Kim Mi Young’s child. Or in the orphanage when she was no one’s child (Yngvesson, 2013: 356).

Aronson expresses the way in which adoption, as Yngvesson claims, ‘creates an adoptive body that is always already the child who was left behind’ (2013: 364). This statement gestures toward a death that serves as precondition for another life, but this body or child is preserved as other. Indeed, Aronson explains that Jaclyn and Hyo Jin are ‘not one and the same’ (2013: 356). Hence preservation here is not transformative but results in a sense of *vertical* substitutability: one did not become another child, but rather one child came to take the other’s place – in order to be placed elsewhere. Moreover, this child whose ‘growth was stunted’ could have been replaced by a different child, or not replaced at all. Hence the adoptee – Jaclyn, in this case – is one of many possible substitutes that could have come to take the place of Hyo Jin, and through doing so preserves her as other. In this sense, the adoptee’s pre-history must be narrated by the child who wasn’t there.

The arbitrariness of the adoptee’s identity, name, family, and nationality, opens a dimension of alternative lives or possibilities, and can prompt speculations regarding what could have been, who I was then, or who could I have been or become. This can form the basis for a sense of *lateral* substitutability among adoptees. In this sense, contingency begets possibility. As Kim argues, adoptee kinship, which is marked by relations of care and reciprocity, is forged through this very ‘arbitrariness and contingency’ (2010: 95). For Kim, this ‘additive, transnational, and expansive’ model of kinship is cogently expressed in a remark by Daniel Kim, president of a Swedish adoptee organization: ‘It’s important to take care of each other because we are a family, and I could be you, you could be him, he could be her’ (2010: 95). Hence lateral substitutability engenders the possibility of reciprocity of a peculiar kind. What Yngvesson calls the ‘gift child’ – the adoptee as both a ‘gift’ (Mauss, 2001) that ‘completes’ a family and an object or ‘resource that has been contractually

alienated from one owner so that it can be attached to another' (2002: 235) – can become a 'gift' to other 'gift children.' The adoptee then becomes a gift twice over: the adoptee is a gift to another by virtue of their very presence and existence.¹⁴ Adoptees may be understood as exchanging the giftedness that each are for each other, and I suggest that this facilitates and sustains what Kim calls 'adoptee kinship' (2010) or what we might call 'adoptee giftedness.' This reciprocity is due to one's shared contingent existence: because I am arbitrarily 'me,' and hence I could be you, you could be him, in a very real sense.

Racial Embodiment and Identity

Alongside epistemological ambiguity and substitutability, Korean transnational adoptees often experience a complex disjuncture between their visible appearances and identities. This can sometimes impede the recognition of one's shared arbitrariness and the possibility of forging adoptee kinship as discussed above. This section provides a phenomenological analysis of the complexities of racial embodiment that underpin adoptees' identifications. I argue that for the transracial adoptee, racial difference is inscribed in the body schema as absence, and suggest that this helps account for adoptee experiences of hyper(in)visibility.

A phenomenological approach holds that race is socially constructed, and racial meanings are historical and cultural, and yet race 'is as real as anything else in lived experience, with operative effects in the social world' (Alcoff, 1999: 17).¹⁵ Phenomenology's emphasis on materiality and lived, everyday experiences of racialization does not entail naturalizing race or ahistoricizing the body. Rather, critical phenomenological analysis draws attention to the varied effects of 'the sedimentation of racial meaning into the very fabric and texture of society' (Lee, 2014: 7) at the level of embodiment. Indeed, Being-in-the-world is a 'unified phenomenon' (Heidegger, 2010: 53). The person who perceives as 'an historical thickness,' and participates in and resumes 'a perceptual tradition' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 248).

Merleau-Ponty claims that in the 'natural attitude,' or the everyday, default attitude in which we are absorbed or caught up with the things of the world, we go straight to the object. This is because our perception ends in objects – and these objects then appear as the reason for all the experiences of it that we have (2012: 69). Due to its apparent or 'obvious' visibility, the object becomes the very reason for our experience, and the way that we see it goes unseen. Phenomenological analysis shifts the focus from the visible body or 'thing' in which a so-called property inheres (i.e. 'race'), to the social and historical conditions, or the

horizon against which this visibility is achieved. It aims to denaturalize the supposedly ‘obvious’ object by situating the very process of becoming-visible, or the process of appearing (which is hidden by the ‘thing’ that appears), within the life-world. As noted above, we tend not to see that the historical and cultural world provides the milieu against (and within) which perceived things appear and which forms the context for our self-understanding. As Alcoff argues, racialization structures both the ‘visual sphere and the imaginary self,’ since ‘if race is a structure of contemporary perception, then it helps constitute the necessary background from which I know myself’ (1999: 18, 20). The racialized body then appears against a background *and* according to a racial mode of perception that goes unquestioned and unseen. ‘Race’ comes to appear ‘as if it were a property,’ and ‘as if it were ‘in’ bodies,” as Sara Ahmed points out (2006:112). This is the outcome of historical and ongoing racism and racialization processes which shape the social world which, as Merleau-Ponty argues, ‘I cannot cease to be situated in relation to’ (2012: 379).

‘White Identity, Asian Body’

Coined the ‘transracial adoption paradox’ by Richard Lee, adopted Koreans are racial minorities who navigate a world in which ‘they 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)’ (2003:711). Assimilationist, ‘colour-blind’ attitudes regarding the raising and treatment of adoptees, particularly during the early wave of adoptions but persisting to a degree since, disavows racial difference and can lead to ‘topic avoidance’ concerning race and racism in adoptive families (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Hübinette and Tigervall, 2009; Laybourn, 2018). While the impacts of this paradox vary across adoptive and historical contexts,¹⁶ including age of adoption, cultural socialization practices, and racial diversity of the communities in which adoptees are raised, several studies have found that most adult adopted Koreans in the U.S. ‘considered themselves to be or wanted to be White as children’ (McGinnis et al., 2009: 5; Park Nelson, 2016).¹⁷ YoungHee, for instance, writes:

I used to believe I was white. At least I was completely emotionally invested in this belief.

Theoretically I was white, my family is white, the community I grew up in was white, and I could not point out Korea on a map, nor did I care about such a place...However, my image staring back at me in the mirror betrayed such a belief (1997: 86).

Another adoptee, going by the moniker ‘Danish Asian,’ explains:

When I look in the mirror I’m actually surprised to see an Asian woman and I honestly don’t know how to feel about the woman I see. I actually expect to see a white woman with rosy skin, blond hair, and blue eyes (quoted in Hübinette 2007: 142).

Indeed, Park Nelson’s study of over sixty adult adoptees found that ‘for most, a White identity was as much or more a part of their personal histories as their Asian, Korean, or adoptee identities’ (2016:133).¹⁸ Many experienced ‘the drive to dissociate from other Asians in order to fit in to White communities,’ and many found ‘the development of a non-White identity’ both ‘culturally rewarding’ and painful, due to ‘experiencing rejection or dislocation within the [adoptive] family’ (Park Nelson, 2016: 134, 135). For the adoptee, to recognize one’s own body as racialized is to see oneself as other than, and as standing apart from, a background that goes unnoticed. This background, however, is for the adoptee not just the broader social and historical context within which one lives but also one’s (white) family. As such, the recognition of one’s racial embodiment (to be non-white) is compounded by, or goes hand in hand with, the recognition of one’s being adopted (to be non-(white family)). The adoptee becomes the ‘thing’ that does not fit or belong; moreover, it is the adoptee that makes the family different, that extends visibility to the family unit more generally.

Since the adoptee is ‘subjectivized as white’ (Hübinette, 2007: 145), it is the adoptee’s body and visible appearance that stands out, such that the adoptee is forced to see themselves ‘outside’ of themselves. It becomes their bodies that fail to align with their white identities. Moreover, the adoptee’s experiences of racism can often go unacknowledged within the context of the adoptive family, especially where ‘colour-blind’ attitudes are the norm. The adoptee lacks what Eng calls ‘the communal nature of racial melancholia’ precisely because there is no ‘intergenerational and intersubjective process’ of recognizing and affirming that experience (2003: 20).¹⁹ The racial isolation that ensues, and which may prevent identification as an adoptee or person of colour, constitutes what Park Nelson describes as a ‘broad socially rendered racism’ (2016: 118). Hence there are numerous barriers to, and risks involved in accepting or ‘seeing’ one’s racialized body in the context of the adoptive family, as well as within the larger overwhelmingly white communities within which Korean adoptees have been raised. These social risks, alongside their white subjectifications, can make it difficult for adoptees to openly question their racial identity

prior to adulthood. Indeed, Park Nelson's study found that it was only after adolescence, and often in their late twenties and early thirties, that adoptees began to 'question or reject their White identity' (2016: 135).

As such, Hübinette and Walton argue that adoptees are 'strangers to their own bodies' as well as to others (2007: 145; 2015: 399). Walton describes the 'out-of-body' experience that this disruptive sense of self can engender (2015: 396, 399). This idea of an 'out-of-body' experience is particularly useful, since an 'out-of-body' experience must be one that is undergone by a body; it is an experience of being simultaneously riveted and disembedded. Hübinette claims that this sense of being a stranger to their own bodies, is due to the fact that 'adopted Koreans have been fully acculturated and socialized into a self-identification as white, while at the same time having an Asian body' (2007: 145). How does this identification as white occur on a bodily level, despite having an 'Asian body'?

The Body Schema of the Transracial Adoptee

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body schema allows us to understand the specificity and structure of this 'out-of-body' bodily experience. The body schema is 'a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 103). That is, it is 'the way that the body experiences its environment' (Gallagher, 1986: 548). It is non-conscious and operative, involving 'bodily skills and capacities that shape our awareness of objects' (Carman, 2006: 69). My body is geared toward certain actual or possible tasks and is practically engaged with its environment or milieu as an open system. Body image, on the other hand, is the representation or image of the body as an object of consciousness. As Gallagher explains, 'in the body image the body loses its anonymity; it becomes 'my' body,' and is hence 'seen as something distinct from the environment' (1986: 550, 552). The body schema is therefore more primary than the body image: it is the body as lived prior to its apprehension as an intentional object.

In his famous critique of phenomenology, Frantz Fanon argues that for the black man, 'the body schema, attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema' (2008: 92). This historical and racial schema is to be found underneath, or below the body schema as conceptualized by Merleau-Ponty. As Ahmed writes, in Fanon's account the body schema

is already racialized; in other words, race does not just interrupt such a schema but structures its mode of operation. The corporeal schema is of a 'body at home.' If the world is made white, then the body at home is one that can inhabit whiteness (2006: 111).

However, what happens when the world *and the home* is made white? How can the 'body at home' be achieved without a negation of difference, particularly in light of prevailing ideals of colour-blindness? I suggest that for the transracial adoptee, racial difference is inscribed in the body schema as absence. That is, in order to live the body as enmeshed in its meaningful environment, in order to achieve the operative body schema that expresses one's being in the world, racial difference is negated. Again, this is not the body image, or 'my body' or 'the body that I know and intend is mine,' but rather the body schema, the operative, anonymous body of phenomenology.²⁰ To take a place in, to be in a place, to belong in the family, to be a *body at home* in one's home, the body that can never completely 'inhabit' whiteness must refuse to recognize this inability. The habitual body, or the body at home is achieved, in its pre-reflexivity, on the basis of a refusal of racial difference. This is why, I suggest, the majority of Park Nelson's interviewees reported that 'a White identity was as much or more a part of their personal histories as their Asian, Korean, or adoptee identities' (2016: 133). Yet, it is important to stress here that the adoptee does not have an 'incoherent body image' (Alcoff, 1999: 18); it is not that the adoptee is cognitively or consciously refusing to see the 'truth' of their body as object. As Young Hee notes above, 'I used to believe I was white,' 'theoretically I was white' (1997: 86). Young Hee's experience is not 'wrong' or 'faulty.' The body schema is expressive of one's being in the world in a pre-reflective sense; it is the body I live, not the body I think. If the adoptee's body schema is structured around the negation of racial difference, then it is unsurprising that adoptees find it difficult to accept a racialized body image, and that it is typically upon reaching adulthood that they are able to 'question or reject their White identity' (Park Nelson, 2016: 135).

Adoptee Hyper(in)visibility

The complexities of racial embodiment and adoptee identifications outlined above, account in part for what I call the hyper(in)visibility of the adoptee. Michelle Martin-Baron uses the term '(hyper/in)visibility' in the context of U.S. military funeral performances, to refer to how queer intimacy is at once hidden and exposed, seen and unseen (2014). I use the term 'hyper(in)visibility' to capture this sense of simultaneous exposure and hiddenness, but also

to emphasize how, for transracial adoptees, visibility is achieved via invisibility. Adoptee being involves a constant negotiation between visibility on the one hand, and invisibility on the other, across different contexts. For instance, the Korean transracial adoptee is highly visible within one's adoptive family. This is perhaps most acutely experienced in public spaces, when the adoptee is perceived as (a)part of/from their adoptive family. Yet, the adoptee is rendered invisible when their racial difference goes unacknowledged. As Park Nelson notes, this dismissal can often occur in private, familial space – wherein racial difference 'can only be used to benefit the family' insofar as it serves to signify generosity on behalf of white U.S. adoptive families, but 'not as a grievance for the adoptee' (2016: 67). Furthermore, I contend that the adoptee's visibility is achieved through, or at the price of, invisibility and vice versa. That is, in order to be visible, the adoptee is made to disappear, or is made invisible. Astrid Trotzig, adopted by Swedish parents in 1971, expresses this:

In Sweden I can never be fully integrated. My appearance is against me. In South Korea it's the opposite. I disappear in the crowd, people who see me think I am Korean, but inside I am in another place (quoted in Yngvesson, 2002: 250).

The adoptee's visibility here works against them – 'my appearance is against me' – or rather, one's visibility is achieved through being rendered invisible. In Sweden, Astrid's visibility goes hand in hand with invisibility. Paradoxically, Astrid is visible as invisible. The adoptee's racialized body is hypervisible and objectified, at the same time as their identity as an adoptee socialized as white and 'ethnically European' (Lee, 2003: 711), is invisible and goes unaffirmed. Yet this structure of experience accompanies the adoptee, even when entering and navigating non-white spaces, or when one may 'disappear in the crowd.' It is indeed, as Astrid puts it, 'the opposite' in South Korea – yet this experience is structured according to a similar logic. The adoptee disappears or becomes outwardly invisible when they are part of the ethnic and racial majority – 'people who see me think I am Korean' - but this is also to render visible one's difference (to oneself), reinforcing and amplifying it. Moreover, one's bodily (in)visibility in South Korea is often accompanied by experiences of 'standing out' via other signs – most commonly, by one's inability to speak Korean fluently.²¹ One's outward 'invisibility' in Seoul *and* 'visibility' in Sweden exposes, or makes hypervisible, one's difference. In both places, Astrid experiences the hyper(in)visibility of being an out-of-body-body. In Sweden, her body places her out of place. In South Korea, 'I am in another place.' In both places, she is not there.

Hyper(in)visibility names a structure of experience that expresses, and is a result of, an abiding disjuncture between visible appearance and (invisible) felt sense of self across both Korean and western contexts. A phenomenological rendering of the ‘outsiders within’²² status of adoptees, it illustrates the dynamic interplay between body and world, the self and the social, and how this is experienced as simultaneous presence and absence, visibility and invisibility. Adoptees often express how their racial embodiment cannot be reconciled with their identifications, and because they are riveted to their bodies which fail to show the ‘truth’ of their felt sense, this disjuncture persists across various contexts.²³ The out-of-body-body is one that feels constantly ‘out of place’ or in ‘another place.’²⁴ Adoptee hyper(in)visibility is a result of a deeply embodied, existential sense of self-estrangement.

In her study of adoptee kinship, Eleana Kim explains how this form of kinship is ‘produced through practices of place-making in Seoul and other parts of the world’ (2007: 522). To make a place – and not just to be ‘in’ one – especially when ‘place’ has always been contingent, implies imagining, investing, and creating the conditions for a future built on the affirmation of adoptee experiences. The sense of being constantly ‘elsewhere,’ being hyper(in)visible, and being an out-of-body-body, can, when recognized by other adoptees, serve as vital points of connection. Indeed, ‘elsewhere’ being can be with others, and this being-with can form the basis for a creation of place, or a ‘where’ without negation. ‘Gail,’ one of Park Nelson’s informants, states:

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’ (2016: 146).

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to build a theoretical account that contributes a critical phenomenological approach to the interdisciplinary literature on Korean adoption. The strength of this approach lies in its keen attunement to social and historical context, including institutional processes, while foregrounding and theorizing adoptees’ lived experiences of self-knowledge, kinship, and racial embodiment. The paper has argued that adoptee being is marked by epistemological ambiguity and substitutability, and that a shared sense of

contingency and uncertain origins can contribute to the forging of ‘adoptive kinship.’ In addition, the complexities of racial embodiment and adoptees’ identifications can be theorized by building on Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body schema. Finally, the article develops the concept of hyper(in)visibility to account for adoptees’ embodied experiences of belonging and place across Korean and western contexts.²⁵ Being adopted involves inhabiting adopteehood as a milieu – that is, as a historically contextual, shifting environment or constellation of meaning that is lived and negotiated in a deeply embodied sense.

¹ See Cho, 2008.

² See J. Kim (2015) for an account of Korean transnational adoption as a ‘militarized diaspora’ to which gendered violence and geopolitics are central. See also Shiao and Tuan (2011) and Park Nelson (2016) for historical and socio-political accounts of the beginnings of Korean adoption.

³ For a discussion of U.S. immigration policy and the framing of adoptees during this period, see Carlson, 1988; Lovelock, 2000; Park Nelson, 2016.

⁴ The ‘adoption triangle’ is used to refer to both domestic and transnational adoption. While reductive when used in both cases, here I am attempting to demonstrate how the socio-political and institutional processes involved in the Korean case highlight the limitations of the term in particularly acute ways.

⁵ The term ‘birth parents’ is often deemed preferable to ‘natural parents,’ in order to avoid casting adoptive parents as ‘unnatural’ (see Floud, 1982).

⁶ See Hübinette, 2012; Park Nelson, 2016.

⁷ For an analysis of the pivotal role of maternity homes in Korean adoption practices, see chapter 3 in Kim, 2016.

⁸ Adoptees’ experiences in the context of their adoptive families and communities obviously vary, due to age at adoption, relationships with family, participation at ‘culture’ camps, etc. I do not suggest that these experiences are unimportant. Moreover, while there are differences between the experiences of first generation, predominantly mixed race adoptees, and younger generations – including age of adoption, memories of Korea and orphanages, and the degree of racial isolation in white U.S. communities – the experiences conceptualized in this paper are intended to apply to transnational transracial Korean adoptees in general. See ch. 2 in Park Nelson, 2016 for a discussion of the similarities and differences between older and younger generation adoptees.

⁹ See Weiss, G., Murphy, A.V., and Salamon, G. (2019).

¹⁰ See Oh (2015).

¹¹ Importantly, South Korea’s 2011 Special Adoption Law requires all births to be registered with the government. In terms of increasing the transparency of adoption practices, this is a significant development. The discussion of the orphan *hojuk* remains pertinent to the experiences of the Korean adoptee cohort more broadly, however, since the vast majority were adopted prior to 2011 (see Condit-Shrestha, 2018: 386).

¹² Genetic essentialism refers to the cultural tendency to view genes as determining life outcomes, physical characteristics, attitudes, and personality traits (Dar-Nimrod and Heine, 2011). In the context of adoption studies, this manifests in arguments that ‘knowledge of one’s heritage is a necessary part of identity formation,’ mobilized by some proponents in favour of open adoption records (Wegar, 1997: 33-34). Furthermore, while consumer DNA testing often employs essentialist discourse, this option is often selected by adoptees alongside or after other avenues have been exhausted.

¹³ ‘Ambiguous gain’ can hence be understood as a social and epistemological counterpart of what JaeRan Kim, drawing on Pauline Boss, terms adoptees’ ‘ambiguous loss’ (2008). While ambiguous loss refers to the experience of ‘physical absence coupled with psychological presence’ of birth family, ambiguous gain references the unclear gains of what is uncovered or recuperated, acknowledging the persistence of questions regarding identity.

¹⁴ Hage (2017) identifies three modes of existence – domesticating, mutualist, and reciprocal – which involve different ways of relating to otherness. The reciprocal mode of existence ‘highlights a dimension in which otherness exists ‘with me,’ and in which ‘the other is always already in a state of giftedness in relation to me’ (55-56). Adoptee giftedness would entail both reciprocal and mutualist modes of existence, as otherness exists both ‘with me’ and ‘in me,’ in the sense that the other is the ‘could-be-me.’

¹⁵ See also Gordon (1999), Lee (2014).

¹⁶ See Lee (2003).

¹⁷ There are certainly resonances between the experiences of transracial adoptees and other migrant groups, including experiences of racism, and disconnection from parents' culture and language. Yet contemporary adoption practices typically result in experiences specific to transracial adoptees, including racial isolation within their family (Ramsey and Mika, 2011; Docan-Morgan, 2010), uncertainty of origins, loss of connection with biological kin, and lack of 'biological mirrors' (Schechter and Bertocci, 1990: 82). The aim in this paper is to identify and theorize three inter-related experiential dimensions of Korean adoptee experiences which, taken together, attend to the specificity of Korean adoptee experiences.

¹⁸ The analyses in this section employ the terms, eg. 'Asian identity,' used by researchers and participants in the studies cited.

¹⁹ See also Ramsey and Mika (2011).

²⁰ The body schema is operative at the level of pre-conscious habit, but is related to the body image, insofar as one can become consciously aware of one's posture, capacities, practical bodily engagements, etc. See Gallagher, S. and Cole, J. (1995).

²¹ The felt sense and social recognition of one's difference in Korea by virtue of language fluency requires further phenomenological analyses, as it involves the interplay of visual and aural fields and highlights the ways in which language use can amplify perceived social differences.

²² Trenka, Oparah, and Shin (2006).

²³ Adoptee hyper(in)visibility speaks to an existential sense of 'rootlessness' or belonging 'nowhere' due to their ethnic and racial hybridity (white and 'Korean'). Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this point.

²⁴ Hyper(in)visibility can also be related to embodied negotiations that occur in the interstitial 'third space existence' (Hübinette, 2007: 155) adoptees can be said to 'occupy.' See Hübinette (2007) for a discussion of the 'contradictory subjectivities and identifications' of adoptees, drawing on Bhabha's theory of hybridity and Butler's performativity.

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