(RE)EMBODYING IDENTITY:
Understanding Belonging, ‘Difference’ and Transnational Adoption through the Lived Experiences of Korean Adoptees

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed: ____________________________________________

Dated: ____________________________________________
For my fellow adoptees and

my two mothers,

Rose Marie Walton and 손화자.
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Abstract

Since the Korean War (1950-1953), over 170,000 Korean children have been adopted from South Korea and dispersed across the world to families in ‘the West’. As Korean adoptees reach adulthood, many are going back to South Korea through their own initiatives to understand their ‘past’ and to try to identify with a part of themselves that feels ‘unknown’. This study considers the significance of these dual transnational movements for Korean adoptees’ identities.

Based on their lived experiences, this dissertation explores the ways Korean adoptees make sense of their identities in their adoptive countries and in South Korea. Specifically, it draws on social scientific theories to focus on topics of ‘difference’, embodiment, experience and belonging.

Another key aim of this study is to examine some of the conventional ideas about kinship and identity that are embedded in a Euro-American construction of adoption. Through this analysis, issues associated with adoptees such as ‘loss’, ‘incomplete identities’ and ‘a need to search’ are alternatively considered to be socially and culturally derived rather than unproblematically viewed as individual problems.

Overall, this is a qualitative anthropological study that engages with Korean adoptees’ lived experiences as they work to situate their identities within shifting socio-cultural
contexts. A central goal throughout the course of this research has been to generate greater understanding about the complex processes involved for transnationally adopted people as they try to negotiate their identities within contested spaces of belonging. This study concludes by looking at the significance of shared experiences and mutual understanding between adoptees and the impact this has on their sense of belonging.
Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation)
ACPP (Aboriginal Child Placement Principal)
AICCA (Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies)
AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare)
ALMA (Adoptee Liberation Movement of America)
ARMS (Association of Relinquishing Mothers)
ASK (Adoptee Solidarity Korea)
CAP (Creative analytical processes)
CMC (Computer-mediated communication)
DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea)
EPIK (English Program in Korea)
ESWS (Eastern Social Welfare Society)
GAIPS (Global Adoption Information & Post Service) Center
GDP (Gross domestic product)
GOA’L (Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link)

Hague Convention/Hague Convention of Intercountry Adoption (Hague ‘Convention on Protection of Children and Co-Operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption’)

ICASN (Intercountry Adoptee Support Network)
IKAA (International Korean Adoptee Associations)
IMF (International Monetary Fund)
InKAS (International Korean Adoptee Service)

KAAN (Korean American Adoptive Family Network)

KAW (Korean Adoptees Worldwide)

MHW (Ministry of Health and Welfare)

MHWAF (Ministry for Health, Welfare and Family Affairs—formerly Ministry of Health and Welfare)

MMA (Military Manpower Association)

MOFAT (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade)

NABSW (National Association of Black Social Workers)

OECD (Organisation for Economic and Co-operation and Development)

OKF (Overseas Koreans Foundation)

ROK (Republic of Korea)

SWS (Social Welfare Society)

TRACK (Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea)

UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child)
Note on Romanisation and Korean Names

I have used the ‘Revised Romanisation’ system which is the official system supported by the South Korean government’s Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. This replaces the McCune-Reischauer system that was developed in 1939 by American graduate students, George McCune and Edwin Reischauer (Ministry of Culture Sports and Tourism, n.d.). The McCune-Reischauer system is still widely used outside of South Korea and is gradually being changed over to the Revised Romanisation system within the country. However, in recognition of the changes made to minimise confusion and inconsistencies, I refer to the official Revised Romanisation system for the Hangeul (Korean alphabet) used in this thesis.

Finally, I use the order for Korean names with the family name preceding the given names. Family names have not yet been standardised according to the Revised Romanisation system as there are potential difficulties that have not been agreed upon (Ministry of Culture Sports and Tourism, n.d.).
Frequently Used Korean Words

교포 Kyopo (Overseas Koreans—people with Korean heritage living overseas)

단군황검 Dangun Wanggeom (Mythological founder of Korea and ancestor of the Korean people)

뿌리의집 Ppuriui jip (KoRoot)

세계화 Segyehwa (Globalisation)

입양 Ibyang (Adoption)

입양인 Ibyangin (Adoptee)

호주제 Hojuje (Family registry system)

호적 Hojeok (Family register)
Chapter 1

Introduction to the study

Encounters in South Korea: Introducing the research questions

On a cool autumn afternoon at the boys’ middle school in Jeomchon¹, South Korea, it is lunchtime and all of the students are hurrying to the cafeteria to queue for a hot meal. Some of the teachers, including myself, have eaten lunch earlier to avoid the surge of students. As we walk down the steps back to the teachers’ office, one of my students rushes by with a broad smile, as if having discovered an important insight, declaring in a loud triumphant voice, “You are Korean!” I smile awkwardly, not quite knowing what to say, hindered by my clumsy attempts at speaking Korean, and continue down the stairs. Earlier that day in class, the same student had asked me, “Are you Korean?” and my hesitant response, “Well, I’m Korean and American” seemed to be unsatisfactory. I attempted to explain that I was adopted by drawing crude scribbles on the blackboard of an airplane, South Korea and the United States. As the students sat there wanting to know more, I struggled with my own uncertainty.

¹Jeomchon (점촌) is a precinct within the larger municipal area or ‘si’ of Mungyeong (문경시). Jeomchon used to be separately administered but today serves as the central business district of Mungyeong-si. Locals who live in Jeomchon say they are from Jeomchon even though it is technically within Mungyeong-si. Mungyeong-si is located within the province or ‘do’, Gyeongsangbuk-do (경상북도), one of the nine provinces of South Korea.
Certain questions seemed to hang in the air: Who is this new English teacher, a ‘native English speaker’ that looks just as Korean as the students and the other teachers? Why did this new teacher say she was born in South Korea to a Korean mother and yet grew up in the United States in a white American family? Did this make her Korean or American, or as she claimed, a bit of both? It was as if that particular student had sensed my uncertain stance as I wavered about having a Korean identity and had decided to make a decision for me, declaring my affinity with Korea and Korean people. However, the ‘simple’ question, “Are you Korean?” continued to debate endlessly in my mind long after I had left the mountainous area of Jeomchon.

The preliminary background and motivations for this study began during the seven months I spent in Jeomchon, South Korea, September 2004 until April 2005. I went to teach English through the English Program in Korea (EPIK) which is sponsored by the South Korean government. I begin with this anecdote as a way to introduce the complex ways Korean adoptees feel about their identity and the kinds of social negotiations they are confronted with such as instances when they are asked about their origins. As a Korean adoptee, raised in the United States, this trip was the first to South Korea since I was adopted at eight months old. While this trip was unique and intensely personal, it was also part of a larger transnational movement of journeys made by Korean adoptees.
This return movement of adult adoptees became increasingly prevalent, especially after the 1988 Seoul Olympics (E. Kim, 2005) when South Korea was placed in the international spotlight and was introduced as a tourist destination. Since then, adoption agencies, South Korean government organisations such as the Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF) and non-profit organisations such as InKAS (International Korean Adoptee Service) and GOA’L (Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link) have worked to provide services that help adoptees that want to go back to South Korea as well as language and cultural resources to aid them while they are there. As more Korean adoptees go back to Korea\(^2\) due to greater accessibility and various incentives such as Korean language scholarships and organised ‘motherland’ tours, issues of identity about what it means to be Korean as a Korean adoptee are issues that Korean adoptees are confronted with in everyday life.

**Situating the research project**

Drawing on 22 in-depth interviews with Korean adoptees aged 18-39 years and three months of fieldwork in Seoul, this study aims to understand the way identity is *lived* and *experienced* by Korean adoptees based on their experiences in their adoptive countries and when they return to South Korea. The empirical basis for this study

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\(^2\)Throughout the thesis, I focus on adoptions and adoptees from South Korea or as it is officially known, the Republic of Korea (ROK). For purposes of simplicity, I will simply refer to South Korea as ‘Korea’ and those who have been adopted from South Korea as ‘Korean adoptees’. I will however, refer specifically to South Korean when emphasis is needed. Otherwise, I will specifically note if I am referring to North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea—DPRK).
stresses that the way identity is understood needs to emerge out of the complexity of how it is lived. It draws on Victor Turner’s understanding of experience as something that is “lived through” and “charged with emotion and volition” in all its richness and vivacity (original emphasis) (1982, pp. 12-13). Experience is then made sense of through its expression by sharing it with others through various mediums such as narrative, performance and ritual (V. Turner, 1982). This is located within the broader literature concerning the anthropology of experience (V. W. Turner & Bruner, 1986). Such an approach values lived experience as an entry point to understanding how Korean adoptees articulate or make sense of their identities. In contrast to studies that theorise about identity without a strong empirical grounding, this study aims to understand Korean adoptees’ identities by working within the complexity of how they experience identity. The aim is not to conclude with sweeping generalisations or to provide statistical categories and percentages but to provide greater insight into how Korean adoptees work to ground their identities even as their identities are contested and reaffirmed in different social situations and cultural contexts.

I draw on Kondo’s (1990) notion of ‘crafting selves’ to understand identity as something that is individually experienced as well as culturally constituted. The idea of ‘crafting selves’ considers identity “not [as] a static object, but a creative process” thus also including a sense of agency (original emphasis) (Kondo, 1990, p. 48). As Bruner also notes, “Selves … are not given but are problematic and always in
production” (1986, p. 12). In this way, one of the aims is to understand how Korean adoptees make sense of their identities by looking at how they ground their identities through their experiences in everyday life even as their identities are contested and subject to change. Moreover, this study understands identities, “not [as] essentialised wholes, but subject-positions—shifting nodal points within often conflict-ridden fields of meaning” (Kondo, 1990, p. 46). Specifically, Korean adoptees navigate their identities in social situations which challenge their sense of self.

In order to gain further insight into the experiences of adoptees, it is important to critically analyse the cultural assumptions embedded in discourse about adoption and identity to understand how adoptees’ identities are represented. Therefore, another issue that this study addresses is the socio-cultural construction of identity and the impact a particular Euro-American understanding of identity has had on representations of adoptees’ identities. Without this perspective, issues associated with adoption and identity seem natural and universal, which consequently, naturalises and universalises the experiences of adoptees. For example, the disciplinary hold that clinical psychology and psychiatry has had on adoption studies up until the 1990s has resulted in studies that tend to pathologise identity that is not viewed as ‘well-developed’ or ‘whole’ or conversely, glorifying adoptees that are deemed to be ‘well-adjusted’ without adequately engaging with the complexity of how

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3 I use the term, “Euro-American” as it was coined by Marilyn Strathern to describe the specific dialectic between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in kin relations (Strathern, 1992, p. 17). This term can also be applied to identity since a person’s identity is believed to be intricately connected to biological origins, especially in relation to biogenetic connections within a family.
identity is lived. Importantly, the very categories that are used to describe adoptees’ identities are also left unquestioned. As a result, adoptees have been represented in ways that consider their identities to be well-adjusted in contrast to those that are not. These kinds of conclusions invalidate and exclude the diverse experiences of adoptees by striving toward generalisations. The danger in overarching generalisations is that they can intentionally or unintentionally homogenise adoptees as a single representative group.

Difficulties typically associated with adoptees such as feelings of loss, emptiness or feelings of a divided self are issues that are assumed to be natural to the experience of being adopted; however, these are not necessarily so inherent. Instead, these ‘identity issues’ need to be understood within the broader social and cultural context in which these issues are constructed, and importantly how these issues are lived and experienced. This is not to say that these feelings are not psychologically and socially real for adoptees but that these feelings need to be analysed in the context in which they are experienced. Moreover, experience is not simply individual experience; it is individual experience encountered in a socio-cultural milieu. Therefore, by considering the way identity is culturally constructed, adoptees whose identities do not fit so neatly into such categories are also included rather than being seen as anomalies in a normative framework. Furthermore, those that experience these difficulties are not simply pathologised in an individual way but are understood in the
context of a culturally specific way of understanding identity that is not in fact, universal or natural.

Additionally, by locating adoptees’ experiences within an understanding of transnational adoption as a specific social practice, the difficulties adoptees face such as feelings of loss, can be understood as part of that process. For instance, a Euro-American construction of kinship problematises the existence of more than one mother or more than one father and thus adoption presents a conundrum. As a way to overcome this, the adoption process replaces one set of parents with another. This practice thus also creates feelings of loss and ‘rootlessness’ that adoptees often experience. Therefore, difficulties that adoptees experience are also part of the transnational adoption process rather than solely an individual matter. Achieving perspective on the cultural relativity of social phenomena such as adoption is often difficult because the cultural assumptions we make are intrinsic to how we think about things. However, it is possible to gain some distance from an ethnocentric perspective by placing our ideas about adoption and identity in a relative cultural context. Therefore, this study also considers the implications for how adoptees’ identities are understood by drawing on a few comparative examples between transnational adoption and other forms of adoption in South Korea and Papua New Guinea (Bowie, 2004b).
Research aims and chapter overview

The primary aim of this study is to engage with the ways adoptees *live* their identities as a subjective experience that shifts and sways rather than following a predetermined path concerned with the *way Identity* (with a capital ‘I’) *should* ‘develop’. The experiences that Korean adoptees shared during the course of this research project are not meant to represent the experiences of all Korean adoptees or for all adoptees. Furthermore, the experiences of Korean adoptees parallel the experiences of other transracially transnationally adopted people as well as those adopted to other countries not represented by the particular group of Korean adoptees that participated in this study (Gray, 2007a, 2007b; Williams, 2003). The focus on Korean adoptees is a way to understand the specific circumstances of overseas adoptions from South Korea in particular and to provide insight into the experience of going back to the birth country given the country’s socio-political, historical and cultural context.

Overall, the diverse experiences presented here serve to highlight the lived contradictions involved in everyday negotiations and contestations of identity as well as the moments of certainty and sense of grounded identity that adoptees talk about, even in the midst of uncertainty and ambiguity. This challenges theories that celebrate hybrid identities without also understanding how identity is made sense of in daily life (Lien & Melhuus, 2007; Lo, 2000). Therefore, one of the central arguments for this study is that adoptees understand their identities as dynamic, negotiated and
contested but at the same time, work to ground and embody an identity that makes sense to them at that particular point in their lives.

The ways Korean adoptees experience identity will be explored through two main themes. First, this study analyses how Korean adoptees embody a ‘white identity’ in their adoptive countries while also contesting meanings of ‘whiteness’. Then, for those that have returned to South Korea, the aim is to understand the ways that Korean adoptees try to make a Korean identity known and tangible by being in South Korea and experiencing the place where they were born.

The following overview provides a descriptive outline of the research aims and questions this study addresses according to how the chapters are organised:

Chapter 2 presents an overview of central themes in previous adoption studies and explores different theoretical and disciplinary approaches to adoption and identity. This works to situate this study by addressing the ways adoption and identity have been comparatively studied in the social scientific disciplines and briefly, in the clinical psychological and psychiatric disciplines. It concludes with an examination of the shifting directions in adoption research concerning adoptees’ identities and calls for an understanding of identity that is both in flux as well as grounded and made sense of in a socially and culturally mediated context.
Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the participant group and the qualitative framework and methods used during the research process. A reflexive approach to ethnography informs this study in order to consider the implications of positionality and representation and to challenge the dichotomy between the researcher and research subjects. Additionally, the importance of engaging with the participants during the interviewing process is highlighted as a way to include informed collaboration in the research project.

Chapter 4 outlines the historical context for transnational adoption from South Korea to other countries, focusing on Australia as one of the receiving countries. The aim is to understand the background for adoption, especially the way the adoption process is constructed and how this has influenced the ways adoptees’ identities are considered. Moreover, any discussion that involves adoptees’ identities needs to be understood by first examining the socio-cultural meanings of adoption and identity because it affects how adoptees are represented and how their experiences are interpreted. By taking an anthropological approach, adoptees’ experiences are understood in the context of a particular interpretation of adoption, in this case, transnational adoption, that may differ according to other cultural interpretations of the adoption process. This approach also takes into consideration the kinds of issues that are associated with adoption, such as those pertaining to identity, as issues that exist because they are made culturally meaningful out of a whole range of possible issues, rather than presuming that certain issues are natural to ‘being adopted’. Therefore, it is possible
to gain further insights into adoptees’ experiences by trying to understand the social and cultural context in which they are experienced as well as the kinds of identity issues that are viewed as significant to ‘being adopted’ by understanding their historical and socio-political particularity.

Chapter 5 centres on interview data based on Korean adoptees’ experiences in their adoptive countries. In the interviews, Korean adoptees described the contradictions they felt between how they look and how they feel, how they are perceived by others based on their physical appearance and their own sense of self based on their cultural upbringing. While adoptees’ experiences vary depending on the different cultures and countries they grew up in, in the majority of transnational adoptions, Korean adoptees were predominantly raised in areas characterised by significant white populations and raised by white adoptive parents. This chapter looks at how Korean adoptees negotiate ‘whiteness’ and their own Korean bodies as they work to embody an identity that makes sense to them but one that is also subject to change. It brings into play the ways Korean adoptees transgress socially constructed boundaries signifying ‘whiteness’ and ‘otherness’.

The chapter concludes by introducing Korean adoptees’ experiences in South Korea and how they transgress boundaries of ‘Koreanness’. Here, they are expected to ‘be Korean’ meaning they are expected to understand the language, cultural practices and social behaviours mainly because they look Korean or have Korean ‘blood’. The
purpose of contrasting Korean adoptees’ experiences in their adoptive countries to their experiences in South Korea is to introduce and highlight the complexity involved in trying to situate and embody a meaningful identity that is also recognised by others.

*Chapter 6* examines how the South Korean government continues to maintain a taken-for-granted understanding of Korean identity based on shared blood and the problem this presents for Korean adoptees as they try to understand what it means to ‘be Korean’ beyond the biology of biogenetic ties. In spite of the presence of Korean adoptees from many different countries, the issue of what it might mean for Korean adoptees to be Korean seems to remain largely unquestioned, especially from the perspective of the South Korean government. Assumptions about Korean identity are largely derived from a conservative national and cultural ideology that imagines a homogenous Korean identity founded on shared blood and a cultural emphasis on patrilineal kinship and ancestral lineages based on biogenetic ties. Although this view is not universally accepted in Korean society, conservative nationalistic rhetoric still presents a problem for Korean adoptees. Notably, by being adopted, they are no longer legally acknowledged – if they ever were – in the family register or *hojeok*. Furthermore, their experiences growing up in their respective adoptive countries challenge the significance of a homogenous Korean identity because it does not include the fact that some may not even see themselves as Korean or may choose to identify themselves as Korean in other ways, not just because they have ‘Korean blood’.

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Chapter 7 follows on from Chapter 6 by considering the ways Korean adoptees conceptualise a Korean identity as well as how they work to make a Korean identity meaningful by embodying it. This chapter draws on Csordas’s (1994, 2002) use of phenomenology in anthropological research in order to provide an analytical framework for how Korean adoptees embody a Korean identity through their lived experiences in South Korea. This opens up what it might mean to be Korean by including the specificity of their varied experiences and acknowledging this as being just as valid as other interpretations of Korean identity, albeit not claiming to be at the same time somehow more ‘authentic’ than other claims. This works to decentre the South Korean government’s representation of Korean identity by including alternative ways to make a Korean identity meaningful.

Chapter 8 is primarily an ethnographic account of the lived experiences at KoRoot, the guesthouse for Korean adoptees where I conducted my field work. This chapter explores the ways adoptees talk about a sense of shared understanding and an embodied feeling of connectedness between other adoptees based on a sense of shared identity and similar experiences. Finally, it describes instances of communitas as Korean adoptees experience being in South Korea together and looks at the significance of these lived shared experiences for adoptees’ sense of belonging.
Chapter 9 concludes by discussing the importance for an empirical basis for research about adoptees’ identities by engaging with the complexity and diversity of adoptees’ experiences. By acknowledging the multifaceted experiences of adoptees, and shedding light on the assumptions that essentialise identity, in particular cultural and ethnic identity, we can engage in productive discussions that will help to facilitate a more complex understanding of adoptees’ lived experiences. The chapter finishes with suggestions for further research directions.
Chapter 2
Navigating adoptees’ identities: A review of adoption literature

This chapter begins with an overview of previous adoption research as a way to situate this study within the anthropological discipline and in the wider social scientific field. The following section briefly introduces a history of adoption research in anthropology by tracing its path from earlier kinship studies to the current context of the ‘new kinship studies’. The discussion then moves onto the question of identity and the issues this topic raises in adoption research. A few examples of adoption studies seated in the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry are considered. These are mainly clinically based and concerned with identity development and adjustment outcomes. While these studies are not meant to speak for all adoption research undertaken in these disciplines, the primary reason for this particular discussion is to draw attention to a crucial element that is often left unquestioned—the cultural specificity of identity understood in a socio-cultural context.

Here, the social sciences offer a way to contest normative frameworks about identity formation by viewing identity as something that is processual or ongoing as well as situated and relational. From this perspective, identity is continually emerging through changing social circumstances and situated and made sense of in varying social interactions. More specifically, this approach to identity underlies
the main argument that shapes this research, that identity is something that is lived and experienced. Rather than imposing ready-made theoretical structures onto Korean adoptees’ identities, identity needs to be understood from a strong empirical base so that a theoretical understanding of identity emerges from and remains grounded in the way people articulate and experience a sense of self.

**Introducing adoption and kinship studies**

Until recently, studies of adoption were primarily centred in the disciplines of psychology, social work, and law, especially pertaining to behavioural adjustment, child welfare and development, and adoption legislation and social policy. In other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, adoption, in particular transnational adoption has only recently been considered an important topic for research, especially due to renewed and increasing interest in kinship, migration and transnationalism (Altstein & Simon, 1991; Bowie, 2004b; Howell, 2001; Modell, 1994, 2002; Volkman, 2005b).

Historically in anthropology, adoption was generally considered to be a matter for systematic analyses of kinship practices and was rarely given more than a passing glance. In anthropology’s structural-functionalist tradition, adoption was often analysed as one aspect of a culture’s kinship system in terms of its function within the wider set of kin relations. In this context, adoption was useful to compare kinship systems, which were considered to be “‘systems’ [that] could be broken
down to common denominators such as rights, obligations [and] inheritance” (Demian, 2004, p. 97). In other words, adoption was regarded as a functional social practice involving individual transactions between kin relations. Although adoption was not usually the key focus of kinship studies, a few notable exceptions of studies that centred on adoption were those conducted by Brady (1976) and Carroll (1970) in various Oceanic societies.

While Demian (2004) critiques the transactional focus of kinship in these studies, these studies were nevertheless significant because adoption was considered an important social practice for the study of kinship rather than simply mentioned in passing. However, in general, beyond the study of kinship patterns, adoption was simply not considered to be an area of research with analytic potential (Howell, 2006). From the 1970s to the 1990s, “almost no attention was paid by anthropologists to adoption” (Demian, 2004, p. 97). A possible reason for this is that generally, adoption was passed over as being mainly an individual concern for families and adoption professionals rather than a social and cultural practice with significant anthropological weight.

Adoption research that explores the significance of adoption and kinship beyond analyses of kinship systems is a recent phenomenon. In the past twenty years, primarily toward the end of the twentieth century, the anthropological lens has turned on itself, which could explain this shift toward studying adoption. For example, a number of adoption studies have examined adoption practices in anthropologists’ home countries such as the United States (Modell, 1994, 2002),
Norway (Howell, 2001, 2006) and Australia (Telfer, 2003, 2004). These studies focus on the ways adoption challenges Euro-American kinship ideologies. As Volkman (2005a) notes, interest in adoption has only since been renewed beginning in the 1990s as it became part of the discussion of ‘new kinship studies’ and new reproductive technologies. In this context, adoption was considered alongside the diverse ways families are formed. Moreover, this renewed discussion about kinship challenged the concept of family based on biogenetic ties and questioned our understanding of kinship apart from a biological framework (Sarah Franklin & Susan McKinnon, 2001; Strathern, 1992; Weston, 1991). These issues will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 4, which considers the ways adoption is culturally constructed within a Euro-American kinship ideology.

**Contesting representations of identity**

I would now like to turn to the way adoption and identity has been addressed in psychological studies by offering a few examples of clinical studies that have affected the ways adoptees’ identities are represented. As mentioned earlier, adoption studies have mostly been carried out in the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry. Howell (2006) offers an explanation for this disciplinary dominance by examining how academic knowledge is produced and disseminated to the wider society. Specifically, she discusses how psychological and psychiatric knowledge about adoption has spread beyond academic and clinical spheres as it is circulated through governmental policies, passed onto governmental bureaucracies, such as
adoption agencies and community welfare services and then disseminated to members of the public with vested interest in adoption such as prospective adoptive parents. Howell proposes that “this diffusion of psychologically informed ideas ... has lent ... authority to the psycho-technocrats” (2006, p. 87). She describes ‘psycho-technocrats’ as gatekeepers of knowledge whose expertise and authority have been reinforced by the state through child welfare legislation and broader social welfare policies (2006, p. 86).

For instance, a major concern in adoption policies has been ensuring that ‘the best interests of the child’ are protected over the interests of others involved in the adoption process. As Kim Gray (2007a) notes in her doctoral dissertation, what is considered to be in the ‘best interests’ of the child depends on the particular historical circumstances which shape social policies and the socio-political context that frames the discussion and relevant issues. State and federal governments play a role in disseminating psychological knowledge by implementing psychological conclusions concerning ‘the best interests of the child’ into adoption policies. From a psychological perspective, the ‘best interests of the child’ are based on what is considered an ideal environment for optimal behavioural development and identity formation. Adoption professionals and others interested in child welfare draw on psychological discourses about child and adolescent behavioural development. Information is then passed onto those interested in adopting a child in the form of pamphlets, adoption guide books, and ‘instruction booklets’ for dealing with issues that may arise with adopted people, mainly during stages of childhood and adolescence.
This has had far-reaching effects. Howell (2006) argues that psychological discourses concerning childhood development and identity determine measures of normality. The effect of this is that adoptees’ ‘levels of adjustment’ are measured according to set criteria determining mental and behavioural development. For example, studies such as those conducted in clinical psychology (Brinich, 1990; Verrier, 1993) have fed popular public perceptions that all adoptees are perpetually burdened with emotional and behavioural problems. These clinical studies are by no means representative of all psychological studies. However, their conclusions have negatively affected the way adoptees are represented and only serve to naturalise and pathologise adoptees by attributing social issues and problems to the individual rather than considering the broader social and cultural context in which those psychological ‘issues’ are situated. As a result, individual case studies, especially in clinical psychology tend to homogenise and pathologise the identities and lived experiences of all adoptees. As Patton observes, “considerations of culture and social structure are outside the purview of such studies because identity is unproblematically viewed as an individual matter” (2000, p. 5). Moreover, such research excludes different adoptee experiences that cannot be explained away by such overarching conclusions.

An example of this kind of research is the popular book, called *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child* by clinical psychologist, Nancy Verrier (1993). She puts forth a theory of the ‘primal wound’, which argues that the trauma resulting from the separation of the child from the birthmother causes
psychological damage that infiltrates all aspects of the adoptee's life and cannot be overcome. She takes a socio-biological approach, which relies on the idea of biological determinism to explain social phenomena. For instance, she assumes that “having been manipulated at the beginning of their lives [the separation] makes some adoptees manipulative and controlling” (1993, p. 97). This implies that adoptees have little agency over the permanency of the ‘primal wound’. While some of the issues she discusses such as feelings of abandonment, rejection and loss are relevant for adoptees, the deterministic approach that she takes largely ignores the diverse processes adoptees engage with to make sense of their identities that do not necessarily rely on such a pathologised explanation.

Smith (2001, p. 491) argues that Verrier's theory of the ‘primal wound’ seems to draw on the pseudo-scientific claim of the ‘adopted child syndrome’ associated with the psychologist, David Kirschner. According to Smith (2001), Kirschner asserts that there are certain problems such as attachment disorders, lying, stealing, and feelings of ‘rootlessness’ that arise from being adopted. Not only does Kirschner generalise all adoptees, he also pathologises adoptees by assuming that their problems are solely psychological and thus intrinsic to being an adoptee (Smith, 2001). He does not consider the diverse experiences that adoptees have that may or may not deal with these issues. Moreover, his clinical diagnoses of adoptees’ experiences neglect to consider the social and cultural context of adoption that may even produce some of the psychological issues he assumes are natural to ‘being adopted’.
Analysing assumptions about ‘selfhood’

At this point, it is important to unpack some of the assumptions about identity that could help to explain why adoptees’ identities are presented as pathological or somehow ‘deviant’ according to a standardised ‘norm’. This discussion seeks to understand how certain concepts of subjectivity shape Euro-American conventional understandings of identity. By taking this approach, we can begin to see how the ways Korean adoptees and other transnational subjects make sense of their identities are played out within these conventions. At the same time, these conventions are also contested and transgressed in the everyday lived experiential context of social interactions, confrontational situations and unexpected circumstances.

From a Euro-American ideological vantage point, the self or subject is an “‘individuated’ being separate from both the social and natural world” (Morris, 1994, p. 16). This is founded in a Cartesian dualism which pictures ‘the self’ as a bounded entity existing in opposition to society and nature. Kondo provides a compelling analysis of how the self is referred to in the English language as an “irreducible ‘I’ ... [that] marches through [society] untouched and unchanged from one situation to the next” (1990, p. 32). The ‘I’ is conceptualised as an autonomous individual contained within the visible boundaries of the physical body. With this logic, the self is composed of a body and an identity which are conterminous to each other and therefore, inseparable. Consequently, it is possible to talk about
selves as whole, complete and adjusted or causing self-harm or pursuing self-knowledge.

Some psychological studies based on adoption outcomes and personality development analyse the extent that adoptees have reached various stages of identity formation based on an Eriksonian outline for identity development (Hoopes, 1990). Erik Erikson developed the term, 'identity crisis' (1968). This concept contends that normality is when the inner self and outer self exist in harmony as a complete self. If the inner and outer selves are discordant, then they must be adjusted or otherwise remain in ‘crisis’. As Hoare points out, this understanding of identity is a Euro-American construction of “self-definition that Erikson projected as the gold standard for all” (2002, p. 66). The very term, ‘identity crisis’ not only presupposes a whole self, it also attaches normality to the idea that a whole self is an ideal state of being, which positions ambivalence and indeterminacy as pathologically deviant or underdeveloped. This is problematic for adoptees because this view can then be used to place adoptees in a vulnerable stigmatised position. In this context, adoptees are often pathologised and compared and analysed within normative frameworks which leave conceptualisations of identity and self unchallenged.

While it is important to be aware of possible psychological problems or adjustment difficulties, adoptees tend to be treated as if they carry Pandora’s Box in their
metaphorical backpacks. It assumes adoptees are prone to poor adjustment and psychological problems. However, that said, conclusions about adoptees as generally well-adjusted compared to non-adoptees are just as problematic. The main problem with narrowly held views such as these is the fact that adoptees' lived experiences are complex, contradictory and dynamic, and cannot be explained in such dichotomous terms as positive and negative, adjusted and maladjusted.

While adoptees experience psychological difficulties for a number of reasons, these clinical studies assume that identity crises and difficulties adjusting in terms of behaviour or personality development are natural to ‘being an adoptee’. As Howell points out, an explanation for this approach is that psychology as a discipline tends to universalise human behaviour and development based on individual case studies, which assumes that “humans are identical regardless of their social and cultural environment” (2006, p. 93). At the same time, psychological studies are useful in their own ways and can help provide a more general understanding of identity formation among adoptees in different groupings according to certain statistical categories such as age and gender. However, it is also important to question the cultural assumptions about identity that shape the research framework.

Emerging studies in the social sciences provide a way to challenge conventional understandings of identity by considering how adoptees experience their identities

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4 The backpack metaphor is commonly used to describe the adoptee’s pre-adoption history with all the emotional, physical and cultural ‘baggage’ that are believed to come with the adoptee.
in a socio-cultural context. Importantly, identity is socially constructed and culturally constituted rather than something that is biologically (pre)determined. This approach views identity as a creative process, something that is worked through and made sense of in the context of social relations. However, before discussing some of the theoretical approaches concerning identity in the social sciences, it is worthwhile considering why identity is such a pertinent topic in adoption studies.

**Connecting adoption and identity**

In adoption studies, “issues of identity, family, and race have emerged as powerful discursive lightning rods through which a broad range of social, political, and economic issues are debated” (Patton, 2000, p. 4). Since the 1990s, adoption research has diversified to include topics concerning the cultural and ethnic identities of both domestic and transnational adoptees from childhood to adulthood. However prior to the 1990s, issues concerning racial and cultural identity dealt mainly with transracial domestic adoptions rather than transnational adoptions and adopted children and adolescents rather than adult adoptees (Simon & Altstein, 1977). This is partly because transnational adoptions did not become widespread until the 1960s and researchers did not take much interest in transnational adoption issues until the 1990s, choosing to focus more on domestic adoption issues. Today, those involved in the adoption process such as adoption agencies, adoptive parents and adoptees are aware of the role that
culture and ethnicity have for adoptees’ identities, especially those adopted transnationally.

Significant events concerning domestic transracial adoption have influenced attitudes and perceptions of transnational adoption. During the 1970s in the United States, transracial domestic adoptions of Native American and African American children into White American families created controversy and heated debates. It was argued by members and organisations of African American and Native American communities that if their children were adopted into White American families, the children would lose their cultural and racial identities and would not have the strategies needed to deal with confrontations of racism. Therefore, organisations such as the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) condemned transracial adoption, which “was seen as a white enterprise instituted for the advantage of the white community” (Simon & Altstein, 1977, p. 46). They argued for ‘race matching’, so that the children would be raised to identify with a Black culture and gain the support needed to counter institutional racism and other forms of discrimination.

In Australia, according to the parliamentary report, “Overseas Adoption in Australia”, a negative domestic adoption history and the forced removal of Aboriginal children have adversely affected attitudes toward present-day domestic and transnational adoption practices (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, 2005). Prior to the late 1960s, it was

5 I would like to recognise that Native American adoptions in the United States are transnational as well since children are adopted out of Native American nations to families in the United States.
common to take the baby away directly after birth and to refuse the mother's request to see her baby. This was thought to be in the 'best interests' of the mother to prevent attachment to the child. Furthermore, children were often taken from their mothers without their informed consent to authorise an adoption. This disregard for informed consent meant that many mothers were coerced to relinquish their children.

Additionally, the *Bringing Them Home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) made the public aware of the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their homes, known as “the Stolen Generation”, which actually took place over several generations and continues to have an adverse impact on Indigenous families today. This history of domestic adoption practices and the forced removal of Indigenous children can partly explain why there is a general public attitude that reacts negatively toward Indigenous children being taken out of their original family and their ‘original culture’. In the *Bringing Them Home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), the Aboriginal Child Placement Principal (ACPP) outlines the steps welfare and community services departments should take when transferring an Indigenous child from their primary carers. The ACPP emphasises that adoption should be used as a last resort after all efforts have been made to keep the child within the original family. If this is not possible, if suitable, the child may be placed with extended family, then with a non-related Aboriginal family within

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6Throughout the *Bringing them Home Report*, the term, 'Indigenous' is used to refer to both Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p. 27).
the child’s community or elsewhere, then with a non-related Aboriginal family in another community, and finally, after all previous options have been exhausted, the Director General of the state or territory’s welfare service may place the child with a White Australian family but only after consulting Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies (AICCA). To varying degrees, the States and Territories have taken the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle into consideration (Passaro, 1997, pp. 466-469).

The point of highlighting this history is to show some of the reasons why maintaining the cultural and ethnic identities of Indigenous children are considered to be of upmost importance and why identity has also become a pertinent issue for transnational adoption. To reiterate this point, I have taken phrases cited in the *Bringing Them Home* report (1997) which are used in various sections of the states’ and territories’ legislative acts regarding child welfare, such as: the Northern Territory’s *Community Welfare Act 1983*, which stresses the need to “prioritise cultural continuity” (1997, p. 442) and South Australia’s *Children’s Protection Act 1993*, which emphasises “preserving and enhancing a child’s racial and cultural identity” in sections 4 and 42 (Passaro, 1997, p. 441).

Overall, the cultural and ethnic identities of adoptees have become unavoidable issues in adoption discourse, both in terms of domestic adoption and transnational adoption. John Telfer (2003) makes the further distinction by arguing that the age when the child was adopted affects how the child’s identity is ‘imagined’. He explains that “a very young baby can be taken as *tabula rasa*, but the older child in
intercountry adoption is never so” because the older child is thought to have accumulated more of an identity in the birth country (2003, p. 78). He points out that this distinction has “significant implications for discourse concerning the maintenance of links with the child’s country of origin” (2003, p. 78). This is played out in adoption discourse concerning the “best interests of the child” as outlined in the Hague Convention and includes not only the welfare of the child but also the importance of maintaining cultural and ethnic identity (Gray, 1999).

Another pertinent issue in adoption discourse regarding ‘the best interests of the child’ is the regulation of transnational adoption. As transnational adoptions increase, there have been a number of illegal adoptions through child trafficking and adoptions without the clear informed consent of the parents. Perhaps one of the more well-known examples of child trafficking is the case of Romania. During the regime of communist dictator, Nicolai Ceausescu, policies with financial incentives encouraged women to have children, while birth control and abortion were banned. This resulted in a surplus of children as the streets became populated with abandoned children and orphanages overflowed. In order to avoid dealing with domestic social problems that caused so many children to spend their lives in orphanages, international adoptions opened in Romania. During the 1990s, children were adopted from Romania primarily to the United States and European countries, many of which were adopted quickly and underhandedly without government regulation. This sparked worldwide shock and outrage toward the state of Romanian children in orphanages and the cases of trafficking children to other countries (Aslanian, 2006).
Illegal child trafficking, the sheer number of transnational adoptions and the ever-increasing demand for children by prospective adoptive parents have demonstrated that it is important to have an international consensus concerning the practice of transnational adoption. This is exemplified at the international level with the implementation of the Hague Convention of Intercountry Adoption. Currently 54 member-states have signed and ratified or accessioned the agreement. The central themes throughout the document are the autonomous individuality of the child, the child's possession of fundamental human rights, the benefits of a permanent family environment, consideration for the child's cultural and ethnic background based on the child's biological origins, and adoption only after all efforts to keep the child with the birth family have been exhausted.

These key principles—a concern for 'the best interests of the child' and the importance of adoptees' cultural and ethnic identity in relation to their birth origin—have been implemented in adoption legislation at state and national levels by signatories to the Hague Convention. Increased emphasis on cultural, racial and ethnic identities has made people more aware of the effects of transracial adoption. This de-emphasises previous adoption policies' which advocated assimilating adoptees to their adoptive culture as a way to achieve a 'clean break' from the birth parents to the adoptive parents. While the principles in the Hague

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Convention demonstrate international concern for the ethical practice and regulation of transnational adoptions, the terms used to refer to cultural and ethnic identity such as ‘preserving’ and ‘continuity’ imagine cultural and ethnic identity to be stagnant and transferable, rather than negotiable and contestable.

Issues of individual identity in adoption discourse can also be considered as part of a general societal preoccupation with self-fulfilment, self-improvement and other concerns for nurturing individual identities (Modell, 2002). For transnational adoption, as noted above with the Hague Convention, cultural and ethnic identity is viewed as an important aspect that should be of prime consideration in the adoption process. Modell states that this focus on individual identity in adoption discourse was "prompted both by an adoption reform movement and by a general cultural obsession with adjustment, fulfilment, and the assertion of one's self" (2002, p. 181). In the following section, I will analyse some of the theoretical debates concerning identity and what this means for considerations of adoptees' identities.

**Theorising identity**

A popular perception of identity, what Melleuish (1998) refers to as the ‘new individualism’, is based on the idea that identity can be nurtured through various pursuits toward the ultimate aim of developing an 'enlightened' self. This concept of a self-determined self-created autonomous individual has contributed to the
idea that identity formation is something that progresses over time, resulting in an improved sense of self. Relying on a model of identity progression places too much emphasis on individual agency while largely ignoring the social, cultural and political factors that influence the different ways people consider their identities. In the social sciences, identity is viewed as multiple and diverse rather than static and homogenous. Furthermore, identity is considered to be processual and creative rather than progressing toward a ‘complete self’. Some cultural theories that draw on these notions of identity focus on the concept of hybridity.

Hybridity is a general term which has been used as a way to understand identity as a process. As a theoretical concept, it supports the idea of a person having multiple identities which continually change and locates identities in a dynamic process that is simultaneously ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ (Kidd, 2002, p. 193). This concept is useful for understanding adoptees’ identities as processual or on-going. However, Lo (2000) also cautions against a propensity to use hybridity to celebrate identities out of context as if they are always in a state of permanent flux. A celebratory approach to hybridity oversimplifies complex processes involved that include ways to situate identity. Therefore, this study departs from the more extreme position that identity is forever changing and perpetually uncertain without any sense of stability (Chambers, 1994).

Some other critiques of hybridity argue that hybridity does not make boundaries irrelevant, rather it relies on boundaries to discuss what it means to be ‘in-between’. This sense of being ‘in-between’ is sometimes referred to as a ‘third
space’ and is evoked as a way to transcend bounded categories of identity (Bhabha, 1994). However, Kondo (1990) argues that Bhabha’s (1994) notion of the ‘third space’ does not entirely free itself from the dichotomy it is trying to escape because it inadvertently supports the idea of two other spaces through which the ‘third space’ is able to emerge. Similarly, Noble and Tabar argue that Bhabha’s “insistent denial of binarism can’t remove the implication that his notion of ‘in-between-ness’, and the ‘third space’ it produces, semantically carries a sense of pre-existing essentialised cultural entities” (2002, p. 132).

Having said that, hybridity can be useful as an analytical tool if it is used in a political and historical context that seeks to understand the processes that essentialise identities. As Pieterse (2001) points out, hybridity is not the problem, rather, the central question to ask concerns the significance of hybridity and the significance of boundaries. He explains that “hybridity as a point of view is meaningless without the prior assumption of difference, purity, fixed boundaries ... that, without an existing regard for boundaries, it [hybridity] would not be a point worth making (original emphasis) (2001, p. 226).

In this sense, hybridity is not to blame for essentialism but then again, neither are boundaries. Bashkow (2004) argues that boundaries should not be demonised as being inherently essentialising. Rather, engaging with the meanings attributed to boundaries can foster more nuanced insight about the process through which cultures are understood.
I argue that this engagement with boundaries can be applied to understanding identities. Rather than simply positioning adoptees into a ‘third space’ as not quite Korean and not quite something else, it could be more useful to consider their identities as existing on a kind of bounded edge. It is an edge that is socially and culturally constructed as it is simultaneously shaped by and gives shape to what it means to be Korean and Canadian, Australian, or Norwegian and so on.

This approach recognises that identity is neither a biological given nor is it located in a ‘third space’, which seems to overlook the kinds of identity negotiations involved. For example, for Korean adoptees, the significance of how certain socially and culturally constructed boundaries delineate a particular kind of ‘Korean identity’ affects who counts as Korean and who does not. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, the South Korean state’s ideology about what constitutes a Korean identity or the boundaries that work to define a particular understanding of Korean identity, serves to exclude the diverse ways Korean adoptees may identify or not identify as Korean.

While it is important to understand how identities are processual, it is also necessary to look at how identities are situated. In an era of globalisation focusing on increased transnational movements, it is too easy to assume that there is no sense of place or locality. Indeed, a focus on fluid identities often leaves our understanding of identity, floating at a high altitude in thick theoretical air without providing evidence of ways that identity is also grounded and made sense of in concrete ways (Lien & Melhuus, 2007). Noble and Tabar point out that some
identity studies have “largely been theory-driven” by mainly looking at how identity is fluid and changing (2002, p. 128). As a result, there is a tendency to overlook the “processes people engage with to stabilise their identity” in a socially-mediated context (Noble & Tabar, 2002, p. 133). In other words, there needs to be a balance between understanding identities as fluid and negotiable but also situated and relational.

Poststructuralist theory is useful for understanding these dual processes. One of the key ideas of poststructuralism is that subjectivity is “precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). This departs from the view that identity is something that is biologically determined or already given and considers different ways that identity is made meaningful as part of a creative process. At the same time, during processes of change, individuals are also positioned within competing and contradictory fields of meaning (Weedon, 1987, p. 34). This theory recognises that identity is composed of multiple subject-positions that are also always changing and shifting since meaning itself is also continually being reconstituted.

This theoretical approach is important because it offers a way to critique psychological studies that view an individual’s identity in terms of ‘wholeness’ or conversely, in terms of what one is lacking. Poststructuralist theory does not see identity as being on the verge of completeness or incompleteness since identity is something that is negotiated in social relations and changes depending on the social context. However, I would like to point out that while the poststructuralist
idea of multiple shifting selves is useful at a theoretical level, it does not always capture the kinds of complexities involved at an experiential level.

Therefore, in addition to the awareness that identity is dynamic, it is important to look at how identity may be experienced and explained in ways that emphasise its certainty rather than its ambiguity. Manuel Castells points out that “for a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities. Yet, such a plurality is a source of stress and contradiction in both self-representation and social action” (1997, p. 6). In particular, for adoptees, the feeling of being perpetually in an ‘in-between state’ is not always an ideal position to be in (E. Kim, 2005) and is not necessarily an easy process as it can be quite painful and traumatic (Hübinette, 2007). For example, based on their cultural upbringing in their adoptive country, Korean adoptees may feel that they have a ‘white’ ethnicity rather than a Korean ethnicity. However, as will be discussed in further detail in Chapters 5 and 6, their Korean bodies are a reminder to themselves and to others that they are neither accepted as ‘white’ nor fully accepted as ‘Korean’. This is not a particularly comfortable position to be in and can be difficult to endure on an everyday basis. As I will argue in Chapter 8, Korean adoptees do not simply resign themselves to a transitory state of being; rather, they are able to find a sense of coherency for their identities and a sense of belonging through shared experiences with other adoptees.

So while I agree with poststructuralism’s position that identity is subject to change and that a coherent stable identity is only ever transient depending on shifting
subject-positions, I think that it overlooks ways that Korean adoptees work to create an identity that is not inherently contradictory. Speaking from the perspective of globalisation, in particular increasingly interconnected networks across time and space, Castells argues that in this context, people actively resist the destabilising effects of globalisation by forming collective identities through various social movements (1997, pp. 2-3). While I do not wholly agree with his suggestion that identity, collective or individual, can be “self-sustaining across time and space”, I do take up his point that it is important for people to *feel* a sense of coherency (Castells, 1997, p. 7). Therefore, it is important to look at ways adoptees also try to feel a sense of stability in terms of belonging and a certain degree of coherency in terms of their identity. This can be done by considering “the relation between flow and fixity as inherently dialectic” (Lien & Melhuus, 2007, p. x). In other words, while identities do change and are fluid in this sense, identity is also something that is grounded.

In other words, rather than being dismissive of ways that people may attribute a certain permanency to their identity, it is worth exploring the processes by which meaning is attached to identity and also how it is subject to change. It is worth noting that this tension between how identity is socially constructed and something that a person is born with or given is seated in a long-standing debate in which primordial and constructivist views of identity are opposed against each other (Fenton, 2003, p. 74). Primordialism refers to something that is “‘given’, not acquired” (Fenton, 2003, p. 80) as opposed to something that is socially learned or constructed. However, Brubaker argues that this opposition “need not be mutually
exclusive” and that one should not be dismissed over the other (2004, p. 85). For instance, he points out that in discussions about ethnicity, primordialist views should be engaged in order to understand why particular physical features are differentiated and attributed meaning in terms of how a person's identity is perceived by others and also how a primordial understanding of identity may be self-ascribed. A constructivist approach can then be used to understand how identity is made sense of and represented and how this is subject to change in particular situations. For example, as will be discussed further in Chapter 6, certain primordial qualities are attached to kin ties by the South Korean government to evoke a sense of ‘Koreanness’, that is to say, a Korean ethnic identity is constructed in particular ways as something that is biologically given. This is especially evident in discussions over changes to the hojuje (family registry system) and in the South Korean government’s discourse about Korean identity in certain official ceremonial settings.

Adoptees actively engage in processes of identity negotiation as well as processes which work to situate identity. Eleana Kim (2007) interviewed Sebastian, a Korean adoptee from Belgium who chose to become a Korean citizen by renouncing his Belgian citizenship because he wanted to be recognised as a Korean by birth, cultural heritage and citizenship. Moreover, he wanted to be able to say that he is Korean without having to explain his Belgian citizenship. For him, acquiring Korean citizenship did not mean he was erasing his Belgian identity but as a way to gain “a sense of locality and kinship, to restore national belonging in
the face of his own foreignness” (E. Kim, 2007, p. 518). As Sarah, a Korean adoptee who was adopted to Australia, commented in an interview:

[Right now] to identify myself as Korean is probably more important to me than to identify myself as Australian. Further along in my ‘discovery’ of Korea, however, I’m aware that I may find myself disillusioned by the cultural gap and quite happy to be just Australian. Who knows.

Similarly, in an anthology of Korean adoptees’ stories, another adoptee asserted, “I have every right to embrace my Irish-American heritage today and my Korean heritage tomorrow, without question or ridicule. This is the right of every multicultural person” (Regan, 2002, p. 55).

Finally, identity is relational in the sense that it is realised, ‘crafted’ (Kondo, 1990), and contested through social relations and interactions. Based on the experiences of Korean adoptees, issues of ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ are played out in social interactions that challenge their sense of identity and belonging. In their adoptive countries, Korean adoptees often grow up in areas where the population is predominantly white. Without much knowledge about their birth country, the place where they ‘came from’ has little relevance in their everyday lives. Instead, their birth origins are often targeted in situations when racism is involved because their physical appearance is marked as a point of ‘difference’. Oftentimes, Korean adoptees say that they wish they were white and their sense of difference arises out of these social relations. Importantly, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, Korean adoptees that I interviewed said that they felt white and did not see themselves as Korean. Their ethnic identity only became an issue when it was made an issue and
this usually arose during social interactions that pointed out their ‘difference’ based on phenotype.

**Ethnicity, ‘difference’ and belonging**

Eriksen (2002) argues that ethnic identity is not something that is given; instead it is something that emerges through social relationships. In this way, identity is relational and processual because it is continually being remade in specific social contexts and in varying social interactions. Unfortunately, in everyday life, ethnic identity is more often assumed to be static or fixed, thus relying on stereotypes that are based on particular phenotypic differences that are culturally constructed as *different*. For this reason, ethnic identity is often attributed to people that seem to be from ‘somewhere else’, usually those with a darker or lighter skin colour, depending on the cultural context. As a result, race is often confused with ethnicity (Eriksen, 2002, p. 6).

Generally, race is a social construct that attempts to define descent based on socially defined physical differences. While race is biologically insignificant, it remains highly socially significant. Ethnicity refers to a group of people that lay claim to common descent as opposed to another group of people and is also associated with certain shared cultural traits. As Eriksen argues, even though “it is true that ethnicity is a social creation and not a fact of nature, and ethnic variation does not correspond to cultural variation ... ethnic identities must seem convincing
to their members” (2002, p. 69). Because of the slippery interchange between using ethnicity and race to refer to one aspect of a person’s background, ethnicity has also been termed by Martin Barker (1981) as the ‘new racism’. This is because ethnicity is often used to make assumptions about the relationship between ‘race’ and ‘culture’. It uses “cultural difference instead of inherited characteristics ... to justify a hierarchical ordering of groups in society” (Eriksen, 2002, p. 6). This is similar to the classical cultural evolutionary theories used in 19th century anthropology, which drew on ethnographic comparisons to group different civilisations according to a Eurocentric model along a cultural evolutionary trajectory (Erickson & Murphy, 2001, pp. 6-7). Unfortunately, these models are still used today, especially in popular media, to compare ethnic groups and ‘cultures’ in ethnocentric and divisive ways.

As noted above, ethnicity is an issue for adoptees that are adopted transnationally or domestically in transracial adoptions because assumptions about their cultural background are made based on their biological features, which presumes their identification with a particular ethnic group. Racial and cultural identifications are major social indicators, which are used to identify who a person is, based on socially constructed differences of how a person looks, speaks and acts. Despite the fact that race is socially constructed rather than biologically viable, race is used to define where a person is from and therefore who they are or their identity. As an example, for Korean adoptees in Australia, their physical ‘otherness’ marks them as being from ‘somewhere else’ with a different ‘cultural identity’ that does
not readily include the possibility that their ‘cultural identity’ could be ‘White Australian’.

Along similar lines, Erez Cohen’s (2003) research about Latin American migrants and refugees living in Adelaide in South Australia discusses issues of ‘otherness’, ‘indigeneity’ and multiculturalism. He argues that the perceived ‘otherness’ of Latin American migrants and refugees is based on the assumption that people who are visibly marked as ‘other’ through perceived racial differences are subsequently also people with culture (2003, p. 50). That is to say, “It is always ‘they’ who have culture and ‘we’ who do not. It is in this context that the Latin American migrants are depicted as colourful people, indigenous and exotic” (Cohen, 2003, p. 50). This could also work the other way in that people who are ‘not white’ are thought to be from ‘somewhere else’ whose presence in Australia is automatically assumed to be marked by migrancy rather than the possibility that they were born there.

For Korean adoptees, their ‘otherness’ is marked by the fact that their physical body looks different from their adoptive family and oftentimes in relation to the wider community in which they live. The physical biological mark of their birth origins—‘where they are from’—is evidence that assumes they are from another country other than the one where they are living and that the way they identify themselves is based on a more ‘exoticised’ cultural identity. Speaking from her own positioning as a transnational migrant, currently living in Australia, Ien Ang states, “In short, if I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics” (2001, p. 36). She
argues that the disjuncture between ‘where you’re from’ and ‘where you’re at’ is something that others often feel needs to be explained. She is ‘inescapably’ seen as Chinese because of her physical appearance which signals to others that she must therefore be from ‘somewhere else’ even though where she is ‘at’ may be more personally relevant than where she is ‘from’. Korean adoptees experience similar dilemmas which are imposed upon them by others that question their sense of belonging, such as being asked, ‘Where are you (really) from?’ This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

What is interesting for this study is the difference between how individuals see themselves and how their identities are seen by others based on their physical appearance. Social stereotypes serve to create a ‘packaged identity’ that is ‘easy’ to relate to or a “convenient shorthand way of telling other members of the society what ‘kind of person’ he or she is” (Eriksen, 2002, p. 82). People rely on generalised perceptions of someone to create a condensed fiction in their mind about who the person is in order to communicate with the person. This produces tensions between how others see us and how we see ourselves. It is within this tension that identity is negotiated, contested and reinforced. Ang describes her experiences as a child in Indonesia, identifying with ‘being Indonesian’ but being told her claim was invalid:

To be told, mostly by local kids, that I actually didn’t belong there but in a faraway, abstract, and somewhat frightening place called China, was terribly confusing, disturbing, and utterly unacceptable … Chineseness then, at that time, to me was an imposed identity, one that I desperately wanted to get rid of … This experience in itself then was a sign of the inescapability of my notional Chineseness, inscribed as it was on the very surface of my body (2001, p. 28).
Korean adoptees I interviewed also recounted similar feelings when they wanted to just ‘fit in’ and ‘be white’ rather than being marked as ‘different’, ‘other’ and ‘foreign’ based on specific physical features such as skin colour, hair and eye shape. These experiences of ‘otherness’ and ‘difference’ and the ways Korean adoptees’ identities are challenged in various social interactions and situations will be discussed in Chapter 5.

**The power of family (photographs)**

In terms of identity and a sense of belonging, belonging suggests familiarity. The family is the primary social group that is meant to evoke a sense of belonging. Perhaps the most telling evidence of this is the proliferation of family photographs (Bouquet, 2000). Family photographs in personal collections as well as those used for political means are powerful expressions of belonging. For instance, politically powerful people such as heads of state often use family portraits to evoke a sense that they are as ordinary as other people with families (Bouquet, 2000). They aim to represent themselves as spokespeople for the interests of the general public and portray themselves as ‘ordinary’ citizens. The political family photograph imagines the nation’s citizens as members of a national family.

Indeed, the family portrait is a highly powerful means of conveying belonging and is often used to define the common ties between members of ‘the family’. The family portrait, enclosed in a frame, shows who is part of the family, but it also
shows who is not by those absent from the photo. Therefore, while belonging evokes familiarity and sameness, it can also point to difference. Thus, the family portrait is a site where difference and sameness, especially in terms of physical appearance become noticeable.

For adoptees that do not share biogenetic connectedness with members of their adoptive families, their physical differences distinguish them from the other members of the family who are biologically related. This is especially evident when adoptees do not share racial identities with their adoptive families. Lynelle Beveridge, founder of Intercountry Adoptee Support Network (ICASN) in Australia, commented, “It’s in your family photos that it’s really reflected back at you that you’re different” (Schmidt, 2006, p. 14). The experiences of many adoptees that they do not belong, is positioned within a powerful narrative that assumes belonging means an exact correlation between identity, family, birth place and culture. Because transracial adoptees look markedly different from their adoptive parents, their sense of belonging is further complicated by social expectations that members of a family share biological similarities.

**Searching and ‘roots’**

Because transracial adoptees are physically marked as belonging ‘somewhere else’, the ‘somewhere else’ is a common topic for discussions about belonging, usually framed in terms of family, ethnicity and culture. In the context of transnational adoption, Yngvesson asserts that the “birth country [as well as the birth mother] is
also a powerful site where the potential and the impossibility of full belonging may be experienced” (2005, p. 37). The birth country is gendered and made synonymous with the birth mother, which together act as powerful cultural indicators of belonging. The ties between the birth mother and the birth country are perceived to be natural, everlasting and unbreakable.

This is the great irony of adoption. Adoptees become adoptees because the ties with their birth family have been legally broken and transferred to ties with an adoptive family. Despite this legal relinquishment and creation of familial ties, it is assumed that adoptees continue to hold a natural attachment to their birth country and birth family. It is seen as ‘natural’ for adoptees to want to search for their birth families and to want to ‘return’ to their birth countries. Those that do not are underrepresented by a cultural ideology that maintains the everlasting character of biological ties while placing heavy social weight on the significance of birth, birthmother and birthplace.

One of the predominant assumptions about identity is that knowing oneself can only be fulfilled through knowledge about one’s origins; otherwise the person remains ‘incomplete’. For adoptees, origins are often blurry due to minimal or falsified information in their adoption records such as the place where they were born, their birth parents’ identities, and their birthdates as well as cultural knowledge of their birth country. Therefore, the assumption that knowledge of personal origins is basic knowledge is not something that adoptees take for granted. However, adoptees are also not immune to this particular ideology that
emphasises knowing one’s biological past in order to have a ‘complete identity’. As a result, for many, searching for birth family is a way to confirm this biological connection.

As Howell points out, the assumption implicit in adoption narratives of searching is that “in order to grow up into harmonious adults, people need to know the identity of their biological progenitors” (2003, p. 476). Therefore, when adoptees search for knowledge about their origins, such as birth records, birthparents, and participate in ‘motherland tours’ to their birth country, this is seen as a natural and inevitable curiosity to ‘know oneself’ rather than a culturally constructed propensity to value biogenetic ties over other kinds of relations. This cultural logic contributes to the view that adoptees always retain a connection with their birth country and culture. In his analysis of the song, *Abandoned Child*, by Clon, a Korean pop band, Hübinette looks at how Korea is feminised through the omnipresent Korean *eomma* (엄마, mother) and reframed as the 'Motherland':

A maternalized Korea is a powerful metaphor given the strong connotations of deep affection, over-protectiveness, limitless endurance, and self-sacrifice invested in Korean motherhood, and it is only by reuniting with the biological mother and returning to the Motherland that an adopted Korean can be relieved from being and feeling eternally different and lonely in a Western country (2005, pp. 234-235).

The South Korean government and pop culture portrays adoptees as Koreans that have been ‘lost’ overseas, wandering and lonely in their adoptive countries. This representation assumes that if adoptees return to the arms of Korea, a feminised birth country, they will ‘find’ their cultural and ethnic ‘roots’.
A primary concern is that culture is something that cannot be picked up like a forgotten object, nor is culture something that a person is born with. This is the underlying assumption framing the idea that it is natural for adoptees to want to return to their birth country and to find their birth families. Again, this is based on the view that biogenetic substance is indestructible and will prevail over all other forms of connections established through legal ties such as marriage and even adoption.

Instead of assuming that searching is a natural thing for adoptees to want to do, this research attempts to go further by questioning the social and cultural assumptions embedded in phrases used to describe the reasons why adoptees feel a ‘need to search’ such as ‘feeling incomplete’ and a sense of ‘rootlessness’. While some adoptees express their feelings in these ways, the problem is that these are taken to be natural feelings that are universal to ‘being an adoptee’ and are not generally considered in the particular ideological context through which such ideas are constructed and interpreted. For example, from a psychological perspective, Schechter and Bertocci rationalise searching for birthparents as something natural to being an adoptee, as a way to connect with ‘the human race’ and to come to terms with those who are ‘born rather than adopted’ (1990, p. 74). As an adoptive parent, Marion Crook also assumes adoptees will feel a sense of connection to their birth country and that the people of their birth country will “accept them [adoptees] because of their appearance” (2000, p. 145). She also notes that the adolescent adoptees she interviewed wanted knowledge of their origins to “give them a sense of belonging to the human race” (2000, p. 80). Such generalisations
overlook how these experiences and sentiments are part of a particular cultural ideology of kinship and belonging in which a particular way of conceptualising adoption is embedded. These issues will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Finally, not all adoptees have the same sense of connection with their birth country or birth culture. Some may not be as interested in returning to their birth country or learning more about their birth culture and there are others who might not have any interest. Nevertheless, the biological determination of identity is prevalent in discussions about ‘cultural identity’. In a move away from an assimilationist approach to transnational adoption practices, adoptive parents are now told to support their (adopted) child's cultural heritage and to preserve a link with the birth culture by taking part in language classes, visiting the birth country and supporting general knowledge about birth country such as its culture and history. As previously mentioned, this is supported by the Hague Convention’s emphasis on preserving ‘cultural continuity’.

While these efforts are to be commended, the fact is that adoptees are no longer living in their birth culture and are not able to learn all the cultural nuances and cultural complexities, which is taken for granted while living in a particular culture. Adoptees have lost access to the cultural knowledge which is learned through immersion in the culture from a young age to adulthood. Korean adoptees have a Korean cultural heritage, which is important for adoptive parents to support and acknowledge, but it is a misconception to assume ‘culture’ is
something that can be acquired through materialistic outlets such as food, clothing and celebrating major holidays.

Furthermore, just because Korean adoptees were born in Korea does not mean that once they return, they can simply ‘activate’ a latent Korean culture that is assumed to be part of their biological makeup and then just pick it up again by participating in a few cultural tours. Instead, when Korean adoptees go back to Korea, they are actively engaged in trying to find out what significance, if any, their ‘birth culture’ has for them rather than assuming it was always a natural part of who they are. When Korean adoptees return to South Korea, the fact that they grew up in another country often becomes strikingly obvious to them despite the comfort of anonymity acquired through shared physical features. Furthermore, as will be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, Korean adoptees challenge the naturalised construction of ‘being Korean’ by questioning the idea that ‘blood’ or biogenetic substance automatically gives them a Korean identity. As Kim points out, Korean adoptees resist and contest “hegemonic versions of being ‘Korean’” by challenging the South Korean government’s efforts to simply represent them as overseas Koreans that only need a refresher course in Korean culture for them to realise their ‘Koreanness’ (2005, p. 52).

In other words, ‘roots’ are not taken for granted but this does not also make them insignificant. Instead, as Ghassan Hage (2008) argues, an understanding of ‘roots’ can be understood in a different way, “not roots that keep you grounded ... [but] roots that stay with you as you move”. This “power” of roots (Hage, 2008) is the
feeling of belonging that Korean adoptees try to ‘find’, not as something that essentialises who they are, but as something that acquires significance by being in Korea. In other words, as will be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, being in Korea is not simply about trying to “be Korean” in the way that the South Korean state’s ideology promotes. Instead, it is about trying to make sense of their belonging or ‘roots’ through immediate experiences in a way that is dynamic and specific to their particular identities.

**Voicing lived experiences**

Finally, the majority of adoption studies about adoptees have been conducted by people that do not have the direct experiences and perspective of those that have been adopted. Furthermore, research has dealt mainly with adoptees as children and adolescents (Koh, 1993; Krementz, 1982; Simon & Altstein, 1977), which has left a void in the literature about adult adoptees. This has contributed toward a view that adoptees are passive subjects rather than considering them to be active participants in the adoption process.

Currently, research is being conducted by domestic and transnational adoptees that draws on their own lived experiences and those of other adoptees (Hübinette, 2005; E. Kim, 2005; Patton, 2000; Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006; Williams, 2003) to analyse adoption issues concerning identity, ‘difference’, adoptee representations and the ethics and politics of transnational adoption. Increasingly adoptees are
stressing that adoption research needs to be located in and “validated by our lived experience[s]” (Sloth, 2006, p. 255). In addition to writing academic research, adult adoptees are engaging with the significance their birth origins have in various ways. They have used expressive mediums such as art, documentaries, personal web page blogs, poetry, personal stories in book compilations, and participation in adoptee organisations and on-line adoptee chat groups. Korean American anthropologist Eleana Kim (2000) describes these activities as examples of ‘Korean adoptee auto-ethnography’. This is a way for Korean adoptees to situate their personal experiences within a larger social, political and historical context (E. Kim, 2000, p. 43). Moreover, they are contributing to adoption discourse on their own terms, often giving their experiences a public and political voice. The significance of expressing lived experiences will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

Another example of adoptees actively participating in the transnational adoption process is that as more adoptees become adults, many are choosing to go back to their birth countries. Importantly, these transnational movements are made based on their own initiative which also serves to highlight that adoption does not necessarily end with a one-way plane ticket. These trips are in a way ‘return trips’ since they are trips returning to the place where adoptees were born. However, these ‘return trips’ are not necessarily a return to something familiar. It can be a journey that is like a winding road with multiple detours and dead-ends with moments of belonging and moments of alienation. For example, there are moments when Korean adoptees may have a sense that they belong by virtue of
sharing a similar Korean appearance, but there are also moments when they feel an acute difference between themselves and other Koreans because of cultural differences. On top of this, they are also reminded that they are visitors in a foreign country by their non-Korean passport or their alien registration card. This will be the focus for discussion in Chapter 7 as Korean adoptees go back to South Korea to understand what a Korean identity might mean for them beyond 'blood' or legal documents.

**Concluding remarks**

The diverse ways adoptees are actively involved in the adoption process is evident by the strategies they engage in as they negotiate and challenge the significance of belonging and their sense of identity. Rather than focusing on adoptees adjusting to some preconceived idea of a successful well-adjusted sense of self, it is important to highlight the diverse and dynamic ways adoptees consider and negotiate their identities and sense of belonging.

Overall, we need to understand that shifting identities as well as situated identities are lived experiences for many adoptees. While adoptees often live with an awareness of how identity can be fluid and multiple, this does not mean they are always uncertain about their identities or perpetually locked in a cycle of identity crises. Rather than adoptees remaining in a permanent state of flux or always considering their identities as being ‘in-between’, it is important to look at ways
adoptees try to feel a sense of situated belonging. One of the ways adoptees can find a sense of belonging is through shared experiences and a sense of common understanding with other adoptees. This will be the main topic in Chapter 8.
Chapter 3
Methodology

A qualitative study grounded in lived experience

This is a qualitative study that focuses on the lived experiences of Korean adoptees as a way to understand broader issues about adoption, identity and belonging. Given the breadth of adoptees' diverse experiences, any particular method or combination of methods, whether they are qualitative, quantitative or both can never fully capture all there is to know. Therefore, the point of any study should not be to explain away the complex range of experiences but to work with the complexity by using methods that try to engage as fully as possible with the data.

An overall aim of this study is to present the stories gathered from the Korean adoptees that participated in order to highlight their diverse lived experiences in the context of certain themes relating to the transnational adoption process. I do not pretend to speak on behalf of all adoptees; instead the voices that emerge in this thesis offer a way to better understand the ambiguities and intricacies of adoptees' identities. A basic premise for this research is that lived experiences need to be analysed within a methodological and theoretical framework that works with the 'messiness' of experience. This can be achieved by embracing the contradictions and complexities of how experience is lived while also situating
those experiences in a particular socio-political, historical and cultural context. This allows for a critical analysis concerning the ways in which Korean adoptees are represented and the kinds of cultural assumptions that shape the way their identities and experiences within the transnational adoption process are interpreted.

A qualitative approach also brings into question the politics and power of representation and authenticity, mainly who is speaking, on whose behalf, and for what personal and social agenda. These issues will be addressed in the context of reflexive ethnography as it has been used during the research stages of data collection, the ‘writing up’ process and importantly, the negotiated relationship between researcher and research subjects. The following discussion will outline the formation of this research project, the methods used to gather data and the particular ethnographic approach that was used.

Interpreting experience

‘Voices that speak for themselves’

Recently in adoption discourse, there has been a greater emphasis on adoptees voicing their own lived experiences and taking authorship through various media, including and not limited to academic research, art, memoirs and web blogs. A combination of adoptees becoming adults and an awareness that marginalised voices need to be heard within a feminist and postcolonial context has contributed
to this important shift in adoption discourse and research. For example, in the United States, due to practices of secrecy regarding adoption records and social stigmas against ‘illegitimate’ children and single parents, the stories of adoptees and birthparents had for the most part remained unheard (Fessler, 2007; Modell, 2002). Since the movement to open adoption records such as social activism by adoptees to know and have access to their past, an increasing amount of memoirs and anthologies have been published (Frame, 1999; E. Lee, Lammert, & Hess, 2008; Robinson, 2002; Trenka, 2003; Trenka et al., 2006; Wilkinson & Fox, 2002). The majority of these stories are about Korean adoptees’ experiences, possibly due to the long history of adoption from South Korea since the end of the Korean War compared to other countries whose intercountry adoption programs began later.

Overall, the shift toward adoptees telling their individual stories is an important development because it is a step toward recognising adoptees as co-authoritative voices in the adoption community. This helps to foster greater understanding of the diversity of experiences that adoptees have as well as some of the difficulties they have faced such as struggles with racism. At the same time, an overemphasis on individual stories out of context of the changing social circumstances surrounding adoption issues and the wider society may have potential homogenising effects where such individual accounts are taken as being representative of adoptees as a whole. For instance, Joan Scott (1991, p. 372) points out that privileging experience as something that reflects ‘truth’ or

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9Generally, the stories of birthparents are still not well known, with some exceptions (Dorow, 1999; Fessler, 2007).
‘authenticity’ rather than as something socially and historically situated, actually works to homogenise and naturalise a particular group’s experiences.

While I am by no means questioning the validity of adoptees’ voices as lived accounts of their own experiences, a note does need to be made about the presumed nature of ‘uncut’ or unedited adoptees’ voices as they are often presented in anthologies. The editing process which determines the kinds of stories that are included and excluded play a part in the representation of adoptees’ experiences. As Scott argues, “it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (1991, p. 369). The ways adoptees talk about their experiences are expressed through particular social and cultural filters which are historically situated and as a result, influence the ways stories are told and which parts of the story are highlighted over others. In other words, the ways stories are told draw on social and cultural conventions as a way to express the story and construct meaning. Such stories or narratives are interpreted in the telling of the story and then again in the analysis of it. In this way, “individuals’ narratives are situated in particular interactions but also in social, cultural, and institutional discourses, which must be brought to bear to interpret them” (Riessman, 1993, p. 61). Therefore, adoptees’ voices do not simply speak for themselves but are also personal accounts situated in the socio-cultural context in which they are told.

It is important to recognise the diversity and individuality of adoptees’ identities and lived experiences but to overemphasise individuality glosses over the
particular socio-political, historical and cultural frames in which they are situated. The ways in which adoptees talk about their experiences are particular and individual to them, but they also draw on social and cultural conventions which are also historically particular (Wagner, 1981 [1975]). That is to say:

All meaningful expression, and therefore all experience and understanding, is a kind of invention, and invention requires a communicational base in shared conventions if it is to be meaningful—that is if it is to allow us to relate what we do, say, and feel to others, and to the world of meanings that we share with them (Wagner, 1981 [1975], p. 36).

By recognising the particular social and cultural conventions that adoptees draw on to express themselves, the diversity of their lived experiences is upheld rather than attempting to portray them as a homogenous group. To clarify, this does not deny that there are similar experiences that adoptees share, but that their shared and individual experiences should not be subjected to grand generalisations that oversimplify adoptees' experiences into an essentialised form of 'adoptive-ness'.

**Lived experience**

If the way adoptees tell their stories and what they choose to include or exclude affects the subsequent representation of their experiences, so does the ethnographic process of description and interpretation. The lived experiences of adoptees as told to me through interviews and informal conversations were shaped and moulded given the participants’ personal background and then interpreted and reshaped through the filters of my own understanding of their experiences. As Geertz argues, “experiences like tales, fetes, potteries, rites, dramas, images, memoirs, ethnographies and allegorical machineries, are made;
and it is such made things that make them” (1986, p. 380). Experiences are made known through the telling or the enactment of those experiences and are therefore subject to the bias and interpretative filters through which the experiences are expressed.

Expression enables experience to be *made into* an experience that can be shared with others. This distinction between experience and *an* experience is based on Victor Turner’s (1986) interpretation of German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey’s categorisation of experience. Experience is indistinguishable until it is processed and made distinguishable from the pool of experience. Thus in Dilthey’s view, supported by Turner, experiences are “‘processed’ ... not simply [through] thought structuring but the whole human vital repertoire of thinking, willing, desiring, and feeling ... ” (V. W. Turner, 1986, p. 35). Experiences are processed and expressed or drawn out by sharing them with others, through different kinds of communication. This is not only restricted to verbal communication since experience can be expressed through bodily performance such as theatre and dance.

Drawing on Dilthey, Turner comments that “experience urges toward expression, or communication with others” (1986, p. 37). In other words, experiences are known through their expression and are understood through a communicative process. During the interviews, the urge to share experiences was part of the rapport building process between me and the Korean adoptee participants. Through sharing a part of myself by talking about similar experiences, the ‘urge’ to
reciprocate was brought to the interview encounter. During these acts of reciprocity and “co-reflexivity” and as a comfortable rhythm developed, there was a feeling of *communitas* or a sense of immediate understanding (E. Turner, 2007, pp. 112-113). In this way the interview became less like an interview and more like a conversation between friends rather than an imposed hierarchy between interviewer and interviewee.

My aim throughout this research project is to use the experiences offered to me as a way to highlight the diversity of adoptees’ lived experiences. I do not try to recount the experiences of adoptees in order to categorise them into a definitive statement about ‘the adoptee experience’. I understand that it would be futile and misleading to try to represent all Korean adoptees or adoptees overall. In the act of ethnographic writing, I re-present the participants’ *expressions* of their lived experiences. Geertz explains that “whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else’s inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into the consciousness.” (1986, p. 373).

However, while experiences are understood and shared with others through their expression, I also take into consideration a critique of this particular kind of interpretative approach—that it creates distance and a sense of detachment between the researcher and research subjects. From a humanist anthropological perspective, Edith Turner (2007) points out that the telling of stories is not merely an empty expression of the original experience, but an enlivened account. She implores us to recognise the significance of the story because receiving the story is
an experience in itself: “The story, the awareness of it by the teller as the teller speaks and as the hearer incorporates it, is the second gift, after the gift of the original experience” (2007, p. 114).

Overall, as a researcher and an adoptee writing within the social scientific field, the voices of Korean adoptees that I present in my research do not exist on their own, but within processes of knowledge production and “processes of ethnographic knowledge” (Fabian, 2000, p. 10). The way their narratives are presented have been reinterpreted in the creative process of ethnographic writing and so have also been influenced to a certain extent by my previous knowledge, personal background and disciplinary position. At the same time, the stories they offered to me were also enlivened accounts of their personal experiences, made meaningful through their telling. As Motzafi-Haller points out, “The power—and the ‘truth’—of this and other autobiographical terms; their ‘reality,’ their poignancy is given, built into the very definition of a lived experience” (1997, p. 218).

By acknowledging these aspects, the strength of the narrative accounts presented here is not undermined. Rather, the narratives have a richness of depth and meaning because they are based in lived experience. Sharing those experiences with others through expression, such as in interviews, does not dilute the ‘original’ lived experience, but offers new significance. In this way, lived experiences are not static or locked in a moment of the past, but are given new life and meaning through the process of sharing them with others. To value experience in this way does not mean that experience speaks ‘truth’ or is somehow more ‘authoritative’ or
‘authentic’ than other forms of knowledge. Instead, by placing emphasis on lived experiences – which are always first and foremost lived through an individual who is subjectively positioned in a particular historical and social context – we can begin to understand what it is about the actual experiencing of something that is so important for understanding the ways Korean adoptees make sense of their identities. This point will be argued in greater depth in Chapters 7 and 8.

**Background to the research project**

In April 2007, I transferred from a Masters program to a Ph.D. program. My choice to transfer to a doctoral program was based on new insights gathered from a review of the literature and a preliminary analysis of the data gathered from in-depth interviews with Korean adoptees in Australia. The transition also involved important changes to my research proposal, which expanded upon and refined my previous Masters proposal. These changes consisted of a widening of the participant sample and three months of field research in Seoul, South Korea.

Since commencing research at a doctoral level, I have addressed certain geographical and demographic limitations in the participant sample. For my Masters proposal, potential participants were limited to Korean adoptees that were adopted to Australian families, aged 18-30 years. My reasoning for this age range was due to the historical context of transnational adoption in Australia. In Australia, transnational adoption only became more widespread toward the end of
the Vietnam War. Therefore the age group of adoptees in Australia was much younger than other countries with longer running transnational adoption programs such as the United States which began toward the end of the Korean War.

Secondly, under my Masters proposal, I had originally planned to collect data solely from face-to-face interviews in the Newcastle/Central Coast and Sydney areas. My main form of recruitment was to display research invitations on bulletin boards at universities in these areas. However, this would have limited the diversity of participants to university students and would therefore have skewed the diversity of social backgrounds as well. Because of these limitations, I chose to change my data collection methods to include potential participants throughout Australia, not limited to one particular area or to participants that were predominantly university students.

After the initial interviews with Korean adoptees in Australia and upon completing a more comprehensive review of the literature, it became increasingly apparent how diverse Korean adoptees’ experiences are. Therefore, as part of the transition to a Ph.D., I decided to explore in greater depth the multiple ways Korean adoptees understand and negotiate their identities from a global perspective by also including the experiences of Korean adoptees in other countries. Therefore as part of my doctoral proposal, I opened participation to Korean adoptees that were adopted to other countries in North America and Western Europe, not only Australia. This change expanded the age group to 18-50 years, which would
include first generation Korean adoptees, such as those that had been adopted toward the end of the Korean War in 1953.

From the interview data, I found that for many, finding a way to travel to Korea and then spending time there was something they felt was important in order to gain a fuller understanding of a Korean heritage that was largely unknown in comparison to their experiences in their adoptive country. I felt this was an important topic that needed to be explored in further detail and so I proposed to conduct fieldwork in Seoul, South Korea in order to get a sense of why Korean adoptees return and what their experiences are while they are there. Therefore, in addition to understanding the diverse ways Korean adoptees view their identities in the Australian social context, I wanted to use the method of participant observation in order to understand how their experiences in South Korea are different or similar to their experiences in their adoptive country. I felt it was important to live alongside other Korean adoptees on a daily basis to get a fuller sense of the different challenges adoptees face in terms of their sense of self. By sharing stories and experiencing life in Korea together, it was hoped that a fuller ethnographic description could be achieved that could not be adequately addressed solely through interviews. Finally, I revised the interview schedule for interviews conducted in South Korea to focus on the significance of their 'return trips' and their sense of belonging in South Korea compared to their adoptive country.
**Data collection**

I was able to reach a wider participant group with the help of various adoption/adoptee organisations in the United States such as KAAN (Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network) and in Australia including ICASN (Intercountry Adoptee Support Network), and Saet Byol, a Korean language school in Sydney. I submitted my invitation for interviews to be included in the organisations’ newsletters and distributed to members through the organisations’ mailing lists. I also posted my research invitation on the message boards of on-line adoption discussion groups such as International-Adopt-Talk, Australia Adopt Korea, and an on-line Korean adoptee discussion group, Korean Adoptees Worldwide (KAW).

Additionally, I received assistance from the University of Newcastle media department which released a statement about my research project to local radio stations and newspapers. This helped to distribute information about my research to a more diverse audience. For example, the Newcastle Herald interviewed me about my personal reasons for my research and included details on how interested people could contact me. I received quite a lot of interest from people in Newcastle as well as those in other parts of Australia that had read the article. Lynelle Beveridge, the founder and director of ICASN, helped by kindly distributing the article to those who were subscribed to ICASN’s mailing list. The article was also distributed to other sources such as [www.koreanadopteess.org](http://www.koreanadopteess.org).
Through these mediums, my contact details and information about my research were provided and those that expressed interest in participating were instructed to e-mail me. Afterwards, based on eligibility, I provided an information statement and consent form for their consideration. Those that wanted to participate and were within the age range of 18-50 years returned the signed consent form to me, detailing whether they preferred to be interviewed through e-mail or face-to-face. Participants were given the option of using their actual name or a pseudonym. Therefore, pseudonyms have been used when interview participants chose not to identify themselves using their actual names.

It was often difficult to find Korean adoptees, simply because they represent a diverse group of people with multiple interests and may or may not be actively involved in adoption groups. The newspaper article helped to reach a broader audience and resulted in a few participants that were not already members of an adoption organisation. Therefore, I acknowledge that most of the participants are clearly those who had already expressed a certain amount of interest in adoption and identity issues evident by their membership in adoptee organisations or their participation in adoptee networks. Again, the participants in this study are not meant to represent the experiences of all Korean adoptees and certainly not all adoptees. However, with these limitations in mind, the diverse group that I was able to interview yielded in-depth discussions along a range of topics outlined in the interview schedule.
Participants and the interview process

Overall, I conducted 22 interviews with adult Korean adoptees, which consisted of 19 females and 3 males. The interviews were arranged by e-mail or in-person, which largely depended on the participants’ location due to travel costs. Of the 22 participants, the ages ranged from 19 to 39 years with the majority under 25 and eight between 25 and 39. Most participants left South Korea when they were under a year old (15) and others when they were one to five years old (7). They were adopted to Australia (10), the United States (8), Sweden (2), Switzerland (1) and Canada (1). Of the Australian participants, 7 were raised in New South Wales, 2 in Western Australia and 1 in South Australia. As far as the participants know from their adoption records, all have two Korean birth parents except for one participant whose birth mother is Korean and birth father is Black American. Most of the participants were born in the 1970s to late 1980s. Those that were adopted during this period usually were not multiracial since the majority of multiracial adoptions occurred following the end of the Korean War (H. Kim, 2007, pp. 136-139). Overall, most of the participants were raised by white parents in areas where the population was predominantly white. Because the majority of Korean adoptees were adopted to the United States, this is also reflected in the participant group with 8 of the 22 participants being from the United States. Because the research project initially focused only on Korean adoptees in Australia, the invitation to participate was open for a longer period for this particular group and so the majority of participants were from Australia.
Interviews were conducted from May 2006 to December 2007. I chose to use two types of interviews, which were electronic interviews via e-mail and face-to-face audio-taped interviews. Due to the diverse locations of Korean adoptees, e-mail interviews allowed for flexibility in the participant group and as a result, a more diverse participant group. Face-to-face interviews enabled a different kind of dynamic between me and the participants because we were able to discuss the interview questions in real time. This included aspects that were not accessible in electronic interviews such as intonation and pitch as well as non-verbal social cues such as facial and bodily expressions. The advantages and disadvantages of this will be considered in later sections.

I interviewed seven participants face-to-face and fifteen participants through e-mail. In Australia, face-to-face interviews were only available to participants located in Sydney, Newcastle and the Central Coast region due to geographical and financial constraints. In South Korea, my aim was to conduct face-to-face interviews with Korean adoptees that were staying at KoRoot, a guesthouse located in Seoul where I carried out my fieldwork. However, participants in Korea still had the option to be interviewed through e-mail if they wished. Those that chose to be interviewed over e-mail said that they felt they could express themselves better in writing and so e-mail was a medium that they felt more comfortable using.

The interviews were divided into several different topics, each with a set of questions to guide the discussion. The discussion topics explored what Korean
adoptees felt was significant about ‘being an adoptee’, their experiences of ‘difference’ in their adoptive country and South Korea, experiences with accessing birth information and conducting birth family searches, perceptions of cultural and ethnic identity in social interactions, and their previous or current involvement in adoptee organisations or events.

For the e-mail interviews, participants were asked to respond to each topic and so received a small set of questions focusing on that particular topic. Upon receiving the responses to the first set of questions, I reciprocated with additional questions that addressed their specific experiences. Then, after the first topic was sufficiently discussed, I sent the next set of questions concerning subsequent interview topics, and so on. This approach aimed to simulate the kind of dialogue present in face-to-face interviews.

For the face-to-face interviews, questions were also organised into topics in order to achieve coherency in the interview. However, flexibility in both the face-to-face and e-mail interviews enabled the discussion to take on different courses particular to the experiences of each participant. The duration of the e-mail interviews depended on the amount of time participants dedicated to each question and the overall depth of discussion. Many of the interviews extended over several months. Conversely, the face-to-face interviews took about an hour.
Interviewing methodology

Semi-structured collaborative interviewing

I chose to use semi-structured interviews rather than structured interviews. Structured interviews use the same list of questions so that “each research subject is asked exactly the same question, in exactly the same order as all other subjects” (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995, p. 63). Semi-structured interviews allow for a more interactive approach because interview questions are used as a flexible guideline rather than a stringent schedule. In order to facilitate more dynamic interactions between myself and the interview participants, I used a semi-structured interview schedule to guide the interview rather than to mandate an interview ‘outcome’. This allowed the interview to flow with greater flexibility while staying focused in reference to the research questions.

As mentioned previously, I organised the interview questions into sections based on certain themes. However, I also asked additional questions based on each of the participants’ specific experiences and particular interpretations of the questions I asked. The benefit of using this method is that I was able to explore the participants’ responses in greater depth by asking additional questions related to their experiences. The participants could then choose to elaborate on their responses and offer additional insights.

In addition to ensuring flexibility in the interviews, I also endeavoured to include a certain amount of reflexivity by using a form of ‘empathetic interviewing’ (Fontana
Empathetic interviewing emphasises establishing rapport between the researcher and the participants. The aim of this is to approach the interview as an “attempt to see the situation from [the participants’] viewpoint rather than [to] superimpose his or her world of academia and preconceptions on them” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 708). Therefore, I prefaces the interviews by drawing attention to my intention that the interviews should be more like conversations rather than one-sided question and answer responses. Fontana and Frey emphasise that ‘interviewing is not merely the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers … The key here is the ‘active’ nature of this process … that leads to a contextually bound and mutually created story—the interview” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 696). By taking this approach, I often offered some of my own experiences in order to create a dialogue and lessen the hierarchical nature of traditional interviewing.

Overall, I wanted to approach the interview process as a collaborative form of data collection between two people. Therefore, I encouraged the participants to ask questions about my experiences and background. I also welcomed participants to draw attention to issues or experiences that I may not have mentioned in the interview, but that they felt were important to discuss. As Foley and Valenzuela note, “a conversational or dialogic style of interviewing … encouraged the subjects to participate more … [and as a result] generated more engaged personal narratives and more candid opinions” (2005, p. 223). I found that this interview approach was beneficial because it also helped to establish a sense of rapport. This was important because many of the participants I had never met and to ask for an
open response regarding their lived experiences required feelings of ease and mutual trust.

A discussion on the method of computer-mediated communication

The interviews conducted through e-mail required a different approach to compensate for the interactive differences in face-to-face interviews. Therefore, I have used the method of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which is used to describe the communicative processes that take place through on-line interactions. Specifically, this method values the different modes of communication offered through this electronic medium, which can in fact offer a different kind of collaboration between the researcher and the interview participants. For example, interview participants can use text as a form of self-expression while also “editing and backspacing the way the self is presented to others” (Markham, 2005, p. 795). Participants were able to review and edit their responses before I could know what they had written prior to editing. In this respect, e-mail interviews are different from the kind of interactional dynamic that face-to-face interviews have.

Because participants are able to censor what they present to the researcher in their e-mails, authenticity is often brought up as an issue for CMC interviews. However, Markham (2005) challenges the idea that on-line interactions are somehow less ‘authentic’ than face-to-face interactions because in fact, any interaction is a performance of the self. She adds that, “perception always involves
embodiment” (2005, p. 809) whether this is verbally expressed or expressed through textual form. Therefore, while minute details of verbal and non-verbal expressions such as tone, bodily emphases, and facial expressions may not be overtly present in on-line interviews, the perceived recognition of embodied expressions are still present in the content and form of the interview participants’ responses. For example, during the interviews, participants often used capitalised letters and exclamation marks to provide emphasis and texture to their statements. Some also used on-line messaging terminology such as ‘LOL’, which means ‘laughing out loud’ to indicate this particular emotive expression.

Furthermore, assumptions are still made concerning a person's gender, physical characteristics, clothing, and personality even when the person is not physically present. Meaning can be read into the way a person writes such as degrees of formality, spelling and grammatical errors, and modes of affective language that are used or not used. The point of this discussion is that issues of authenticity, interpretation and perception are not exclusive to CMC interviews. Participants may choose what to say or what not to say in face-to-face interviews as well. They may choose to express certain emotions over others.

Finally, as an ethical decision and as a form of community review (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005), I sent the transcripts from both the e-mail interviews and the audio-taped face-to-face interviews to the participants so that they could add or delete parts of the interview. My aim was to ensure their satisfaction with what would be included as part of the data analysis. Therefore, participants that chose
to do a face-to-face interview also had the opportunity to review what they had said, just as the participants that chose to do an e-mail interview.

The main reason for conducting e-mail interviews is that it allowed Korean adoptees to participate in an interview regardless of physical and financial constraints. Another benefit of using the CMC method is that it gave participants that were able to do face-to-face interviews the choice to opt for an e-mail interview instead. This acknowledges that there are different ways that people feel comfortable expressing themselves, especially involving in-depth interview questions that explore personal opinions and lived experiences. In fact, when given the option a few participants chose to do an e-mail interview saying that they felt they could express themselves better through writing.

**Negotiating narrative**

The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to give participants the opportunity to describe their experiences in narrative form. This was a way to get a sense of their lived experiences, past and present. As Ratliff argues, “Narrative is an essential part of everyday interaction where the subject employs descriptions of experiences, attitudes and desires to reposition his or her self within an ever-changing social milieu” (2004, p. 37). This understanding of narrative was used to encourage participants to give narrative descriptions of their experiences in response to the questions.
As I was considering the ways I would like to conduct the interviews, I recalled a meeting with Dr. Edith Turner during the supervision of my honours thesis in 2003. She insisted an interview should be more like a conversation and that if you give a little bit of yourself, others will be more willing to offer part of their selves in return. This piece of advice helped to establish rapport in a potentially unequal situation. In a traditionally structured interview situation, the researcher begins from a position that holds more power because the ‘interviewees’ are expected to reveal personal aspects of themselves without receiving anything in return. This is antithetic to the reciprocity of gift-giving in social interactions. The interview is a negotiated social interaction and so reciprocity also applies in this context. When an interview situation is treated like a conversation, in which the subjects involved are considered participants rather than as interviewees, what often occurs in the interview process is “a productive interpersonal climate” (Minichiello et al., 1995, p. 79). In the interviews, I found that by narrating some of my own experiences, participants were often more open to sharing their experiences.

As the interviews progressed, participants began to offer more in-depth descriptions of their experiences and often asked questions about my experiences as an adoptee. In this way, narratives, like ethnography, involve processes of negotiation. Chase speaks of the narrative as a “joint production of narrator and listener” (2005, p. 657). This was a quality characteristic of the semi-structured interviews I conducted both face-to-face and through e-mail. During parts of the interviews, the interview participants and I occupied shifting roles as narrator and
listener, more notably in the face-to-face interviews but also on a different level in the e-mail interviews.

The style of the interview questions was meant to encourage participants to relate their experiences in narrative form by recalling particular memories or feelings. Of course, not all of the questions put forth to the participants resulted in narratives. Some participants chose to follow through and others felt that they had finished the question and did not need to expand upon their responses. Therefore, the interview was approached differently by each participant. In particular, they brought their own expectations about how they would approach the interview and the level of commitment they felt they could offer. For example, despite my attempts to foster a conversational feel to the interviews, some of the participants resisted this and took a more structured question and answer approach. To invite more in-depth narratives, I often offered a narrative account of one of my experiences that was related to a particular question. Usually this flow of sharing each other’s experiences occurred quite easily because of my personal interest in the topics.

Finally, the narrative data acquired from the interviews have been analysed through the lens of narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005). Narrative inquiry is a broad analytical category with many interpretations and applications. However, the key focus of narrative inquiry emphasises the social, cultural, political and historical context of stories such as personal biographies. In the context of this research, narratives serve as a medium through which the experiences of Korean adoptees
can be understood. As a way to situate adoptees’ experiences, I have analysed their narratives in the context of their adoptive countries and South Korea. Due to the number of adoptive countries that Korean adoptees are from, I was unable to go into a detailed analysis of each country. However, I was able to find similar themes among the different narratives since most of the participants were raised in mainly white communities and had similar experiences of ‘difference’ and ways of understanding their identities. Then, in the South Korean context, I was able to again find similarities between the different interviews despite the varied cultural backgrounds of the participants.

**Fieldwork**

**KoRoot: A different kind of field location**

As previously mentioned, I proposed to conduct fieldwork as part of the transition from a Masters program to a Ph.D. program. In 2007, I was awarded a fieldwork grant from the School of Humanities and Social Science at the University of Newcastle in order to conduct further research in Seoul, South Korea. From July to October, I stayed at KoRoot, a guesthouse that provides accommodation and resources for Korean adoptees. KoRoot or 뿌리의 집 (ppuriui jip), which means literally, “House of Korean Roots” was founded in 2002 (KoRoot, 2003). ‘Roots’ draws on the symbolism of a tree anchored to the ground by the roots from which it grows. KoRoot is a registered non-governmental organisation that provides affordable accommodation, language support, and resources for Korean adoptees
that come back to South Korea to explore their Korean background or their ‘roots’, as it is used in the KoRoot metaphor. KoRoot is only open to adoptees and their guests so as a Korean adoptee from the United States, I was able to live there.

Before arriving at KoRoot, I received permission from the director of KoRoot, Reverend Kim Do Hyun to stay there during the course of my fieldwork. My purpose was to interview Korean adoptees that were living at KoRoot as well as to share our stories and to understand the kinds of daily cultural negotiations, challenges, frustrations, joys, emotions and excitement while experiencing life in Seoul together. I also offered the option for those participating in an interview to keep a diary for a week to write about their immediate experiences in South Korea. This was a way to get a sense of their lived experiences in a different context from that of an interview. The initial premise was that they could have a different medium to express themselves that was less structured than an interview. One person agreed to; however, the others felt that they would not have the time or the energy to keep a diary. I realised that they would have their own travel diaries and that writing a parallel diary for a week would take more effort than most would be willing to commit.

The convivial atmosphere at KoRoot was due largely to the generous support of Reverend Kim and his wife, Kim Jung Ae, the KoRoot staff and the Korean volunteers. KoRoot also supported a very communal environment. Most of the rooms were shared and separated by female and male. Similar to a backpacking hostel, the kitchen and laundry facilities were shared as were the communal living
areas. Many residents were temporary, staying from one night to a few weeks and a few were long-term choosing to stay for several months. The difference between KoRoot and other similar accommodation was that all the guests were told that while they were there, they should consider themselves part of the 'KoRoot family'. Indeed, adoptees that returned to KoRoot were remembered and welcomed back like members of a family.

While immersed in this adoptee community, I was able to meet and become friends with Korean adoptees from many different countries as they passed through during their travels. Using methods of participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviewing, I was able to gather in-depth field notes and acquire additional insights concerning the ways adoptees experience their identity, this time in the context of South Korea. Of the total number of participants, I interviewed eight that had lived at KoRoot at different times during my fieldwork period. Because the rooms were separated by gender, it is possible that this could account for the gender imbalance in the participant numbers. As a female Korean adoptee, I spent more of my time with other female adoptees, especially those that shared a room with me which changed periodically. Frequently, more intimate discussions occurred in these places that were much more private than the main communal areas probably because there were less people around. Because of the living situation, I was more likely to develop friendships with other female adoptees and spend more time with them outside of KoRoot even though I did develop close friendships with some of the male adoptees as well. It may have also been the case that female adoptees were more
inclined to talk about their experiences and my position as a woman may have influenced this kind of rapport.

Another possible reason is that much of adoption discourse is feminised and maternalised and as a consequence “the field of adoption is equally describable as female-centred, female-dominated and female-oriented” (Telfer, 2004, p. 248). The focus is usually on the birth country as the ‘motherland’ and searching for the birth mother over other blood relations (Dorow, 1999; Hübinette, 2006, pp. 110-111; Kendall, 2005). For example, the act of relinquishing a child and the struggle of this decision is often based on the idea of “naturalised maternal love” (Telfer, 2004, p. 248). This implies that there is a stronger cultural association between women and nurturing family ties, supported by a naturalised maternal connection between mother and child. These reasons could help to explain why more female adoptees volunteered to participate in this study due to this emphasis on adoption as a feminised arena.

While I was at KoRoot, I met Korean adoptees that had been adopted to countries such as Belgium, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the United States, Canada, and Australia. During these introductions, a common question was the purpose for coming to Korea. At these times, I would specify my research interests and mention that one of the reasons why I was staying at KoRoot was to conduct interviews and that if they were interested, I could provide more information. Some expressed interest in my research and offered to help
with an interview. Others wished me luck and did not suggest they would be interested.

Initially, most of the Korean adoptees staying at KoRoot in July and August were there to attend the IKAA (International Korean Adoptee Associations) Gathering in an activity packed week-long conference. I participated in the events organised during the Gathering and met more Korean adoptees than I had ever known before. This was the fourth Gathering since the first held in Washington D.C., USA (1999) and subsequently, Oslo, Norway (2001), and Seoul, South Korea (2004). It was also the largest Gathering with “more than 550 adoptees from 17 countries, and 700 attendees in total” (International Korean Adoptee Associations, 2007, p. 5). IKAA is especially significant because it consists of adoptee organisations in Europe, the United States and South Korea, which are run by Korean adoptees for the purpose of providing resources and assistance for Korean adoptees while also including regular social activities to build a supportive community and a sense of solidarity.

Living at KoRoot gave me the opportunity to meet other Korean adoptees on a regular basis as new people frequently came and left. I was able to connect with many people through everyday conversations in ways that were different from the face-to-face interviews conducted previously in Australia and through e-mail. This was a unique situation because there was an atmosphere of emotional support due to a shared history of being adopted from South Korea even though many, but not
all, had only met for the first time. There were Korean adoptees raised in different countries and speaking a variety of different languages.

During my experiences of field research, I questioned what it meant to be ‘in the field’ at KoRoot in South Korea. KoRoot was like a home but located in a country and a culture that most of us as Korean adoptees, were only discovering as adults. We were from many countries and we were also from one country. Additionally, although the ‘field location’ at KoRoot occupied the same physical space, the social space was a living and breathing environment which continuously changed depending on the people that were there. Furthermore, while KoRoot is a transient place, it also provides a sense of permanence and belonging. This was evident by the adoptees that returned to KoRoot every time they came back to Seoul.

Additionally, I also questioned what it meant to ‘do fieldwork’ based on my position as a researcher from ‘the outside’ and a Korean adoptee on the ‘inside’. I will explore the negotiations I underwent as my positions shifted and how these experiences contested the divide between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. This complexity is reflected in my writing as I vacillate between using ‘they’ and ‘we’ and ‘their’ and ‘our’ to describe the experiences of the Korean adoptees that participated in this project, my experiences as a Korean adoptee researcher and the experiences we shared together. To address these interesting shifts, I have drawn on some key aspects involved in writing reflexive ethnographies as a way to approach my research data. These key aspects include issues of reflexivity and positionality
which will be analysed in the following discussion of fieldwork methods and field locations.

**Turning the lens: Contextualising the fieldwork method**

Fieldwork continues to act as the key method for ‘doing’ anthropology. However, contemporary critiques of fieldwork methods challenge the notion that fieldwork necessarily entails the researcher studying an ‘other’ in a defined place and space. Debates concerning multi-sited field research, knowledge and representation and collaboration between the researcher and research subjects have opened the practice of fieldwork to reflect a move toward writing more reflexive ethnographies (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

Before embarking on a discussion of reflexive ethnography, it is worthwhile to discuss the historical context of fieldwork in order to compare and contrast the shift from more ‘traditional’ fieldwork practices to the kinds of issues that reflexive ethnographies addresses. A critical analysis which positions fieldwork alongside its early developments can help to understand the current postmodern and postcolonial critiques of fieldwork practices in which knowledge production and representations of that knowledge are called into question and ambiguities implicit in field research are brought to light (Prattis, 1997, p. 90).

Fabian (2000) and Pratt (1986) locate fieldwork as a method tracing it to early travel accounts kept by European explorers and missionaries at the turn of the 20th
century. During European expansion, European explorers were commissioned by their governments to go to other countries and document their experiences and report their findings in the form of travelogues. As Fabian argues, the European explorers that travelled to African countries to write reports about their findings used “modes of knowledge production (and of knowledge representation) that continue to inform present-day conceptions and practices of field research” (2000, p. 7). Importantly, an air of objectivity informs the explorers’ written accounts. They were expected to remain objective even though their experiences often seriously contrasted with what was presented in their writing.

The same was expected during the early days when anthropology was being institutionalised as an academic discipline. For example, in his seminal work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1984 [1922]), in parts, Bronislaw Malinowski outlines fieldwork methods which established a standard for acquiring knowledge in ‘the field’ through an objective scientific lens. In an analogy of the hunter (ethnographer) and the hunted (everything ‘native’), he presents the ethnographer (with a capital ‘E’) as a distanced individual armed with special scientific tools that can extract and capture the essence of ‘native’ life: “But the Ethnographer has not only to spread his nets in the right place, and wait for what will fall into them. He must be an active huntsman, and drive his quarry into them, and follow it up to its most inaccessible lairs” (Malinowski, 2001, p. 211). He holds steadfast to the ‘scientific’ aim of achieving “a real, unbiased, impartial observation” (2001, p. 219).
Of course, these statements must be considered in the context of this period when the discipline of anthropology was only just developing and the emphasis on scientific aims was in a way meant to distance anthropology from the ‘unscientific’ accounts and unstructured research carried out by those early European explorers. As Pratt points out, anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Maybury-Lewis (1967) interpreted Malinowski’s fieldwork agenda in such a way that ‘doing anthropology’ entailed “codified field methodology, professional detachment, [and] a systematic write-up” (1986, p. 41). As was common during the mid-twentieth century, positivist claims of knowing were considered to be more objective and therefore valid. This perspective was situated in an academic environment which was working to institutionalise the social sciences and present research as objective and therefore, ‘scientific’.

While this needs to be recognised in the context of the emerging anthropological discipline, the emphasis on objectivity has continued to affect the way fieldwork is practiced today. The schism imposed by a focus on ‘hard science’ in anthropology created a divide between subjective and objective modes of conducting fieldwork and writing ethnography. Even when Malinowski speaks of needing “sometimes to put aside camera, notebook and pencil and to join in .... [with] what is going on”, he continues to maintain a ‘scientific’ distance asserting that as a result, his observations of ‘native’ behaviour became “more transparent and easily understandable than it had been before” (2001, p. 222).
The effects of this positivist thinking is that it worked to undermine and separate subjective experience and personal reflection from ethnographic data as a way to validate and portray research as scientifically objective. However, as is evident from Fabian’s research of European explorers in Africa, the artificial divide between objectivity and subjectivity was not filed away into obscurity. The tensions between objective and subjective practice were complicated by their lived experiences ‘in the field’. On the one hand, objectivity was heralded as necessary for self-control and hence, “self-control required ‘other-control’” (Fabian, 2000, p. 7). Regulating the self and maintaining an objective stance meant that the ‘other’ could also be regulated and therefore, objectively analysed. However, behind this veneer of self-control, Fabian argues that in spite of the rhetorical imperialistic message of rational superiority, the experiences of the explorers were actually fraught with many contradictions and were far from the imperial ideal of the solitary courageous explorer (Fabian, 2000, pp. 6-7). While the explorers were aware of these tensions and the blurry mediations between ‘self’ and ‘other’, official rhetoric maintained that objectivity could be achieved through self/other regulation.

Nevertheless, the European explorers experienced instances of “‘stepping outside’ or ‘being outside’... [what Fabian calls], the ecstatic” (2000, p. 8). The main characteristic of ecstasis refers to “not so much a kind of behaviour but a dimension or quality of human action and interaction” (Fabian, 2000, p. 8). Ecstasis describes the condition during moments when psychological and social boundaries are crossed and become blurred. Moreover, ecstasis points to a sense
of ambiguity when the boundary between self and other becomes muddled in the contradictions, negotiations, and uncertainties involved in social interactions. Ecstasis is perhaps most apparent during periods of fieldwork when the anthropological project is put to the test. Fieldwork is more often than not, a time of ambiguity and uncertainty when interactions with various people ‘in the field’ are subject to negotiation and contestation. It is a period of change and surprises as carefully laid-out fieldwork plans are often challenged in unexpected ways.

In the context of this research project, the concept of ‘ecstasis’ captures the sense of ambiguity between the researcher and research subjects. A historical understanding of the development of fieldwork as a method demonstrates that the divide between subject and object is one that is constructed and therefore one that can be changed. A reflexive approach to anthropological methods and the anthropological project itself, offers a way to engage the complexities involved during the research process. This has resulted in ethnographies that do not try to hide the subjective experiences in the field, arguing that all research is first and foremost subjective (Behar, 1996; E. Turner, 1992).

**Toward reflexive ethnography**

By collapsing the categories of native and non-native, subject and object, researcher and subject of study, I hope to go beyond the strict laws of the genre identified with traditional social-science practices. This is making me a better, not less able, anthropologist and analyst (Motzafi-Haller, 1997, p. 219).
Too often, the ethnographic research process and the negotiations that occur in social interactions during field research have been oversimplified into acute oppositions between subject and object. In the above quote, Motzafi-Haller takes the critique further by criticising the way subject and object, insider and outsider, and native and non-native are opposed against each other. She maintains that it is important to retain a critical perspective on reflexivity in order to avoid essentialising these kinds of dichotomies. Rather than focusing on the differences between these terms, a more critical and fruitful analysis can be had by highlighting the tensions.

By including my experiences as part of my research, I attempt to ground this study in the context of social scientific ethnographies that challenge perceived boundaries between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ as well as the constructed dichotomy between personal experience and theory. Based on her own identity as a Japanese American anthropologist doing fieldwork in Japan, Dorinne Kondo argues, “the specificity of my experience … is not opposed to theory; it enacts and embodies theory” (original emphasis) (1990, p. 24). In this way, instead of opposing personal experience against theory, they can emerge from each other. This creates the potential to generate interesting parallels and juxtapositions by enriching analyses of research data, and as a result, producing more engaging ethnographies.
Critical reflexivity and shifting subjects

When I began this research project, I found that I had conflicting feelings between my own position as a Korean adoptee and the position of the people I interviewed who were also Korean adoptees. For example, as I mentioned previously, I sometimes felt uncomfortable using pronouns such as ‘they’ and ‘their’ when talking about ‘other adoptees’ and their stories and how they were positioned as subjects/objects whom my research was about. It felt as if I was setting myself apart from ‘other’ Korean adoptees even though I also identified as a Korean adoptee.

This was an experience I often encountered during the course of my research and especially during my fieldwork in Seoul. For example, I became friends with many of the people I interviewed not primarily as a researcher but as a Korean adoptee and as another resident at KoRoot interested in meeting new people. Perhaps because of the adoptee community atmosphere at KoRoot, many but not all of my conversations with other adoptees were about topics that I was interested in for my research. Because of the common aspect of adoption that we all shared, adoption topics in normal conversation were not a rare occurrence. For this reason, a few of the interviews I conducted almost seemed like an afterthought or a necessary formality because I already knew so much about some of the participants’ experiences.
Inevitably, my research of them was also in some ways, research about myself because of our shared experiences as Korean adoptees. In other words, the dichotomy between researcher and research participants collapsed, causing the lines between subject and object to blur. This experience is located within an increasingly reflexive understanding of the anthropological project, which can no longer claim to be a purely objective endeavour. Although research has never been ‘purely objective’, the ethnocentricities that supported positivist approaches have since been challenged by postmodern and postcolonial critiques. After World War II and especially during the 1970s and 1980s, the tendency in academic thought toward grand generalisations was questioned as aspects of the social world that were previously taken for granted became less certain (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, pp. 8-9). This is what Marcus and Fischer refer to as a “crisis of representation” and is played out in the social sciences especially around issues of methodology, and specifically “to problems of epistemology, interpretation, and discursive forms of representation” (1986, p. 9). This has had a significant effect on ethnographic methods because the way anthropological knowledge is presented affects those who are represented. Furthermore, the indeterminacy of knowledge has questioned the authoritative stance of ethnographic texts and instead opens them up to multiple readings and interpretations.

Since the ‘crisis’ in anthropology, “anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves” (Clifford, 1986, p. 10). This has exposed the relativity of ethnographic representations in that they are always partial understandings. Abu-Lughod goes further and argues that while
ethnography reaches at ‘partial truths’, “what is needed is a recognition that they are also positioned truths” (1991, p. 142). She supports this statement by pointing to the kinds of challenges that feminist and ‘halfie’ anthropologists encounter. By ‘halfie’, Abu-Lughod refers to “people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education or parentage” (1991, p. 137). She argues that their position when studying their ‘own people’ as “native or semi-native anthropologists” is challenged because “the Other is in certain ways the self” (1991, p. 141). In other words, their position disrupts the self/other distinction. This recognition does not undermine the objectivity of the anthropologist, rather it works with the tensions in which ‘self’ and ‘other’ are not distinct entities outside of each other. This situation is certainly not exclusive to anthropologists with these particular backgrounds as it is something all anthropologists must take into account.

Overall, postmodernism which views knowledge and one’s position in the world as uncertain has affected a range of disciplines across the social sciences and humanities. Anthropologists in particular can no longer claim a distanced relationship between themselves and their research and the people they study. This shift in perspective has shaken academia’s foothold and the reverberations continue to be keenly felt, evident by the theoretical debates related to methodology (Marcus & Fischer, 1986).

Therefore, postmodernist approaches have questioned the ability to know and then to subsequently assert authority over that knowledge. This approach claims
that there are multiple interpretations and therefore also multiple ways of knowing. One interpretation is relative in terms of another interpretation, which is considered just as valid as the other. While these critiques have been taken on board in the social sciences, there is an extreme form of postmodern relativity that renders any claim to knowledge as useless. While this form of postmodernism claims that it is impossible to take a singular position because of the relative nature of knowledge, Metcalf (2002) argues that this position is nevertheless, still a position. While strict postmodernists may claim that nothing can be known and therefore everything is unknown, “those who assert unknowability assume a position of knowing” (Metcalf, 2002, p. 10).

The attributes of postmodernism are diminished when it is applied in such a way that all perspectives, all positions, and all judgments become so relative to each other that nothing can be said for fear of claiming to know something. When used in a constructive way, postmodernist theory has undoubtedly been beneficial to enlivening debate about positionality, responsibility, and accountability in ethnographic research and its critique has had a humbling effect. In the wake of postmodernism, researchers are called to engage with their research by incorporating greater reflexivity in ethnography. In particular, researchers have an obligation to make known their position in the field and to critically reflect on claims to knowledge and representation of the people and cultures they study.
Positionality

As a result of this reflexive awareness, positionality was an ongoing issue that I had to address throughout the course of my research. As a Korean adoptee at KoRoot, I was ‘native’ amongst other Korean adoptees, but at the same time, I was an ‘outsider’ given my position as a researcher. This is a view that has been similarly expressed by Sandra Patton, a White American adoptee and anthropologist, “In interviewing adoptees there was none of the traditional ‘danger’ for me of going native, because, as I learned, I was already ‘one of the people,’ though true to form, also always an outsider, also an academic” (original emphasis) (2000, p. 9).

This kind of negotiation arose during interviews and also during general conversations at KoRoot. While my ‘insider’ status helped me to understand and relate to the experiences of the Korean adoptees I spoke with, my ‘outsider’ position as a researcher was highlighted on a number of occasions. I was often asked, ‘Why are you here?’—which is a typical question and conversation starter asked of adoptees that have come to South Korea, and especially at KoRoot. At these times, I would make known my intention to interview Korean adoptees for my research and to gather daily experiences in the form of field notes. However, it also occasionally left me with an uncomfortable feeling because it made me aware of my ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positions. To alleviate this odd tension, I sometimes mollified my statement by saying that I was also there for personal reasons since Korea has obvious significance for me as a Korean adoptee. Furthermore, the idea
for my research project began after my first time back in South Korea and was thus personally motivated.

So while I made claims to both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positions, my claims were alternately foregrounded or backgrounded in negotiated social interactions with Korean adoptees. As a researcher, I felt an artificial distance between myself and others living at KoRoot because it was a characteristic that differentiated myself from all the other Korean adoptees staying at KoRoot. I was a researcher in their midst because from an academic position, my task was to gather and analyse data. At the same time, I felt a sense of common identity with other Korean adoptees because we could relate to each other through similar experiences and a sense of mutual understanding. This dynamic became an important aspect of my field experience and has led me to engage with this by considering how at times, I was also a research subject alongside the adoptees that participated in my research project. As a result, this has affected the research methodology and especially the ethnographic approach.

**Ethnographic modes**

Experiences can only be interpreted through various tools, which include the researcher as an interpretive tool since the methods chosen by the researcher affect the way the experiential data is analysed and presented. In fact, data can only be understood through the particular interpretive filters of the researcher and
the research participants involved in the research process. CAP (creative analytical processes) ethnography recognises the multiple ways research data may be analysed and presented. CAP ethnography criticises the basic premise of the ‘triangulation’ approach—which uses different methods to lend authenticity to research findings—by challenging “the assumption that there is a ‘fixed point’ or an ‘object’ that can be triangulated” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963). CAP ethnography draws on the imagery of a crystal to describe the interpretive process of ethnographic production (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963). A crystal reflects and refracts various angles of interpretation as opposed to ‘triangulation’ which focuses on a singular interpretation using different methods to validate that interpretation.

While I would not characterise my research as fulfilling all of the creative aims of CAP ethnography (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 964), I draw on some of its basic premises, mainly the call to write more reflexively by situating the researcher within the ethnographic text as a key figure in the process of knowledge production and presentation. This is not particularly unique to CAP ethnography but is part of a wider effort to contest and generate debate about ethnographic methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Plummer, 2005).

My primary focus for the way I have written my dissertation is based on ethnographic approaches that centre on the intersubjective character of knowledge production and representation. I have endeavoured to present my data using ethnographic methods which convey reflexivity and intersubjective
knowledge, in particular the dynamic between the Korean adoptees that offered their experiences and myself as a Korean adoptee and researcher. I have explored this intersubjective process involved in the interviews, my fieldwork, and my lived experiences alongside the Korean adoptees I spoke with by drawing on key aspects of narrative ethnography and autoethnography. The co-creation of knowledge was evident during the interview process in both the e-mail and face-to-face interviews. There was a great deal of negotiation in terms of the meaning that the participants evoked through sharing their experiences and opinions. While this thesis is largely based on interview material, similar issues experienced during everyday interactions in 'the field' also applied while conducting the interviews.

**Negotiating positions in the process of ethnographic writing**

Narrative ethnography highlights the intersubjective nature of the research process (Chase, 2005). Specifically, it focuses on how the researcher represents the participants in the written research, based on information gathered from the participants. It emphasises the need for researchers to reflect in their writing the importance of the participants’ voices and their vital contribution to the research. This representative approach helps to convey the multivocal characteristic of this research by highlighting the varied lived experiences of Korean adoptees.

Another interpretation of narrative inquiry is autoethnography. Autoethnography has been used in a number of ways in various disciplines and is therefore also subject to multiple interpretations (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Voloder, 2008). I have
used autoethnography in this study by drawing on its applications in the social sciences as a way to highlight the dynamic processes that shape ethnographic research regarding issues of identity, positionality, and authenticity. Importantly, exploring these issues opens up the complicated negotiations which are present in ethnographic presentation and representation. Autoethnography has provided the means by which I can acknowledge my position within academia as well as my position as a Korean adoptee. Both of these subject positions are integral to the methods, analytical techniques and interpretations used toward the collection and presentation of the research data.

One of the ways I used autoethnography was by openly presenting my own experiences intermittently alongside the narratives of the Korean adoptees I interacted with, in conversation, interviews and social activities. I have done this to open up the text as a collaborative venture that brings together multiple ‘voices’, rather than relying on a singular authoritative voice. By opening ethnography to scrutiny and multiple interpretations, research is strengthened not weakened. Therefore, this approach views ethnography along similar lines, as a text open to multiple interpretations instead of presenting it as a purely authoritative text. This does not undermine the ‘authority’ or ‘validity’ of the research; rather it acknowledges and interacts with the complications and contradictions which are integral to the ethnographic process (Motzafi-Haller, 1997). As discussed previously, the distinction between ‘native’/‘insider and ‘outsider’ is just as complicated as the debate between ‘subject’ and ‘object’.
As was also mentioned earlier, I am ‘native’ in terms of identifying as a member of the participants in my study, as a Korean adoptee. However, I am also an ‘outsider’ in terms of my position as a researcher approaching the data from an academic position. Therefore, I do not claim automatic authority simply because I am writing from the position as a Korean adoptee. I acknowledge that my ‘insider’ status is also complicated by shifting subject positions based on my gender, socioeconomic background, and other factors. However, I do claim the knowledge from my experiences as a Korean adoptee because it has been useful as a research tool during the course of the research process, especially when talking with other adoptees and during data analysis. Furthermore, as Voloder argues:

... the insight gathered from ‘insider’ research need not rely on assumptions of shared experiences and identifications between oneself and participants, but rather that it is in the exploration of the convergences and divergences in these experiences and identifications that the researcher’s experiential self can be used as a key heuristic resource (2008, p. 28).

For example, my experiences as a Korean adoptee have helped me to understand and empathise with the Korean adoptees I spoke with in the interviews and in casual conversations. At times, the participants would comment that they felt comfortable talking with me because I was adopted too and could understand where they were coming from when they talked about their experiences. As Amy noted, It’s interesting too cause I’ll say stuff and you can just understand it almost. It is really interesting. We did not have the same experiences and did not necessarily identify in the same way. However, my position as a Korean adoptee helped me to explore the ‘convergences and divergences’ of our experiences.
By drawing on this ‘insider’ knowledge, I do not mean to essentialise Korean adoptees as having the same experiences; rather it acknowledges the commonalities that we do share since our lives were similarly affected by the transnational adoption process. As Motzafi-Haller argues, “The point here is not one’s indigenous qualifications but rather the connection that is always there between the researcher’s positioning in society and history and the kind of research agenda and understanding such personal background shapes” (1997, pp. 216-217).

**Ethical considerations**

I would like to end by addressing some of the ethical issues involved in terms of my methodological choices. As Markham noted:

> In a very real sense, every method decision is an ethics decision, in that these decisions have consequences for not just research design but also the identity of the participants, the outcomes of our studies, and the character of knowledge which inevitably grows from our work in the field (2005, p. 796).

I have had to consider methodological and ethical issues on a participant level as well as a personal level because of my identification as a Korean adoptee. For example, based on my own experiences I am acutely aware of the sensitive nature concerning a few of the topics. As a result, it was important for me to use a semi-structured interview schedule to accommodate greater flexibility in the interviews. This also helped to customise the interviews to the individual experiences of the participants.
Another important methodological consideration concerns the degree of collaboration between me and the participants during the research process. Upon completion of the interviews, I provided an interview transcript for the participants to review. They could then edit the transcript by adding or deleting anything they wanted included or excluded to be used as data for my research project. This technique is a form of community review, which acknowledges and respects the participants’ role as contributors in the research project (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). It also acknowledges that content gathered from the interviews has an impact on the way participants present themselves and are later represented in the final written product. There are various levels of community review and different depths of collaboration and so there are not necessarily right or wrong ways to enacting community review. In the end, as is often the case, “each ethnographer ultimately develops his or own notions of collaboration, possibility, and authorship” (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005, p. 231).

Markham states that “putting the human subject squarely in the centre of the research both shifts the ethical considerations and allows for socially responsible research” (2005, p. 815). This has been a guiding principle throughout the research process and I hope that the experiences presented here are understood with this in mind. Overall, a reflexive approach in research methods not only acknowledges but engages with the issues of accountability, positionality and representation, which should be a consideration for any research project.
Chapter 4
Identifying the Adoption Process

Introducing adoption

Adoption is a culturally specific social practice that generally involves the transfer of an individual from those considered to be biogenetic or birth parents to others that assume parental responsibilities. In Western societies, this involves a permanent legal transfer of rights to a child from the birth parents to adoptive parents. Thus, in the process, one set of parents is replaced by another set of parents. This understanding of adoption applies to both domestic and transnational adoption processes in which Western countries are involved. In transnational adoption, the transfer also involves the movement of children from one country to another.

My aim in this chapter is to critically analyse the connections between adoption, kinship and identity. I do this by showing how adoption has different meanings in different cultural contexts in order to position a Euro-American conceptualisation of adoption as culturally relative. As Bowie (2004a, p. 6) explains, a cross-cultural approach views adoption as a culturally constructed and constituted practice. This recognises that adoption needs to be understood holistically by looking at how certain cultural values and ideas concerning kinship and specifically family and parenthood are interrelated.
In addition to a discussion of adoption and kinship, a cross-cultural analysis of adoption can also be used to question the way identity is discussed, in particular relating to adoptees’ sense of self. John Telfer (2004) researched Australian adoptees that were domestically adopted and described their birth family searches as “Quests for wholeness”, in which knowledge is related to feelings of completeness. From this perspective, birth searches involve striving to acquire knowledge about birth parents or biological origins as a way to provide a sense of closure with the hope that it will “bring completeness to the present and perhaps the future” (Telfer, 2004, p. 253). At the core of this statement are notions of temporality, selfhood and knowledge. These are culturally specific and their significance for adoption is located in a web of interrelated meaning, which is also culturally created. Importantly, the cultural significance placed on birth family searches is related to underlying concepts about kinship and identity. For instance, there is an understanding that knowledge about the self in the form of biological origins or successful birth family searches has the potential to provide a sense of ‘completeness’ in regards to identity.

However, embedded in this understanding is a tendency to naturalise a connection between identity and biological origins, thus viewing an adoptee’s birth family search as just a ‘natural need’. Therefore, when discussing identity issues that adoptees may experience such as feelings of ‘incompleteness’, ‘loss’ or uncertainty due to lack of knowledge about their past, it is important to place these ‘issues’ in the context of a particular Euro-American ideology about the self as well as a particular understanding of adoption.
In the following discussion, I focus primarily on how adoption is understood in Western societies such as the United States and Australia and then compare this to adoption practices in Papua New Guinea and domestic adoption practices in South Korea before transnational adoption became prevalent. I begin by analysing how adoption is outlined in the Hague Convention of Intercountry Adoption in order to highlight certain culturally specific constructions of adoption. Then, through cross-cultural comparisons, I argue that the way adoptees experience identity and the kinds of ‘identity issues’ that are associated with adoptees are related to the way adoption is practiced in Western societies. Through this analysis, I will try to unpack certain assumptions about kinship and identity that are embedded in the adoption process.

**Explaining adoption**

In transnational adoptions, children are removed from their country of origin to the receiving country where they are given adoptive parents. This process removes the legal ties between the child and the birth parents and creates new kin ties between the child and the adoptive parents. To regulate this migration of children, the Hague Convention of Intercountry Adoption was enacted to ensure that the “best interests of the child” are met at every stage of the adoption process (Hague Conference on Private International Law, 1993). This doctrine aims to achieve universal ethical standards and regulations for transnational adoption.
practice for those sending and receiving countries that have signed and ratified the Hague Convention. The “best interests of the child” involve efforts that strive to firstly, place the child within a suitable family in the birth country. Then, if this is not possible, considerations for transnational adoption can be made given the consent of the mother and of the child, when required. As outlined in article 26, an adoption involves:

... recognition of a) the legal parent-child relationship between the child and his or her adoptive parents; b) parental responsibility of the adoptive parents for the child; [and] c) the termination of a pre-existing legal relationship between the child and his or her mother and father, if the adoption has this effect in the Contracting State where it was made (Hague Conference on Private International Law, 1993).

Therefore, adoption involves a legal process that creates kin ties between the child and the adoptive parents at the expense of terminating legal ties between the child and the birth parents. Additionally, the distinction is made between two different sets of parents by labelling one set “adoptive”. Therefore, at the heart of this legal document and what is also central to understanding the adoption process are culturally specific notions of parenthood, kinship and identity.

“Adoptability” and the adopted child

The first two points described in article 26 concern the legal adoption of a child to adoptive parents and the subsequent responsibilities of the adoptive parents to the child. What is of interest is that implicit in these statements about adoption is the automatic assumption that adoption involves the adoption of children and not adults. In article 16, one of the requirements necessary for a child to be adopted
concerns the child’s “adoptability” (Hague Conference on Private International Law, 1993). This involves making sure that all efforts were made to have the child remain with the birth parents before being considered for adoption. Implicit in this assumption regarding “adoptability” is that only children may be adopted and that children are only consulted when they are of a certain age. Children, in general, are seen as vulnerable, dependent on others and incomplete in the sense that they do not necessarily have the social autonomy or decision-making power that adults have. Therefore, “adoptability” means that the person to be adopted must be a child and that because of their dependency, the “best interests of the child” must be met on behalf of the child.

Furthermore, in transnational adoption, children are usually adopted from sending countries with poorer economic and social conditions to receiving countries that are considered to be wealthier and able to provide more opportunities, such as education and employment prospects. While this is generally the case from an economic point of view, it ignores other factors that cannot be measured. For example, this rationalisation minimises the fact that there are also immeasurable factors such as birth family ties, language and cultural understanding of the birth country.

There is another parallel narrative that is common in adoption discourse, the ‘rags to riches narrative’. It works to reinforce reasons for transnational adoption while also justifying a child’s “adoptability”. This narrative draws primarily on material disparity between the birth country and the adoptive country. It is used to justify
adoption based on the belief that having been ‘saved’ from less than adequate living situations and opportunities, adopted children can thrive and live a ‘better’ life in their new adoptive country. As a result, this narrative tends to “[portray] international adoption as a rescue mission and thus pegs the child as a lucky survivor” (Register, 1991, p. 131). Although attitudes are changing, adoptees are still sometimes made to feel ‘grateful’ for being adopted based on the idea that their existence and social survival is a result of the ‘lucky’ circumstances of their adoption. Young Mi explained her feelings about this:

*People in Australia are just as ignorant as Koreans, just in a different way. Australians think of us as lucky, and as people who should be grateful, they assume our parents are good altruistic people. I haven’t seen that many instances of maladjustment and from my knowledge in Australia it’s not that common, so I guess most people assume that we’re well adjusted and have nothing to complain about. ‘Cos for some I guess this is the only or best way to gauge how well a person is doing … aside from material wealth, achievements.*

While material wealth and opportunities offered in receiving countries are usually greater than in the sending countries, this way of assessing the relative ‘success’ of adoption needs to include a more holistic understanding of the adoption process.

There will never be a conclusive answer or consensus about whether being adopted is better than the life that might have been in the birth country. However, this kind of ‘saved’ or ‘rescued’ mentality tends to overlook the loss created by the circumstances of transnational adoption. The fact that adoption does actually replace one set of parents with another is not often considered to be something that could contribute to the kinds of difficulties including psychological difficulties that adoptees often experience. As discussed in Chapter 2, psychological issues relating to adoption and identity are taken out of the socio-cultural context which
frames the adoption process and instead are considered at more of an individual level. Adoptees are often confronted with the realisation that their adoption was not just about gaining a family but also about what they lost and cannot necessarily retrieve or regain in the fullest sense. This becomes especially apparent when they go back to their birth countries and realise that they do not necessarily belong there in the way they might have initially hoped. These losses are unquantifiable and include but are not limited to, loss of kin ties with birth family, loss of language and culture, loss of identifying information such as medical history, names and birth dates, and the realisation that what they know may be misinformation including false names and false birthdates.

Psychological difficulties that may coincide with understanding the impact of these losses need to be understood in the context of the adoption process. For instance, certain underlying assumptions pertaining to kinship and identity that inform adoption practice need to be critically analysed. By doing this, adoptees are less susceptible to being seen as ‘vulnerable children’ that needed to be saved or as pathologised individuals with ‘adoption issues’. Instead, by looking at adoption and identity as culturally relative, we can understand how particular issues concerning identity, specifically cultural identity, are also culturally constructed. This I believe would help adoptees understand that while some of the issues they are experiencing may be psychological, they are also part of a Euro-American understanding of identity and selfhood that make such issues relevant over other possible factors. Therefore, ‘adoption issues’ are not only psychological problems, but ones that are also culturally created (Bowie, 2004a, p. 9). The following
section discusses the way a Euro-American understanding of kinship informs the adoption process by showing how adoption presents important challenges to issues of rights, substance and parenthood.

**Culturally engineering subjectivity: Rights and substance**

The third point of article 26 in the Hague Convention concerns the recognition of an adoption. This is of particular interest because it explicitly states that the adoptive relationship is only possible by first terminating the kin ties between the child and his or her parents. This illustrates the core of adoption practice in Western societies in that adoption necessarily involves the *replacement* of one set of parents with another (Demian, 2004). In order to validate the adoptive relationship or to make the adoptive relationship ‘fit in’ with a kinship ideology that values biogenetic ties, the birth parents are legally erased and replaced with a new set of adoptive parents who become not simply adoptive parents, but the child's parents. Similarly, the adoptee is constructed as the (adoptive) parents' child so that the adoptee is not an adoptee but their child (Demian, 2004).

This belief that one can only have one set of parents is particular to adoption practice in Western countries. For Suau society in Papua New Guinea, an “adoptive relationship occurs ‘after’ or ‘on top of’ the natal relationship as opposed to ‘in place of’ [as] in the West” (Demian, 2004, p. 104). In other words, in order for the child to be adopted, it is not necessary for the natal relationship to be replaced and
consequently, the child does not have to be ‘relinquished’. The adoptive relationship is ‘in addition to’ the natal relationship instead of one largely defined by loss. Furthermore, the adoptive relationship is not seen as something inferior to the natal relationship, but as a relationship that is just as ‘real’ as the other, without the ‘as if’ or ‘fictive’ comparisons of biological ties versus adoptive ties. It is not necessary to modify parenthood with words such as ‘biological’ or ‘adoptive’.

Therefore, in countries with a Euro-American kinship ideology, adoption ultimately challenges a culturally constructed dichotomy that differentiates between biological kin ties and kin ties formed by law. Furthermore, this challenge highlights the discomfort and the heated debates regarding transactions of rights to a child and the potential commoditisation of children. The following discussion demonstrates the ways kinship and rights are intertwined in Euro-American constructions of adoption.

The process of making someone else’s child one’s own is made possible by a legal process that transacts the rights to parent the child from the birth parents to the adoptive parents. The child is viewed as an individual subject and rights to parent the child can be transferred from one set of parents to another. Importantly, the child remains biologically connected to the birthparents while being legally connected to the adoptive parents. In other words, the biological substance of the child remains and the biogenetic connection between the child and the birthparents also remains. This logic coincides with a kinship ideology that adamantly asserts that biological relations cannot be severed.
The paradox of adoption is that a child is removed from the biological parents and given new parents that regard the child as their own. The cultural dilemma that arises in adoption discourse and practice is how a biological relationship that remains between a child and birth parents can allow for another set of relations between the child and adoptive parents. This paradox is overcome by making a distinction between rights and substance. The rights to the child are transferred rather than the biological substance of the child. Consequently, when a child is adopted, technically it is not the substance of the child that is adopted; instead it is the individual rights to the child that are transferred to the adoptive parents. This allows the adoptive parents to adopt the child as their own without devaluing biological relatedness. The biological substance of the child remains connected to the birthparents, while the legal rights to the child connect the child to the adoptive parents. It is in this way that adoption both challenges and validates biological modes of kinship.

This Euro-American interpretation of adoption demonstrates that to understand the social practice of adoption, it is necessary to locate it in relation to specific indigenous understandings of kinship and personhood. According to David Schneider’s analysis of American kinship, all categories of relatives are “constructed of elements from two major cultural orders, the order of nature and the order of law” (1980 [1968], p. 27). Persons are related to each other by nature/'blood'/'substance', by law/code or by a combination of both. Using Schneider’s terms, ‘blood’ relations such as those between mother or father and
daughter or son are connected by *both* nature and law or substance and code. The adoption process ultimately aims to separate the element of ‘law’ or ‘code’ from the ‘blood’ relation and transfer it to an adoptive kin relation.

Firstly, adoption is conditional on the birthparents, more often the birthmother, relinquishing rights to the child. This is an act that is perceived as an individual act by choice, which legally acknowledges that the birthparents may no longer lay claim to their child. The rights to the child have been legally removed, which makes the child available for adoption. Thus, effectively, the birthmother relinquishes *rights* to the child rather than the child itself. The adoption process becomes a transaction in parental rights to a child (Demian, 2004). This cultural logic enables the process of creating new ties between a child and parents that are not biologically related.

This discourse of rights not only serves to ameliorate the tension between substance and rights, it also masks more socially difficult and controversial issues. Demian suggests a discourse of ‘rights’ hedges debate about the commoditisation of children on the global market (2004, p. 100). For example, when adoption is seen as transactions of children rather than transactions of rights *to* the child, adoption becomes a less valid way to create a family and instead becomes an ethically unacceptable practice. Children become commodities ‘for sale’ and family ties become subject to marketing influences and commercialisation. This obviously sits uncomfortably in a cultural ideology, developed only relatively recently in the 20th century, which locates family in the personalised sphere of the
home, a symbol of love, nurturance and safety, as opposed to market forces and the industrialised workplace (Bottomley, 1983).

Thus, in order to avoid representing adoption as a business practice that involves transactions of children, adoption is reframed as a transaction of rights. Through a discourse of rights, substance and rights are separated. The relationship between the birthparents and their child is made into a relationship consisting of substance alone. From a legal perspective, the child is no longer their child because they are no longer legally bound to the child. The adoptive parents receive the relinquished rights to the child and through a court of law; a relationship between the adoptive parents and the child is formed. This maintains a culturally constructed dichotomy between biology and culture. It also upholds the high social value placed on substance or biological ties because what is actually being transferred are parental rights to a child rather than the child itself. In other words, the rights to the child are viewed as separable and transferable while the child’s biogenetic substance remains.

**Challenging biological frameworks in the ‘new kinship studies’**

What these tensions show is that the opposition of legal ties to biological ties presents a problem that is at the core of a particular understanding of family belonging and kinship. Based on the idea that biological ties between parents and children are meant to be everlasting as opposed to contractual ties such as the ones formed by marriage, the validity of the relationship between adoptive parents
and adopted children is questioned. How can a parent-child relationship be formed out of ‘paper’ instead of ‘blood’? How can an adoptive relationship be made into something as ‘real’ as a biological relationship? These questions present a cultural conundrum, which is at odds with the idea that a child can be “as-if-begotten but not born” (Modell, 1994, p. 227).

From one perspective, adoption challenges biological interpretations of the family because it presents an alternative way to create families that are not formed by biogenetic substance. However, as Weston points out, adoption also confirms biological models of relatedness because adoptive relations are still founded on the idea of a “culturally standardized image of a family assembled around a core of parent(s) plus children” (1991, p. 38). Specifically, this argument maintains that even though birth or biological parents are replaced with a new set of parents, this does not serve to devalue biological ties. By creating new kin ties between adoptive parent(s) and the adopted child ‘as if’ it were a relationship connected by biogenetic substance, the legal process actually upholds a cultural preference for biological relatedness. In this sense, adoptive kinship does not completely challenge biological ties because it supports a cultural preference for ‘blood’ relatives rather than offering an alternative that does not appeal to “procreative interpretations of kinship” (Weston, 1991, p. 38).

Basing her argument on Schneider’s theories, Modell (2002) claims adoptive kinship is ‘fictive’ in the sense that it is not founded on ‘real’ biological ties but is made ‘real’ in comparison to biological ties. She uses the term ‘fictive kinship’ to
argue that adoptive kinship can never be biological kinship because it does not have the biogenetic substance that biological kin relations have:

'Blood' is a reminder that adoption is a paper kinship. The application forms filled out by adoptive parents, the surrender papers signed by a birthparent and the amended birth certificate all assert the fictive in this kind of kinship. And fictive here connotes "unreal" rather than "created." A paper parenthood cannot compare with the "physical realities" of conception, creation, gestation, and birth, not in American culture anyway (1994, p. 226).

Here, it is important to point out that Modell (1994) does not use the idea of 'fictive kinship' to suggest that adoptive parents perceive their relationship to their adopted children to be fictional. Rather, she elicits the term 'fictive kinship' to show that as adoptive parents, the relationship to their children is perceived to be 'unreal' in a particular cultural ideology that privileges biological relatedness as the ideal form of kinship.

Howell admits that biology is still a dominant point of reference by which kin relations are judged because “adoption is meaningless without a biological model of kinship as a reference” (2006, p. 38). For example, adoptive parents often compare the adoption process with the biological process of pregnancy and birth. This is achieved by using tropes of biological conception to describe the adoption process that coincide with terms used for procreative kinship, such as pre-pregnancy, pregnancy and birth (Howell, 2006, pp. 70-71). For instance, once the prospective adoptive parents have been approved to adopt a child, they enter the gestation period or "pregnancy" as they wait for news from the adoption agency that they have been allocated a child. Through these stages, adoptive parents experience a “symbolic pregnancy and birth events for themselves, they normalise
their own experiences and forge ties with their child which are analogous to blood ties elsewhere in society” (Howell, 2006, p. 70). These comparisons between the adoption process and biological procreation stress the high cultural value placed on biological relatedness. Therefore, it is not surprising that adoptive parents use biological tropes to lend validation to their relationship with the child they have adopted.

However, Howell is also (2001, 2006) critical of the dichotomy between ‘fictive kinship’ and ‘real’ biological kinship. Conversely, Modell’s approach draws too heavily on positioning adoptive kinship in opposition to biological kinship rather than seeing adoptive kinship as something that can exist without relying on Schneider’s dichotomy of nature versus law. Howell suggests that adoption can allow for critical interpretations of biology rather than relying on biological kinship as a model by which all ‘other’ kinships are compared. This shifts the perspective from adoption viewed through a biological lens toward viewing adoption as an interpretation of biology.

This view of adoptive kinship is part of a new shift in kinship analysis, which contests interpretations of kinship by de-centring biology and making space for multiple forms of kin relations (Sarah Franklin & Susan McKinnon, 2001). This alternative view is articulated in feminist studies and the new kinship studies in anthropology, especially in relation to new reproductive technologies (Sarah Franklin & Susan McKinnon, 2001; Strathern, 1992, 2005; Weston, 1991). Understanding adoption as an interpretation of the dominant Euro-American
kinship ideology places adoptive kinship as valid on its own terms, as another way of *enacting* kinship. Proponents of the new kinship studies in anthropology endeavour to “open up the category of kinship and examine how it can be put to use in ways that destabilise the ‘obviousness’ of its conventional referents, while expanding the scope of its purchase as well” (Sarah Franklin & Susan McKinnon, 2001, p. 7). This approach presents an opportunity to analyse kinship in a more open and generative way and offers new insights for studying how adoption broadens understanding of kinship. Rather than trying to fit adoptive kinship to a pre-existing kinship structure, the new kinship studies allow a more open understanding of how adoptive kinship *interprets* and ‘reconfigures’ the kind of dominant kinship ideology put forth by Schneider.

Whereas Schneider emphasised a more bounded dichotomy between biology and choice by evoking the orders of nature and law to explain how relations are constructed, Dolgin points out that although this dichotomy exists, “the two notions represent contrasting options and are actually used in ways that variously ignore, subvert, elaborate or reconstruct the history of families” (1997, p. 15). She argues that the boundaries of biology and choice are not fixed and instead, with changing ideas about family, these boundaries become flexible. Similarly, Carsten problematises this dichotomy and suggests a more “processual view of kinship and personhood” (1995, p. 223). Based on her research on the island of Langkawi in Malaysia, she describes how Malays on the island conceptualise kinship as relations “derived both from acts of procreation and from living and eating together. [In this context] it makes little sense in indigenous terms to label some of
these activities as social and others as biological” (1995, p. 236). Naturalised
categories that dichotomise biology and choice are therefore not culturally
universal.

By looking at adoptive kinship as an *interpretation* of kinship on its own merit,
other processes involved in creating adoptive kin ties can be considered. Howell’s
(2006) research is one of recent studies that critically analyse different forms of
kinship that challenge the dichotomy between biology and culture; nature and
nurture (Sarah Franklin & Susan McKinnon, 2001). She analyses the ways
Norwegian adoptive parents negotiate the dichotomy of biology and choice
through other processes that she claims have been overlooked in understanding
adoptive kinship. Her research outlines two processes involved in establishing
adoptive kin ties, “kinning” and “transubstantiation” (Howell, 2003, 2006).

Through a process of “kinning” or “self-conscious kinship” (Howell, 2001),
adoptive parents work to reposition the child within the Norwegian historical and
socio-cultural context. They do this by reinforcing the child’s position in the family
while simultaneously backgrounding the child’s connection to the birth family and
birth country. The “ultimate aim is to kin the adopted child into his or her parents’
network” (Howell, 2003, p. 471). By considering the process of ‘kinning’ we can
see that adopting a child goes beyond the confines of the bureaucratic and judicial
processes.
Additionally, through a process of “transubstantiation”, Norwegian adoptive parents highlight their adopted child’s new position in their family, perhaps most poignantly exemplified by the *bunad*. The *bunad*, the Norwegian national costume, is “the ultimate symbol of belonging to a place” or a particular locality and it represents “the strong associations made in Norwegian cultural life between place of origin, kin relatedness, and identity” (Howell, 2003, p. 474). By dressing the child in a *bunad*, the adoptive parents actively incorporate the child into Norwegian history and culture, thus imparting a sense of shared Norwegian identity. The *bunad* acts as a way to “symbolically ‘plant’ the child in the soil of their [adoptive parents’] ancestors” (Howell, 2006, p. 75). The child is thus repositioned as the adoptive parents’ child, their child. In other words, the relinquished child/adopted child becomes son or daughter to the (adoptive) parents. This is what Howell refers to when she makes the distinction between transformation and “transubstantiation”. She claims that “their [transnationally adopted children’s] incorporation into their parents’ kin transcends the constraints of the blood tie while the outward appearance remains. The substance (biological body) remains; the social essence (being, self) is changed” (2006, p. 69). The biological substance remains the same, but the child’s self or personhood is changed to remake the child as the child of the adoptive parents.

This discussion has demonstrated that by unpacking the ‘common sense’ ideas that define the adoption process, complex cultural assumptions unique to a Euro-American construction of adoption are revealed. In particular, assumptions about parenthood and a kinship ideology that values biological ties over other forms
demonstrate the tensions involved when negotiating two sets of parents, rights to the child, and the task of creating new adoptive kin ties.

Embedded in this process is a sense of loss, especially a loss of kin ties to the birth family. Because of this, adoptees sometimes feel that they lost a part of their identity. This is exacerbated by the fact that a connection to their birth origins is hidden away in adoption files and contact is cut off between birth parents and the adoptee. This sense of loss is part of a kinship ideology that replaces parents rather than fully allowing and accepting that there can be more than one mother and more than one father. As outlined in the following section, which looks at the Australian adoption context from an historical perspective, measures of secrecy involving access to birth information and birth relatives, further contributed to a sense of loss.

Situating adoption in a socio-cultural and historical context

Australian context

Within this overview, I will focus on the Australian context by highlighting some important changes in adoption policies, social attitudes toward adoption and the political and historical circumstances that helped to bring about those changes. Finally, I will discuss how transnational adoption emerged in Australia as an alternative to domestic adoption and the changes that occurred to make transnational adoption more widespread.
Adoption in Australia has changed due to shifting attitudes and public policies within Australian society as well as international influences. For example, in the first half of the 20th century, Australian society placed “primary emphasis ... on uniformity, conformity and homogeneity” (Melleuish, 1998, p. 12). Emphasis was placed on the self-sufficiency of the nation, society and the family. The Australian family was meant to represent or underpin the nation (Melleuish, 1998, p. 23). This meant that the nuclear family was constructed not only as an important social institution but also a vital national institution.

The emergence of the nuclear family ties in with the historical changes of the late 19th century leading up to the nation-building project of the early 20th century. For example, it was not until the late 19th century that the nuclear family became defined as the prototypical family (Gilding, 1991). This was a result of a variety of social factors such as a decrease in household size, decrease in domestic servants, and an increased separation and distinction between home and work as household production and income moved outside of the home and into the outside world of factory work (Gilding, 1991). This coincided with a “national efficiency' movement in business and politics” with the nuclear family at the centre (Gilding, 1991, p. 41). Thus, the nuclear family was the prime representation of national efficiency because it compartmentalised home and work along gendered lines (Dolgin, 1997, p. 25; Gilding, 1991).
As an exemplar of national aims, the nuclear family as well as other “various components of the nation were encouraged to seek harmony and unity—to sink their differences in the pursuit of a common goal” (Melleuish, 1998, p. 23). Families that existed outside the perceived norm of the two-parent, two-child nuclear family were marked as ‘broken families’ (Gilding, 1991). As a result, single mothers were stigmatised because they gave birth to a child outside the socially acceptable institution of marriage or were otherwise, divorced. Within this social and political climate of homogeneity, conformity and unity, adoption could be seen as a threat to the social fabric because it meant that a family had previously been ‘broken’. Thus, using Gilding’s (1991, p. 121) argument, adoption could be perceived as the aftermath of a ‘broken’ family with the understanding that family was constructed as biological, natural, and nuclear.

Adoption presented a challenge to the unity of the nuclear family by contesting the biogenetic ties that were seen to bind it. This challenged the presumed biological basis of family composition. As Dolgin points out, until the late 1960s, families were unreservedly “understood as predicated upon the substantial (biological) links among those people [within families]. These links were consistently understood to make families families” (original emphasis) (1997, p. 28). Consequently, adoption also exposed the fact that biological ties between mother and child could be ‘broken’, which was counterintuitive to the belief that the symbolic ties between mother and child are supposed to last forever.
Therefore, legislative efforts—as part of the overall “regulation of [the dominant view of the] Australian family” (Gilding, 1991, p. 10)—were made to hide the fact that adoptive ties were being created at the perceived expense of the biogenetic stuff of family unity and certainty. For example, Frame (1999) discusses how adoption legislation during this period emphasised secrecy of identifying information, especially secrecy between birthparents, adoptive parents and adoptee. These secrecy measures were thought to be in the best interests of those involved in the adoption. Frame suggests that the rationality behind this seemed to have been based on:

A dual fear that the child would be presented with a conflict if the birthparents came forward; the authority and status of the adoptive parents with respect to the adopted child would be challenged by the presence of the birthparents; and, the birthparents might wish to regain custody of the adopted child at some point subsequent to relinquishment. In effect, the objective [of the adoption legislation] was to create and perpetuate an environment in the adopted situation which was as near as possible to the ‘normal’ situation. Furthermore, the secrecy provisions were inviolable (1999, p. 142).

The adoption legislation centred on maintaining a secret wall guarding the fact that the adoptive family was not a socially ‘normal’ family in the sense that it was not a nuclear family created by biological ties.

Because the nuclear family unit had been constructed as something ‘natural’ and timeless, founded on the institution of marriage, a child born outside of that social perimeter was considered to be ‘illegitimate’. For similar reasons, a single parent family was also not socially acceptable. Because of the high social value placed on the biologically formed nuclear family, legislative efforts were made to try to
regulate deviance from the norm of the biological family; this included the ‘problem of illegitimacy’.

Historically, most ex-nuptial births were to women who were disadvantaged in some way, such as from financial difficulties, less access to birth prevention information and the high costs of contraceptives. In particular, contraceptives were largely controlled and monopolised by doctors (Gilding, 1991). Adoptions usually occurred as a result of the social stigma placed on unmarried mothers and their ‘illegitimate’ children. Gilding cites the late 1940s as the beginning of a period of ‘permissiveness’, which resulted in a double increase of ex-nuptial births among women, aged 15-19 (1991, p. 116). The general public met this increased incidence of single mothers with resistance in an effort to uphold the nuclear family. The existence of unmarried mothers was considered a disruption to the unified façade presented by a nuclear family unit.

Because of this stigma, these women often moved to another town to hide their pregnancy; their pregnant body was a mark of difference and shame. On the ABC television program, Compass, Hannah, who relinquished her child for adoption, related her story of the social stigma and contempt that she experienced:

I remember walking through the streets of Sydney when I was very pregnant with my hand tucked in my pocket, my left hand away from public view so that people couldn’t see that I actually wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. Because on the few occasions when people did notice that I wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, the looks that I received, well they really had to be seen to be believed (“Pregnant Pause,” 2006).
Once a woman gave birth, the perceived danger of being ‘found out’ was not over. Quite often, the child was relinquished for adoption, against the will of the mother. Furthermore, in order to replicate a semblance of a ‘natural’ family, the adoption was kept secret from the child and from the rest of society. At the time, this arrangement of secrecy was considered ‘in the best interests of the child’ and for all those involved in the adoption. This attitude maintained that secrecy was in the best interests of everyone but in fact it was an effort to maintain the social and moral continuity of a very specific idea of the family. Through the process of socially manufacturing ‘biological’ families, the child was proclaimed ‘as if born’ to the adoptive family, while simultaneously de-emphasising the ‘as if’ qualifier; this was necessary for preserving the biological premise for parenthood (Modell, 1994, 2002).

Secrecy in adoptions was designed to keep the ‘as if’ factor hidden. Secret measures were possible because most adoptions between 1896 and 1964 were privately organised through intermediaries such as doctors and clergymen instead of through state recognised adoption agencies (Boss, 1992). Private adoptions were more common during this period when the family was viewed as the self-reliant stronghold capable of organising its own matters (Melleuish, 1998). As a result, state involvement was de-emphasised, which also minimised the extent of state legislation, including adoption legislation.

Overall, secrecy measures and the constant presence of social disapproval affected how ‘illegitimacy’ was treated and moreover, how adoption came to be seen as
'second-best' and as a ‘solution’ to the ‘problem of illegitimacy’ (Modell, 2002). This characterisation of adoption as ‘second-best’ is largely due to the social attitudes and cultural ideology preoccupied with the preferred way of validating and forming family ties through shared biological substance. These assumptions about the perceived universality and natural state of the nuclear family connected by biogenetic ties have rendered adoptive families created by contractual ties substandard rather than valid in their own right. Modell (2002) argues that these attitudes and assumptions toward adoptive families in comparison to biological families have affected how the experiences of those involved in adoption, such as adoptees, are influenced and shaped by this particular kinship ideology. Thus, attitudes that emphasise secrecy and shame have affected how adoptees are made to feel, as ‘almost but not quite as good’ as a biological child.

**Changing adoption policies and the emergence of transnational adoption**

From the mid-1960s onwards, Australia underwent a period of major social and political changes and these changes subsequently affected attitudes toward adoption. In particular, these changes were reflected in adoption policies as emphasis shifted away from policies that centred on secrecy toward more open adoption practices. These changes did not happen quickly as adoption was mainly seen as a way to uphold the idea of the nuclear family by keeping the adoption secret, cutting off contact with the birth parents and sealing off the adoption records. So pervasive were the efforts to maintain secrecy, it was as if the adoption never happened. These policies were rationalised as being in the best interests of
the birth parents and the adoptive parents, suggesting that a ‘clean-break’ from the past was also beneficial for the adoptee’s adjustment into the adoptive family.

The New South Wales *Adoption of Children Act* in 1965 marked a shift toward upholding ‘the best interests of the child’ or what was known as the ‘paramountcy principle’ (Boss, 1992). However, due to continuing social stigma against single mothers at this time, secrecy provisions—namely sealed records—continued to remain in place and the move toward more open adoptions and the rights of the child was a gradual process. As was stated in the 1984 *Review of Adoption Policy and Practice* in N.S.W., the ‘paramountcy principle’ was more often “honoured in the breach than in the observance—so all pervading was the acceptance of the overriding rights of adults” (New South Wales Parliament, 1985, p. 7).

The 1970s and 1980s brought significant social change especially as birthmothers and adoptees began to protest against the heavy fog of secrecy surrounding adoption practice. It coincided with a shift toward ‘new individualism’, which portrayed the “‘new individual [as] rational, autonomous and emancipated from the constraints of the past” (Melleuish, 1998, p. 40). The ‘new individual’ was someone who was mobile and actively working toward self-fulfilment by asserting self-expression. It was in this context that the adoption movement became more active. Interest groups were crucial advocates behind changes to adoption policy, such as the Association of Relinquishing Mothers (ARMS) and Adoption Jigsaw in Australia and the Adoptee Liberation Movement of America (ALMA), organised by adoptee Florence Fisher in the United States. They worked to raise public
awareness of the rights of birthmothers and adoptees (New South Wales Parliament, 1985). Importantly, they worked to challenge the ‘clean-break’ principle which was foundational to adoption policy, especially regarding access to adoption records.

This principle maintained that adoption was a ‘clean-break’ from the past, meaning adoptees and birthparents should forget about what happened prior to adoption. The birthmothers especially, were told to forget that they ever had a child and to move on with their lives as if their pregnancy, childbirth and relinquishment never happened (Fessler, 2007; New South Wales Parliament, 1985). For adoptees, the sealed records also had the effect of saying that they were being given the opportunity to begin again by being ‘born’ into their adoptive family and as a result, it was assumed that they would have no desire to know about their life prior to adoption or want to search for their birthparents. Thus, the ‘clean-break’ principle formed the basis and rationale for sealed records and secrecy surrounding the adoption process (Modell, 2002).

Due to these lobbying efforts and within the context of broader societal change, the mid-1980s brought about adoption reform that began to consider possibilities for open adoption practices. In Australia, acts\textsuperscript{10} were passed in a move away from secret adoptions, which emphasised dialogue between those groups involved in the adoption process, including birthmothers and adoptees. For example, the New South Wales Adoption Information Act 1990 (AIA 1990) included measures

\textsuperscript{10}Examples of these acts are the N.S.W. Adoption Information Act, 1990; QLD Adoption of Children Act Amendment Act, 1990; S.A. Adoption Act, 1988; and the VIC Adoption Act, 1984 (Boss, 1992).
allowing adoptees to have greater access to adoption information such as original birth certificates (Boss, 1992, p. 8)\textsuperscript{11}. The \textit{AIA 1990} also set up a “Reunion and Information Register” (New South Wales Legislation, 1990). Part 4, sections 30-34 outline the main objectives of this register, which is to facilitate reunions and the exchange of information and messages mainly between birth parents and adoptees (New South Wales Legislation, 1990). Debates continue to discuss the meaning of ‘open adoptions’ and the practical extent of openness considering the interests of all those involved.

To understand what helped to bring about these changing attitudes toward adoption and the rights and interests of those involved, it is again, important to look at the broader context. Changes were occurring regarding attitudes toward the family allowing for inclusion of single parent families and de-facto families (Gilding, 1991). In the late 1960s, Australian women had increased access to birth control pills and as a result, there was an overall decline in fertility (Gilding, 1991). At the same time, single parent families were becoming more common and visible and in 1973, welfare benefits were extended to single mothers, which created a more viable option for single mothers to raise their children rather than relinquishing them for adoption (Gilding, 1991, p. 120).

In this atmosphere of social change, those who were excluded due to a perceived ‘threat’ to the ‘Australian family’ such as unmarried mothers and divorced families “found a voice … [as social movements] launched a critique of the family” (Gilding, 1
\textsuperscript{11}Legislation regarding access to information in other States is similar to the New South Wales legislation.)
Therefore, during this period, the interests of individual groups of people were voiced in their demands for social change and recognition. There was an increased focus on the individual and self-empowerment and expression.

Overall, the move toward more open adoptions was shaped by changing social attitudes regarding individual rights, increasing recognition of diverse family formations, and social movements for women and other marginalised members of society. This included less stigma toward unmarried mothers as single parents became more visible\textsuperscript{12}, access to contraceptives and sex education, and assistance programs for single parents (Boss, 1992). These factors are also attributed to a gradual decline in the number of children available for domestic adoption. This in turn is related to the subsequent increase and interest in transnational adoption as the number of prospective adoptive parents has not decreased (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, 2005).

While these factors have undoubtedly contributed to a shift toward transnational adoption, there are also other reasons why domestic adoptions came to be seen as less ‘ideal’. A forthcoming study by a Melbourne-based academic research team about adoption in Australia points to issues that are often overlooked.\textsuperscript{13} For example, at a recent adoption research seminar, Professor Denise Cuthbert—one of the chief investigating the research project—argued that the form of adoption,  

\textsuperscript{12}The concept of ‘broken families’ became less shameful in the 1960s due to the increasing divorce rates and the increase of single parent families (Gilding, 1991, p. 120).
\textsuperscript{13}This adoption research is an Australian Research Council funded project titled, ‘The Search for Family: A History of Adoption in Australia’. The chief investigators are Professor Marian Quaity (Monash University), Professor Denise Cuthbert (Monash University) and Professor Shurlee Swain (Australian Catholic University).
perceived as ‘open’ or ‘closed’, was a major factor for prospective adoptive parents to turn toward intercountry adoption (Cuthbert, 2009). There was a perceived threat associated with domestic adoption that birth parents would want their child back or desire more contact than the adoptive parents wanted. Conversely, adopting a child from overseas was seen as a ‘closed deal’ because the birth parents were physically and geographically far away. This coincides with the ‘clean break’ rationalisation discussed previously in relation to early state adoption legislation in Australia.

In general, transnational adoption only became a significant social practice in Australia after the Vietnam War. During the Vietnam War, people became increasingly aware of the atrocities and devastation of the war through media reports and televised images. In this volatile atmosphere of social change at home and abroad, transnational adoption became a way for prospective adoptive parents to fulfil their desire for a child while simultaneously feeling like they were doing something to counteract the atrocities of war (Harvey, 1981; Williams, 2003).

Unlike the United States, which had been involved in transnational adoption since World War II and especially after the Korean War, transnational adoption did not become widespread in Australia until after the Vietnam War (Harvey, 1981). For Australia, even in the early 1970s, “adopting a child from a different culture and country was usually the exception [and it was] still considered strange by many people” (Harvey, 1981, p. 38). Although there were a few transnational adoptions taking place through private arrangements, they did not really become more
common until Operation Babylift in 1975.\textsuperscript{14} ‘Operation Babylift’ was a large-scale effort by countries in ‘the West’, which included the United States, Australia, Canada and countries in Europe, to evacuate Vietnamese war orphans from Saigon. In April 1975, two airlifts from Vietnam to Australia carried 292 orphans, 59 of which were sent to New South Wales. Of these 59, 14 children still needed homes; the interest in adopting these children was so high that “over 4000 sets of adoption application papers were dispatched from telephone enquiries” for these 14 children (Harvey, 1981, p. 41). In the years following Operation Babylift, transnational adoption applications increased as more people chose to adopt from overseas.

Since Operation Babylift, transnational adoptions have increased as domestic adoptions have decreased. In 2004-05, 74\% of the total 585 adoptions were from overseas, the largest number on record and an increase from 17\% of 370 in 2003-04 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005). The gradual increase of overseas adoptions and the decrease of domestic adoption are due to a number of factors. This includes some of the reasons discussed earlier such as increased availability of contraceptives and government welfare payments for single parents. This made it more viable for parents to keep and care for their children. As a result, there has been a decline over the years of ‘ideal adoptable children’ mainly

\textsuperscript{14}For more detailed studies of international adoptions from Vietnam to Australia see research conducted by Harvey (1981) and Williams (2003).
healthy white infants. Therefore, many prospective adoptive parents in Australia began to look overseas for available children.\textsuperscript{15}

After Operation Babylift, adopting overseas became more common as an option to family planning. Consequently, other countries were made available for Australian families, such as South Korea. According to a report by the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) in South Korea, adoptions from South Korea to Australia began in 1969 with 3 adoptions but it was not until the mid-1980s that adoptions significantly increased to 100-300 each year (Hübinette, n.d.). Since 1969, there have been over 3000 transnational adoptions from Korea to Australia (Hübinette, n.d.). The next section will discuss the history of adoption from South Korea and some of the cultural and social reasons why adoptions from South Korea have persisted for as long as they have.

\textbf{South Korean context}

This section begins by briefly discussing the emergence of transnational adoptions from South Korea by explaining some of the reasons why it began and why it continues today. Secondly, in order to highlight the cultural specificity of adoption, comparisons are made between Korean domestic adoption practices and Australian adoption practices. This also helps to understand that transnational adoption is historically, a relatively new social practice for South Korea, since it

\textsuperscript{15}As previously mentioned, Professor Denise Cuthbert (2009) proposed that the preference for transnational adoption could be more a preference for ‘closed’ adoption due to an imagined finality that this kind of adoption would offer compared to ‘open’ adoption practices in domestic adoption.
only began in the 1950s as a result of the Korean War and as a way to try to ‘deal
with’ the “growing problem of unwanted ... [multiracial] children” (Sarri, Baik, &
Bombyk, 1998, p. 87). Adopting someone with a different ancestral lineage was
uncommon and so transnational adoption and current efforts by the Korean
government to encourage Koreans to domestically adopt across bloodlines
highlight the tensions involved relating to Korean family and identity. This
discussion also provides some background knowledge for Chapter 6, which
considers how the South Korean government’s approach to overseas Koreans and
Korean identity affects the ways Korean adoptees are viewed and the kinds of
tensions surrounding what it means to ‘be Korean’.

**South Korea and the practice of transnational adoption**

Transnational adoptions from South Korea began in 1953 toward the end of the
Korean War when United States military and government personnel based in
South Korea were allowed to adopt South Korean orphans (Lovelock, 2000, p.
912). Since the Korean War and primarily through efforts by Christian evangelists,
Bertha and Harry Holt who later formed the adoption agency, Holt International,
South Korea has historically been the main sending country of its children to other
parts of the world.

South Korea continues to send children to adoptive families in receiving countries
for a number of reasons. One of the main reasons is due to racial and social
discrimination toward single mothers, multiracial children and orphans. Initially,
adoptions from Korea began as a way to address the presence of multiracial children—reminders of the U.S. military occupation before, during and after the Korean War. Multiracial children were “considered by Korea itself as unfit for a country perceiving itself to be racially homogenous” (Hübinette, 2003, p. 2). This public perception, Hübinette points out, is still present in Korea today:

International adoption is still used by Korea as an easy way of getting rid of unwanted children, whether stigmatised by race, by disability, or by illegitimacy, even though the country is now part of the industrialised world, both with a falling birth rate and an unbalanced sex ratio (2003, p. 3).

Additionally, adoption, both domestic and transnational, has provided an easy and cheap way (“Baby Exporting Nation: The Two Faces of Inter-Country Adoption,” 2005; Hübinette, 2005) for the Korean government to deal with increasing numbers of orphaned children in state institutions. Reliance on transnational adoption as a convenient crutch gives the government an excuse to avoid thoroughly addressing entrenched social issues that contribute to the continued flow of transnational adoptions.

Racial discrimination continues to play a role in the continuous flow of transnational adoptions from South Korea each year. In the 1970s and 1980s, poverty and discrimination against single mothers were the main reasons for children being adopted to other countries (H. Kim, 2007, p. 137). Since the 1980s, full-blooded Korean children born mainly to young single mothers represent the majority of overseas adoptions (H. Kim, 2007, pp. 137-139). Hübinette argues that transnational adoptions from Korea can no longer be justified based on “self orientalizing images of Confucian thinking and bloodline clannishness excuses
which are still sometimes heard” (2005, p. 243). Korea is being forced to face changes in society such as a move toward cultural and racial diversity as the number of international marriages and foreigners working in Korea increase (C. U. Cho, 2006). However, Korean society is still largely homogenous and while staunch conservative ideas regarding ‘blood purity’ are wavering, Korean identification remains entrenched in the belief of one race, one ethnicity and one culture. Professor Shin Gi Wook (2006b) makes the point that:

... historically, Koreans have not differentiated between the two [race and ethnicity]. Instead, race served as a marker that strengthened ethnic identity, which in turn was instrumental in defining the nation. Koreans thus believe that they all belong to a ‘unitary nation’ (danil minjok), one that is ethnically homogeneous and racially distinctive.

These ideas about shared blood and Korean identity have extensive implications for attitudes toward adoption outside the bloodline. In Korea, this belief in ‘one blood/one people’ impacts how adoption (ibyang [입양]) is understood, including ambivalence toward transnational Korean adoptees and why ex-nuptial children, multiracial children, and orphaned children continue to be sent overseas.

**Comparing domestic adoption practices**

While the focus of this thesis is on transnational adoption, to understand how Korean adoptees are identified in South Korean society and why South Korea continues to adopt out over 1,000 children each year, we need to look at the historical context of domestic agnatic adoption in Korea as it was shaped by a particular cultural ideology based on ‘blood’ and ancestral identity. By analysing why Koreans historically preferred agnatic adoption, the reasons why
transnational adoption began and continues today can be better understood. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparison can help to illuminate the cultural specificity of adoption in Korea and to illustrate this, comparisons will be made in relation to the Australian context.

Therefore, this discussion will focus on a specific adoption practice that is historically contextualised at a time when agnatic adoptions were more prevalent. It is important to note that current adoption practices in South Korea are changing as domestic adoptions of non-relatives, resembling that of non-relative Euro-American adoptions, are on the rise. As an example, in 2007, domestic adoptions within South Korea surpassed the number of overseas adoptions for the first time (Onishi 2008). However, these adoptions are often shrouded in secrecy in an attempt to create a kin tie that is ‘as if’ it were formed by ‘blood’ (Herskowitz, 2007)\(^\text{16}\). According to a GAIPS (Global Adoption Information & Post Service) survey, 60% of families that were surveyed want adoptions to be secret (A.R. Kim, 2008). Furthermore, the importance placed on patrilineal descent is evident by the continued pressure on women to have a son despite changes that do not require women to observe patrilocal residence (Moon, 2002, p. 81). Therefore, while I acknowledge that domestic adoption practices in South Korea are subject to change and should not be presumed to exist in a static ethnographic present, there are aspects of current adoption practices that are informed by historically situated adoption practices such as agnatic adoptions, which are worth

\(^{16}\)Secrecy surrounding domestic adoption practices may be changing as more people are willing to speak out about adoption, in particular popularised representations of Korean celebrities adopting.
considering when trying to understand different cultural perspectives and reasons for transnational adoption.

In Korea, agnatic adoption is a type of domestic adoption, where agnatic refers to those persons who are related through patrilineal descent. Thus, agnatic adoption is "the adoption of relatives related through the father's side" (Roesch-Rhomberg, 2004, p. 81). Under circumstances when a male heir is absent, a family may adopt a male who is agnatically related, "[ideally] a younger brother's elder son" (Roesch-Rhomberg, 2004, p. 87). Over the past few hundred years, this form of adoption practice was the preferred means of continuing the rule of patrilineal descent when there was not a male heir and was practiced long before the Korean peninsula was divided (C. S. Kim, 1988, p. 41). This form of adoption favours males over females and coincides with the family registry system, hojuje, that requires being able to identify ancestral lineage through patrilineal descent.

Roesch-Rhomberg refers to agnatic adoption as “institutionalised adoption” in order to emphasise that agnatic adoption is considered the standard means of adoption according to the South Korean Civil Code of 1960 and the 1990 amendment (2004, p. 85). While, cognatic adoption or the adoption of relatives through the mother's side is a form of adoption that is still practiced, it is not widely recognised by the government (Roesch-Rhomberg, 2004). My primary reason for analysing key distinguishing features of agnatic adoption or ‘institutionalised adoption’ is to show how particular adoption practices may historically have an influence on current attitudes toward transnational adoption.
In this section, I highlight four main features of Korean agnostic or ‘institutionalised’ adoption that differ from the Australian context; these are:

- The central purpose of adoption is to continue the ‘blood’ connection of the social lineage.
- Adoption acts to benefit the family in relation to a common ancestral line rather than for the benefit of an individual child within an individual nuclear family.
- The focus is parent-centred within the context of continuing ancestral bloodlines instead of child-centred within the context of individual families.
- ‘Adoptees’ are oftentimes adults who are married and have children of their own.

To begin with, because of an intense focus on ‘blood purity’, adoptions within South Korea have historically been agnostic adoptions. Since the Joseon period during the Yi dynasty (1392-1910) and the implementation of Confucian ideology, Korean society has been severely altered to fit a patriarchal worldview. This refers especially to “rules and regulations of Korean kinship—patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, patriarchal authority, primogeniture … and male preference” (C. S. Kim, 1988, p. 43). Korean agnostic or ‘institutionalised adoption’ is a way to ensure that there is a “ritual heir to succeed a sonless couple” (Roesch-Rhomberg, 2004, p. 83). This means that the purpose of ‘institutionalised adoption’ is to maintain the primogeniture line and to ensure ancestral rituals are continued in the absence of a legitimate son. Therefore, in the Korean context, ibyang is
customarily used not only as a kind of ‘blood maintenance’ to continue the primogeniture line; it is also a form of social maintenance of the patriarchal customs and beliefs.

Secondly, because adoptions in Korea are traditionally meant to ensure the blood permanence of “a primogeniture line of a clan, a lineage or a major kin group” (Roesch-Rhomberg, 2004, p. 83), the purpose of adoption shifts from individual families to families that are related to each other through a common ancestor. This understanding of adoption shifts the focus from adoption and individual identity (a concern for adoption ‘in the West’) to adoption and “ancestral identity” (Roesch-Rhomberg, 2004, p. 83). In other words, adoption is not so much concerned with individual identity or used as a way to create a single nuclear family, but a way to maintain the longevity of the group or lineage. Adoption is not just about creating familial kin ties; it is also a form of group or lineage maintenance.

Because of this focus on ancestral identity, it is in the parents’ interests to adopt so that there is a son who may continue the rituals of honouring the ancestors. Therefore, a third major aspect of ‘institutionalised adoption’ in the Korean social context is that adoption is primarily ‘parent-centred’ with the aim of preserving the ancestral bloodline (Roesch-Rhomberg, 2004, p. 83). In fact, “an adoption can be dissolved if the adoptee does not live up to the expectations of the adoptive parents” (Roesch-Rhomberg, 2004, p. 84). This differs from the ‘paramountcy principle’ in Australian legislation and international legislation, which strives to put the ‘best interests of the child’ above all other interests. The main function of
international adoption according to the UNCRC is to provide a family for a child; first within the birth country and then if there is no other option, to a family in another country. Conversely, in Korea, the purpose of agnatic adoption is to benefit the family, which also includes the importance of maintaining ancestral lineage. Therefore, the focus is shifted away from the individual person (the child in transnational adoption or the male heir in Korean agnatic adoption) to a focus on the well-being of the family and the sustainability of the entire ancestral line.

Finally, a fourth characteristic of Korean institutionalised adoption is that the ‘adoptee’ is usually an adult, rather than a child. In Euro-American adoption practice, an adoptee is always an adopted child. A person considered for adoption in Korean institutionalised adoption is someone who is socially accepted as being worthy enough to bear the weight of continuing ancestral rituals and ensuring the longevity of the ancestral line. In contrast, the child ‘adoptee’, born ‘illegitimately’ or born into material poverty, is someone considered of low social status born in socially unacceptable or unfortunate conditions. Therefore, these ‘adoptees’ do not fit the description of an “ideal adoptee ... an agnate of the same generational level as an own son would have been, preferably a brother’s son” (Roesch-Rhomberg, 2004, p. 84).

Additionally, Roesch-Rhomberg notes from the life histories she collected that an adoptee of high social standing whether it is education or wealth was preferred (2004, p. 93). Children, who are born ex-nuptially, are especially vulnerable because they have the social disadvantage of being born without a family name.
Having claim to family name largely determines social mobility and social success. The *hojeok* or family register is used “instead of a birth certificate ... when making applications for passports, visas, bank accounts or jobs” (Cooper, 2005). Therefore, children who are born outside of marriage are seen as socially ‘illegitimate’ because family name has such immense social weight.

Being born without having a legal right to a patrilineage consequently means being born outside of society. In other words, the child is not part of society because she or he was not born under the socially accepted arrangement of marriage and are therefore not recognised by society. According to the MHW, most of the children relinquished for adoption are children who have been born to unmarried mothers (Hübinette, n.d.). The very existence of these children challenges the core of a Korean Confucian focus on patrilineal descent and they are socially rejected:

> The multigenerational, patriarchal family is the cornerstone of Korean society, and a birth outside the bounds of the family is intolerable. Not only the mother, but the child, too, is marked by shame. Every Korean baby born within a legal marriage has its name entered in the family's registry, a document of lineage that is all-important in Korean economic and social life ... A baby not legally acknowledged by its father cannot be entered into the public record except as the founder of a new family, which is culturally unacceptable. The child may as well not exist (Register, 1991, p. 11).

In Australia, adoption is a process that socially constructs kinship ties between parents and children ‘as if’ they were biogenetically formed. Thus adoption becomes something that is capable of replicating blood relations.

However, for Korea, imposing a Euro-American concept of adoption that blood ties can be *made* is a contradiction that, given the context of a Korean understanding of
‘one blood’, is inherently opposed to ‘being Korean’. There is a belief that the Korean people are descended from a common mythological ancestor, Dangun Wanggeom (단군왕검), and that this forms the basis for Korean identity. Because of this association of ‘blood purity’ with ‘Koreanness’, there is very little room or tolerance for people who ‘do not fit’. Discrimination against those who do not conform to socially accepted ideas extends to those who are foreign or alien. People who do not ‘look Korean’ (even if they have Korean citizenship) or are of foreign nationality are put into the all-encompassing social category of oegukin (외국인, foreigner) opposed to hangukmin (한국인, Korean people).

However, while foreigners who are not biologically Korean can more easily be dismissed and categorised as ‘other’, those who are ‘partially Korean’ present a social conundrum. Multiracial Koreans such as the children who were fathered by foreign soldiers present a frustrating and challenging dilemma to the ‘one blood’ belief that cannot accept their existence. Therefore, it is not surprising that adoptions from Korea began during the Korean War as a result of Korean children who were socially rejected because of their multiracial appearance.

Part of the reason why transnational adoptions from South Korea continue today is because of a stubborn adherence to an imagined Korean society that is defined by racial homogeneity. Other factors related to racial homogeneity and patriarchal values have also contributed to the increasing number of children relinquished for

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17 This mythological foundation for Korean identity is discussed in further detail in Chapter 6.
adoption or placed in foster homes. Admittedly, while South Korea is no longer dominated by a poverty-stricken economy,

... factors such as ... rapid industrialisation, uneven economic development, patriarchal attitudes about women's sexuality, residual gender ideologies that are in contradiction with liberal sexual practices, and ... [the] IMF crisis serve to perpetuate the social conditions that contribute to the abandonment or relinquishment of children in South Korea (E. Kim, 2005, p. 56).

These social impediments exist and need to be seriously addressed and worked through to challenge the reasons why Korean children are adopted domestically as well as transnationally. There is no excuse for neglecting to address these issues and avoidance should not justify the unchallenged continuance of transnational adoption from South Korea in lieu of providing adequate social welfare support for families, especially unmarried mothers, so that they can keep their children.

**Challenging social attitudes and public perceptions**

While the government has made an effort to openly address adoption, the feeling is that efforts have been made out of national interests rather than out of interests of social welfare, a typical phenomenon of countries involved in transnational adoption (Lovelock, 2000, p. 911). In 2000, South Korea had “the lowest social welfare spending of any OECD country” (E. Kim, 2005, p. 58). In 2001, although Korea’s GDP ranked 9th of the thirty OECD members, the public social expenditure percentage ranked second at 6.1% of the GDP, barely ahead of Mexico at 5.1%; this is 14.8% below the OECD average (OECD, 2006). Today, one example of poor social welfare spending by the central government is evident by the increasing number of children institutionalised in orphanages. The number of children in
orphanages has increased with “17,675 children in institutional care in 2004, compared to 17,342 children in 2002” (Tran, 2006). This increase in numbers is due partly to inadequate funding for individual foster care and the Ministry of Health and Welfare’s\(^\text{18}\) transfer of child welfare jurisdiction to local governments, which has left local governments with the responsibility to provide child welfare services with insufficient funding.\(^\text{19}\)

Therefore, in spite of South Korea’s economic success, social welfare spending is left wanting. Inadequate social welfare spending and the central government’s overall lack of attention to child welfare and the social issues that create the conditions for more children being placed in orphanages have contributed to the steady flow of children being adopted to other countries. In Australia, according to 2004-05 statistics, 22% of adoptions came from South Korea, just behind China (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005, p. 13). Since the inception of South Korea’s transnational adoption program, more than 170,000 children have been placed in adoptive families in other countries in Europe, North America and Oceania (Selman, 2007).

The practice of transnational adoptions from South Korea has had its share of international criticism, especially during the Seoul Olympics of 1988 when South Korea was placed under intense scrutiny. There were accusations from North Korea that South Korea was “exporting” its babies, and other countries also

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\(^{18}\) MHW is now known as the Ministry for Health, Welfare and Family Affairs (MIHWAF).

\(^{19}\) For example, “over the last five years the number of children going into foster care has increased. In 2004 there were 10,198 foster children, compared to 1,722 in 2000” (Tran, 2006).
questioned why an international adoption program was still necessary given South Korea’s strengthening economy. At the time, South Korea was the country with the highest number of children sent to receiving countries (Selman, 2002). Under this heavy criticism, South Korea pledged to phase out its international program (Lewin, 1990). While the number of adoptions did actually decrease, with the IMF crisis in 1997, the South Korean government decided to increase the number of children to be adopted overseas. Only recently, in 2007, transnational adoptions decreased to just over 1,000 as domestic adoptions in South Korea overtook the number of transnational adoptions for the first time (Onishi, 2008).

Currently, South Korea is working on promoting domestic adoptions in an attempt to close its international adoption program again, this time by 2012 (Onishi, 2008). For example, effective 2007, the MHW declared that a 2 million won stipend for administrative fees and a 100,000-won monthly allowance would be given to families who choose to domestically adopt until the child is 18 years old (Park, 2006). Additionally, single parents are now allowed to adopt. This is partly due to the increase in single parent households alongside increasing divorce rates (Rahn, 2007). However, despite this change, single parent households continue to face social prejudice and discrimination (Rahn, 2007).

While government initiatives have been made toward promoting domestic adoption, what is often overlooked are the single mothers who face social stigmatisation and poverty in which adoption is often the only ‘option’ for them. Serious difficulties remain for single mothers who may wish to keep their children
but are disadvantaged economically and socially. In 2004, 90% of children relinquished for adoption were from single mothers (Rahn, 2005). Recently, according to Korean Foster Care Association President Park Young-sook, the government has increased stipends to help single mothers raise their children to 100,000 won, on par with the monthly amount given to parents who choose to domestically adopt (The Hankyoreh, 2009). Additionally, there are more ‘unwed’ mothers’ homes opening but it is still inadequate to meet the needs of women who face shame from their families and are ostracised without a place to live.

While these adoption legislative measures are positive, more needs to be done to support women and to educate the public about these discriminations in order to work toward facilitating greater acceptance and incorporation of family diversity in Korean society. Rather than only boosting financial incentives for domestic adoption, more effort needs to be made to help single mothers to care for their children as a viable option; this includes raising social awareness. Recently, adoptee-led organisations such as TRACK (Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea) and ASK (Adoptee Solidarity Korea) alongside other non-governmental organisations that support unmarried mothers and alternatives to adoption, gathered to raise awareness of the social inequalities that these women face and to garner support from the government to do more for them (The Hankyoreh, 2009). This glimpse into the current state of social welfare and social attitudes in South Korea demonstrate that this need is gradually being acknowledged and supported by the government, which is positive, but this needs
to continue to gain momentum in order to ensure that single mothers that wish to keep their children may do so as a socially viable and financially secure option.

Additionally, raising public awareness through education is necessary to work toward social acceptance of children who are part of single parent families, especially children with different cultural heritages. Attitudes toward those with a multicultural background are slowly changing toward increased acceptance, which indicate the overall changes that Korea is facing. For instance, the number of international marriages has increased, especially in rural areas where there are significantly more males than females (Y. J. Lee, Seol, & Cho, 2006). In 2005, there were 43,121 international marriages, an increase of 21.6 percent from 2004 (C. U. Cho, 2006). Additionally, the National Police Agency has said that it will allow multiracial Koreans to serve in the police force beginning in 2007 (R. Kim, 2006). Furthermore, those born after 1987 are allowed to enter the military under revisions made by the Military Manpower Administration to allow multiracial Koreans (Jin, 2006). However, none have submitted applications because racial discrimination against multiracial people still dominates Korean society (Yahoo! Singapore News, 2006). These changes are part of a gradual process that hopefully will build upon each other and eventually achieve wider acceptance and understanding of people with diverse backgrounds.
Conclusion

Transnational adoption involves complex social, political, historical and cultural intersections which impact those involved at the crossroads of transnational adoption processes. Adoptees, in particular, are at the centre of adoption discourse. They are the focus in a whole range of mediums, notably media coverage of birth searches and reunion stories, political and ethical debates over continuing transnational adoption, especially in the South Korean context, and research studies in academic disciplines.

However, little attention is given to how the cultural construction of adoption affects the experiences of adoptees. A socio-cultural analysis of adoption provides insight to how a particular cultural ideology affects how adoption is practiced and in turn, how it affects the experiences of those involved in the adoption process. By using a cross-cultural comparative approach, assumptions about adoption are analysed relative to the cultural context, as in the examples of Australia, Papua New Guinea and South Korea. Taking this approach provides greater understanding of the kinds of issues adoptees may experience, such as feelings of loss and locates these feelings within the adoption process. Importantly, it places adoptees’ personal experiences into a context, which acknowledges the complexity of adoption. The next chapter will focus on how adoptees negotiate their cultural and ethnic identities and the kinds of social and personal issues adoptees often
experience as a result of having been transnationally and transculturally adopted. These issues relate to experiences of difference and belonging.

20 “Transcultural” is a term used by Indigo Williams Willing as part of the 2009 ‘Transcultural Adoptee Film and Panel Event’ held in Melbourne and held in a similar capacity nationwide with a focus on adoptee-made films. This term highlights that there are other processes involved in adoption that cross not only national boundaries but also cultural ones.
Chapter 5

Experiencing identity along contested boundaries of ‘whiteness’ and ‘Koreannness’

Introduction

In this study, the majority of research participants were adopted to white parents living in areas characterised by significant white populations. For this reason, most of the experiences described here will be presented by Korean adoptees with this particular background. A few exceptions include an adoption to Australia to parents of Japanese heritage and adoptions to areas with significant Asian populations, such as one participant who was raised in Hawai’i in the United States. These participants had different experiences from those adopted to white parents in predominantly white communities. However, they still encountered situations when their sense of self was challenged and they were made to feel ‘different’ based on their phenotype. This is a complicated position since most of the Korean adoptees I interviewed had difficulty relating to their ‘Koreanness’ as it did not resonate with their sense of self and did not have much relevance in their everyday lives. Instead, most tried to find belonging by asserting a ‘white’ identity and quite often, this meant pushing aside the possibility of a Korean identity.²¹

²¹This study is particular to a specific group of Korean adoptees and does not mean to imply that all Korean adoptees identify as ‘white’ by also pushing away or backgrounding a Korean identity.
This chapter draws primarily on interview data to analyse how Korean adoptees negotiate socially constructed boundaries of the self and the body by looking at how identity is experienced. Other studies have looked at the ways adoptees experience a disjuncture between their ‘non-white’ bodies and a white subjectivity (Hübinette, 2007; Park Nelson, 2007) as well as experiences of ‘otherness’ as they are made aware of their ‘difference’ (Gray, 2007a; Williams, 2003). These studies touch on the embodied experience of identity by analysing the feelings that adoptees have about their identity but do not explicitly frame it in these terms. I too address the politics of representation and identity but my interest also lies in the immediate way identity is experienced through the body. In other words, rather than looking strictly at the ways adoptees are represented, I locate the challenges they face at the site of contestation, mainly their bodies that are marked as ‘other’ not only to other people but also to themselves.

As more studies about adoptees draw on their lived experiences, it is important to include an analytic framework that engages the meaning of experience and what it means for experience to be lived. Drawing on a phenomenological understanding of the body, Csordas explains that in everyday life, “our bodies are not objects to us. Quite the contrary, they are an integral part of the perceiving subject” (2002, p. 84). Based on this premise, experience is lived through the body as it interacts with the world in an immediate way. It is important to note that this bodily immediacy does not mean that it exists ‘outside’ of ‘culture’ or that it is ‘pre-cultural’, nor is it meant to – as Joan Scott claims – “attribute an indisputable authenticity to ... experience” (1991, p. 376-77). Instead, what ‘cultural
phenomenology’ (Csordas 2002) is trying to do is to find a way to understand experience before it is made into ‘an experience’. Experiencing the world is always situated in a particular cultural, historical and socio-political context and therefore, experience is not ‘pre-cultural’. Thus, the issue lies in the distinction between what is meant by ‘pre-objectification’ and ‘objectification’. Csordas argues that the former describes the way people engage the world around them in an immediate and bodily way and the latter occurs when the immediacy of experience is represented as an “objectified abstraction” (2002, p. 10).

In other words, people do not experience the world by consciously objectifying the world around them even though at the same time, how they experience the world and how they act is formed by the way their thoughts and behaviours are structured. This is possibly something similar to what Bourdieu describes when he talks about the ‘dialectic of objectification and embodiment’ as “the em-bodying of the structures of the world, that is, the appropriating by the world of a body thus enabled to appropriate the world” (1977, p. 89). The body is at once immediately experiencing the world by its presence and engagement with the world while also being structured by a particular social and cultural framework that is learnt and acquired over time.

A phenomenological framework situated in anthropological theory is useful as a way to more directly engage adoptees’ lived experiences. It is useful because it

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22 This is what Victor Turner was referring to when he described the way experience is made meaningful or when experience is represented and objectified as ‘an experience’ in relation to past experiences (1986, p. 36).
begins with the premise that “the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words, as the existential ground of culture” (original emphasis) (Csordas, 2002, p. 58). This approach, which Csordas calls, ‘cultural phenomenology’, considers the body to be analytically meaningful as well as culturally meaningful because the self/body exists subjectively situated in a cultural world as it experiences the world (Csordas, 1994, 2002).

My aim is to understand how Korean adoptees experience and embody an identity in situated social interactions during which their identities are asserted, negotiated and contested. A phenomenological approach offers a way to try to understand “what that embodied identity actively is” (Katz & Csordas, 2003, p. 284). I do this by analysing the affective descriptions that the participants used to talk about their sense of belonging and sense of self as they experience identity through their bodies. Therefore, I aim to go further than previous adoption studies by looking at how Korean adoptees actively embody an identity in a way that works to collapse this mind-body dualism. I look at how they experience identity based on an anthropological and phenomenological understanding of experience and the self (Csordas, 1994, 2002; Morris, 1994; V. W. Turner & Bruner, 1986) rather than something that is objectified and known strictly through its representations.

Korean adoptees’ identities are multifaceted and so I focus on two aspects, embodying a white identity and embodying a Korean identity. Specifically, I explore two dominant themes from my data. First, I will analyse the process of
embodying a ‘white’ identity which for the participants, also involved negotiating a sense of self in relation to their bodies that mark them as ‘different’. In other words, Korean adoptees experience the world in such a way that they embody a white identity and ‘forget’ that their body is not ‘white’. The fact that others subsequently objectify their bodies as ‘different’ or ‘non-white’ points to the extent to which Korean adoptees have embodied a sense of self that is not defined by ‘difference’ until it is constructed as such. I support this argument by drawing primarily on Korean adoptees’ experiences in their adoptive countries.

Secondly, I will introduce a different kind of (self) confrontation that occurs when Korean adoptees go back to Korea. In Korea, they are seen to (re)embody a Korean identity because they look Korean. Based on an ideology of ethnic nationalism, it is assumed that to be Korean is to look fully Korean, know how to speak Korean, understand Korean culture and have Korean nationality. Here, I draw on interview data that centres on Korean adoptees’ experiences when they go back to Korea, especially social encounters which illustrate the awkward tensions between looking Korean and being perceived as such while being keenly aware that they were raised in a different country. This will be described in greater detail in Chapter 7 after exploring the broader context of Korean identity in South Korea in Chapter 6.
Considering identity: Representation and embodiment

From a poststructural perspective, identities are conceptualised as processual, dynamic and situated. This has been an important shift in anthropological thought because it has challenged disciplinary assumptions about the people, places, and cultures that are described in ethnographic accounts. This theoretical shift is especially relevant for understanding the context of Korean adoptee identities. While growing up in their adoptive countries, many encountered situations when they were approached as if their physical appearance was an automatic signifier for their sense of self. Their identities were stereotyped based on their Korean body, whether or not they felt a significant connection to a Korean identity. Since they were predominantly raised by white parents in white communities many had scant, if any, knowledge about Korean culture. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) problematise static associations between culture, place and space by politicising the boundaries of these perceived entities. Importantly, this approach contests the idea that people belong to fixed cultures, locked in time and space. The questions that have emerged as a result of a critique about anthropological thought and practice are part of a more general postmodern “crisis of representation”, which refers to “uncertainty about adequate means of describing social reality” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 8). The effect of these seismic shifts has had far-reaching implications because it has challenged anthropological approaches to fieldwork, theoretical analysis and ethnographic writing methods. This has in turn, fostered open engagement with the complexities of contested and problematised spaces as well as the boundaries that define those spaces.
While this shift has further enlivened anthropological thought and challenged static distinctions about culture, it is important to note that there is a tendency in some postmodern thought to exaggerate the fluidity of culture and identity to the extent that boundaries are disregarded as outdated and relics of modernist essentialist and static approaches. This tends to overlook the fact that people continue to localise and situate themselves, even in the context of global movement (Lien & Melhuus, 2007). In this sense, boundaries have been unfairly demonised because while cultural boundaries are indeed arbitrary and flexible, they do not become irrelevant. In a postmodern world with an increased focus on globalisation and migration, it may appear that we live in a boundless world. However, these boundaries do not simply disappear. Instead, they are alternatively remade and resignified with new meaning to coincide with individual, local, and national interests. Taking a Neo-Boasian approach, Bashkow (2004) argues that boundaries have been unnecessarily essentialised and condemned in the context of this postmodern climate. He insists that “[boundaries] are meaningful even where they are arbitrary, socially consequential even where they are crossed” (2004, p. 444). Boundaries become significant and apparent when they disrupt naturalised constructions of the entities they attempt to define.

Using this approach, it is possible to engage boundaries through constructive analysis in order to understand how they are made meaningful in different social, historical and political contexts. For example, the South Korean government views Korean identity in terms of naturalised metaphors of shared blood and shared
ancestral origins. The arbitrary nature of this identity construction is revealed when Korean adoptees challenge these essentialised and socially constituted boundaries of Korean identity. They do this by pointing to the different ways a Korean identity can be made more meaningful based on their own experiences rather than one dictated by South Korean nationalist agendas. In this way, the boundaries which appear to encapsulate a particular kind of Korean identity supported by the South Korean government are remade in meaningful ways as Korean adoptees form their own sense of Koreanness in relation to and in opposition to those boundaries.

This analysis aims to engage the dual processes of embodiment and objectification by looking at how identity is experienced and represented. I use this understanding of boundaries as arbitrary and meaningful to consider the ways Korean adoptees challenge boundaries of race and ethnicity. Then, drawing on a phenomenological concept of embodiment, I show how the process of challenging boundaries of race and ethnicity is also something that is lived and experienced. For many Korean adoptees, race is socially experienced because of the way others perceive their bodies. Based on their physical appearance, racialised assumptions are also made about their ethnic identity. As a result, their identities are represented in ways that do not reflect the complex ways their identities are lived. For example, while some Korean adoptees may feel Australian, their Asian features often predetermine how others perceive them. Their identities are assumed to be represented solely as a reflection of their bodies. However, in terms of embodiment, the way adoptees perceive their bodies is not solely relegated to
objective thought but is also an embodied experience. For example in the interviews, some Korean adoptees talked about ‘forgetting’ that they look ‘Asian’ because they had embodied a white subjectivity that allowed them to temporarily ‘forget’ that to others, they were not ‘white’. This embodied identity is just as important as the way their identities are represented and objectified by others as being from ‘somewhere else’.

Therefore, it is worthwhile to also look at how Korean adoptees experience identity through their bodies, not only how their identities are subsequently objectified. Csordas points out that lived experience includes bodily experience, which emphasises the “intersubjective and social nature of bodily experience” (1994, p. 14). This generates a compelling analysis to understand lived experiences. By focusing on how experience is lived, this chapter explores how Korean adoptees’ identities are experienced and embodied, not only how their identities are represented. As Csordas insists, an argument for a shift toward embodiment is “not to supplant textuality but to offer it a dialectical partner” (1994, p. 12). As a way to engage this dialectic, I will begin by addressing how Korean adoptees’ identities and sense of belonging are narrowly represented through assumptions made about their bodily appearance. Then in the second half of the chapter, I will draw on the phenomenological concept of embodiment to explore how Korean adoptees challenge these representations by immediately experiencing their identities through their bodies as an embodied identity.
A question of belonging

A common question that most of the participants were faced with on a number of occasions is, ‘Where are you from?’ This question, while usually asked out of curiosity, points out perceived socially constructed racial differences by targeting certain physical attributes that signify ‘otherness’. Such an encounter can potentially be interpreted as bothersome or offensive and may also unknowingly lead to insensitive probing questions. Sarah described this situation:

People tend to assume that I come from China or Japan, and often that forces me to just go along with it and not bother to correct them, or to reveal that I’m Korean. That’s when we get into dangerous territory! If the conversation keeps going, it usually means I will have to also reveal that I’m adopted. I resent doing that because it’s a very personal issue and no one else’s business.

These sentiments were also expressed by Brea, a Korean adoptee from the United States: I get asked the question all the time. And usually I am not sure what to answer … Sometimes I don’t want to answer the questions because I know more questions come and I hate answering them.

A more subversive approach to this question was taken by Alyson. She remarked, I’ve been asked that question a million times. Okay, not that many, but it feels like it! Sometimes, I’ll just say, ‘Oh, I’m adopted from South Korea’ and other times I’ll get cheeky and say, ‘Oh I’m from Connecticut’ even though I know they are asking my birthplace. Occasionally, Louise turned the question around and asked where they thought she was from. She received an astounding number of different responses, but none of them included Australia, the country where she was raised: Apparently,

\footnote{Pseudonyms have been used when interview participants have chosen not to identify themselves using their real names.}
according to some people I don’t even look Korean, and when I ask them where I look like I’ve come from, I’ve had some interesting responses, including Indian, Islander (South Pacific Islands), New Zealander, and Chinese, just to name a few! The possibility that adoptees could be from the adoptive country, the country where they are living, is not anticipated. In fact, that the person is adopted is usually not even considered. As a consequence of this line of questioning, Korean adoptees may feel an imposed sense of alienation because their positioned sense of belonging is shaken. It is especially disconcerting when experienced in their adoptive countries because it is a reminder that they are considered to be from ‘somewhere else’ even though they may feel that they belong more in their adoptive countries than where they were born.

While other migrant groups and their descendents experience similar ‘othering’ encounters based on ‘racial differences’ (Ang, 2001), adoptees experience an additional layer of alienation. They are both alienated from their birth country as well as their birth family. For example, they do not necessarily grow up with the kind of immediate knowledge that first generation Korean children may learn from Korean family members, which would confirm some kind of familiar connection to Korea. Because of their lack of knowledge, Korean adoptees may not feel accepted by other groups of people with Korean heritage. Kelly recalled, I have tried going to a Korean church to try to belong but they all spoke Korean and I do not speak Korean, only English. Sometimes I would try to go to Asian or Korean picnics but still felt like I was an outcast with the Koreans because I cannot speak Korean. Similarly, when Brea joined the Korean Student Association at her university, Everyone
assumed I would fit in but I felt very out of place because I knew nothing. Furthermore, Korean adoptees are not usually part of Korean community groups. Instead, most were part of adoption playgroups as a result of their adoptive parents' participation. Amy spoke about this: Mum used to always take me to an adopted group. I can’t remember what it’s called, but it was for all kids who were adopted from overseas countries ... but as an adult, I haven’t had much to do with any part of [a Korean or adoptee community group].

Therefore, any lack of knowledge about their birth country such as the culture and history, may cause discomfort or anxiety and a deeper awareness that not only are they different from their adoptive parents, they are perceived as different by strangers in the adoptive country as well as by people from their birth country. Moreover, they are expected to have an understanding of Korea and when they do not, they often have to explain themselves by saying that they were adopted. Thus, a question that addresses origins is also related to a person’s known connection to the place where they are ‘from’. It implies that the person has some experiential knowledge and at least a basic understanding of the culture, language and social mores. As Matt explains from his experiences interacting with Korean Americans:

I don’t feel fully Korean American because Korean Americans can be very cliquish. They usually have a lot of other Korean friends, eat Korean food every night, everybody knows each other, for the most part they are all fluent, and attend Korean functions all the time [such as Korean] church and festivals ... The only time I eat Korean food is when I try to cook it myself or go out to a restaurant. So I feel like an outsider in this culture because I only identify with it as being of Korean heritage and being American as well.

While this is an oversimplification of Korean American experiences, the differences are made apparent based on the social activities that Korean Americans engage in
compared to those that Korean adoptees, such as Matt take part. Matt felt like an ‘outsider’ because he did not have the same kind of knowledge and cultural and linguistic fluency that his friends had and therefore did not feel he could identify as wholly Korean American either.

Thus, ‘Where are you from?’ could easily be substituted with, ‘Where do you belong?’ because it implies that people confronted with this question do not fit in the socially defined category of those who are included and therefore need to either confirm their exclusion or prove their claim to belonging. This is problematic because it fetishises and exoticises the person constructed as ‘other’.

As Cohen remarks, “Notwithstanding the multicultural rhetoric of tolerance and the encouragement of migrants to ‘retain’ and express their original cultural identity, it is important to note that such difference is often a product of the social construction of the migrants as ‘people of culture’” (2003, p. 50). For example, a stranger at a tram stop commented on Mia’s Korean eyes and remarked, Wow, you have beautiful eyes. What’s your orientation? After recounting this incident in an interview, Mia stated, I feel that it emphasises the fact that we ‘look different’. Isn’t Australia supposed to be a multicultural country? I don’t go around asking Caucasians what their orientation is. As Ien Ang argues, ‘so long as the question ‘where you’re from’ prevails over ‘where you’re at’ in dominant culture, the compulsion to explain, the inevitable positioning of yourself as deviant vis-à-vis the normal, remains” (2001, p. 30). Therefore, regardless whether Korean adoptees in Australia feel they are from Australia, where they are ‘really from’, will continue to be foregrounded in terms of the prevailing discourse about belonging and identity.
In his discussion of ‘Orientalism’ Edward Said argues that there would not be an ‘other’ without some other entity to draw comparisons or in his terms, ‘the Orient’ only exists because of ‘the West’ and vice versa. He states:

… that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, ‘there’ in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient” (1978, p. 22).

In other words, ‘the Orient’ depends on ‘the West’ to articulate it rather than existing independently as a separate entity. The ‘other’ is then given life-force through the kinds of social vehicles that Said lists and it is realised through social interaction. In situations where Korean adoptees are confronted with a question of origins and belonging, their identities are more often categorised according to stereotyped notions of ‘Asianness’. Using Said’s framework, their ‘Asianness’ is positioned as ‘different’ in comparison to those seen to be ‘normal’ based on conventional representations of ‘Asian’ as ‘other’ opposed to ‘White’ as ‘normal’.

There are of course variations to this quite general opposition because criteria for certain categories change given particular historical, social and political situations. Hawkins (2006, p. 109) highlights Stuart Hall’s experience with difference by contrasting his experience in Jamaica where he did not identify with being ‘black’ with his experience in England. In Jamaica, ‘black’ is not a relevant social category. However, when he migrated to England, his skin colour became a point of difference and ‘blackness’ acquired a different social, political and historical meaning; in this new context, “he ‘became black’” (Hawkins, 2006, p. 109). As this
demonstrates, certain differences are foregrounded while others are backgrounded given the socio-cultural and historical construction of the perceived difference.

**Experiences of ‘difference’ and ‘whiteness’**

While Korean adoptees are often immediately categorised as ‘Asian’, they also challenge race and the associated socially inscribed meanings by disrupting the perceived natural unity between bodily appearance and self. In the process they challenge essentialised assumptions about race and identity. However, at the same time, normative discourses about ‘Whiteness’, ‘Blackness’ or ‘Asianness’ are experienced in ways that adoptees often internalise, which may cause them to feel like they do ‘not quite’ fit in anywhere. For example, Marah, who identified as a Black Korean adoptee was confronted by people not accepting her identity as a multiracial person because she did not fit neatly into their stereotypes: *White people think I’m just Black most of the time so there are all of those stereotypes that I only listen to rap; I am from ‘the hood’ all that stupid stuff. Black people think I’m ‘white washed’ and that I’m stuck up because of how I look.*

Therefore, whether or not adoptees identify themselves as ‘white’, ‘black’ or ‘Asian’, they often experience feeling like they do not quite belong given the way others respond to them. So while Korean adoptees may transgress and challenge
socially constructed boundaries of race and identity, they are also subjects within
these processes and discourses. Therefore, they also move within these situated
fields of meaning, which inform their understanding of identity and how they talk
about their identity.

An example of this is the way Korean adoptees often say that they feel white and
that they do not feel Korean. Based on their cultural upbringing within their
families, they often internalise a white identity especially if the social and cultural
environment in which a Korean adoptee was raised is predominantly white.
Because of this adoptees may feel conflicted about their identities when they are
challenged by people that do not understand their background as transracial
transnational adoptees. More often, this experience of ‘difference’ happens around
the time they attend school. They learn that they are ‘different’ because of their
Korean physical features and this difference is frequently experienced in negative
ways. Some examples of this are derogatory racial slurs, taunting, gestures such as
pulling at the corners of the eyes to make them slant, and other forms of
psychological and physical bullying. In order to try to fit in, Korean adoptees such
as Todd learn that belonging is associated with whiteness and therefore they often
felt that in order to belong, they had to become white: When I was younger, I was
always bullied by other people because I was Asian ... I really wished that I was a
Caucasian person so that I would fit in with everyone. I felt like I didn’t belong.

In these situations, whiteness and a ‘white’ identity become a matter of being seen
as ‘normal’. Their bodies are marked as ‘other’ in relation to white bodies, which
are believed to be ‘the norm’. Richard Dyer (1997) offers a deeply insightful analysis about the meanings of whiteness. He notes that whiteness and the ‘white privilege’ associated with it is based on the socially constructed assumption that whiteness is neutral or that it is the absence of colour. This has served to attribute whiteness with qualities of so-called normality and invisibility. In other words, white bodies are unmarked bodies in comparison to visible bodies of ‘colour’. This ‘white privilege’ is based on the socially constructed assumption that whiteness is neutral or that it is the absence of colour. Because of this kind of logic, it is important to recognise what whiteness represents so that it can “be made strange” in order to criticise the position that it holds in the social imagination (Dyer, 1997, p. 10).

So long as whiteness is constructed as a normative state of being, in their effort to belong or to be seen as ‘normal’, Korean adoptees such as Kelly respond to this desire to fit in by first denying their Korean bodies to themselves: *I wanted to be white so bad growing up. I did not like being Korean.* Todd reiterated the perception that whiteness is associated with normality: *When I was about 8 years old, that’s when people started to tease me about my appearance, and that’s when I really hated my appearance. I think I wished everyday that I was a white person, a normal person.* Taking a postcolonial position, Hübinette suggests that Korean adoptees become “strangers to their own bodies” (2007, p. 150) as a consequence of being raised in a white society, resulting in the “acquisition of a white self-identification” (2007, p. 158). Consequently, the strange ‘other’ becomes the Korean body they inhabit. Hübinette goes on to argue that self-identifying as white
is “a magnificent symbol of the final triumph of the colonial project” (2007, p. 158). While I do not wholly subscribe to this particular postcolonial framework, it is useful because it raises some important considerations.

If we take the above statement and consider the meaning behind ‘white self-identification’, achieved at the expense of a Korean self-identification, then as with any colonising endeavour, self-regulation is an essential component toward controlling ‘the other’. In a way, self-regulation could also be called self-colonisation or to say it another way, the act of self-identifying as ‘white’ could involve dual processes of both colonisation and self-colonisation. This would involve internalising a hegemonic discourse that positions whiteness on an ivory pedestal while suppressing and degrading other positions. For many adoptees that experience racism, they develop a form of racial consciousness that associates a Korean body with something that makes them different in a negative way. When this is combined with being raised in a predominately white community with little access or involvement in a Korean community, the tendency is to internalise a white identity while rejecting a Korean identity. As a result, Korean adoptees could be said to have effectively self-colonised their bodies in order to suppress and control their perceived difference.

A few adoptees have spoken about their own racist feelings and behaviour toward Asians because of their learned negative association between being Asian and being different. This is exacerbated by disassociating oneself from a Korean identity and associating more with a white identity and so as a way to demarcate a
desired separation between these identities, sometimes this leads to not only self-discrimination but also discrimination toward other Asians. This seems to accompany experiences that were not supported by more positive associations with a Korean identity and instead, looking different became attached to difference as an undesirable thing. As Erin recounts:

My parents knew no other Korean or Asian people and everyone I interacted with were of European descent and looked nothing like me. I basically grew up to resent the fact I was so different from everyone else and I wanted to be just like them. I became racist out of my own fear to accept who I really was and couldn’t handle being around other Asians or even being referred to as Asian. When I started going to university I became friends with other Asians and finally started to accept who I really was.

Mia also talked about being seen as ‘Asian’ but not identifying as such. She even found herself making judgments about other people who looked ‘Asian’: I think that people define you as being Asian because that’s exactly what you are externally. I sometimes even find myself judging Asian people and stereotyping them.

Although Korean adoptees may disassociate their sense of ‘difference’ from their sense of self in order to try to identify with the culture in which they were raised, this endeavour is difficult to achieve. It is not enough to internalise a white identity unless it is externalised and supported by a white body that others will recognise and therefore confirm a white identity and not a Korean identity. This is when a white identity becomes problematic. Obviously their physical bodies do not support such an identity in a way that others will immediately recognise. Hee Su explained that although she identifies as Canadian, she continues to experience situations, sometimes involving racism, when her experience as a Canadian is contested. She used the metaphor of a Halloween costume to describe the conflict
she feels between her Korean bodily appearance and her identity as someone that was raised in Canada:

My language and my culture and my life reference are Canadian or North American but my experience is not so I always feel like I'm wearing a Halloween costume that I can never take off. I'm just stuck with it. The zipper is broken ... [The mask] is melted onto my face so yeah it's just really, it's hard like particularly when there's racism involved ... because I don't associate or identify myself with the group of people that I'm being discriminated because of or against or whatever because I feel white like all, well a lot of adoptees feel white or whatever nationality they were raised in and [then] to be discriminated against because you're Asian.

Similar to other experiences, adoptees have not only internalised a 'white' identity, but embodied it. However, as noted here, this embodied identity is continuously challenged by their appearance or the 'Halloween costume' that others see. Halloween costumes imply a macabre element, a parody of a character or a farcical representation of self. It is also a liminal state of being, lasting only for one night on 31 October, until returning to the normal everyday self. In Hee Su's description, the 'Halloween costume' feels temporary, but actually remains something permanent, that cannot be removed.

As a way to try to overcome these feelings of difference, some adoptees felt they needed to strongly emphasise a 'white' identity by undermining their 'Asianness' to prove that they are just as Australian, Canadian and so on, as anyone else. Although she does not feel the need to prove herself now, when Emily was in her teens, she commented:

I did feel that I had to dress a specific way and act a specific way so that others could recognise that I am no different to them. Sometimes, I felt the need to prove that I was no different to any other person by talking to them or talking on the phone or talking to others so they could hear my perfectly normal English.
Similarly, Brea noted, I do feel that I have multiple identities because when I am home I am very white American and until this year I never talked about anything related to Korea/adoption ... I also think when I am at school sometimes I tend to act white so I don’t stand out. In a casual conversation, another adoptee commented that ‘We [Korean adoptees] are probably more white than white people’ because Korean adoptees are more consciously aware of these kinds of identity negotiations.

A common theme throughout these examples of identity negotiations is that consciously over-emphasising a ‘white’ identity meant not emphasising a Korean identity. As Hee Su asserts, I really tried to not be Korean. You know I really tried so hard to dress white, to act white, to be white ... and to emulate everything that is to be white middle class Canadian. However, these acts are not simply performances either nor are they simply ‘acts’. They are ways that Korean adoptees try to not only internalise a white identity, but also to embody an identity that feels right to them. In these examples, the emphasis is on embodying a white identity.

**Negotiating an embodied identity**

Korean adoptees often ‘acquire’ white identification by being brought up in Western countries. However, it is also important to understand what it means to embody an identity and to live and experience identity. Again, as Csordas noted, in everyday life, we are not objects to ourselves, but subjects primarily experiencing
the world. Of course, we can become objectified through representations and categorical assumptions, in this case, about identity or sense of self. As discussed so far, adoptees are objectified as ‘other’ because of the difference their bodies signify to other people. However, there is also another thread that needs to be explored, which is the experience of an embodied identity, before it is objectified as ‘other’. I argue that it is not only a matter of feeling white and feeling that their Korean body is other, but also that in this process, they have effectively embodied a ‘white’ identity. Therefore, I would like to take this argument further and suggest that from Korean adoptees’ perspective, their bodies become white because their sense of self includes an embodied white subjectivity.

As long as Korean adoptees can avoid being reminded that they look Korean and consequently objectified as ‘different’ or ‘other’, they can temporarily displace the knowledge that they inhabit a Korean body and therefore, ‘forget’ that they look Korean. When I asked Amy if she thought being adopted was something integral to her identity, she replied, *Yes and no. Yes in that I can’t get away from it.* She explained that she is reminded because people ask her where she is from but otherwise she tends to forget that she is adopted and that she looks Korean:

*I’ll go, I’m from Korea and I always go, ‘Oh I was adopted and I have Australian parents’ because they always wonder about the accent. ‘Oh are you? You don’t have any accent’. ‘Well no, I was adopted when I was 9 months’ and blah blah blah. So it is a big part of like everyday life in that sense, but in a way no, because I often forget that I am adopted and that I look Korean too. It’s a bit of pulling of two things.*

These acts of ‘forgetting’ and ‘remembering’ are not so much cognitive acts, but something that points to an embodied sense of self that ‘forgets’ that their bodies
look ‘Asian’. A white subjectivity is experientially embodied in such a way that a white subjectivity usurps, if only temporarily, the possibility of an ‘Asian’ body that speaks otherwise. It is only when Korean adoptees bodies are recognised and thus objectified as ‘other’ that this sense of self centred on a white subjectivity is disrupted.

As described earlier, in situations when they are asked, ‘Where are you from?’ the feeling of confusion or even surprise at the question, could be a result of this sense of self being disrupted. This act is part of a process of objectification, a concept put forth by Merleau-Ponty in his analysis of perception (Csordas, 2002). The self is firstly perceived in a ‘pre-objective’ way as something that is immediately experienced, albeit all the while being immersed in culture. What is of interest for phenomenological anthropology is “to capture that moment of transcendence in which perception begins, and, in the midst of arbitrariness and indeterminacy, constitutes and is constituted by culture” (Csordas, 2002, p. 61), meaning the self is first something that is experienced and then culturally objectified or constituted. The point when adoptees are presented with the question, ‘Where are you from?’ is when their sense of self goes from something subjectively experienced to a self that is objectified, usually based on a culturally constructed stereotype of their racialised body. This then challenges that subjectively held sense of self.

Overall, the situation described above is an example of how adoptees’ identities are subjectively experienced and then, through a process of objectification, represented as ‘other’. It also shows how adoptees’ identities are negotiated
between ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ when on the one hand, they feel just as Australian, for example, as other Australians, thus also attributing ‘normality’ or ‘sameness’ with a ‘white Australian’ identity. Then, on the other hand, they are made to recognise the representation that their bodies project to others, something that is perceived as ‘different’. These experiences of ‘being normal’ and ‘being different’ can be understood using Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’. Habitus is described as “an ensemble of schemata of perception, cognition and action” (Joas & Knöbl, 2009, p. 398). In other words, a particular habitus is formed through a process of socialisation in which certain behaviours and thoughts are learned.

Korean adoptees are socialised into the world of their adoptive parents, usually into a predominantly white community. Therefore, identifying as Korean, in terms of cultural and ethnic identity can be difficult to relate to. Again, drawing on Bourdieu, Joas and Knöbl point out:

Because the habitus has entered into people’s bodies and become their identity, people (unconsciously) tend to uphold this identity. We wish to see our familiar world confirmed repeatedly and have no interest in destroying this trust in the meaningfulness of the everyday world (2009, pp. 393-394).

Although Korean adoptees may feel just as ‘white’ as other people as a result of being socialised into a particular habitus, this is not recognised. Instead, they are assumed to have a Korean culture and ethnicity based on simplistic notions of identity determined by physical appearances.

Furthermore, because particular structural ideologies construct ‘whiteness’ as ‘normal’, Korean adoptees often point out their ‘differences’ within this normative framework. As was previously mentioned, while growing up, some of the Korean
adoptees I interviewed said that they wanted to be ‘normal’, meaning accepted as ‘white’. This points to Bourdieu’s emphasis on the way “action and structures determine one another through their interrelationship” (Joas and Knöbl, 2009, p. 380). In this context, the structural norm of ‘whiteness’ is reinforced by experiences of ‘difference’, in which particular differences are constructed as ‘not normal’. Matt illustrates this tension based on his upbringing in the United States:

*I identify as American; however [I] do not fully belong here either. In terms of lifestyle, pop culture, media, hobbies and other things I am very American. However, America has a long way to go in accepting non-white races into their ‘American’ title. Asians look different so they are immediately referred to as Asians. They are Asians not Americans. You constantly see the media portray this as well. I remember one news clip stating ‘Michelle Kwan Beats American for the Gold’. However it is funny that it implies that Michelle is not American. So in terms of the superficial aspects of life I am American, but do not fully feel like I have obtained full American status in the view of white America.*

In all respects, Korean adoptees are products of the cultures in which they were raised. They should also be able to feel like they belong in their adoptive countries because they have the kind of social and cultural knowledge to be able to identify with the place where they lived for the majority of their lives. Marie commented:

*Well the thing is for us as adoptees—we grew up in white countries, white places—is that our mentality is pretty white, it is almost like you’re white on the inside ... because we have seen all our lives, like the food we’ve been eating, it’s the TV ... the friends, the home, it’s the family, so it’s almost like we are white on the inside in our way of thinking.*

Although Marie had this kind of ‘white’ upbringing, growing up in Sweden and then coming to the United States, she continues to face assumptions from people that only see her ‘Asian’ features. She gave an example:

*So I knew this one woman ... and she was super blonde, blue eyes, you know white white white [with] Swedish ancestry but she lives in Minnesota and she’s like I just wish I were more exotic like you and I’m like, exotic, what? At that point I don’t even know what to say, so I don’t say anything.*
Again, similar to the question, ‘Where are you from?’ this serves to objectify adoptees’ sense of self as ‘different’, ‘exotic’ and ‘other’ thus questioning and even displacing the identity that they have embodied.

Another example that illustrates how identity is embodied and then subsequently objectified is perhaps most evident in the act of looking in the mirror. Upon gazing into the mirror, the self becomes objectified through the body’s reflection. As Hee Su explained, You know I always forget, like every day and then I’ll wake up and look in the mirror and I’ll be like oh yeah, I’m Korean, like that’s the face that stares back at me. But I leave, I leave the bathroom. I leave my house and then I forget that I’m Asian again. The unity of the image is disrupted because the person looking back does not accurately portray the sense of self that is felt. This reflection is not simply a confirmation of self. Instead, the image reflected back at the person represents something that is simultaneously recognisable and unrecognisable. The act of looking in the mirror creates an image of a temporarily disembodied projection of the self or an objectified self. In a way, the person looking in the mirror is not the same person reflected back through the mirror. For adoptees like Hee Su, it can be like looking at someone else, someone that is ‘other’ but at the same time someone that is ‘familiar’ or must be familiar because the reflection in the mirror is no doubt a mirror-image of their bodies. Looking in the mirror can be a kind of ‘out-of-body’ experience because the objectified ‘Asian face’ in the mirror is a reminder that adoptees do not look ‘white’ to other people, even if they may feel ‘white’. 
Importantly, this experience of ‘othering’ and ‘otherness’ is not necessarily performed or thought of as a performance. On the one hand, Korean adoptees may try to background their Korean origins revealed through their Korean bodies in an attempt to foreground their sense of identity in the communities in which they were raised. In this sense, it may be seen as a conscious act to ‘other’ their ‘Koreanness’. However, the majority of the time, it is not an act, and it is not a performance because it is not necessarily always experienced as such. For adoptees living in areas largely characterised by white populations, often they have not only internalised whiteness but embodied it. Instead, it becomes ‘who you are’, as sometimes happens when actors cease to perform their role and begin to inhabit their role so completely that their role becomes indistinguishable from themselves and the stage becomes indistinguishable from everyday life. The stage disappears, the Korean body disappears and it is replaced with a conceptualised white body and an embodied sense of ‘whiteness’. Korean adoptees’ bodies become white because they feel white. As Alyson commented:

*I always associated with typical, white America; I grew up in a mostly all-white suburb in Connecticut, and rarely had a chance to interact with many other Asians, never mind minorities .... My friends will make some jokes about me being the whitest Asian they know. I won’t lie; sometimes I even kind of forget I’m Asian, just because my interactions with other Asians are so limited. My ethnicity is an afterthought almost.*

This example shows how whiteness can be internalised and embodied to the extent that Korean adoptees momentarily forget that they look ‘Asian’ not only to others but also to themselves. They ‘forget’ that their bodies are not actually white. However, it also points out the indeterminacy of Alyson’s identity
expressed by her tenuous and uncertain position as a ‘white Asian’. According to her friends, she was not really white but not really Asian either.

In some instances, Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender identity can be applied to the ways adoptees ‘do identity’. Butler describes gender “as a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical” (2004, p. 1). She elaborates further by saying that this ‘doing’ “is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary” (2004, p. 1). Louise described how as a teenager, she felt that she had to over-perform her identity so that others would see her as ‘one of them’:

However, before (in my teen years) I did feel that I had to dress a specific way and act a specific way so that others could recognise that I am no different to them. Sometimes, I felt the need to prove that I was no different to any other person by talking to them, or talking on the phone, or talking to others, so they could hear my perfectly normal English accent. Now, I don’t feel the need to ‘prove’ myself to anyone as such, but because I went to such lengths to do so in the past, I find that it’s hard to reverse what I’ve accomplished already. My friends often say ‘Silly Asian drivers!’ in which I reply ‘I’m Asian...’ which they then reply with ‘Yeah, but you’re not really Asian. Even when I look at you, you don’t look Asian’. I’m not sure whether that is a good thing or a bad thing.

As outlined in previous examples, some of the Korean adoptees I spoke to also reiterated that they wanted to be seen as ‘normal’, which meant to ‘be white’. This meant performing ‘whiteness’ so that others could see that they were not really ‘different’.

However, to what extent is the notion of performing identity perhaps imposed onto the ways Korean adoptees experience identity in an embodied sense? Are
they always performing identity even if they are not conscious of it or is it made out to be a performance primarily when their identity is constructed as being ‘other’ or ‘different’? Butler explains that to say ‘gender is performative is not simply to insist on a right to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle but to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested” (2004, p. 30). Therefore, performance could mean an everyday ‘doing’ and that it does not refer to sensationalised performance for the sake of performance. It could be argued that even when Korean adoptees ‘forget’ that they look ‘Asian’, they are still performing ‘whiteness’. However, what I am interested in here is what happens between the ‘forgetting’ and the ‘remembering’ of constructed ‘difference’? What happens when the everyday unconscious performance of identity is made ‘different’ and what effect does this have on the way Korean adoptees have come to embody ‘whiteness’?

For many Korean adoptees, their ‘otherness’ becomes an issue when it is made an issue. Their perceived ‘otherness’ is revealed when they are asked such questions as, ‘Where are you from?’ In this particular social interaction, their difference is immediately made public and their claim to a white body appears ridiculous. They are made aware of their bodies and are unable to deny their physical appearance to themselves any longer. As if in a cruel twist of the plot, the mask of whiteness is ripped away and they are revealed for who they ‘really are’ or how they are perceived by others. The makeup cracks; the ‘performance’ is revealed as if it were a mere performance. Furthermore, the ‘performance’ is not believed and their identities as anything other than Korean or ‘Asian’ are doubted. What makes this
so jarring is that their identity is not necessarily experienced as a performance but something that is integral to their sense of self. Hanna’s identity was questioned at the Frankfurt airport in Germany: The check-in-lady and security questioned whether I really hold Swedish citizenship or not. They did not want me to pass the security check as an ‘EU-member’. In these kinds of situations, Korean adoptees are forced to rehabit their Korean bodies or at least to become once again aware of their difference, their ‘otherness’.

**Transgressing contested boundaries of Korean identity**

While Korean adoptees often find it difficult to be seen to belong in their adoptive countries, they experience different challenges in South Korea. The rest of this chapter will focus on the ways Korean adoptees transgress boundaries of Koreanness when they return to South Korea. Specifically, this will examine boundaries which seem to define an imagined sense of who a Korean person is, such as physical appearance and cultural and linguistic competency. The aim is to introduce what it means to be Korean based on a state-sponsored ideology that centres on ethnic homogeneity and then show how Korean adoptees contest this hegemonic definition of Korean identity in everyday social interactions. Using illustrative examples from interview data focusing mainly on Korean adoptees that have been back to Korea and experiences gathered during field research in Seoul,
the complexities involved for Korean adoptees as they confront these boundaries will be examined.

Looking Korean

Whereas their Korean physical appearance marks Korean adoptees as different and ‘foreign’ in their adoptive countries, in South Korea, it signifies sameness. When Korean adoptees go to Korea, their Korean bodies are no longer what make them appear different but what allow them to feel a sense of anonymity and oftentimes, a sense of belonging. In Korea, adoptees like Steph, often say they feel they belong in a way that they do not feel they belong in their adoptive countries:

*In Australia, I often feel like I don’t belong, especially when I’m in a room full of Caucasian people. But in Korea, I just blended in with everyone else. It was a nice feeling.* For some adoptees, it is the first time they can exist on an everyday level without feeling like they stick out like a sore thumb. Looking Korean no longer makes them special in the sense that it does not make them different from everyone else; to look Korean is the norm.

However, that said, there are specific criteria that ascertain what kinds of physical features mark someone as Korean. For adoptees with multiracial backgrounds, the possibility of blending in seamlessly with the rest of the population is not as easy and can be a source of deep anxiety. Marah, a Black Korean adoptee who grew up in the United States said that when she tries to claim that Korean part of herself, it is not recognised: *In my experience many Korean people won’t even acknowledge*
that I am in fact Korean, because I am Black. This attitude has only served to exclude people with multiracial backgrounds because of an entrenched ethnic nationalist ideology that centres on perceived ethnic and racial homogeneity. In fact, this was one of the driving forces behind sending children away to be adopted because they were usually born to Korean women and fathered by UN soldiers occupying Korea during and after the Korean War. The children were seen as a ‘problem’ in the context of a society that saw itself and arguably, continues to see itself as largely homogenous.

This racist discrimination continues to make it difficult for people who do not conform to an extremely conservative stance, which is directed toward those that are considered to be Korean and those that are not. For example until 1 February 2006, multiracial Koreans were not allowed to enter into military service which is compulsory for all Korean men (Jin, 2006). This excluded Koreans males with multiracial backgrounds from taking part in what is viewed as a rite of passage for Korean men. The fear is that multiracial Koreans will be bullied and tormented because they do not fit in due to their physical appearance. Therefore, measures have been put in place to make sure they are assigned to military bases with a high presence of foreigners and with other multiracial people. An official from the Military Manpower Administration (MMA) stated that the "[MMA] believed the mixed-bred people would not successfully adapt themselves living in the barracks due to their differences in appearance and skin. But MMA decided to remove the restriction out of concerns that this prejudiced assumption could lead to another" (Jin, 2006).
Still military service for multiracial Koreans is voluntary rather than compulsory (Jung, 2006a) even though it is required that all physically fit Korean men over 20 years old complete their service (MMA, 2009). In particular, the MMA further discriminates against people that are of ‘mixed-Asian’ heritage and those that are of ‘Asian’ and ‘white European/American’ heritage (Jung, 2009b). The latter are exempted from military service because of their more obvious differences in skin colour (Jung 2009b). Clearly, who counts as Korean is based on certain discriminating criteria that differentiate between particular physical characteristics. So even though most adoptees do feel like they belong based on shared physical features, many other adoptees are also excluded.

**Acting and speaking Korean**

Additionally, Korean adoptees are expected to act Korean and speak Korean because to be Korean is to not only 'look Korean' but also to fit the idealised role of a completely competent Korean person with cultural and linguistic fluency. These complexities are often overshadowed by national rhetoric that centres on a packaged Korean identity based on shared blood. This position taken by the South Korean government will be examined in further detail in the following chapter. Briefly though, there is an imagined sense of national unity which draws on metaphors of shared Korean ancestry through shared Korean blood, which also assumes shared Korean culture and language. This is obviously problematic for
people that do not fit this rigid category defining who qualifies as a 'Korean person'.

While this public imaginary may only seem to hold at an ideological level, at an experiential level, the seams unravel as the stitching holding together the fabric of a 'whole' Korean identity begin to show signs of stress. This is especially played out in everyday social interactions between Korean adoptees and Korean people such as on public transportation. Pia recounted an experience during 'The Gathering' in Seoul, while she and other Korean adoptee participants were riding the subway:

_It was strange looking the same as everyone else, but knowing that I was so 'different' ... I know a lot of Korean people looked at us strangely on the subway when we were laughing and speaking in English (loudly) and wearing name tags around our neck. Whether consciously or not, we did isolate or distance ourselves from native Koreans._

It is usually when Korean adoptees begin to speak in a language that is not Korean such as on the subway in Seoul that they suddenly become noticeable. In casual conversations, adoptees used similar descriptions to talk about other situations. In a few instances, some were told to be quiet, even when the volume level was low, and other commuters were speaking loudly in Korean. The reason for this could be that the language they were speaking was perceived as an irritating noise in comparison to the Korean language. Others have received stares of wonder at their ability to speak English so fluently. On other occasions, they reported receiving glares or verbal abuse because they were not speaking Korean. Usually this reaction is because people do not understand why they are not speaking
Korean and either assume it is a matter of choice or they question why their parents did not teach them Korean.

Of course there are other indicators like dress, gestures, facial expressions, posture and gait that specify social and cultural differences. As Marie pointed out, you can pass as Korean until you open your mouth: *It's amazing to be here [in Korea] and I think the most powerful thing to be here is to walk down the street and completely mix in with everybody else. Well, we all agree as long as we don't talk.* Similarly, Hee Su insisted, *Sometimes I see myself as Korean, but usually I just forget I'm Korean and then here [in South Korea] I know I'm Korean as long as I don't say anything.*

Generally, adoptees that can 'pass' as Korean in physical appearance also realise how unlike they are from the Koreans around them. As Young Mi and Sarah explained:

*Being in Korea makes me feel completely un-Korean. I know for certain that I have very little in common with the people around me, aside from appearance/genetics. Though I’ve met many beautiful people here, I don’t feel the same affinity that I do with people who speak my language and understand my culture.* (Young Mi)

*So, I think being there actually highlighted the Australian part of me more. I wasn’t able to communicate with other Koreans in Korean or participate in their society, and I had no sense of familiarity with their culture, society, locations, infrastructure, government, customs etc. Being there affirmed that I looked Korean, but that was it.* (Sarah)

For many adoptees expecting to feel a sense of belonging with other Koreans, oftentimes, the cultural and linguistic gap becomes obvious in ways that do not allow them to feel like they belong completely in Korea either. While adoptees may feel more comfortable being in Korea because of a shared physical
resemblance they may also feel like strangers inside. This is inversely related to experiences in their adoptive countries where they are often perceived as strangers but feel like they are just as Australian, for example, as everyone else. In Korea, it is their outside appearance that enables them to 'pass' as Korean but as they go about daily life such as shopping, ordering food at restaurant and catching public transportation, it becomes obvious that they were raised in a country other than Korea and there is a possibility that they could be 'found out'.

This sense that adoptees can be 'found out' is a feeling that they are somehow an imposter or a kind of double agent as they simultaneously feel a certain degree of belonging while also feeling out of place. Sarah explained:

[In Korea] I felt that the Korean part was emphasised in looks, but not at all in any kind of interaction. I was always assumed to be Korean, for example shop assistants, fast food workers and waiters would automatically speak to me in Korean, and some people even asked if I was Korean or commented that I looked Korean (when I was with white Australians), but when any kind of interaction took place it was obvious that I wasn’t. I also didn’t feel like I had any familiarity with the society, the language or the ‘way things worked’ over there. Everything just felt unfamiliar, like it would to any other traveller in a foreign country for the first time.

These kinds of feelings indicate a temporary and situated sense of belonging because at any moment, they could be revealed as not quite being the person they appear to be. Sometimes this can happen when a Korean person asks for directions or asks for further unanticipated information such as when ordering at a restaurant or browsing for something at a shop. When this happens, the gap between Korean adoptees and Koreans is made apparent and the boundaries defining a perceived unity of a Korean person are transgressed. These boundaries become apparent when Korean adoptees move across and in relation to

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boundaries by alternatively disrupting and confirming what it means to have a Korean identity.

On the one hand, they can be anonymous among the crowds of other Koreans on the street but on the other hand, they carry with them a sense that they do not quite fit in either. Sarah expressed these conflicting feelings based on her first trip back to Korea as an adult:

*I felt more like I 'blended in', in terms of appearance. I was, however, aware that I didn't know the language or cultural nuances of Korean society, so I might not have 'acted' Korean. So I did feel a small connection with the people in terms of having a similar appearance, but not 'acting Korean' only reinforced that I hadn't been brought up in Korea.*

Korean adoptees are tenuously positioned as Koreans because they are also foreigners since they were raised in different countries after being adopted. The everyday difficulties Korean adoptees face when they come to Korea is related to a very constricted definition of who is Korean and who is not. It is very confronting, especially in public spaces where the ethnic nationalist ideology supported by the government struggles to maintain its hold. It becomes apparent that not everyone that 'looks Korean' identifies with a narrow vision of what it means to supposedly 'be Korean'.

The fabric of South Korean society continues to change as more Koreans travel and live overseas and more migrants come to Korea to find work and more people marry across cultures. There are diverse ways that overseas Koreans, including Korean adoptees, can identify as Korean just as some may choose not to. This needs to be recognised in order to include and accept many Korean identities,
instead of continuously judging in comparison to an essentialist definition of one Korean identity. Cindy Pan, a Chinese Australian born to Chinese parents, wrote:

I am more comfortable with the fact that there’s lots of different kinds of Chinese and even if other Chinese people don’t realise you’re Chinese, that doesn’t mean you’re not. When I was walking around in China, I didn’t feel the same as all the people there, but that doesn’t mean I’m not Chinese (2002, p. 225).

Similarly, Korean adoptees can claim a Korean identity that is just as ‘Korean’ as any other way of identifying as Korean. As Anne, a Korean adoptee from the United States pointed out, “What I am is a little different but just as valid as anything”.

Nevertheless, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the South Korean government, since the presidency of Kim Young Sam, continues to stress a Korean identity based on shared blood while paying lip service to the identities of Korean adoptees and other overseas Koreans living in other countries. For Korean adoptees like Hee Su, their experiences in their adoptive countries have strongly shaped their sense of self and also their feelings toward Korea and what it means to be Korean. Hee Su commented, Yeah and it’s so foreign like I tell my white friends, I’m as Korean as you are, you know, like I try and tell them or convey to them like I really I don’t, like I identify myself as Korean but I don’t at the same time. As discussed in the first half of this chapter, Korean adoptees often feel conflicted when they feel just as ‘white’ as others in their family, community and schools, but are continually reminded that they cannot be ‘just like everyone else’ because they look ‘Asian’. These kinds of experiences make identifying as Korean under the terms of the Korean government’s hegemonic discourse quite problematic. Rather
than ignoring those that do not identify in this way with their Korean heritage, it is important to recognise this and to make spaces for people to create their own sense of meaning regarding a Korean identity.

**Concluding remarks**

The aim of this discussion has been to contextualise Korean adoptees’ experiences using a theoretical framework that explores ways static boundaries of the self and the body are transgressed. In adoptive countries, finding a sense of belonging was attempted by embodying a ‘white’ identity and shadowing their Korean bodies. For some, this was actively rejected while for others the fact that they looked Korean was ‘forgotten’ due to the irrelevance of a Korean identity in their everyday lives. In Korea, they were perceived by Koreans as having an embodied Korean identity based on their Korean physical features. However, frequently, the cultural and language barriers that Korean adoptees face in Korea cause them to feel like an ‘outsider’ in Korea too even though they share similar physical features. In both situations, the struggle to feel a sense of belonging was played out on the contested terrain of their bodies. Their embodied identities in their adoptive countries were challenged by situations in which others assumed they were from ‘somewhere else’ based on their Korean bodies. In Korea, their identities were automatically assumed to have an embodied Korean identity, again based on their Korean bodies. However, their cultural upbringing in different countries due to adoption
challenged and transgressed socially constructed boundaries of Korean identity, thus demanding a more open understanding of what it means to ‘be Korean’.

Chapter 7 will continue this discussion by understanding how Korean adoptees work to (re)embody a kind of Koreanness that makes sense for their identities, not necessarily prescribing to a composite essentialised ‘Koreanness’. First, however, it is worthwhile looking at how Korean adoptees are perceived in South Korea by analysing how the South Korean government constructs and promotes a particular kind of Korean identity founded on ethnic nationalism. Therefore, Chapter 6 will discuss the South Korean government’s approach toward overseas Koreans, including Korean adoptees, beginning with the policies initiated during Kim Young Sam’s presidency. This will then provide the setting for Chapter 7, which will look at how Korean adoptees contest this narrow category of Koreanness by presenting a more flexible understanding of what it means to be Korean as Korean adoptees.
Chapter 6
Who is (really) Korean?

Introduction

In 2008, I travelled to South Korea to attend the 11th Future Leaders' Conference (28 July-1 August) organised by the Overseas Koreans Foundation and held at the Grand Hilton in Seoul. 105 overseas Korean participants gathered as 'Future Leader' representatives from 21 different countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, Oceania and North and South America. Many were prominent members of their community working as political leaders, lawyers, CEOs of their own enterprises, human rights activists, youth workers and government workers. Most of the events were held in the Convention Centre, which was attached to the hotel. After the registration day, we gathered for the opening ceremony, dressed in formal business attire and seated at round tables covered in white linen.

As we waited for the keynote speeches to begin, we were alerted to a military style call to attention ordering us to rise for the South Korean national anthem. It was quite sudden and most of us were taken by surprise. Slowly, the casual conversations diminished and we stood up a bit apprehensively, some of us exchanging awkward glances as we directed our gaze to the front stage. As the music blared out of the speakers, those that did not know the words shifted awkwardly and tried to summon up some feeling of national pride. About a third
of the way through, the music stopped abruptly. There was an uncomfortable sense of confusion as we were not sure whether to remain standing. Eventually we all sat down when we realised that the disruption was not a technical glitch. Instead, we were told that the reason why they stopped was because most of us did not know the words.

Coincidentally, the conference year also marked the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Korea. Throughout the conference period, the government demonstrated a keen interest in the potential contributions we could make and the advantageous networking relationships we could foster between South Korea and our respective countries. Above all, the ongoing theme throughout these sudden spurts of nationalistic rallying, such as the incident with the national anthem, was to instil in us a shared sense of Korean identity. This was seen as the one commonality that we all shared and so it was presented to us as a given rather than something that could be questioned. This was achieved by naturalising a Korean identity through metaphors of shared blood. By doing this, the diverse ways someone could identify as Korean is depoliticised and embraced as a fervent point of unity. However, as the 'glitch' during the opening ceremony illustrates so well, there are also cracks in the governmental discourse's well-polished veneer that point toward a sense of ambivalence.

There is ambivalence about how to position overseas Koreans, which includes Korean adoptees, as Koreans while still maintaining an imagined sense of Korean identity that is able to cross cultures, languages and national borders. Rather than
engaging with this ambivalence, complexities are often lost in the South Korean government's discourse, which focuses on welcoming 'overseas Koreans' into the nationalistic embrace of a common Korean identity based on shared blood.

There are over 7 million overseas Koreans (M. B. Lee, 2008), some that were born in Korea and those that were not, some with Korean families and those without. Of the 7 million, at least 170,000 are Korean adoptees. For Korean adoptees in particular, realising a Korean identity is not something that is easily attainable because most did not grow up with knowledge about Korea and were not involved in overseas Korean communities, mainly due to language barriers. From a Korean adoptee perspective, understanding what it means to be Korean is perhaps more problematic than it is for other overseas Koreans. As Sarah points out:

\[I\]can't get past my lack of cultural literacy in the Korean way of life. I haven't grown up there, I don't speak the language, I don't know the nuances of the society or culture, and I am not familiar with its history apart from what I have proactively sought out. So I feel that I can't really justify describing myself as simply Korean.\]

Korean adoptees are in a sense, 'conceptual anomalies' (Kondo, 1990, p. 11), people that look Korean but do not understand Korean cultural nuances and cannot speak Korean, unless otherwise learnt through language studies. Kondo explains that as a Japanese American in Japan, she was a “living oxymoron, someone who was both Japanese and not Japanese” (1990, p. 11). Similar to Kondo's observations of Japanese definitions of what it means to be Japanese, Korean identity is understood and defined in biological terms due to the focus on shared blood. There is a strong sense that a Korean identity means being racially Korean which also assumes that means being able to speak Korean and understand
Korean cultural values and practices. Anyone that does not possess one of these characteristics is put in a difficult position, hence being a “conceptual anomaly” (Kondo, 1990, p. 11). According to this kind of narrow logic, how can someone be Korean but not be able to speak Korean? How can someone be Korean but not look 'fully Korean'?

I would like to explore two important points that emerge from this. First, how does the South Korean government’s representation of Korean identity try to maintain a sense of unity and shared duty for the estimated 7 million overseas Koreans in relation to an imagined ‘motherland’? This will look specifically at the complex feelings Korean adoptees have toward South Korea and toward their own sense of a Korean identity. The second point will argue that the ambivalence felt toward people that do not fit the conventional definition of a Korean person is due to the ways they contest these conservative boundaries of what constitutes a Korean identity. How do Korean adoptees' experiences, especially the difficulties they face, challenge this discourse which celebrates an unproblematic Korean identity?

The aim when asking these questions is to juxtapose these two themes in order to demonstrate why Korean identity is not taken for granted by Korean adoptees, in the sense that it is not naturalised as a given, but something that is worked through and made sense of as a continuous process. This will be done by focusing on the South Korean government’s approach to crafting a sense of Korean identity that moves beyond national borders and then locate adoptees' experiences within this
context as they work out an understanding of what a Korean identity means for themselves. First, it is worthwhile understanding why there is such a strong emphasis on 'blood' when talking about Korean identity.

PART 1—Mythological and historical foundations for Korean identity

In order to understand the present context, especially when looking at the Korean government’s approach toward overseas Koreans, it is important to understand the historical significance of Korean identity. History is worked through in the present and so understanding the South Korean historical context is not a “[view of] the past, but [of] present-day constructions of the past” (original emphasis) (Eriksen, 2002, p. 73). Korean identity is founded in mythological origins and is based on conservative notions of ‘blood purity’ through tracing an ancestral line. It is part of the origin story of the [North and South] Korean people, which is rooted in the belief that Dangun Wanggeom, a mythical figure, is the ancestor from whom all Koreans are descended.

Korean historical texts such as the 13th century *Samguk Yusa (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms)* and the 18th century *Annotated Account of Korean History* begin Korean history with Dangun (Eckert, Lee, Lew, Robinson, & Wagner, 1990). When the *Samguk Yusa* was written, the Korean peninsula was not yet united. The historical context was characterised by contestations for land and power and so unifying the people hinged upon creating a sense of common identity. Therefore,
during this tumultuous time, “the suffering of the people of [Goryeo] ... strengthened their sense of identity as a distinct race and gave force to the concept of their descent from a common ancestor” (Eckert et al., 1990, p. 103).

This origin story which focuses on ancestral descent through a single bloodline has unfortunately at times been used with inherently racist aims and spurred on by xenophobia. An example of this was the founding of Daejonggyo (Religion of Dangun Worshippers [대종교]) as a response to aggressive Japanese imperialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was a “conservative religious movement with strong chauvinist-nationalist overtones” which used the belief in Dangun as the “divine progenitor of the Korean race” to assert itself (Eckert et al., 1990, p. 250). It is ironic that the reasons for affirming a Korean identity were largely in response to racist policies enforced by the Japanese during the colonisation of the Korean peninsula.

Overall, the origin myth of Dangun has been used historically to build a sense of national identity based on shared blood. The idea of ‘one blood, one nation’ is thus very much a part of contemporary Korean society and is supported by Korean mythology that views Korean people as descendents of a mythically divine origin and as a ‘race’ defined by ‘common blood’. However, it also serves to exclude those that are not considered to be ‘really Korean’ and moreover, limits the many ways people may see themselves as Korean that is not based on these conservative principles.
**Hojuje and the significance of 'blood'**

The contentious dominance of bloodlines in Korean society can be seen in issues such as the Roh administration's revisions of the patriarchal family registry system known as *hojuje* (호주제) (C. H. Cho, 2005a). *Hoju* (호주) refers to the (typically male) head of the family. In the *hoju* system or *hojuje*, each family member is identified in relation to the *hoju*. In 2005, three landmark decisions were made concerning *hojuje*, which were put into effect in 2008 (C. H. Cho, 2005b). In February 2005, the South Korean Constitutional Court ruled *hojuje* was unconstitutional since it perpetuated gender inequality. Then in March 2005, the National Assembly revised the Civil Code and effectively abolished *hojuje* and *hojeok* (호적), the male-centred family register required in virtually all aspects of Korean society including employment and passport issuance. Furthermore, in a Supreme Court decision, married women could lay claim to their father's assets whereas before the decision, women were removed and transferred from their father's register to their husband's register. These decisions significantly challenged patriarchal dominance over family and society.

Internal debates such as the *hojuje* debate are based heavily on the significance of blood relations and traditional family values in South Korean society. It is a debate not only about who is included on the family registry but also ultimately, what forms the basis for the Korean family and the manner in which it is officially recognised. The court's decision to repeal *hojuje* challenges the dominance of bloodline identification through the male side. These debates relate to the
government’s approach toward adopted Koreans. In fact, bloodlines and identification through blood ties are central to the government’s approach toward adoptees especially evident by “recent attempts to produce a homogenously ‘Korean,’ yet heterogeneously dispersed, ‘family’ based on shared ancestors or ‘blood’” (E. Kim, 2005, p. 65). Recently, the South Korean government has taken to representing Korean adoptees as part of the diaspora of overseas Koreans by including them in an imagined “global Korean family” (E. Kim, 2005, p. 52). This shift in policy to include Korean adoptees in the category of overseas Koreans can be seen as part of the Korean government’s “cultural and economic ‘globalisation’ policy (segyehwa [세계화]) nominally inaugurated under President Kim Young Sam and expanded under President Kim Dae Jung” (E. Kim, 2005, p. 52).

However, this change in policy is not such a dramatic shift since it continues to draw on the unifying role of the Korean family and the symbol of blood. As discussed in the previous chapters, ‘blood’ is a symbol that continues to play out generally in adoption discourse, especially in relation to the family, kin ties and identity. Following Victor Turner’s analysis of symbols, ‘blood’ is a symbol because it is “associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means ... [It is] a dynamic entity” (V. Turner, 2001, pp. 357-358). Thus, the symbol of ‘blood’ is also something that can be manipulated for political means. In the context of the Korean family, the meaning of ‘blood’ is used to justify a range of political agendas, from conservative aims to advocate adherence to a patriarchal social structure to those that draw on the notion of a ‘global Korean family’ to recognise overseas Koreans on the basis of ‘blood’.
It is important to remember, however, that aspects of Confucian ideology in Korean society are also mobilised in different historical contexts for different purposes. As Moon points out, attributing certain gender inequalities as represented by social institutions like *hojuje* to ‘traditional’ Confucian values as if “tradition persists automatically or that it tenaciously refuses to go away” overlooks important historical changes that influence “how ‘tradition’ itself is constructed” (2009, p. 82). In the context of industrialisation and globalisation, Korean ‘traditional’ values take on different meaning. For example, post-Korean War, rapid economic development has also posed particular political challenges, mainly “[how] to retain and develop a uniquely Korean identity while absorbing a constant and intense barrage of foreign cultural influences” (Eckert et al., 1990, p. 414). What exactly that ‘unique’ Korean identity is, is subject to debate, especially in the present context as the South Korean government aims to develop a strong presence in the Asia-Pacific region and as globally dispersed Korean citizens present a challenge to the idea of a unified national identity. These issues will be discussed in more depth in Part 2 of this chapter.

**Formation of a national Korean identity**

In order to understand the current basis for South Korea’s globalisation policies, it is helpful to consider the conceptual role of the Korean family and its significance in the development of a Korean national identity. At the heart of Korea’s development as a nation-state, is the view of the Korean family as the bulwark of
Korean society and identity (C. S. Kim, 1988). The concept of modern nationalism in Korean society first took significant hold during Japanese colonisation and occupation of the Korean peninsula and especially during the independence and patriotic movements of the 1920s when “Korean nationalism ... took shape as a political ideology” (Buzo, 2007, p. 30). Under Japanese colonial rule, Koreans were forced to replace their Korean names with Japanese names (R. E. Kim, 1998). This was exceptionally painful and rendered a massive psychological blow because it effectively severed that generation of Koreans from their ancestors by forbidding them to use their family names.

This along with other atrocities committed against Koreans during this period "saw the development and articulation of ethnic nationalism based on shared blood and ancestry that countered colonial racism and assimilation" (Shin, 2006a, p. 19). In a move to delineate Korea as a separate nation with a separate identity, the basis for Korean nationalism and in particular a Korean national identity was founded on what made Korea unique. This focused on ethnicity as well as Korean cultural heritage and values. This particular form of ethnic nationalism is a Korea specific construction of nationalism. As Buzo argues, Korean nationalism was not defined according to identification with the state, but rather as a “cultural and ethnic collectivity, made real ... mainly by family, kin and local district ties” (2007, p. 31). This different understanding of nationalism presents a problem for organising identity in terms of the state.
Tensions between central identification and local identification are not new to Korean society. Throughout Korean history and before the unification of the Korean peninsula, political and economic power shifted between central and local spheres as various interested parties grappled for power and prestige (Eckert et al., 1990). However, these tensions were perhaps more pronounced during this historical period of intense nationalist activity. There were two dynamics present at this time. Buzo notes:

> [As] Korean nationalists urged Koreans outwards, beyond familism and localism, to the nation-in-waiting and beyond [on a global scale] ... simultaneously, Korean culture urged the nationalists inwards, back towards the deeply rooted social and cultural norms in which they had been raised (2007, p.31).

This historical tension applies to present tensions between national identification and a deeply rooted local familial identification that is at the heart of Korean identity. For instance, in the current context of globalisation, while there is pressure on Korea to play a greater role on the international front such as promoting a more transparent and open refugee policy (J. H. Lee, 2006) and encouraging a sense of national and global identity, there is also resistance to any perceived threat to the stability and unity of family and local identification (Buzo, 2007). Therefore, even the idea of Korea as a nation is relatively recent which makes the South Korean government’s effort to represent Korea as a global nation even more divisive.

Furthermore, in the 1920s and 1930s, competing ideologies created an ideological divide even before the geographical division of the Korean peninsula as opposing views from moderate to more radical socialism developed within the nationalist
and independence movements (Eckert et al., 1990, p. 298 and p. 325). Indeed, “by the end of [World War II], Korea was already an ideologically bifurcated society” (Eckert et al., 1990, p. 329). This division continues to play out in Korean politics as both the north of Korea and the south of Korea assert the ‘right’ to represent the Korean nation. In particular, the term for ‘Korean nation’ – *han minjok* – is indistinguishable from ‘Korean race’ (Eckert et al., 1990, p. 407). This presents a source of conflict over asserting nation-state sovereignty since both South Korea and North Korea recognise the same origin myth of Dangun being the primogeniture line from which all Korean people are descended. This poses the question that if Korean race is synonymous with Korean nation, then how can both states lay claim to national sovereignty over the Korean peninsula if both also recognise this common ancestral descent.

Today, in the context of South Korean nationalism, in order to try to reconcile national and local affinities, the central government is attempting to reframe national and now, global Korean identity in terms of the Korean family. However, at the same time, there is resistance to Korea’s modernisation as seen in some of the public reactions toward the government’s contentious decision to repeal the *hoju* system. Because *hoju* has served as a patriarchal buttress for the Korean family and society as some argue since the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) and then when it was officially institutionalised during the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), any change to this sparks a reaction from conservatives who see it as diminishing the strength of the Korean family (C. H. Cho, 2005a). Professor Choi Byong Chul of Sungkyunkwan Confucian University lamented that with the end of *hoju*,
“Egoism will spread fast. When the unity of family is weakened, the economically weak in a family are isolated or abandoned” (Fifield, 2005). The Korean family is perceived as being under threat by change and this anxiety coincides with the Korean government’s attempts to superimpose local familism onto globalised familism.

However, this conservative view of maintaining a state-sanctioned patriarchy through social institutions like the hojuje is not universal. There is evidence that younger generations place less importance on these practices, especially regarding mandatory military service, which has been seen as supporting a “hegemonic masculinity” and a rite of passage to adulthood (Moon, 2002, p. 95). Furthermore, there is a “trend toward the uncoupling of military service and masculinity among [a] younger generation of [Korean] men … attitudes noticeably different from those of the rest of the population” (Moon, 2002, p. 98). This points not only to generational differences but also the dynamic nature of rapid social change that South Korea continues to face, particularly in the context of globalisation.

PART 2—Korean identity and the legacy of segyehwa

With this historical context in mind, this section turns to the ways the South Korean government has repositioned Korean adoptees and other overseas Koreans into a nationalistic discourse that aims to maintain a sense of unity based on a
Korean identity founded on shared blood and shared cultural heritage. This discussion provides a way to contextualise the latter half of the chapter, which seeks to understand how Korean adoptees challenge this discourse in relation to their own experiences. Specifically, it looks at how they strategically reposition themselves through their own understanding of identity as they grapple with what it means to be Korean.

Ultimately, I am more interested in the cracks that emerge to challenge these images of unity and naturalised metaphors rather than discourse for the sake of discourse. Therefore, the focus will be on how Korean adoptees as ambivalent subjects create cracks in the mirror and reflect those cracks back into the face of the South Korean government's image of a Korean identity. Of course, Korean adoptees are also engaged in appropriating a Korean identity for themselves and so in this process, they may also simultaneously confirm hegemonic notions of a Korean identity. This section highlights these simultaneous processes of contesting and upholding hegemonic discourse in ways that I hope will illuminate the complexities involved in understanding and creating a sense of Koreanness that is not necessarily constrained by static ideological fixtures.

First, it is important to clearly outline the South Korean government's discourse regarding overseas Koreans. The policy known as *segyehwa* refers to South Korea's globalisation policy. This was introduced by President Kim Young Sam on 25 January 1995 during an official state visit to Sydney in Australia (Y. S. Kim, 1995). *Segyehwa*, which means globalisation, was chosen to reflect a Korea-
focused approach toward changing global trends so that South Korea could continue to develop as a worthy competitor on a global scale. The policy approaches *segye* as a way to strengthen South Korea through globalisation. It is an opportunity to further develop South Korea in an "effort to make a nation and its citizens first-rate in all areas—politics, the economy, society, culture and ways of thought—in order to sustain the nation's development" (Y. S. Kim, 1995, p. 13). Therefore, while *segye* means 'globalisation' the focus is ultimately on national development.

In addition to concerns about national development in economic and socio-political areas, *segye* also stresses a strong national identity. In President Kim's speech, two relevant themes pertaining to national identity emerge in the section titled, 'The Five Major Meanings of *Segye*’ (1995, p. 15). The third point states that *segye* will only be successful "when the entire Korean people unite as one in the pursuit of globalisation" (Y. S. Kim, 1995, p. 15). The fourth point outlines the method and reason why national identity is important for South Korea's successful globalisation:

*Segye* must be underpinned by Koreanization. Koreans cannot become global citizens without a good understanding of their own culture and tradition. *Segye* in the proper sense of the word means that Koreans should march out into the world on the strength of their unique culture and traditional values. Only when the national identity is maintained and intrinsic national spirit upheld will Koreans be able to successfully globalise (Y. S. Kim, 1995, p. 15).

In order for South Korea to become a powerful global player, President Kim argues that the foundation for globalisation policies such as *segye* needs to be positioned in reference to 'Koreanization'. Again, this illustrates why President
Kim’s chose to use a Korean word, *segyehwa*. He uses it to stress his particular approach to globalisation, which is to enter the global playing field while prioritising national development and relying on nationalistic sentiment. He proposes to develop South Korea by eliciting a common sense of purpose among Koreans so that they can become 'global citizens'. In order to create this common purpose, *segyehwa* discourse draws on unifying metaphors to create a shared Korean identity, in particular, the image of Koreans "march[ing] out into the world" (Y. S. Kim, 1995, p. 15).

This focus on 'Koreanization' in a globalisation policy may seem to indicate a contradiction, namely fostering a national identity while also trying to develop a more open view toward Korea’s position on the world stage. President Kim acknowledges earlier in his speech that in the process of Korea’s surge toward economic development and industrialisation, one of the "serious side effects ... [was that] a large majority of Korean people continue to be bound by nationalistic sentiments bordering on xenophobia" (1995, p. 10). However, at the same time, he says that globalisation is only possible if Koreans unite with a strong sense of national identity. It may seem strange to lament nationalistic attachment and in the same breath, promote it. However, according to Shin, "Most Koreans appear to see no inherent contradiction between nationalism and globalisation. Rather, they seek to appropriate globalisation for nationalist goals" (2006a, p. 208).

In order to draw a subtle distinction between Korea’s approach to globalisation and other countries, it is useful to illustrate this in comparison to a (self-
proclaimed) multicultural country such as Australia. Australian singer songwriters Bruce Woodley and Dobe Newton composed the song, 'I am Australian' for the Bicentenary in 1988 (Woodley & Newton, 1987b). The song is used today to celebrate cultural diversity in Australia by including people from different cultural backgrounds as characteristic of Australian identity. This is especially noted in the lyrics of the main chorus, "We are one, but we are many and from all lands on earth we come. We share a dream and sing with one voice: I am, you are, we are Australian" (Woodley & Newton, 1987a). The Australian government's approach toward global diversity within Australia draws on the song's key phrase, 'we are one but we are many'. It focuses on celebratory multiculturalism in a pluralistic society. The message is that 'we' come from many places and many cultural backgrounds but 'we' are all Australian through residency or citizenship. Inversely, the Korean government's approach is 'we are many but we are one' which celebrates and seeks to develop ethnic nationalism based on shared Korean blood. For the Korean government, the 'we' includes Korean people living in many countries and cultures; however, by blood, 'we' is always still Korean. The message is that wherever 'overseas Koreans' live, they will always be Korean. Therefore, while countries such as Australia tend to celebrate cultural and ethnic diversity within the nation, Korea focuses on a single ethnicity to unite the nation. It does this by including Koreans in other countries even though they may hold different nationalities in order to foster a common identity.

This form of ethnic nationalism has shaped a sense of Korean identity which continues to form a backdrop for policies relating to Korea's position in the world.
This is especially relevant for the current government’s globalisation agenda under President Lee Myung Bak. Professor Hyun In Taek from Korea University gave a speech at the OKF 11th Future Leaders’ Conference, which highlighted similar goals. Professor Hyun explained that he was a major figure who played a key role toward helping the Grand National Party headed by President Lee Myung Bak to win the election in December 2007. He helped to develop what he referred to as the 'MB [(Lee) Myung Bak] Doctrine', which included a vision for the future of Korea called the 'Global Korea' policy. Therefore, it was perhaps appropriate that his speech was titled, 'The New Administration’s Foreign Policy'. He talked about forging global partnerships with neighbouring countries in the Asia Pacific region as well as other countries, in particular the United States. Underlying his statements, it almost seemed that the proposal to develop international relations was somewhat begrudingly offered out of necessity for South Korea’s national interests, suggesting that South Korea would only globalise so much as it benefits national development.

It is evident that ideas introduced through President Kim’s segyeilha policy have continued to influence President Lee Myung Bak’s aims toward achieving pre-eminence within the Asia Pacific region as well as in relation to the other major world powers. For example, President Lee’s inauguration speech echoed President Kim’s concept of ‘Koreanization’ in his segyeilha policy:

There is a map of the Republic of Korea within each of us. I will take that map and expand it so that it reaches out to the world. By allowing the world to come into Korea without hindrance, we will together create brand new values. And then, the Republic of Korea will be a nation that sends these new values out into the world—a genuinely top-notch nation (M. B. Lee, 2008).
It is interesting to note that this interpretation of globalisation involves Korea coming to the world as Korea expands on its own terms rather than the world coming to Korea. It implies an awkward tension between maintaining a Korean national identity and uncertainty about how that will be affected if Korea continues on a path of globalisation. Additionally, President Lee’s 'Global Korea' policy places emphasis on shared Korean identity based on ethnicity. In his inauguration speech, he began by welcoming all Koreans, including Koreans living overseas. At the Future Leaders’ Conference, the same symbolic gesture was offered, inviting all those with Korean ancestry to feel included as Koreans regardless of residency or citizenship. However, as with most state-sponsored discourse, these gestures largely overlook complex realities and experiences. At the conference, the audience consisted of 105 overseas Koreans, including 7 Korean adoptees from 21 different countries. As it was made uncomfortably obvious during the playing of the national anthem, the message of shared ‘Koreanness’ was momentarily overshadowed by the differences between us.

(Re)making Korean adoptees into overseas Koreans

Since the Overseas Koreans Act was passed in 1999 during Kim Dae Jung’s presidency, the South Korean government has recognised Korean adoptees and other overseas Koreans as part of a global Korean community. The Act allows overseas Koreans to apply for an F-4 visa, which gives them similar rights to a Korean national. By passing the Overseas Koreans Act and creating the Overseas
Koreans Foundation, the nation expressed an active interest in Koreans living in different countries, in particular countries that could provide useful ties for Korea. In 2007, over 550 Korean adoptees attended 'The Gathering' held in Seoul and organised by IKAA. During the opening ceremony, with the aid of a translator, the former President of OKF Lee Goo Hong declared, "Whatever nationality or wherever you live, you are Korean and OKF will help you". Other Korean ministerial officials proceeded to apologise on behalf of the South Korean government for sending us (Korean adoptees) away to other countries, and also in the same breath, emphasised that we will always remain Korean. By including overseas Koreans in the Korean national discourse, the government is able to appropriate overseas Koreans as vital social and economic resources for the development and global interests of Korea (E. Kim, 2005, 2007). The way the government is able to do this for Korean adoptees in particular is addressed slightly differently than for other overseas Koreans. Korean adoptees were given orphan status so that they could be deemed 'adoptable'. They were sent away because of the economic and social conditions and for this the government officials at 'The Gathering' apologised.

However, now Korean adoptees have another status, this time as overseas Koreans, which is a status that GOA'L campaigned for on behalf of Korean adoptees. While this has been widely supported by Korean adoptees, the government has also taken advantage of this new status with some strings attached. They have promised support for Korean adoptees when they come back to Korea which is a positive acknowledgement of the challenges many face.
However, at the same time, the government officials at the 2007 Gathering presented Korean adoptees with a message which echoed the former First Lady Lee Hee Ho at the 1999 Gathering, when she said, “Now you must forget your difficult past and renew your relations with your native country in order to work together toward common goals based on the blood ties that cannot be severed even if we wanted to” (H. H. Lee, 1999). At the 2007 Gathering, the message built on this by effectively saying that adoptees must embrace this Korean identity unquestionably and take on the role as ‘overseas Koreans’ in order to realise their duty toward Korea. During the speeches, the government officials emphasised that many Korean adoptees have led ‘successful lives’ and have received high quality education demonstrated through various achievements as 'successful' adults. However, the relative ‘success’ of Korean adoptees paralleling South Korea’s ‘success story’ as an industrialised nation cannot be easily swept aside in exchange for national and international amnesia. It seems that the government is only willing to welcome back Korean adoptees into the ‘family’ now that they are newly represented as successful overseas Koreans even though they had previously been rejected as orphans and cut off from having any officially recognised family ties.

Framed in reference to segye hw a and as was evident by First Lady Lee Hee Ho’s speech to Korean adoptees, contemporary nationalistic discourse continues to draw on biologised constructions of family and origins. This enables the government to include Korean adoptees in terms of a broader concept, a “global Korean family”, by also naturalising their trips to Korea as ‘returns’ to the ‘motherland’ (E. Kim, 2005). This attitude largely ignores the fact that Korean
adoptees were raised elsewhere and do not necessarily share the idea that they are part of a 'global Korean family'.

State-sponsored discourse also assumes that all adoptees have a natural affinity toward Korea as well as a natural inclination to find their birth families. This perspective presumes that Korean adoptees, while legally severed from their birth family and their birth country, remain connected by a metaphorical umbilical cord, as if their social and cultural moorings were never lost. It does not recognise the fact that Korean adoptees' lives were changed dramatically when they were adopted and that what they 'lost' is not fully recoverable in the sense that they cannot simply reactivate some kind of Koreanness left harbouring inside them and become instantly 'Korean' with the expected pride and affinity toward Korea. Those that may not wish to search for their birth family or do not feel a sense of shared Korean belonging are underrepresented by a Korean cultural ideology that maintains the importance of ancestral 'blood ties' for Korean identity (Roesch-Rhomberg, 2004). Korean identity relies on maintaining strong kin relations, which includes ancestral relations. As adoptees, these kin relations were severed as part of the adoption process. This is an atrocious act in the Korean context because by removing a person from the ancestral lineage, the person exists outside of the family and therefore, outside society as well.

From the perspective of the Korean government, being Korean is irrefutable and is synonymous with naturalised notions of family, ethnicity, culture and nation. By including Korean adoptees as overseas Koreans and ultimately as 'Koreans'
without any condition such as 'overseas' or 'adoptee', the government is able to impose on them a sense of duty or obligation toward Korea. This works to instil the idea that because we are all Korean and share the same Korean identity based on blood, 'we' must all work together to look toward the future in order to help Korea to become a great nation. In fact, the message is that not only do 'we' have the opportunity to promote Korea by acting as social and economic capital; it is 'our' obligation as 'Koreans'. In this way, Korean adoptees are repositioned as 'overseas Koreans' and specifically as “capital-bearing subjects” (Ong, 1999, p. 112). Through this strategic manoeuvre, the South Korean government is able to create a sense of diplomatic duty and impart this expectation on Korean adoptees. No longer are they the unwanted orphans; now they are redefined as important assets to the South Korean nation.

Similar parallels can be drawn between this outlook and the government’s overall approach toward welcoming globalisation as long as it provides a direct benefit for Korea. An example of this is when President Kim Dae Jung's government passed 'The Act Regarding the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans'. This law originally excluded overseas Koreans in China and Russia in favour of those in the United States until it was overruled by the Korean Supreme Court (Shin, 2006a, pp. 213-214). Furthermore, while the current Overseas Koreans Act includes all those that can prove Korean ethnicity, in practice, inclusion is debatable. Based on her experiences in South Korea, Hee Su observed:

Korea as a culture ... it's just like its own small bubble of a community that is really hard in accepting anybody that deviates from their standardised norm and I don't think I will ever be able to infiltrate that bubble ... Korea as a nation
is unmatched as far as being totally obliterated during the war, like completely decimated and to come back literally as one of the top world powers is phenomenal ... But it’s also like you can accomplish so much on the global and economic scale but you can’t accomplish being accepting of that which is diverse and it’s such a paradox ... How can you be so strong in this one aspect of your culture and then be so closed about another, about your ‘own’ people?

These mixed feelings of inclusion and exclusion are part of the lived experiences of Korean adoptees when they go back to Korea. For some, their Korean appearance helps them to feel included; for others with multiracial backgrounds, their appearance is what makes them feel excluded. Then of course there is the overall feeling of being “outsiders within” (Trenka et al., 2006) without the cultural and linguistic fluency that Koreans that were raised in Korea within a Korean family have.

In order to rationalise Korean adoptees’ inclusion into a national ideology of belonging and obligation, the state draws on metaphors of shared blood. As discussed earlier, this is based on the pervasive myth that all Korean people are descended from Dangun, the mythological founder of Korea and ‘father’ of the Korean people. However, by drawing on the myth that Koreans are all descended from a common ancestor, the fact that Korean adoptees were removed from their ancestral lineage is overlooked. The problem for adoptees is that when they were given orphan status to be adopted overseas, they could not be included in the family register (hojeok) because the parental rights of the birthparents were replaced and transferred to the adopting parents. This means that effectively, Korean adoptees are the sole bearers of their own lineage. Because this is not possible in Korean society, Korean adoptees are like non-persons; without a place
on the family register it is more difficult to be accepted in Korean society. This has real significance in terms of social opportunities and overall livelihood in South Korea.

The main problem that is of particular interest for Korean adoptees is that Korean identity is constructed as something that is natural and known as 'true' without even a shadow of doubt. For adoptees, it is the unknown that forms the context in which they try to understand what being Korean means. It is the unknown that often brings adoptees to Korea again and it is the unknown—represented in the form of birth information and reasons for their adoptions—that affects the way their Korean identity is challenged. Before being adopted, they were only Korean and not Korean adoptees. During this time, they were indisputably 'Korean'. However, that period before adoption often remains to some degree, unknown, especially since adoption agencies exercise power over disclosing information in the adoption documents to adoptees.

So on occasions such as 'The Gathering', when the main message pronounced by government officials is, 'You are Korean', it contradicts the difficult reality that Korean adoptees face when they are searching for birth family and information, not to mention that it also overlooks the fact that their identities are much more complex than such a statement implies. Furthermore, if they really wanted Korean adoptees to try to better understand the pre-adoption Korean part of themselves, then why not make it less of a struggle to access adoption records as well as endeavouring to ensure that adoptees are told accurate information and not the
kind of false information that they often receive. Marie offered her thoughts about this:

I think they never expected us to come back so why keep paperwork because you know why greet us with kindness ... they don't know what to do with us. We left and we were supposed to stay there ... It was a one-way ticket so they're like what are you doing here? What do you want?

Overall, simply saying that Korean adoptees are Korean, full stop, is an insufficient approach to recognising Korean adoptees as ‘Korean’. It attempts to hide away the ‘unknown past’ of adoptees’ birth information and more broadly, it tries to forget the past reasons for Korean transnational adoptions and the present context in which Korean children continue to be adopted to other countries due mainly to discrimination against socially disadvantaged single mothers.

As this discussion has shown, it is important to situate contemporary state-sponsored discourse about Korean identity within an historical context in order to understand how overseas Koreans, which includes Korean adoptees, are represented in terms of a broader socio-political agenda. So what does it mean to be Korean? The rest of this chapter will be based on interviews with Korean adoptees concerning how they make sense of what a Korean identity means for them, ways they have gone about this and some difficulties they encounter during this process. Through their experiences and narratives, Korean adoptees challenge essentialised constructions of state-sponsored Korean identity by presenting their own identities in ways that show they are just as valid as any other. They also challenge the apparent dis-ease within Korea’s nationalistic discourse, which appears to welcome the diversity of Korean adoptees and other overseas Koreans.
but under the condition that they do not question a Korean identity based on blood. By presenting Korean adoptees’ lived experiences, the South Korean state’s hegemonic discourse begins to show signs of stress as cracks begin to appear on the surface, revealing the arbitrary negotiation and construction of identity.

PART 3—Unknown: Forgetting, remembering and knowing the past

When the government officials at the Gathering in 2007 implored Korean adoptees to forget the past, the message drew a parallel to the government’s broader agenda which is for the Korean nation and its people to also ‘forget’ a difficult past of war, corrupt military dictatorships and poverty. The idea is that all Koreans, identified by their Korean blood, should join as one to embrace Korea, Koreanness and the future. When Korean adoptees come back to Korea and try to begin to understand Korea and what a Korean identity could mean for them, the push to automatically acquire a Korean identity—as if it were as easy as putting on a hanbok24—is overwhelming. The focus is completely on feeling Korean, being Korean and embracing Korean national pride. The premise seems to be that all Korean adoptees have to do is tap into their Korean blood that supposedly runs through all people considered to ‘be Korean’ and their Korean identity will suddenly awaken from its latent state, bursting to the surface. If only it were that easy, then Korean adoptees would have no problem understanding the culture, the language, and not only that, but forget that they were adopted in the first place. This kind of ideology

24 Hanbok (한복) refers to Korean ‘traditional’ clothing.
is blinded by a focus on ethnic nationalism in order to subsume any differences beyond a particular kind of Korean identity.

By including Korean adoptees in the same category as *kyopo* (교포)—a general term that refers to people with Korean heritage living overseas—the specific historical, social and political circumstances that made Koreans into Korean adoptees is largely ignored. Importantly, it ignores the different struggles Korean adoptees encounter when they come back to Korea. Katie described her feelings about wanting to identify herself as a Korean adoptee rather than being subsumed into the *kyopo* category:

*For me I feel different, like I don’t feel that I’m a kyopo … To me it doesn’t feel right to be placed in the same category maybe as those people because … we’re all Koreans living abroad but we’re so different. It seems very strange that they put us all in the same category.*

She goes on to explain why she would rather say she is *ibyangin* (입양인), which means, ‘adoptee’:

*I want people to know that I’m ibyangin … because I think [not knowing] is part of the problem … I think it’s important for Korean people to know that there’s differences and for them to be reminded of this history and that there’s people who are adopted who are coming back and that we’re not children because Koreans tend to think of like ibyangin as children who are being adopted but no there are so many adults … There’s a long history and people tend to not think about that so for me it’s important to tell people that like when I say you know I’m ibyangin they know that I’m adopted Korean which is different for me than telling them [kyopo].*

It is important not to forget the past. This does not mean that Korean adoptees should just dwell on the past and remain stuck there, but it is important to be reminded of that past in order to recognise that Korean adoptees exist as well as the on-going difficulties they face in Korean society.
Being a Korean adoptee is not the same as other kyopo who were raised with their Korean families. Korean adoptees have another dimension which is often characterised by a sense of rejection, loss and powerlessness because they were orphaned from their Korean families without any say in the matter. These are a few of the sentiments that were expressed:

[Being in Korea] gave me a feeling of being a part of the Korean history, but it also reminded me that Korea did not want to take care of me and still send children away. On the one hand I feel like I belong to Korea, but on the other hand I feel rejected by the Koreans, the Korean society, the government etcetera. (Hanna)

Sometimes I have felt anger over being an adoptee too, because I was powerless in the process that made me an adoptee, and I have lost many things because of that process. These include a relationship with and knowledge of my biological family and heritage, and knowledge of the Korean language and culture. It has also resulted in feeling displaced, out-of-place, alien and different. (Sarah)

This needs to be not only acknowledged but also engaged with in discussion instead of trying to hide it away and 'forget' about it like dirty laundry. These feelings are part of the experiences Korean adoptees bring with them when they come to Korea. Like many have said, it is not the same as going on holiday to another country. On the one hand it is like a holiday because it involves travelling to a country that is just as foreign as any other. However, for many adoptees, going to Korea has potentially more significance because it is where they were born and where they lived for some part of their lives. They are also not just kyopo visiting family that have stayed in Korea. For those that have not found their families and wish to, it also involves the emotional uncertainty of searching. For those that have found their families, it means trying to negotiate how the relationship between them and their family will continue after so many years apart.
While OKF makes it possible for Korean adoptees to explore 'Korean culture' by offering birth country tours and other related programs, it is still difficult for Korean adoptees to find their birth families. So while the government says, 'forget the past', the past is what Korean adoptees are often searching for and trying to understand. In this sense, it is somewhat insulting to hear this and then on top of that, Korean adoptees are expected to accept an imposed ready-made Korean identity that ignores the different lives they have led in their adoptive countries, which have shaped their identities, including their feelings about a Korean identity.

State-sponsored statements that claim certainty and knowledge of a Korean identity overshadow the many unknowns that Korean adoptees face and the obvious gap between themselves and those that were raised with Korean families in Korea and in other countries. In adoption records, the unknown is implicit between the gaps of what information is there; it is also explicit in that sometimes all that is known is 'unknown'. ‘Unknown’ is often the only word written in boxes that are meant to contain birth date, birth parents’ names, birthplace, family medical history and so on. The unknown has been expressed in different ways and relates to feelings of belonging and being in the world:

*I still have deep feelings of melancholy when thinking about all of the unknowns in my life. I have never felt like I’ve truly belonged anywhere and I am constantly searching for that.* (Marah)

*For me, the whole unknown aspect of adoption is the biggest issue for me. I have so many questions which don’t have answers, and I will probably never get answers to those questions. The impact it has on my life is that there is some sort of mysterious quality. One of the big factors is why? Why was I given up for adoption? How did she make that decision? How did it affect her? Did anyone*
support her? The other unknown aspect is what your medical history is. You
don’t know if you’re more at risk to medical problems and that adds another
‘unknown’ aspect to your life. You simply just do not know. (Steph)

It’s just [I] kept running into dead ends basically. No we don’t know. No we
don’t know. Go here. No, go there. No one had anything. And they say 1970s?
We threw all those files out. It was long ago and so I really did not get anything
more after that trip than I already knew, which is unknown, unknown, unknown ...
basically. (Marie)

Parts of Korean adoptees’ identities are reframed as 'unknown' and the 'unknown'
refers to their lives before adoption, who they were and who their families are and
what the context of the decision was that altered their lives so dramatically. It
imparts a sense that knowledge is an elusive thing that tempts from between the
pages of their records, something that frustrates their searches as adoption
agencies give only the information that they deem is appropriate and it is
something that mocks any efforts at reclaiming a Korean identity as if they had not
been adopted.

The extent of knowledge that Korean adoptees have that involves Korean culture is
often left to eating at Korean restaurants, going to adoptee culture camps,
attending festivals and other ways that allow easy 'cultural consumption'. Brea
noted, I went to one culture camp in 6th grade but besides that the only Korean
adoptee or Korean I met was when I went to Korea for the first time with a
group. Growing up I learned about being Korean from the dictionary, encyclopaedia
and the Internet. Young Mi went about understanding Korean identity for herself
through similar avenues:

I can’t say that my parents did anything active to promote my interest in things
Korean. I was always reminded and made to internalise that I was Korean, but
no action was really taken to back this up. When I was about 19, I started
learning the language, trying food, watching movies ... that kind of stuff, but completely of my own choice.

She said that while she was growing up, it was always acknowledged that I was Korean. But not in a way, which actually ever made me think about my 'Koreanness'; it was just words. For Nate, growing up knowing that he was originally from Korea was not particularly relevant until he began to express a more avid interest in his late teens. He noted, Yeah it was basically just a fact. I didn’t deny it but I didn’t go out of my way to make it known that I’m Korean to say, I’m Korean and I’m proud. So, for Young Mi and Nate, understanding what it might mean to have a Korean identity was limited to factual knowledge and the significance of a Korean identity was not explored much further.

Even when parents might have encouraged engaging with a Korean identity in other ways beyond acknowledging facts, it might be the case that these actions are also in a way, 'just words'. This may be due to the extent that Korea plays a part in an adoptee's everyday life:

I don’t have a lot of knowledge about Korea and the Korean culture and that kind of stuff, that’s why I think of myself as more Australian. But not for reasons like my parents never said, 'You can’t learn about Korea'. They always encouraged it. But I was always very, 'Oh I don’t want to know or I can’t be bothered to know, I’m doing other stuff'. (Amy)

Of course involving aspects of Korean culture or not as part of the adoptive family also depends on the attitude and approach of adoption policies in particular historical contexts. It is also important to keep in mind the particular participant sample that is being drawn upon in this study. Most of the Korean adoptees I interviewed were in their mid 20s and 30s and so in the 70s and 80s when they
were growing up, there was not as strong a push to include aspects of their birth culture. It was not that it was always actively denied; rather, it was that it was not the common practice at the time.

Previously, the focus was on assimilating the child into the adoptive country because it was thought to be in the 'best interests' of the child so that they could adjust quickly to the new setting. Currently, adoption agencies tend to emphasise inclusion of the child's birth culture. This may involve learning the language, cooking typical foods, observing particular holidays, wearing traditional clothes and making trips back to the birth country. These tend to focus on material culture rather than cultural values and practices. The reason for this is that engaging these intricate layers of Korean culture in everyday life is not very practical. Introducing 'Korean culture' into the lives of adoptive families living in another country will always be based on a somewhat superficial level. However, while the level of engagement with Korean culture is only a very basic one, the effort to engage is not. Some adoptees such as Nate have said that they wish their parents had helped them to learn more about Korea, especially the Korean language, so that they could have some knowledge to draw upon as adults if they wished to explore further. Nate commented that the benefit of this is that adoptees will always have it [knowledge] in the background and like when they get older they might choose to like push it away but when they’re a bit older again maybe once they reach adulthood, they might realise it was something special and they’ll have that to fall back on.
While effort and engagement may be important, the *approach* toward including a child’s birth culture needs to be critiqued. To think that Korean adoptees can simply have the best of both worlds, Korea and their adoptive country, is a misconception. This attitude does not acknowledge that the transnational adoption process involves losses as well, notably all the cultural intricacies that are consciously and subconsciously learnt by being raised in a Korean family within that culture. Therefore whether or not an interpretation of Korean culture was supported within an adoptive family, it would be naive to think that the complexities of a culture could be replicated in consumable ways, such as food, music and clothing. In this sense, any understanding of a culture is always known through its interpretation; "culture is public [or known] because meaning is" (Geertz, 2001, p. 340). A culture is known through interpreting its vast array of meaning, which opens culture to the idea that there is not one static 'Culture', just as there is not one sanctioned interpretation.

On the other side of the same coin, culture is also understood and learnt through *experience*. This means that culture is experienced through engagement with all the senses by feeling it and breathing it. It is not something that can simply be picked up, packaged and transplanted into the unsuspecting person. Nevertheless, the Korean government's approach takes precisely this position, that Korean culture, specifically 'traditional culture' can travel through time and space as a relatively unchanged whole to be instilled in future generations in order to foster a sense of Korean identity. Using this mindset, Korean culture becomes 'Korean Culture' and Korean identity becomes 'Korean Identity'. By approaching Korean
culture and Korean identity in this way, the government assumes that it can (re)make Korean adoptees by having them digest 'Korean Culture' and reinforcing it by telling them, 'You are Korean'. Importantly, it takes for granted that Korean adoptees are simply Korean with passing acknowledgement of their lives in their adoptive countries as if they were simply away on a long holiday.

Struggles in Korea

An undeniable aspect of my experience in Korea is that of feeling and being excluded, yet again. This uncomfortable feeling hits hard because it is in our motherlands, (our rightful country) that we experience it. We fly for thousands of miles from our homelands in America, Europe, and Australia. In our homelands we are misunderstood, judged, even though we are fully integrated in the culture and language. So why would we want to experience it again? It takes tremendous courage to see all this through and live in Korea ... I stayed for six months, others stay for twice that long, and others persevere for years. Every day happens to be an awkward moment. I think you know what I mean. We look the part, and if we keep our mouths shut we can fake it, but inevitably we are so far out of our domain it's scary. I'm thinking of the times I had to explain to a group of Koreans that I didn't speak Korean, or worse yet, have someone else explain. For us, [it involves] a series of awkward, sometimes humiliating situations (original emphasis). (Anne)

Initially, the national rhetoric that proclaims such slogans as, "Welcome to Korea! Welcome to your motherland!" and "You are Korean!" may be warmly received because they are saying that Korea is offering a sense of belonging to Korean adoptees within their birth country. However, as discussed previously, the problem is that the kind of Korean identity supported by the government is too conservative and like all good rhetoric, the complexities of everyday life are glossed over in favour of this glorified discourse. This has a real impact on Korean adoptees when they come to Korea when people expect them to be Korean because
they look Korean and also when they find their Korean birth families and try to establish a relationship with them. As Anne described, this is a difficult expectation to face and can sometimes become a humiliating experience. There is a feeling of being out-of-place yet again, which plays out in everyday experiences. It also indicates an awkward sense of belonging, not quite being Korean enough to be considered Korean while also having that expectation that they should be. In the next two sections I will highlight some of the difficulties Korean adoptees face through the experiences of Natacha and Hee Su.

**It's not that easy to just 'be Korean'**

Natacha was five years old when she was adopted to Switzerland. She learnt French as her first language and also spent some time living in France. During the interview, she spoke in English. She said that she would have felt more comfortable speaking in French because she would have been able to express herself more fully. Despite this, she described her experiences with such animated detail that it did not seem to matter so much that she used English instead of French. While Natacha was living in Switzerland, her birth family initiated contact with her. She felt that she should meet them and so she travelled to Korea for the first time when she was 31. She has since been to Korea twice and during the second trip, she tried to live with her family in order to get to know them better, especially her mother. Unfortunately, living with them was not easy and caused Natacha a great deal of stress. Eventually, she moved away and visited only on the
weekends. Around the time of the interview, she began to find it too difficult to be with them at all and eventually stopped visiting.

During her efforts to become familiar with her Korean family, she experienced many difficulties but what she found most challenging was trying to communicate to her family that she cannot simply become Korean in the way that they expected her to. They expected her to learn Korean instantaneously and treated her like a child because she could not understand Korean fluently. Even though she studied extensively and enrolled in intensive university level language courses, her efforts were largely ignored and belittled. She compared her steady efforts to learn Korean and her family's expectations to the process of knitting:

*It was so desperately depressing because ... when you start to learn Korean, you know just a few words, and the vocabulary, you get the vocabulary layer by layer, step by step, little by little, one point of grammar after another. It's like knitting a pullover, one knot after another. It takes time. So when you're at the beginning, starting the pullover and they want you to wear the pullover, it's so depressing, because it's not your level.*

One of the problems is that based on Natacha's Korean physical features, her family approached Natacha as they would any other Korean person. Instead of helping her by being patient and speaking a little slower, Natacha said:

*My mother spoke to me like I [was a Korean person]... Even if you have worked hard and you have studied hard, you cannot reach the level of fluent Korean [so quickly] so you just feel stupid and depressed and powerless and day by day, day by day, it was the same thing, so I felt really really so heavy.*

This experience of powerlessness is similar to the feeling that Korean adoptees often have when they are trying to make themselves understood in everyday situations, sometimes with no knowledge of Korean or only a few key phrases. Because they look Korean, it is assumed that they can speak Korean. Sometimes
people are understanding if they can explain that they were adopted but other times it is met with unpleasant reactions.

Another difficulty Natacha faced was that her particular circumstances as a person who was adopted from Korea and raised in Switzerland was not dealt with in a way that could have helped her family to empathise with her challenging situation. Instead, they just expected her to be Korean and to fit into a cookie-cutter mould shaped into their idea of a Korean person. She felt that they did not consider the different values, thoughts and ways of living that she developed as an adult living in Switzerland. Natacha explained: My own space, my own things, my own thinking, and yeah my difference. They don’t acknowledge it. I [felt] really suffocated (original emphasis). She goes on to say that she felt her mother treated her abandonment, adoption and her subsequent life in Switzerland in a disparaging way:

*In addition to this, she called me sometimes ‘Natacha’ with laughs that expressed that to her, this name was similar to a joke. It hurt me that she didn’t consider [more deeply] the consequences of having abandoned her children ... She always behaved like nothing had happened and she always lamented to my sister when she considered these or those behaviours of mine that were beyond her comprehension. She complained about that to my sister [so that] she [could make] me know what my mother wanted me to do or not do.*

Natacha also recalled another situation when her older sister organised a family picnic. She had previously attended similar family get-togethers and she usually felt like the odd one out since she was not treated as an adult with her own knowledge that was as equally as valid as any other. She told the following story
with an ability to laugh at the situation but it was clear that it was incredibly difficult at the time:

One Sunday she [older sister] said, 'Oh we'll have a family [outing], we will go out together, on a picnic together with the family'. I was not in the mood [to do this] again ... It was a [kind of] humiliation for me to be this stupid person who doesn’t understand at the family picnic, yeah and old people around ... who treat me like a child. So yeah to me, I wasn’t ready to experience again this kind of humiliation so I said to my sister, ‘Nooo, I prefer to stay at home alone today, but my sister [said], 'Oooh but I love you so much, oh please all of the family wants you to come’. So ... in French there's an expression like hard-head, to stay on your point of view only, so I thought ok, maybe I should make an effort and I went with them and it was exactly as I expected it to be. So, it was horrible.

Situations such as this one point to a need for increased awareness about the actual difficulties Korean adoptees face not only living in Korea, but also when they meet their families and try to bridge a temporal, cultural, and social divide which is not helped by language barriers. Importantly, there needs to be continued acknowledgement of Korean adoptees' experiences in order to effectively engage strategies that could help to promote understanding thereby making it a little easier for everyone involved, not only adoptees.

Hee Su was adopted from Korea when she was 4.5 years old to a family in Canada. Reflecting on this at 24 years old, she realised that what she had as a Korean child is what she is striving to relearn now as an adult as she tries to reconcile what she lost:

I was a fluent, culturally aware, informed Korean citizen with a Korean citizenship with a Korean name, with a Korean everything. Everything that I strive for now, I had 20 years ago and it’s so weird because at that time all I wanted when I arrived in Canada is what I have now. So it’s like, it’s such a push and pull because it seems like everything that I want is at a different time of my life that I can’t access (original emphasis).
In 2007, Hee Su returned to Korea to attend the Gathering in Seoul. During this time, she noticed how many aspects of the culture she did not understand. She expressed how frustrated this made her feel knowing that before she was adopted, it was all she knew. It made her aware of the impact her adoption had on her in the sense that now as an adult, there is so much she does not understand that there seems to be an impassable gap between herself and the Korean people around her. If she had the opportunity to live in Korea for a longer period, she would begin to understand some of the many things that seem clouded with fog. However, her initial impressions were centred on not being able to understand:

*I’ll never really understand why Koreans do something or why they say something like why they make appointments just to break them, why do they do that? I don’t understand. They do it all the time apparently, or like why they’re notoriously late, I don’t know why they’re late or like why the bus driver can’t wait for you to sit down before he like steps on the gas, like I’m just not going to understand these things you know, why when there’s like a huge berth of space do people in the market walk right into you, why do they do that? Like they could sidestep half an inch and they would avoid my shoulder but no, they just walk right into you and they don’t apologise and I know they don’t apologise because they don’t say anything. If they said something I’d be like maybe that’s an apology in Korean, who knows, but they just don’t say anything ... I don’t think I’m ever going to understand that ... I know those are just like trivial things and then there’s lots of other more important things that I just won’t understand* (original emphasis).

This description of all the little everyday things that Hee Su encountered expresses the complexity and depth of the many things that she would have to learn to feel included as someone who was raised in Korea. Her experiences emphasised that she is also in many ways, a foreigner in Korea, or an outsider looking in. She goes on to explain this feeling:

*It makes me realise that I’m an outsider in Korea too you know, like I can be Canadian but I’m still not really, really born and raised Canadian, like raised from four and a half plus but not born from 0 to 4 and so when I was [doing my internship], there’s so many patients, who’d be like, ’You know, I’m a true blue*
Calgarian. I was born and raised here’ and I was like I don’t know what you’re implying about me but I obviously ... or maybe I was, you have no idea what my history is, you know like just because I’m Asian like you don’t have to rub it in my face that I wasn’t born and raised here. Yeah and then like I mean some people see me as truly Canadian and others don’t because I’m Asian ... and then like Koreans in Canada are just totally baffled.

It is common for Korean adoptees to experience a feeling of being both an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’. As a result, Korean adoptees are perhaps more conscious of the kind of ‘identity work’ that is involved when confronted with situations when how they see themselves differs from how others perceive them.

Concluding remarks

As this discussion has tried to illustrate, Korean adoptees’ identities do not fit easily into clear-cut categories. What it means to ‘be Korean’ is not a static category and it is not simply a matter of biological determination in the way the South Korean government has presented it. Instead, there are multiple ways Korean adoptees could identify as Korean that are not necessarily and already contradictory to other aspects of their identity.

Overall, there have been some interesting changes regarding the South Korean government’s attempts to redefine Korean identity along the lines of being part of a “global Korean family” (Kim 2005). The political manoeuvre of including overseas Koreans in this image of a (global) Korean family portrait has necessitated a slight shift from considering Korean identity to be based on ‘blood’, culture and nation to one based on having Korean ancestry. However, even though
this state ideology asserts that those with Korean ancestry are Korean; those who
do not appear to be racially Korean have difficulty asserting a Korean identity that
is also socially affirmed. Therefore, even though they may be considered at a state
level to be ‘overseas Koreans’ and part of the ‘global Korean family’, what it means
to ‘be Korean’ continues to be contested.

Based on the background given in this chapter, the following chapter will centre on
the ways Korean adoptees actively seek to create a sense of Korean identity that is
meaningful for them. The overarching theme will centre on the question, how do
Korean adoptees (re)claim and (re)embody a Korean identity that is relevant to
their lived experiences in the context of a competing ideology that views Korean
identity as a fusion of race, ethnicity, culture and nationality?
Chapter 7

Being in Korea: Experiential knowledge and (re)embodied identities

Introduction

This chapter analyses the connection between experiential knowledge acquired by living and being in Korea and how Korean adoptees use these experiences to lend substance to their Korean identities in an attempt to re-embody the objectified body they see in the mirror. The discussion focuses on the ways Korean adoptees substantiate a Korean identity through their lived experiences in Korea by consuming, sensing, and being there. It also considers the importance of experiential knowledge and the significance of place. By interweaving theoretical concepts concerning knowledge, lived experience and embodiment, my aim is to show that by being in Korea, Korean adoptees are able to fill in some of the unknown gaps of their pre-adopted selves. The unknown becomes less abstract as experiences create a new relationship with Korea, one that is more concrete and alive. Through their experiences, I argue that Korean adoptees attempt to (re)embody their physical bodies by trying to identify with their appearance as well as their past. These acts toward (re)embodiment demonstrate agency as Korean adoptees try to make a Korean identity something that they can feel, move around in, experiment with and understand.
Introducing key concepts

Korean identity is often difficult for Korean adoptees to relate to because for many, it is only evident through their physical appearance. They understand that they have a Korean background because they were born in South Korea, but a relevant Korean identity may only go as far as the Korean body they inhabit. As discussed in Chapter 5, even their connection to their Korean bodies is a tenuous relationship because their bodies are what make them appear ‘different’. This ‘difference’ is then contrasted with their socially constituted selves in their families and communities that are often predominantly White with European heritage. As Gray (2007b) argues, the area where they are raised and the broader context shaped by social policy related to cultural difference and cultural diversity affect how adoptees see themselves. Therefore, in a country such as Australia, ‘difference’ has been alternatively constructed under the rhetoric of assimilation, focusing on ‘being’ Australian’ translated as ‘White Australian’ and under multiculturalism that celebrates/tolerates cultural diversity. However, as Gray points out, multiculturalism "can also force minority individuals to choose a particular 'ethnic label' as a way to gain a greater share of resources and recognition for their cause" (2007b, p. 259). Therefore, in spite of progressive approaches claimed by multicultural policies, people who are seen as 'different' in relation to the white population are still essentialised into categories based on race and stereotyped according to generalised representations.
Consequently, for Korean adoptees and other transnationally adopted people, they may not only be seen as 'different' but that perceived difference can also be discriminated against in negative ways. Drawing on Asian American experiences, Ho asserts that, "race and ethnicity may be understood to be social constructs, yet the reality for people ... living in the U.S. as racial and ethnic minorities is that their experiences are marked by their phenotype" (2005, p. 14). Being identified based on physical appearance is common when certain physical differences are socially constructed as 'different'. Korean adoptees that experience this sense of difference in negative ways may begin to associate an 'Asian' appearance with something undesirable and oftentimes connected to this are traumatic experiences of racism. This racial consciousness may lead to the desire to be 'invisible' in order to quell these feelings of difference. For this reason, they may begin to feel disassociated from their Korean bodies.

In his interpretation of Leder (1990) and from a phenomenological perspective, Csordas notes that "the vivid but unwanted consciousness of one's body in disease, distress, or dysfunction is a kind of dys-appearance, a bodily alienation or absence of a distinct kind" (original emphasis) (1994, p. 8). Korean adoptees often wish that they did not look Korean because based on their position in their community and current social attitudes toward 'difference', their bodies do not fit with their social world. In this way, the body is experienced as being absent rather than a simple separation of mind and body. Furthermore, because they are not socialised to identify with a Korean ethnicity, they may 'forget' that their phenotype speaks otherwise. Therefore, because they are experiencing a kind of 'bodily alienation','
they may not actually see themselves as Korean until they are reminded by
another person's remark or when they look at their reflection in a mirror when
their 'difference' is made obvious. Because they do not see themselves as Korean
and even forget that they look Korean, they are in a way, disembodied and
disconnected from their Korean bodies, and subsequently their Korean identities
as well. Identity is by no means a direct reflection of the body as there are many
ways to identify oneself regardless of appearance. However, in the context of
Korean adoptees' relation to a Korean identity, what is often the only indication
that they might have some kind of Korean identity, is the Korean body they see in
the mirror.

For many Korean adoptees, knowledge of lived experiences or memories of their
lives in Korea before adoption are largely absent. This kind of relevant knowledge
could help to support a Korean identity beyond the body they see, but many only
have a skeletal knowledge of Korea or none at all due mainly to varying degrees of
its significance in their everyday lives. Even if Korean adoptees are made aware of
aspects of Korean culture and history by their adoptive parents or have tried to
learn the language, this kind of knowledge is often just factual knowledge. While it
can help to foster a better understanding of their Korean heritage, it does not have
the same kind of depth that experience does. Indeed, experience is characterised
by "bodily immediacy" (Csordas, 1994, p. 19). It involves the body living in the
world and immediately experiencing the world through the body. Csordas refers
to Heidegger's existential philosophy to argue that "being-in-the-world is
fundamentally conditional, and hence we must speak of 'existence' and 'lived
experience” (1994, p. 10). This draws attention to the immediacy of experience and its central role in understanding how people experience the world they live in subjectively as well as how they make sense of it through objective representation by sharing their experiences with others.

By lived experience I refer to its meaning as it was put forth by Victor Turner, that which involves "the total human being ... at grips with his environment, perceiving, thinking, feeling, desiring" (1982, p. 13). This emphasis on experience is part of an overarching aim in the anthropology of experience to make lived experience central to ethnographic knowledge (Goulet & Miller, 2007b; E. Turner, 1992) and to value phenomenological analyses of embodiment just as much as semiotic analyses (Csordas, 1994). Likewise previous studies about adoptees have tended to overlook the central meaning that experience plays in how Korean adoptees make sense of their identities, especially when they go to Korea.

Some studies critique the idea that Korean adoptees are going on 'return trips' when they travel back to Korea on the basis that 'return' assumes adoptees have a natural connection to their birth country, thus also implying that it is essential for their identities to be considered 'complete' (Gray, 2007a; E. Kim, 2005; Volkman, 2005a; Yngvesson, 2005). I also take this critical position but I think there is another significant dimension that has not been fully explored—the experience of being in Korea. Rather than focusing on whether or not these trips can help Korean adoptees feel like they belong or whether or not they have 'complete identities', a more compelling discussion would be the significance of being in Korea and how
this helps them to understand their identities. The aim of this chapter is to draw out the significance that being in Korea has for Korean adoptees, particularly how they engage and perceive the world they are in as a way to make a Korean identity more meaningful.

When Korean adoptees travel back to Korea, they are able to give substance to the facts of their Korean origins through lived experience. It is more than the biological substance reflected in their bodies because they are acquiring experiential knowledge substantiated through their senses and everyday interactions. Through this process, they can begin to embody a meaningful Korean identity. They can work to re-embody the mirror image of themselves by going to Korea and making a Korean identity 'real' and tangible through direct lived experience.

I understand embodiment to mean "an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world" (Csordas, 1994, p. 12). Korean adoptees work to embody a Korean identity by perceiving and engaging with the world around them while they are in Korea. They do this by literally taking into their bodies material aspects of Korean culture by eating the food, wearing clothes that are fashionable in Korea and shopping for Korean souvenirs. These acts are part of the process of acquiring knowledge through experience to make a Korean identity 'real' to them because it has been such a mystery for most of their lives. It does not matter that these are typical ways of consuming an objectified and perhaps exoticised Korean culture; what
matters is that they are there, in Korea, eating, breathing, sensing and doing. Therefore, by being in Korea, lived experience and embodiment are interwoven.

The significance of being in Korea

Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed how important it was for them to experience Korea for themselves. For Anne, living in Korea for six months was about actively exploring what Korea means for her identity. She did not feel like it was based on belonging to Korea because as she noted, *I guess my place of belonging isn’t so much as important as my confidence and how I feel because in truth like I don’t know, maybe I don’t belong.* Living in Korea independently was a way for her to gather first-hand knowledge in the country where she was born. She articulated why it was important for her to be in Korea:

*I think there’s a big part of my identity that I can only find here, because not so much that’s where I belong but because that’s what I chose to identify with. Like I want to have some connection to the culture and some kind of understanding of it so that I won’t feel vulnerable ... There’s some humiliation in not knowing, about being perceived as something or being from or of a certain group of people and not being able to defend it or to speak with any knowledge about it, so that’s partly why I came.*

Anne refers to the expectation that she have the ability to authoritatively speak about Korea mainly because she ‘looks’ like she is ‘from there’. However, being in Korea is not simply about accommodating a stereotyped view of identity; it is about being able to substantiate and make known a Korean identity that is neither forced upon her nor constructed by other people’s expectations.
Just going back to Korea and being there is a powerful statement and hugely significant because it is seen as a way to have an immediate connection with Korea by experiencing it directly. When the focus is shifted, Korea becomes not so much a place to belong but a place to be in, to experience. Being in Korea is meaningful because Korean adoptees can begin to establish concrete experiential connections to the place where they were born. As Nate expressed, being in Australia where there are suburbs with large Korean communities is not the same as being in Korea, even though the communities in Australia may resemble life in Korea. He explained, *You can always explore Korean culture outside, like in places like Sydney you know ... Strathfield is a very big Korean community ... But just the actual country itself, I want to see what it’s like to visit.*

For some, being in Korea made them realise an alternative life that was imagined differently from the life they had in their adoptive countries. Matt articulated this feeling: *Just seeing the ‘world’ that I came from was an overwhelming experience. It was amazing to see that this could have been the place that I would have grown up in.* For Sarah and Todd, being in Korea was also about understanding the place where they 'came from':

*I think the main thing is that I gained more of an understanding of where I came from. I got to see the country, and be amongst people that looked Korean, spoke the Korean language, and grew up in the Korean culture. I got to see ‘what I had missed out on’, or the country and society that I could have grown up in. So going to Korea enabled to fill in some background information relating to what Korea, the country of my heritage, was like.* (Sarah)

*Going to Korea, I wish to learn about the culture again. I wish to meet people that can show me how to live life as a Korean. I want to learn the Korean language. I want to find another part of myself, which belongs here in Korea.* (Todd)
Being in Korea is about filling some of the unknown gaps and it is also about making Korea subjectively real through experience.

Vieda Skultans draws on American philosopher, Thomas Nagel, to argue that "experience is necessarily subjective" as a way to emphasise the centrality of individual experience in Latvian narratives of illness and healing (2007, p. 13). She explains Nagel’s bat analogy in relation to consciousness and subjectivity by highlighting his theoretical stance, "No amount of understanding of the brain mechanisms of the bat will tell us what it feels like to be a bat. There is an explanatory gap because physical accounts leave out subjectivity" (original emphasis) (Skultans, 2007, p. 13). Nagel (1979) uses the bat analogy to emphasise that consciousness and subjectivity are interconnected, meaning that the two cannot exist without the other and importantly, cannot be reduced to explanations of brain activity.

Likewise, drawing on Wilhelm Dilthey’s thoughts on experience, Victor Turner observed that experiences are not composed of "bloodless 'cognitive structures' ... [even as] thought clarifies and generalises lived experience" because experience involves direct interaction with the world, a quality that is unmediated because it is felt (1982, p. 13). These observations are not dissimilar to the meanings that Korean adoptees attribute to being in Korea. Although they can read about Korea through the words of others, see Korea in photographs framed by different camera lenses, and listen to the experiences of other Korean adoptees that have been
there, it is not the same as experiencing it for themselves. By subjectively experiencing Korea, it becomes a *lived* experience.

Being in Korea is a way to come to terms with the fact that they were born in Korea and began as Korean people. It is about trying to find a sense of understanding about what a Korean identity could mean for Korean adoptees. As Marie pointed out, being in Korea helps Korean adoptees to begin to understand this part of their identities that feels unknown. They can build on their experiences in Korea to make it a more familiar place and importantly, a place they can feel a part of, not so much by 'belonging', but by having a subjective *lived* connection. Marie eloquently described what it was like for her to be back in Korea:

*It’s being here. This may potentially be the closest I will ever get to knowing who I am. Like if you think of your life as a puzzle or you have this piece missing then, say all the pieces are green for example, then this piece you know is empty because we don’t know who our mothers are or our fathers or siblings or aunts and Uncles but just being in Korea almost shades in maybe a really light green, you know like for every time you come back maybe it gets a little bit more green. You can never get completely green as all the other ones but it can fill a little bit of the void so I think that’s the power, for me, knowing that it’s pretty much impossible for me to find my parents but being here helps that. It has to be enough because there isn’t any more [birth information]. I mean there might be but probably not. And if I can even fill it in you know a light green, that’s better than no green, you know* (original emphasis).

It is about making sense of the unknown in concrete ways and it is about making that 'unknown' less unknown. For adoptees like Marie, being in Korea helps to reconcile that she can never fully regain what she 'lost' through adoption, but she can regain a bit of that by actively being in Korea and helping to make that part of her identity, 'a little bit more green'.
While the impetus for the trajectories that Korean adoptees’ lives took was determined for them, when Korean adoptees go back to Korea as adults, they go by choice. The initiative it takes to make a decision to go to Korea rather than going along on a family trip seems to be more significant in terms of raising issues about identity. Therefore, there is also a difference between going to Korea as a dependent with adoptive parents and going to Korea as an independent adult.

Steph went to Korea for the first time when she was 12 with her parents and a few of her siblings. Later at 26, she went to Korea on her own and she experienced it much differently from her first trip. She described her feelings:

“My first trip was basically as a tourist with not a lot of emotion involved. I went with my parents and the three of us adopted children. We did a lot of the tourist things like go to the folk village, and we were also taken to the Eastern Babies’ Home [part of the Eastern Social Welfare Adoption Agency]. On the first trip, I felt no affinity to Korea. It didn’t feel like I was returning to the country where I was born—it was simply a holiday overseas.

The second time Steph went to Korea, identity issues became more significant as she dealt with the fact that she looked Korean and blended in with everyone else but could not speak the language and did not understand what it meant to be Korean in Korea. This made her aware of what she felt she had lost by being adopted and also what she imagined could have been her life if she had stayed in Korea.

In subsequent conversations, Steph talked about how going to Korea now is not simply a holiday. There is an extra dimension that has opened up that she cannot ignore, mainly the effect that these experiences in Korea have had on how she thinks about her adoption, her identity and her relationship with her Korean
background. The impact of this awareness was emotionally difficult as she explained:

Seeing Koreans made me aware of what I may have been like; perhaps should have been like, if I had been brought up in Korea. In many ways, I was glad to have not been raised in Korea. But I have missed out on being involved in a culture that should belong to me (original emphasis).

The idea that Korea should belong to Steph rather than a struggle for Steph to belong in Korea points to this paradox that Korean adoptees often feel when they are in Korea. On the one hand, they are viewed as people that belong in Korea and on the other hand they are viewed as foreigners and feel like foreigners because it is a country that is not familiar to them.

Anne described similar feelings as well as the conflict she felt being with her adoptive mother in Korea on a ’motherland’ tour when she was 14 years old:

I was in a very vulnerable—I think I would call it—situation, because here I am in the country that I was born in and my mother is in a position of like a caretaker and yet this is a foreign country for her but this isn’t supposed to be a foreign country for me. So it was just really, I didn’t really like the feeling of being … [in Korea with] my mother and being so dependent on her even though this is my country in some ways.

In some ways, Anne felt like a foreigner in Korea and being with her mother exacerbated that for her because she felt that Korea should not be foreign in the same way that it was foreign for her mother. They were both in a position of experiencing Korea as a new place through similar cultural lens, but they also occupied very different subject positions. Her mother was unproblematically foreign because of her White Euro-American appearance and culture. Anne felt uneasy being viewed in relation to her mother because of certain tensions between her dependency in the shadow of her mother and the sense that she should be the
one guiding her mother. Because Anne was born in Korea, she felt she should have
the corresponding knowledge about Korea to enable her to be in a position of
authority, the position that her mother was occupying at the time as caregiver.

When Anne went to Korea again on her own, her experience was quite different.
She emphasised that being in Korea was also about testing her independence and
living her own life:

*And this, it's not just about like Korea, but also about just being 21 years old in a
different country away from your home, not living with [your parents]. Basically
everyone I know right now are people that I've met within the last two months,
and just being, doing something that you've never done, that I've never done
before and taking a big risk and living on my own ... I think it's good for me to do
this.*

After an initial organised tour of Korea, Anne chose to stay for another six months.
She explained that this decision was motivated by the feeling that there was more
for her to discover about herself and that going home at that point was not
something she could do. She compared this sense of change to early pioneers: *Ok,
it's almost like in America, like the new frontier like making a new life you know for
myself; like this is the start of it ... I feel this is something that's going to direct me in
the future [such as] choices all throughout my life.*

Going to Korea for the first time as an adult can be a life-changing experience in
many ways. It can be a vulnerable time but also a very empowering time. For
example, Sarah talked about what being an ‘adoptee’ meant for her: *Maybe because
of the suffix ‘ee’, such as in 'interviewee', I also understand the term adoptee to
connote something having been done to me.* In contrast to their adoption, going
back to Korea or learning more about Korea can be empowering decisions. Young Mi explained: *When I was about 19, I started learning [Korean] language, trying food, watching movies ... that kind of stuff, but completely of my own choice.* Hanna describes why it was important for her to go to Korea and see for herself what it was like: *My visit gave me my own picture of Korea and not the one other people have tried to force on me.* Therefore, what seems to be one of the defining characteristics that make going to Korea significant is making a conscious choice independent from others. This choice may be fraught with indecision and uncertainty of the unknown, but it is also a courageous step toward understanding the past and what it means or does not mean for one’s identity.

Judith Butler explains what it means to live as social beings with individual agency, "If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility" (2004, p. 3). This eloquently captures a sense of what adoptees go through as they try to understand their identities. Indeed, their identities are in part, constituted by a path they did not choose by being adopted and being raised in their adoptive countries. However, Korean adoptees are also actively involved in making sense of their own identities so that they can create a sense of self that does not necessarily subscribe to socially defined identity 'norms', such as the South Korean state's representation of Korean identity and assumptions based on physical appearance about who counts as Korean, Australian, American, Swedish, Swiss and so on. Korean adoptees have agency to interpret their own understanding of their
identities in Korea and their adoptive countries even as they are simultaneously moving within those 'social worlds' as social beings.

Pia had been to Korea twice, once at 9 years old and a second time at 22 years old. For Pia, going to Korea as an adult helped her to understand that she could include both Korean and Australian identities without having to reject either. She compares her sense of self before and after going to Korea:

Until this trip, I never considered myself to be Korean. From a young age, I was always taught to say 'I'm Australian' should someone ask 'Whereabouts are you from?' Through no fault of my parents, this was the blanket answer that I was taught to give, and as a result I never felt Korean or wanted to be identified as being Korean. However, after going to Korea, I realised it was ok to be more than one 'thing' and that by embracing my Korean heritage is not pushing away my Australian upbringing. Before the trip, I really didn’t see it was possible for my 'Korean' and 'Australian' identities to coexist.

For Nate like other Korean adoptees, identifying with his Korean background is a gradual process. It is something he is exploring more now in his 20s:

I always knew I was adopted but I didn’t exactly have what you would call, pride of being Korean. I just generally thought of myself as Australian being indifferent up until probably year 10 which is around 16 years old ... The couple years preceding that I started becoming aware [and when I was 16], I really started to embrace the fact that I was Asian and Korean and just slowly after that I started to embrace the culture even more. I have a high interest in Korea basically nowadays.

Nate has a keen interest in Korea, especially its popular culture exported in the forms of music, television drama series and movies. He is also studying the language and would like to visit Korea one day.
Similar to Nate, Natacha acknowledges the multiplicity of her identity, that she is culturally Swiss, from the French-speaking part of Switzerland, but that she wants to also recognise the Korean part of herself. She explained:

*There is a layer, a basic layer which is Korean in me and then there is a layer of education, which is Western because I was raised in Switzerland and France but mostly in Switzerland ... I have nothing in common with my biological family, culturally, but ... the genes are still alive [so] that's important.*

These experiences indicate the paradox that adoptees feel when they try to negotiate their identities based on where they were raised and where they were born. One of the ways Korean adoptees try to make sense of this paradox is to go back to Korea. Undoubtedly, the choice to go back needs to be understood within the particular context in which the choice is made, such as the current social climate that encourages 'return trips' and the assumptions associated with adoptees' identities. Taking this into consideration, the choice to ‘go back’ also represents a sense of agency geared toward recognising the various aspects of their identities. The following section will discuss another example of agency and identity located in the way Korean adoptees use food as a metaphor for identity. In particular, by analysing the connection between consumption and identity, it becomes apparent how Korean adoptees work to actively embody a Korean identity through the food they consume and as a way to 'feel Korean'.
Consuming a Korean identity

Connecting consumption to identity

One of the ways that Korean adoptees in this study talked about their situated experiences of Korean identity was by using food as a metaphor. Using food as a symbol for expressing identity is located within symbolic anthropological theories which demonstrate food’s symbolic value, not only its nutritional biological functions (Douglas, 2002 [1966]). The connection between food and identity has also been analysed in Asian American studies such as the use of food in Asian American coming-of-age novels (Ho, 2005). Ho analyses the ways the author in each novel “affirms the place of Asians in America by focusing on their relationship with food and consumption as a means for asserting themselves as both Asian and American” (2005, p. 4). Korean adoptees use food to talk about their sense of a Korean identity. In the context of Korean American identity in the United States, Matt explains why he does not feel like other Korean Americans:

I don’t feel fully Korean American because Korean Americans can be very cliqueish. They usually have a lot of other Korean friends, eat Korean food every night, everybody knows each other, for the most part they are all fluent, and attend Korean functions all the time i.e. church, festivals etc. I don’t have many Korean friends. I only have 3 or 4 that I actually hang out with. The only time I eat Korean food is when I try to cook it myself or go out to a restaurant. So I feel like an outsider in this culture because I only identify with it as being of Korean heritage and being American as well.

Matt identifies with his Korean heritage and his American upbringing but does not combine the two to identify with Korean Americans as an entity. He does not feel like he belongs as a Korean American because he does not take part in Korean

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American social activities within the community. He also talks about only eating Korean food occasionally to further emphasise why he feels like an 'outsider'.

Alyson also talked about feeling excluded from an Asian American sense of belonging by using knowledge about cooking rice as an example:

*When I’m with some of the Asian friends that I’ve met through work, whenever they talk about their experiences growing up, I always feel that I have to say I’m adopted to explain my ignorance on some topics. For example, one day they started talking about different ways to make rice, and the merits of all the different ways; obviously the only rice I ever knew was Uncle Ben’s Minute rice, so I felt I had to explain why I couldn’t participate in that conversation!*

While this may seem to support the stereotype that all Asians eat rice because they are Asian rather than as a cultural food preference (Ho, 2005, p. 5), Alyson feels excluded from a Korean identity or more broadly an 'Asian' identity because she is not familiar with the different ways to cook rice. She does in a way uphold the stereotype that to be Asian is to eat rice, but the experience she recounts is more meaningful than this. For her, her lack of knowledge about how to make rice reflected her ambivalence toward identifying as 'Asian' or more specifically, Korean. Knowledge plays an important part in how Korean adoptees describe their sense of self. In this example, knowledge about Korean food is associated with 'being Korean'. Therefore, not knowing about Korean food can also indicate a feeling of *not* 'being Korean'.

Amy expressed ambivalence toward claiming a Korean identity when she flew with Korean Airlines. She also talked about the connection between eating Korean food and claiming a Korean identity:

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25 This is a brand of instant rice from the United States.
On my way to the UK [United Kingdom], I went with Korean Airlines. I don’t know if that was my choice or if it just happened. I can’t remember, but I went with Korean airlines so I got to have Korean food on the plane and they thought that I was Korean and I was like, no but well I am but...

Usually there is a choice of a 'Western meal' or a 'Korean meal' on international flights to and from South Korea. Amy looks Korean and also chose the Korean meal option and so the flight attendants would have spoken to her in Korean assuming that she was Korean. She hesitated to claim a Korean identity because she was also adopted and so she had difficulty saying that she was Korean without modifying this statement in some way.

Korean food provides a medium through which to explore Korean identity. This highlights a key connection between consuming Korean material culture and how Korean adoptees make a Korean identity something that is known and relevant for their sense of self. An example of this connection is given by Brea's experience in Korea with her adoptive parents and her adoptive mother's remarks about Korean food:

> I think for me I enjoyed [being in Korea] and it was important for [my] sense of self. I think for me it was really hard for me to see and hear my parents complain and talk bad about it. It was hard because what they were talking about was who I was. I thought it was important and I know for both of my parents it was shocking and they wouldn't accept it and understand it. Even now when my mom talks about Korea it is all, Korean food was horrible and this and that. I wish my parents would try and learn from the trip.

As Brea’s experience illustrates, the connection between food and a Korean identity means that when others criticise the food, it can also be interpreted as a criticism of identity or a lack of acceptance toward that identity. Brea described
how she felt that her parents' criticisms of Korean food and their experience of Korea in general was also a criticism of her Korean identity.

For Korean adoptees, identifying as Korean is often fraught with ambivalence. Indeed, the saturated meanings that are infused in the metaphorical relationship between food and identity point to its intricacies. Ho argues that, "food as a symbol of identity is always fraught and full of complexities, complications and confusion: it is never as simple as eating Chinese food makes one Chinese or its opposite—not-eating Chinese will allow one to forego a Chinese identity" (2005, p. 5). I agree with Ho's assertion about the complex relationship between food and identity because simply eating Korean food does not make someone Korean and vice versa. However, I think that it is premature to seemingly disregard the phenomenological meaning of taking food into the body. Korean adoptees that I interviewed talked about how eating Korean food was a way for them to 'feel Korean' and to embrace a Korean identity, not to necessarily be Korean. Because Korean adoptees were not raised in Korea, Korean culture in their everyday lives is often limited to the material culture, especially food. Therefore, while eating Korean food does not make them Korean, it is a way to make a Korean identity a part of their sense of self. Eating Korean food is a way to embody a Korean identity. While there are indeed "integral connections between ontology and food" (Ho, 2005, p. 11), I would go further and say that the experiential bodily significance of consuming the food also needs to be recognised.
The next part of this section on consumption and identity discusses this experiential, phenomenological significance that is evoked in the way Korean adoptees talk about what it was like to be in Korea, to eat the food, and to take everything in through the senses. Using interview data and experiences during fieldwork, I describe some of the strategic ways Korean adoptees incorporate a sense of Korean identity while they are in Korea. The aim is to show how Korean adoptees literally experience Korea through their *senses* in order to try to *feel* some kind of Korean identity. They also work to embody 'Koreaness' by consuming food and shopping for souvenirs as a way to make Korea more familiar and something that is more relevant for their particular identities in their everyday lives.

**Sensing and incorporating a Korean identity**

It seems that Korean adoptees, and others included in the overseas Koreans category, are spoon-fed a 'Korean identity' through cultural tours, which normally include traditional ceremonies, traditional musical performances and other traditional rituals and practices (E. Kim, 2005). For example, often included on a homeland tour is a visit to a Korean folk village, a traditional music performance and a *kimchi*\(^\text{26}\) making class or demonstration. This emphasises a very static notion of Koreanness, especially expressed by President Kim Young Sam's aim toward 'Koreanization' as part of his *segyehwa* policy (1995, p. 15), which was discussed in Chapter 6. However, as Korean adoptees show, "identity is not a fixed

\(^{26}\) *Kimchi* (김치) refers to fermented food, usually cabbage or other vegetables that is seasoned with chilli, garlic, onion and salt. It is a national staple of Korean cuisine.
‘thing,’ it is negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous, the result of culturally available meanings and open-ended, power-laden enactments of those meanings in everyday situations” (Kondo, 1990, p. 24). One of the ways Korean adoptees challenge presumptions about fixed identities is by engaging in these tours and other modes of consumption not as affirmations of an already known Korean identity, but as a way to enter into Korean culture and begin to make sense of what a Korean identity means for them beyond the fact that they were born in Korea.

Korean adoptees exercise individual agency through the myriad of creative possibilities offered within a particular socio-cultural context. Unlike the South Korean government’s assumption that Korean identity is already made and ready to be accepted and consumed, Korean adoptees begin with the premise that a Korean identity is open to varying formations; it is like a mound of clay that can be sculpted in a multitude of ways. As artisans living in a social world, they bring previous experiences and culturally constituted 'sculpting tools', which inform the shape of the clay. In this sense, a Korean identity is not automatically given or inherent in the individual. Rather, Korean adoptees show that a Korean identity emerges in the act of 'doing'. West and Zimmerman’s (1987) approach to 'doing gender' draws attention to the situated socio-cultural context from which identity emerges. 'Doing Korean identity', like 'doing gender' is "an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 130).

Identity is worked through, made sense of, and engaged through lived experience. One of the ways Korean adoptees craft a Korean identity for themselves is by being
in Korea to experience it and to absorb and consume aspects of what they understand to constitute Korean culture. By doing this, they incorporate a Korean identity into their corporeal bodies so that they can digest and make sense of Korea and how it relates to them in very concrete ways. As Matt noted:

*I think that visiting Korea was essential to my identity. Even though I haven’t fully figured out who I am, just going to Korea, just being where it all started does something. I can’t describe it that well, but there’s something about just being there physically and seeing it. Seeing with your own eyes where you came from, standing there with your own feet, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching. All of that does something in helping me discover a little more about myself. Doesn’t really make much sense does it?*

These connections become familiarised as adoptees learn more about the place where they were born by being there. Importantly, they are able to experience what it is like to be there through direct sensorial knowledge. This has also been talked about by people who were not adopted but were born and raised in a different country from where their parents lived. Cindy Pan, Australian born with Chinese parents expressed what it was like for her to be in China, "In going [to China], I formed my own attachment; my own bank of experiences. It became personal—and it brought China alive for me" (Pan, 2002, p. 227). For Korean adoptees as well, going to Korea makes it 'alive' because they can experience the place directly; it becomes *enlivened*.

Certain experiences are more relevant than others, but what seems to be most memorable are the different senses that being in Korea evokes. Again drawing on Turner's interpretation of Dilthey, the *lived* characteristic of direct experience and the strength of it becomes meaningful to oneself and others when it is expressed (V. Turner, 1982, p. 14). Matt goes on to talk about the significance of the various
smells of Korea that are not usually considered pleasant, such as the smell of traffic congestion. He explained, *Oh one thing that is kind of odd, every time I smell pollution, like the exhaust from a bus, it reminds me of Korea. It sounds weird but I love that smell of pollution because it is so reminiscent of Korea to me.* Katie expressed what it meant for her to take in the atmosphere of Korea:

*I think it really would be a life changing experience to be in the country that you were born in, to feel it and to smell the kimchi on the streets ... You know and just to say that you've gone, you know whether or not you're interested in doing things like birth search or meeting other adoptees or doing things like that, I think the feeling that you get just by being here sometimes it's very different you know.*

The sense of smell conjures powerful memories because it is an immediate reminder of bodily presence and for Korean adoptees it creates a feeling of familiarity that was largely absent as they were growing up in their adoptive countries. It is like by being in Korea, their picture of Korea begins to take on new life, acquiring all five senses as Korean adoptees immerse themselves in the robust and energetic life of Korea. They actively ground the Korean part of their identity by making it something *real*, something they can feel. Being in Korea, especially the first time since adoption, is an onslaught of the senses. They can smell the mix of *kimchi* and urban congestion, see people that look like them, taste the fiery foods, hear the contrasting sounds of bustling city life in Seoul and the peaceful countryside with Buddhist temples scattered through the mountains, and feel the humidity of summer seep through their skin and the icy piercing winds of winter.

*During my fieldwork and previous visits to Korea, these sensations worked their way under my skin and became a part of me. In the evening light toward the end of*
a balmy summer day, as I walked back to KoRoot, the smells of exhaust fumes, kimchi, garlic and sesame oil mix with the putrid stench of rubbish piles falling over into the street as garbage collectors drive by. Every evening, there are the same piles and the same smells as the day’s food scraps begin to ferment in the humidity. Every weekday at KoRoot, an ajumma [아주마]\(^{27}\) comes to cook lunch for the guests and KoRoot staff. Delicious aromas permeate the house as stomachs begin to grumble well before the food is ready. In the popular shopping districts and university areas of Seoul, smells of street food such as fried potato, simmering tteokbokki [tteok 떡]\(^{28}\) and grilled squid drift through the air, enticing the senses. Ever since my first seven months living in Jeomchon in 2004 working as an English teacher, I still remember walking out the door of my home to the sounds of the bustling market on the adjacent street and the sounds of children playing in the street late at night.

Natacha was adopted at 5 years old and she describes the memories that she still had from those early years of her life:

> I had memories. I had some feelings remaining during all this period of adoption and I didn’t put it clearly with, in relation with Korea actually but it was really Korea, in fact. For example, some tastes I have for some things, for example, the ceramics, the kind of ceramics I really loved and I discovered that it was from Korea ... There were some foods I had in memory like the grapes and like the kim [seaweed], and like the crabs and like some Korean food specialties that I discovered here in Korea. And some sensitivity, a sense of sensitivity that I think is coming from my Korean roots actually (original emphasis).

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\(^{27}\)Ajumma (아줌마) is a familiar term short for ajumeoni (아주머니) that refers to a middle aged Korean woman often with the assumption that she is also married.

\(^{28}\)Tteokbokki(떡볶이) is a popular snack food consisting of glutinous cylindrical rice cakes in chilli sauce with flat fish cake strips.
All of these memories are interwoven through the senses and provide a grounded connection to Korea. Experiences are indeed lived through the body and are retained through sensorial memories.

Hee Su was adopted at 4 years old but she does not have many memories. However, she is aware that she would have known certain cultural practices such as how to respectfully greet people that were older than her and how to eat. She also acknowledged that she would have had food preferences and would have been able to eat spicy food: I knew when to bow. I knew how to bow. I knew how to eat. I knew what the food was. I knew what I liked in Korean food; I knew what I didn’t like. I knew. You know, I could eat really really spicy food whereas I can only eat kind of spicy food but in Korea not spicy at all. Food is often a focal point in Korean adoptees’ descriptions of their experiences. It is of course a necessary commodity but it is also symbolic. Food is a way that Korean adoptees can enter into Korean life and take part in it. It is also seen as a way to internalise a Korean identity.

Hee Su continued, Like I had not-spicy-at-all food but I thought I was gonna die; it was so spicy. I was like sweating and crying and I was like but I want to eat it I want to be Korean. Like to eat the food is to be more Korean, so it’s really important that I like [it], yeah. Spiciness can be a metaphor for the difficulties adoptees face trying to connect their identities with a Korean identity. It is literally a ‘workout’ or working out the significance of a Korean identity. As Hee Su illustrated, the body is ‘sweating and crying’. Drawing on Turner’s analysis of ritual process, like a rite of passage, eating spicy Korean food works to break down the person being initiated
in the hope of making it through the perilous culinary journey and being transformed and recognised as 'really Korean'. While an identity transformation did not necessarily take place, eating the food is a way to try to do this, to feel Korean and to be recognised as 'really' Korean. By consuming fiery red food which is so characteristic of Korean cuisine, Hee Su was undergoing a kind of bodily transformation as she tried to also transform her identity to 'be more Korean'. For Hee Su, the spicy food represented an aspect of 'Koreanness' or what it means to be Korean. Eating the spicy food—taking it into the body—works as a way Korean adoptees can try to really feel Korean.

Likewise, wearing clothes that are characteristic of Korean fashion is also a way to 'be more Korean'. While living in Korea, I bought some clothes that other Korean young people were wearing. At KoRoot, another adoptee told me, You look really Korean. This comment surprised me because I did not see myself as looking like other Koreans. Talking with other female adoptees, they often say that they do not feel they look like Korean women because of the way they dress, the way they wear their makeup, and some of their mannerisms, like covering their mouths with their hands when they laugh. In a casual conversation, Hee Su joked that, 'We're Korean now' because we were both wearing clothes that we bought in Korea and had Korean style women's haircuts with side-swept fringes. The first time I went to Korea in 2004 was also the first time I cut my hair in that way and I remember feeling like I blended in more. It was also a way to be accepted as Korean and to lessen the sense of difference I felt being in Korea. Buying clothes and shoes that are fashionable among women in Korea at the time was also a way to 'be Korean'.
Consuming things that are typically 'Korean' is a way of *doing* Korean identity. In ways, this is no different from other tourist activities in the sense that Korean culture is exoticised and objectified for consumption. While it may seem that Korean adoptees are simply exoticising Korean culture like any other person, it is not as simple as this. It is not just consuming for the sake of consumption, it is also a way to 'feel Korean'. Hanna visited Korea for the first time but did not feel that she began her life there: *I realised how my birth country is, looks like, but I still have not really realised that I have lived there for 4 months [before adoption]. I feel a strong connection to Korea. I like the food, the people et cetera—but I do not really 'feel' that I was born there.* Therefore whether or not Korean adoptees 'feel Korean' is not really about 'being Korean' and 'doing Korean identity' does not necessarily mean that Korean adoptees want to 'be Korean'. Instead, these acts, such as going to Korea and being in Korea to experience the culture are entry points to a past that is largely unknown. Therefore, 'doing a Korean identity' and being in Korea are ways to make a Korean identity familiar so that it is *felt* and grounded in a sense of self.

If 'Koreanness' is 'the other', consuming aspects of Korea's material culture is a way to incorporate 'the other' to make it more familiar to them, a Korean identity they can try to identify with through tangible means. While Korean adoptees may essentialise and exoticise Korean culture like other tourists by taking part in typical tourist activities and exclaiming at the differences between Koreans and themselves, they are also engaging in these activities to understand what it might
mean for them to identify as Korean in some way. Korean adoptees make 'the other' familiar by doing things like eating Korean food, buying souvenirs, getting Korean-style haircuts and wearing clothes that are fashionable in Korea. As Hee Su explained, buying souvenirs is a reminder that she is also Korean, especially when she goes back to Canada and to her everyday life of 'forgetting' that she looks Korean:

*I'd like to feel* Korean, *like feel more Korean.* And *so like here I've spent a lot of my time buying souvenirs to remind me that I'm Korean when I go home so I bought like a coffee mug, a pencil case, like a tea cup, a traditional tea cup thing and like I bought some clothing and stuff to try and remind myself when I'm at home that I'm Korean ... like everyday things to remind me cause I always forget that I'm Asian, like Asian, not just Korean, just like not White ... So I spent a lot of my time ... like I found a little pencil holder, like a case, and then a little stamp for my desk and then like some pictures and paintings and stuff to put in my apartment so that I remember that I'm Korean every day ... because I think it's really important and because especially because I really ignored it and I really tried to not be Korean* (original emphasis).

By consuming Korean products, there is an attempt to make the disembodied 'other' in the mirror familiar by re-embodying the reflection and making sense of what is seen and what is felt. There is an attempt to collapse the distance between self and 'the other' in the mirror. By consuming an objectified Korean culture through food, souvenirs and other material goods, it is also an act of subjectifying Korean culture by making it familiar. It is about familiarising a Korean background for their particular sense of identity.

Consuming Korean food and other examples of material culture is symbolic for Korean adoptee identities because the material culture is a way for Korean adoptees to enter into this world that they are 'from' but which is not familiar. Korean food offers a way to bridge this gap by directly taking in an objectified
Korean identity into their bodies to make the connection real. The Korean products are embodied through consumption and as described earlier through Hee Su's spicy food encounter, it can also be a way to transform the 'unknown' part of their identity—a Korean identity—into something that is known. Young Mi explained the effect that being in Korea had for her:

*I think I have a strong sense of identity. Before coming to Korea and not knowing much about Korea or Korean people, I was somewhat confused and felt that perhaps there was something missing. Now I don't feel this at all. I understand Korea a little more now and how I fit into the picture and how Korea fits into the picture for me.*

**Concluding remarks**

While the Korean government's view is that Korean identity is explained by shared blood and ancestry, this is only a starting point for Korean adoptees. What does having 'Korean blood' mean if the birth parents are 'unknown' in adoption records and by being adopted, you are no longer officially part of an ancestral lineage? The government's position is that shared Korean blood should be enough to unify people with Korean heritage so that they can also share Korean identity. This is one of the paradoxes of Korean adoptees' situation. A Korean identity is usually only evident by their bodies since they were not raised in Korean culture or raised by Korean parents. However, at the same time, the fact that they may look 'Korean' is not enough to substantiate a Korean identity beyond the fact that they were born there. Therefore, for Korean adoptees, Korean identity is not given, but something that has to be worked through. Likewise, identity is not automatically contained within the physical boundaries of skin, hair and bones and it is not easily acquired.
like inherited physical traits. Rather than taking their Korean identity for granted based on an ideology that blood and biology are evidence for having a Korean identity, Korean adoptees make sense of their identities in much more creative ways.

As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, Korean adoptees use food and other modes of consumption to (re)embody a sense of Korean identity. Since having biogenetic ties to Korea is only one aspect and oftentimes it is the only connection they feel they have to Korea, they work to make sense of what it means to be from Korea by going back and experiencing the country for themselves. These lived experiences work to enliven and ground a Korean identity that relates to their sense of self. By being in Korea and literally embodying a Korean identity through food, they are trying to feel a meaningful Korean identity through their body. The aim is not necessarily to 'be Korean' but to make that part of their identity something that is substantiated through lived experiences.
Chapter 8

Living at KoRoot: An exploration of adoptee connections, differences and shared experiences

Introduction

This chapter draws primarily on field notes acquired during my research at KoRoot as opposed to previous chapters which relied mainly on interview data. I used the participant observation method to guide my research as I took part in social life with other Korean adoptees staying at KoRoot. Therefore, the format for this chapter will resemble a more ethnographic style of writing as I draw on these experiences at KoRoot to discuss key themes about adoptees’ sense of embodied understanding as well as their diverse and shared experiences that arose from the overall research data. This chapter will centre on three themes, mainly, a sense of belonging as well as an awareness of difference between adoptees, the embodied experience of mutual understanding between adoptees, and the experience of ‘communitas’ (V. Turner, 1982) that worked to create a feeling of shared identity. The ultimate aim of anthropological research is to understand what it means to be human in all of its diversity and so my aim is to situate these experiences within the particular social space created at KoRoot as a way to provide further understanding about what it means to be an adoptee.
An unexpected introduction to ‘the field’

KoRoot is a guesthouse for Korean adoptees and is situated in the Jongro district of Seoul. It was donated in March 2002 by the previous owner of the house and registered as a non-profit organisation in April 2003. It was also given the name ‘House of Korean Root’ or KoRoot which evokes the image of tree roots as a metaphor for origins and refers to the organisation’s aim to help Korean adoptees when they come back to their birth country. KoRoot is only available to adoptees, usually Korean adoptees, although they may be accompanied by family and friends wishing to stay there with them.

In September 2006, I visited KoRoot for the first time with my partner as part of our holiday with the Newcastle Korean Language School. We took an airport bus from Incheon International Airport, and got off at the Gyeongbokgung subway stop. Passing by the shops, outdoor markets and restaurants along the main street and weaving through the bustling pedestrian traffic, KoRoot can be difficult to find. After about a 20 minute walk, there is a small unobtrusive sign at the entrance to one of the side streets that indicates KoRoot’s location is only a few steps away. Upon arriving, we were welcomed by Kong Jung Ae or Mrs. Kim, the wife of Pastor Kim Do Hyun. Although she has kept her family name, Kong, as most Korean women do when they get married, guests staying at KoRoot refer to her as Mrs. Kim.
I was only there for a few days but within that short period, I was struck by the adoptee community as it was my first time being in a place where the majority of the people were adopted. Although adoption-related topics are not always part of conversations, there is an understanding that most of the people at KoRoot are there because they were adopted from South Korea and share this common origin. As an adoptee at KoRoot, it is difficult not to be reminded of this. One prominent example of this reminder is some artwork displayed on the walls in the main dining area. The artwork was donated by the artist Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine or Cho Mi Hee (her Korean name), a Korean adoptee from Belgium and a dedicated activist for adoptees’ rights. One particular thought provoking piece is titled, ‘The 50 years of Korean Overseas Adoption’, which takes a critical stance toward international adoption as it documents the number of Korean children adopted from South Korea to other countries for each year during the first 50 years since the end of the Korean War. In some ways, my first experience at KoRoot was more overwhelming than I expected due to a heightened awareness of this common aspect as an adoptee. During those few days staying at KoRoot, I found that I was confronted with additional personal questions about what it really means to be an adoptee in terms of lived experiences rather than as a label or a token of information. Subsequently, these questions opened up further avenues of inquiry to explore with my research.

After returning to Australia, it occurred to me that it was important to not only ask adoptees what it was like for them to go back to Korea but that by going to Korea and
experiencing Korea alongside other adoptees I could better understand their experiences as they are lived as well as create new shared experiences. I decided that KoRoot would be a good place for my fieldwork because many Korean adoptees from different countries frequently pass through. Therefore, in April 2007, I transferred from a Masters program to a Ph.D. program. My aim was to conduct an ethnographic study that further explores the lived experiences of Korean adoptees as they negotiate their identities in Korea and what it means for them to be there by experiencing this with them. I planned to stay at KoRoot from July to October in order to also coincide with the fourth Gathering of Korean adoptees organised by IKAA. I received written permission from Pastor Kim, the director of KoRoot, to interview adoptees at KoRoot and to stay there long term.

I acknowledge that this ethnographic account of my experiences at KoRoot is specific to a particular time period and a particular mix of people that were living there during the time I was there. My experiences, like those of other Korean adoptees staying at KoRoot are also influenced by the people I spoke with and those I spent more time with thus creating varying levels of rapport. While in a very limited sense, KoRoot as a place stayed the same in terms of its structural makeup, the social space that informed KoRoot as a living place was constantly changing as new and familiar faces came and went. Each person brought with them their personal stories and their individual personalities which made KoRoot into an enlivened dynamic space and more than just a guesthouse.
Living at KoRoot

I arrived in Seoul on a stifling hot and humid July day. The sky was clouded over with a combination of summer haze and air pollution giving the atmosphere a milky texture. As the airport bus zoomed along the highway from Incheon International airport, I noticed the usual trucks with various products displayed along the side of the road. One man stood by his truck selling office chairs still wrapped in the factory plastic as they baked in the sun. After getting off the airport bus, I hailed a taxi and asked the driver to take me the rest of the way to KoRoot. Picking up on the fact that I spoke very little Korean, the taxi driver asked me if I was from Japan. A common situation for adoptees, I replied by saying that I was adopted. Instantly, there was a shift in his demeanour and he became stone-faced and silent for the rest of the trip. His silence thwarted any attempt on my part to alleviate the mood as I tried to use some of the conversational Korean that I knew. Considering whether I should just turn around and go back to the airport, I paid the taxi fare and walked the last few meters up the narrow side street to KoRoot.

Upon arriving, Mrs. Kim showed me upstairs to one of the female bunkrooms which I would share with three others. KoRoot accommodates about 20 people consisting of one female bunkroom, one male bunkroom, a ‘couple room’ and a family room fitted with bunks that alternately serve as a female or male bunkroom depending on the guests, as well as two rooms in the basement and a rooftop room. Mrs. Kim and Pastor Kim also live on the premises.
The overall layout of KoRoot is designed with a very open plan. On the first floor, there are two desks for administrative and managerial staff, a small lounge area with bookcases lining the wall holding various adoption resources and toward the back of the room is the dining table. The kitchen, storage area and laundry are located further along through a door adjoining the kitchen and the dining area. One of the female dorms is also on the first floor just near the front entrance. Running from the centre of the first floor to the second floor is a spiral staircase, which opens up into a larger lounge area where people can use the computer and watch television. The showers and male toilets are also upstairs while the female toilets are downstairs. The spiral staircase is the only way to get from the first floor to the second floor and so very rarely can you go upstairs or downstairs without encountering someone. If you want to have a shower and you are living in the downstairs female dorm, the only option is to go upstairs via the staircase, which is located in the middle of the room.

In part because of the house layout, the emphasis at KoRoot is on communal living. There is very little privacy and it is rarely quiet because sounds echo throughout the house. Conversations on the first floor can be heard by people on the second floor and vice versa. People are continually coming and going and it is easy to tell when someone has come back or left because of the tune that the lock on the front door plays whenever it opens or closes. The basement is one of the more private areas because it is accessible from a separate outdoor entry. In the basement, there are
additional bedrooms as well as Pastor Kim’s office. The rest of the area serves as a
general area for study, meetings and social events.

The building’s structural openness also plays a part in the openness that permeates
social life at KoRoot. Every weekday a Korean ajumma prepares lunch, which is ready
at 12:30pm. Just before lunch, Lee Ji Eun, KoRoot’s managerial assistant, knocks on
the bedroom doors to let everyone know that lunch is ready. Everyone sits at the
dining table and usually Pastor Kim and Mrs. Kim will make a note of who did not
come and will sometimes ask where they are. Because of the communal atmosphere,
it is difficult to go unnoticed for even a day. One morning, I woke early before most
people were up to get some work done at the National Library. I stayed out and did
other things before returning to KoRoot that evening. When I came back, I was
surprised that my absence had been noticed when another adoptee exclaimed, “Long
time no see!” The next day during breakfast Mrs. Kim asked me many specific
questions including, when I left KoRoot, where I went, how long I spent at the library
and what I did afterwards. I had only been gone for the day. Not surprisingly, the
constant social interactions make personal space and time an uncommon occurrence.

Overall, there is an emphasis on community, group belonging and familiarity. During
the first week that I was at KoRoot, Pastor Kim and Mrs. Kim said they wanted me to
feel like this was my home too and that I should feel part of the KoRoot family. As
Natacha commented, [The people] who are responsible of this place are very tactful.
You know, they make everything not too hard, to make it very harmonious. Yeah so that's an important aspect and the pastor is trying to speak to everyone. The warmth and generosity that Pastor Kim and Mrs. Kim offer to everyone at KoRoot help to create a comfortable and supportive environment. Because of this, KoRoot is also a familiar place as people who have lived there before come back to visit or to stay at KoRoot again upon subsequent trips to Korea. In addition to the amiable atmosphere at KoRoot, social events are also organised by the KoRoot staff which help to create a feeling of belonging and community. For example, on 15 August, after a few date changes due to Seoul's rainy summer weather, there was a ‘Garden Party’ to commemorate KoRoot’s 4th anniversary. With the help of GOA’L, adoptees living in other parts of Seoul and those at KoRoot enjoyed the food prepared by KoRoot’s volunteers and staff. There were people who knew each other and those that were meeting for the first time.

There was a similar get-together to celebrate Chuseok. This is an important three day holiday during which families travel back to their hometown to remember their ancestors and to reconnect and reinforce kin relations. It is also a time to celebrate the harvest and to prepare a feast to share amongst the family. KoRoot and GOA’L jointly organised and hosted a Chuseok (추석) celebration on 25 September so that adoptees without families to be with could still share in the festivities. Some adoptees that had found their Korean birth families were invited to spend Chuseok with them. At KoRoot, an array of Korean food was prepared, including songpyeon (송편), a half-
moon shaped rice cake traditionally eaten during Chuseok. Having a Chuseok celebration at KoRoot was special because it gave adoptees a way to be together like a family and to be part of this major nationwide family holiday.

Therefore, while personal space may be hard to come by, what makes KoRoot more than just a guesthouse is the support offered by the people that make KoRoot a place to come back to and a place that is created and enlivened by the diverse people that live there. As Marie commented:

*What I think is really cool [about KoRoot is] ... that if you say, ‘Ah, I’m going to SWS [Social Welfare Service] today and do a [birth family] search’ or ‘Oh my god, today is my KBS taping’ or whatever, every single one supports you. It’s almost like a huge family where you know you have people rooting for you and I think that’s really cool ... and you don’t get, ‘Ugh, why are you wasting your time?’, ‘Why would you do that?’, or ‘Who cares?’ Or you know all that kind of stuff. Here you just get, ‘Good luck’."

The emphasis on group belonging, mutual support and communal living makes KoRoot a place where adoptees can meet other adoptees and become quite close in a short amount of time. Korean adoptees from many different countries come to KoRoot where they have the opportunity to share their stories and experience Korea together. This is one of the distinguishing characteristics about KoRoot. While immersed in this adoptee community, I met and became friends with Korean adoptees as they passed through during their travels. It was surprising to me how different we all were and it was interesting to see how each of our lives took different paths after leaving Korea for the first time.
A different kind of conversation

Going into my fieldwork, I assumed that Korean adoptees would have an almost automatic connection based on similar experiences as adoptees. This assumption was partly based on my own position as a Korean adoptee expecting to find an instantaneous camaraderie with other people who were adopted too. Others I spoke to later on also expressed these same expectations. For example, Steph noted, I wanted to feel an affinity with other adoptees that I don’t feel with people who aren’t adopted and by going to the [Gathering], I thought I would be able to experience this. In a way, I did, and in other ways, it was a bit disappointing. As I met more adoptees, my initial hypothesis became much more complicated than I had originally anticipated.

In conversations, two distinct themes emerged. The first theme which will be discussed in a later section was that there was a definite basis for shared experiences among adoptees, especially on occasions when differences slipped away and became less overt. This sense of immediate rapport was present between adoptees, but it was only in certain situations when this feeling of shared understanding overshadowed their differences. It was not an automatic connection, but one that was more easily arrived at in situations when adoptees could put aside their differences and support each other on this common grounding.

Secondly, while there were similarities on the basis of being adopted, there were also distinct differences between adoptees that point to their diversity as people, not just
as adoptees. This was mainly due to their particular cultural upbringing in their adoptive countries. Of course, there were also other differences such as nationality, gender, age, socioeconomic background and personal interests that were occasionally brought up in the interviews. For example, Brea said that while she feels more comfortable around friends that are Korean adoptees, she also said that there are some adoptees that she gets along with and others that she does not. For instance, she said that she tends to get along better with adoptees that are male and bases this on the fact that her three closest Korean adoptee friends are male with whom she can be more open with her thoughts and feelings. She also explained another reason why she does not feel comfortable around all adoptees: *Many adoptees that I talk to came from a different background and [had] different views of life. They grew up in a city where they had options of exploring [their] heritage. Even if they didn’t they had the option that I didn’t* (original emphasis). Finally, because she grew up as the only adoptee in her family, she felt that her experiences were different compared to those who grew up with siblings who were also adopted and that it would have also been different if she had known other Korean adoptees in her town.

At KoRoot, Hee Su felt that the differences between herself and a few other adoptees living there at the time made her question whether she could really feel belonging amongst other adoptees. She had expected to connect more with adoptees but found that this was not always the case. While she was able to make some good friendships
with adoptees at the Gathering, she wondered if she was “twice an outsider” for not feeling a sense of belonging with all adoptees:

*I know KoRoot is really great but still like not all adoptees, like if I was only with the people that I’m here with kind of; I would feel probably twice as lonely as if I were just alone because they’re just so different than who I am. And then I’m like am I weird to be an adoptee and not identify with these other adoptees, you know, does it make me twice an outsider, you know?*

Similarly, Marie observed during her time at KoRoot:

*Some people say, “Oh, hi” at breakfast but that’s it because on a personal level we really don’t have anything in common. Yeah well you’re polite. We can talk about the adoption thing but that’s all you can really talk about … you know because we don’t have the other stuff because then you’re so completely different.*

As I spoke with more adoptees and observed the way people interacted at KoRoot, it became apparent that even though adoptees may expect to get along with each other because of the similar turn their lives took, their diversity as people indicates that this is not necessarily the case. Furthermore, it was interesting to observe how normally private topics concerning adoption became the ‘small talk’ of conversations, such as birthplace, age at adoption, and if someone had done a birth family search.

Differences between adoptees were especially apparent at the Gathering where over 550 adoptees from 17 different countries attended. During this six day event, it was interesting to see how people that share a common beginning, being born in South Korea and adopted to another country, could also be so different. This sentiment was reiterated by the people I interviewed and in the same breath, expressed surprise that they did not feel the same depth of connection with all adoptees. Hee Su attended the Gathering and stayed some time at KoRoot while Marie was not able to attend the
Gathering but made similar observations while she stayed at KoRoot. Both pointed out the ways adoptees from different age groups related to each other.

Hee Su was born in the 1980s and felt that each generation of adoptees tended to stay together rather than interacting across age groups. She felt that this was unfortunate because the older generation of adoptees could help to mentor or educate younger adoptees about their experiences as they begin to learn more about the circumstances for their adoption and as they try to understand in more depth what being adopted has meant for them. She explained:

*I find, like it’s really stratified. It’s like the different cohorts of adoptees throughout the generations have stuck together ... I feel that the older ones have so much to tell us younger ones that are just starting this exploration and maybe it’s not that they don’t want to, it’s just that they’re comfortable with their older friends, like their friends that are the same age as them and stuff. So I don’t know. Like I know that there was a huge range of ages and adoptees at the Gathering, and, like I would have loved to talk with more adoptees that had met their birth families ... [that are] ... in their 30s and can tell me, like their experiences in integrating their two identities and how they negotiate their relationships with their birth parents across culture and language and how they have learnt Korean. You know there’s all these things that I think would be really helpful.*

Marie was born in the 1970s and explained why she feels a stronger connection to adoptees within a similar age group as opposed to adoptees in a younger age group. She explained that it’s partly to do with the different experiences they have doing a birth family search, specifically not having as much information in their file as younger adoptees tend to have:

*If I talk to someone who was born in the 80s or 90s or whatever, then I don’t necessarily feel we have anything in common. Just being an adoptee, no. To some level, yes. But I feel a greater connection to the people, to adoptees that were born during the 70s than I do with the 80s, just because we were more the first batch.*
You know but during the 70s, we pretty much all had like two sheets of paper and that's our paperwork. During the 80s you had like an inch thick stack, in general. So I mean I do feel more of a connection to the older, you know my age people, 70s people ... in some ways (original emphasis).

However, after pointing out this difference between adoptees from different age groups, she goes on to explain that even then, being in the same age group does not necessarily mean that she will get along with all of those adoptees. She emphasised that in addition to age, adoptees are also very different in terms of where they were raised:

*It's not like we're ALL the same. You know the Belgians or the Norwegians or the Americans or the Australians. I mean, we all grew up completely different. We might have one experience that is fairly similar and that I guess connects us in some way but after that it comes down to personality, do I like you as a person?* (original emphasis)

At the same time, she also says that on a whole, she relates more with adoptees than non-adoptees mainly because of this one thing they do share:

*We have the adoptee thing together and we can talk about that in a way that you can't talk to other people because if I say, 'I just don't know. I just wanna know', then other adoptees will say, 'Yeah I know what you mean'. But other people wouldn't have a clue what I'm talking about, that I just wanna know. I guess there is a power in that.*

As an adoptee from Belgium told me, what we share is one aspect but it is also very important. While it may seem like a contradiction that adoptees could be so different but also share so much, it is actually characteristic of what it is like to be someone that was adopted. There is this sense of shared experience but also awareness that adoptees are not necessarily defined by being adopted but are people who happen to be adopted.
For many that attended the Gathering, it was their first time talking with so many other adoptees. In addition to this, for some, it was their first trip to Korea or their first experience being among one of many Asians. In many of the European countries and more rural areas of multicultural countries such as the United States, it is often common to be one of very few people who look Asian. Therefore, it can be a very new experience coming to Korea and blending in with the rest of the population and on top of that, being around so many other adoptees. As Katie noted:

*To be around other adoptees, that maybe they've never had that experience before or it's been a very limited experience, I think that’s really important for a lot of people in terms of the Gathering. And then of course the fact that the Gathering is in Korea this year is like a big draw* (original emphasis).

In Korea, adoptees often say that what they like about being in Korea is that they can more easily blend in with the rest of the population and remain relatively anonymous. Conversely, at KoRoot, our differences were more obvious especially when different languages were spoken. Not surprisingly, adoptees from the same adoptive country were more likely to connect because of shared language and cultural upbringing. While most adoptees could speak English, for adoptees from European countries, English was usually not the first language they learned and so it was more comfortable for them to be able to speak to other adoptees in their first language. One of the difficulties I faced with finding adoptees that were willing to be interviewed was that some adoptees whose first language was not English felt that they could not express themselves in a way that they would feel satisfied, especially because they would have to respond to in-depth questions.
At KoRoot and during the Gathering, there was also a sense that differences among adoptees were largely random primarily because they could have just as easily been adopted to a different country. It became apparent how very little agency there is for adoptees in the process leading up to their adoption, which contrasted to their choice to go back to Korea as adults. Hee Su observed: You know I know I could have been anywhere in the world. Like you could spin the globe and point your finger and that’s where my home could have been so it was really cool to meet people who landed somewhere else in the world. So on one hand there was the obvious connection between adoptees because of similar shared experiences, feelings and thoughts about being adopted as well as the experience of looking different from others in their family and community. Then, there are the differences between adoptees that make them more than simply people who were adopted, but also people who grew up in different countries with different personal experiences.

When new people arrive at KoRoot, the first question that is often asked is, ‘Where are you from?’ Ironically, in contrast to adoptees’ experiences in their adoptive countries, the expected response is not South Korea or another East Asian country. Instead, the responses refer to the adoptees’ adoptive country. Other questions that are typically asked are, ‘How old are you?’, ‘How many times have you been to Korea?’ or, ‘Is this your first time back to Korea?’, ‘How long are you staying in Korea?’, ‘What are you going to do while you’re here?’ and ‘Have you found your birth family?’ Some adoptees I spoke to who had been at KoRoot for about a week or more found the
conversations repetitive but also sometimes emotionally difficult because they were reminded of adoption issues on a daily basis. I too experienced this emotional and physical fatigue and there were days when I really had to spend time away from KoRoot so that I could regroup and feel less overwhelmed. It was Marie’s first time staying at KoRoot and the openness that is expected when talking about these personal topics is something that can be initially confronting. Marie talked about how she felt revealing this kind of information to adoptees at KoRoot that she had only just met: So I mean my first time here, I was never in this adoptee community thing until I came to Korea, well this time. The first time I reacted [like], ‘Oh, do I really want to talk about it to this person, even though the other person was adopted. I just didn’t feel comfortable at first. While Marie stressed that coming to Korea is a ‘personal thing’ she also admitted, But here … part of that has to just be open because we all in some ways come with that, you know, call it baggage if you want.

**Adoptee-centred social space**

Being at KoRoot and talking about these topics in very deep and personal ways was one of the more challenging aspects during my fieldwork. However, it was also the most fulfilling part about being there. Living at KoRoot, you are very much aware that you were adopted and that most other people were too. Adoption was not always a part of conversations, perhaps because it was obvious why someone would come to KoRoot and therefore, the fact that we were adopted was not something that had to be
explained. Indeed, one of the most satisfying aspects about being at KoRoot was that there was no need to have to respond to the string of questions from strangers that adoptees usually have to face, compelling them to reveal that they were adopted. Sarah commented on her experience of this in Australia:

Sometime[s] I'll say that I'm from Korea, but then if they try to show off some of their knowledge about Korea or ask me about something to do with Korea or (most commonly) whether my parents were born here, I need to make a decision about how to respond. I sometimes say, I've grown up here and [I'm not] that familiar with the language or culture or that yes my parents were born here, then change the subject (leaving them to assume I'm third-generation Korean-Australian), or just not offer any more information. Sometimes I'll begrudgingly say I'm adopted.

At KoRoot, the fact that we were all adopted was not something that had to be explained or begrudgingly discussed because there was an implicit understanding that everyone there would have gone through similar issues and been faced with similar conversations. For this reason, it was refreshing to meet new people without having to first deal with questions that inevitably lead to adoptees having to choose whether or not to say they were adopted.

However, at the same time, this opened up other avenues for discussion that went more deeply into topics about adoption that perhaps had not been talked about previously. As it was mentioned earlier, typical opening questions between people at KoRoot were not usually concerned with favourite music, hobbies or careers, but about whether or not someone had done a birth family search or what age someone was adopted. Due to the predictable commonplace nature of these kinds of conversations, the questions sometimes acquired a tinge of superficiality akin to
‘small talk’, especially for those that had been living there for some time. However, while this was true to some extent, the questions did not become irrelevant; on the contrary, the questions were a constant reminder about being adopted, which for some people was like carrying around an emotional weight. It made the fact that we were all adopted more apparent and therefore it was often hard to avoid thinking about it.

Since one of the requirements for living at KoRoot is being an adoptee, life there can also feel quite insular, especially in comparison to the rest of Seoul. I spoke to an adoptee about how he felt about living at KoRoot and he said that it was like a ‘safe haven’. He explained that because people who live at KoRoot tend to also socialise together outside of KoRoot, it is too easy to never really leave that ‘safe haven’. Anne also talked about her initial experiences at KoRoot in a similar way. She wanted to experience more of what it would be like to be Korean living in Korea and felt that she could not really access that by living at KoRoot. She said:

> It was a little hard to be honest coming here ... I was looking for something else ... [such as] learning Korean and I didn't know if I could find that within the adoptee community ... I feel like if I feel too much at home here, if I seek out people who just speak English then I'll be so comfortable and so, basically like a vacation almost and I didn't think I wanted it ... and I'm still probably pretty still reserved like around maybe the adoptee activities.

KoRoot is indeed a unique place within Seoul because it offers Korean adoptees a space where they can have a place that is like a home to come back to at the end of the

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29 InKAS, a non-profit organisation, also offers accommodation for adoptees through their guesthouse, ‘Woori-jip’, meaning ‘Our House’. Refer to their website: [http://www.inkas.or.kr/eng/index.asp](http://www.inkas.or.kr/eng/index.asp).
day. It is also a place where they can talk about their experiences with people who can more readily understand what it is like to be a Korean adoptee in Korea. As Marie mentioned earlier, if she needed support when she visited her adoption agency or while she was searching for her birth family, she could always count on people at KoRoot to be there for her.

Living at KoRoot also entails a certain amount of personal confrontation when it comes to understanding what it means to be adopted and the impact that this has had and continues to have. For some, this could be the first time they have had to address the implications of transnational adoption not only for themselves but also what it means for other adoptees. Everyone has different stories and different opinions about how they feel about being adopted and what that means. As Anne recounted when she first arrived at KoRoot: *I realise that there's so much difference about my story, about an adoptee's story, that I can't pretend to be like everyone else [or] to have that regular story about where I came from.*

Initially, Anne felt uncomfortable being around other adoptees because it reminded her too much of the difficulties she wanted to leave behind. She explained: *Because like if you feel bad about yourself, you don't want to be, like you don't want to be in a group where other people are going through the same like, coming from the same place.* Anne was conscious of Korean people that might pity her because she was adopted. She pointed out that she did not want to be seen as a vulnerable person and chose to
focus on the strength that it took for her to come to Korea and especially to be there on her own as a young person. She explained:

*We're all searching for something, we're all coming here because it's a, like it's a really nice place to live, like a big house, but more importantly I think that it's ok to be reminded and it's ok to have, to be uncertain of how you're perceived ... It's a huge step just to understand yourself and just to go after what you want and that's what I'm going to do.*

In the interviews, I asked all the participants, not just those who have stayed at KoRoot, what being an adoptee meant for them. Some talked about feelings of shame and inferiority:

*Being adopted has always felt like I was not wanted, grew up feeling inferior towards myself and others. (Kelly)*

*I know this doesn't sound very nice but I sometimes feel ashamed of being adopted. I think that it's harder for Korean adoptees with white parents, or any other child that is so obviously aesthetically different. (Mia)*

*I think that being an adoptee has very much shaped who I am. It is just the sense of shame I associate with being adopted and it being a very personal part of my life that stops me from using the term adoptee to describe myself with the majority of people. (Sarah)*

Others like Amanda focused more on the social stigma attached to being adopted. She despised being made to feel like she could be 'less than' a daughter just because she was adopted in comparison to someone who was not. She criticised the way the media talks about the children that celebrities adopt by pointing out: *Every time someone adopts a kid, the kid is referred to as so-and-so's ‘adopted daughter’. How about so-and-so's ‘delivered-by-Caesarean section son’?* Come on (original emphasis). She explained the effect this has by saying, *In short, I feel minimized and dehumanized in a way when I'm reduced to a bizarre stereotype as an adoptee, rather than a daughter*
in those contexts. However, she adds that despite this stigmatisation, around other adoptees, it can feel empowering to sort of ‘reclaim’ that term. It's not derogatory, at least not yet (original emphasis). Indeed, for others such as Todd, identifying as a Korean adoptee has helped him to realise that he can find a sense of belonging where he has not been able to either in Australia or in Korea: My sense of belonging is that I am Korean adopted. I don’t feel completely Australian and I don’t feel completely Korean. Similarly Hanna describes herself in this way: Yes, I consider myself being an international and transracial adoptee—that is my situation and my identity. I have never really felt Swedish and I do not really feel Korean.

Although the Korean adoptees I spoke to had different things to say, one of the main aspects that linked them was the difficulty involved in the process of understanding what it means to be adopted, how that affected their lives and how they see themselves. As Sarah clearly stated, It's just one of those things that is part of one’s reality, I guess. Once you confront how big an impact it has had on you, it’s hard to avoid it. There is something about being in the place where our lives began that makes the accompanying thoughts and feelings about adoption all the more pertinent. Specifically, addressing issues about adoption are more immediately present just by the very nature of being back in the birth country. For example, the first time I went back to Korea in 2004 and then went to my adoption agency to have a social worker open my file and show it to me, the reality that there was a life before adoption affected me like a jolt through my body. Suddenly, my connection to Korea became
real and substantial and moreover, unavoidable. The combined impact of being in Korea and finding out more information was like a dam had been broken allowing a rush of emotions and unanswered questions to finally break through. While some adoptees that go to Korea may choose to search for their birth family and others may not, the possibility is there to explore.

**Adoptee connections**

Although Korean adoptees experienced different life trajectories after leaving Korea, they also have a common connection to each other based on shared experiences as adoptees. Of course, adoptees feel differently about being adopted and they individually approach how they want to go about understanding the significance of their past. Some may feel they need to go back to Korea to understand their identity and others choose not to. At the same time, there is a sense of belonging among adoptees that goes beyond their differences and is supported by mutual understanding, shared experiences and similar feelings and thoughts. This was often articulated by adoptees in conversations and interviews:

Yes I do feel a connection with other adoptees. An unspoken natural bond, I guess you’d call it. Although our lives, personalities and so on are often very different, we have a shared experience that is unique. I’m not saying I get along with adoptees better than non-adoptees, just because we’re adopted ... that’s definitely not the case! There’s just an understanding that you don’t have with non-adoptees of where you’ve been and sometimes where you are (emotionally) now. (Pia)

I never expressed how I felt until I met other adoptees in 2002 on a home tour back to Korea and realized I wasn’t crazy with all these thoughts. They actually felt the
same too, it was such a relief to have discovered all these other people who were all normal and thought the same stuff as myself. (Erin)

At university, I know a couple of other Korean adoptees, and I've talked to them about things, such as looking for biological parents, and travelling to Korea and stuff ... but nothing on a major scale. It has been good for [me] to talk to them about these topics, so I can understand how other people feel about these topics and situations. It helps me organize my thoughts and know that I'm not alone. (Todd)

There was a sense of common understanding and shared belonging based on the fact that we were all adopted with a connection to Korea. While adoption was not always the focal point of conversation, there was an unspoken feeling of understanding that flowed between adoptees. Adoptees often spoke about this kind of immediate understanding and empathy as something that is not experienced in the same way with people that have not been adopted. They reason that ‘non-adoptees’ cannot fully grasp what it is like to be adopted when they could never experience it for themselves.

As Marah noted, It is nice to find other people out there who have the same feelings as you and can really and truly understand what you go through. People who are not adopted can never know what it’s like to not know who you are and where you came from. Young Mi also said, It was just kind of comforting and something new to be around people who instinctively understood my situation and didn’t have to ask stupid questions or make unfounded assumptions about me.

While I lived at KoRoot, the communal atmosphere of the guesthouse provided a comfortable space in which adoptees could share their stories with each other. I found that as we exchanged stories and listened to each other, an intimate feeling of belonging began to develop. Erin described how before meeting adoptees, she felt
'crazy with all these thoughts’. When she was able to talk with other adoptees, these feelings of isolation were subsumed by a sense of mutual understanding. During these kinds of exchanges, experiences are processed and expressed or drawn out by sharing them with others, and occasionally in these instances an immediate bond or sense of closeness and sameness is realised.

At KoRoot, I saw and experienced for myself how special connections formed between complete strangers with diverse backgrounds and personalities in a strikingly short period of time. Sometimes people only stayed for a few days, but the friendships they began at KoRoot would continue long after they had left. Eleana Kim refers to these connections as ‘adoptive kinship’, something that “emerges out of common experiences of alienation and disidentification with hegemonic racial and familial ideologies” (2007, p. 522). Indeed, there is a sense of family belonging among adoptees evident by the extensive support network, especially in Seoul. Even after adoptees leave Korea, they continue to actively work to reinforce kin ties over great distances. Usually, they exchange e-mail addresses and add each other as ‘friends’ on social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Frequently, adoptees meet up again on repeated trips when they are in Korea or in their respective adoptive countries, such as at the IKAA Gathering, mini-Gatherings or the GOA’L annual meeting. Then, they are able to reconnect and create more memories together, thus building on their friendships and forming new ones.
“Until you’ve gone through it you just don’t know”

At KoRoot, new arrivals will usually be invited to join in various social activities so they can also get to know other adoptees staying there. For example, an adoptee from Germany had just arrived at KoRoot after a series of long flights, finally landing at Incheon International Airport that evening. As a group of us were introducing ourselves, one person mentioned that there was a classical guitar concert at KT Art Hall to be performed by Denis Sung-ho, a Korean adoptee from Belgium. She decided to come along and as a result, was able to immediately spend time with other adoptees and become part of the social network of adoptees in Seoul. While there is the obvious potential for a place like KoRoot to be divided into groups, if newcomers are willing to be a part of the social atmosphere, people are generally welcoming and inclusive. Amanda stayed at KoRoot for four days and reflected, Going into these situations, I was aware that it could have been an insular, insider experience and I was definitely set to be the outsider. However, my hostess was fantastic and the people there were so open and friendly that I really got to know a few people.

KoRoot is not only a place for adoptees to stay; there is also an expectation to socialise such as going out to eat or for a night out in the popular university areas of Sinchon (신촌) and Hongdae (홍대). For example, one of the places in Sinchon is called Mike’s Cabin, a bar run by Mike, a Korean adoptee from the U.S. I went there a few times with other adoptees not only because it is a nice place to go to have a drink and talk, but also because it was a way to support a fellow adoptee and his business. Through these
various social activities, adoptees are socialised into the adoptee community at KoRoot and the wider adoptee community in Seoul. The more they take part in these group activities, the more they can get to know other adoptees. As a result of these connections, a sense of belonging is also imparted.

KoRoot is a small community and not surprisingly, some people get along more with others, personalities clash and tensions arise. Friendships form along different lines so that certain people tend to socialise with the same people. It can be difficult for someone that is not initially outgoing in new situations to brush off the ‘new person’ veneer. An adoptee from the U.S. told me that if people do not want to be socially active, they should not come to KoRoot. Tensions between adoptees at KoRoot point to the diverse group of people that stay there. It also shows that people are different whether or not they were adopted and they will not necessarily become friends just because they were adopted.

However, while being adopted is certainly not the only aspect that characterises a person’s life experiences, personality, and identity, being able to share experiences about being adopted is incredibly significant. An example of this special quality between adoptees and the immediate feeling of closeness that often surrounds adoptees that have just met is illustrated in a story Katie recounted. While Katie was studying Korean language at a university in Seoul, she lived in the international dorms. A welcoming party was held and as everyone mingled, Katie was again faced
with the expectation that she would be able to speak Korean because she looked Korean. She explained that she was adopted and so she was introduced to another person who was adopted. They found out that they were both born in Busan, the main port city in the southern end of South Korea. Even though it was the first time they met, the other adoptee asked her if she would go to Busan with her to visit her birthmother. It was the second time she would meet her birthmother. This quite personal and intimate invitation between people that had just met shows the depth of connection that is often felt between adoptees.

Going to adoption agencies together is an example of another situation when a sense of mutual understanding and support works to bring adoptees together in spite of their differences. In July, during my early days at KoRoot, I said that I was going to visit Eastern Social Welfare Society (ESWS), the adoption agency that arranged my adoption. An adoptee from the United States said that he had also planned on going and offered to join me. Then another adoptee from Norway said that he would come along for support as well. I was surprised at their willingness to join me since I did not really know them and had always felt that it was a personal thing to go to the adoption agency. However, it made me realise that I was not alone in this journey and that there were other adoptees in similar situations who could understand that going to adoption agencies can be emotionally difficult and that it can be better to have that support.
Throughout my time at KoRoot, adoptees that had just met often found a connection because they were adopted through the same adoption agency. Sometimes, by going together they became closer through that experience. For example, one day, a few adoptees went to Social Welfare Society (SWS) and came back simply saying that ‘it was intense’. It means a lot having someone there with you because they are going through it too and it helps to feel less alone. The fact that adoptees have dealt with similar difficulties such as feelings of ‘otherness’, loss, and alienation creates a bond between adoptees that is grounded in their shared experiences.

Marie articulated this sense of unspoken understanding about what it is like being adopted and going through these journeys together by using an analogy referring to amputees:

*It’s almost like we have one more sensory or one more feeling or one … I don’t even know what to call it that non-adopted people that don’t know, you know wouldn’t have … Ok, so this is a bad analogy and I don’t mean it literally but if you cut a leg off, you know if you had to amputate it, they say you can have ghost pains, ok. It’s not like that; I’m not saying that we have that. But not being an amputee, I wouldn’t know what that ghost feeling feels like, I can imagine but I can never know. [It’s] not that I’m saying being an adoptee is like being without a foot, but it’s like that, we can never know. It’s like … giving birth to a child. Until you’ve had a baby, you really don’t know … Until you’ve gone through it you just don’t know.*

In this way, understanding what it means to be adopted is something that is experienced and felt at an immediate level. Marie’s analogy refers to the embodied experience of being adopted as something that is understood through the bodily *lived* experience of it, not simply a cognitive understanding.
This parallels Jackson’s account of chronic pain sufferers as she strives to understand the connection felt between other sufferers. She finds that, “People who do not suffer chronic pain can perhaps grasp its meaning intellectually, but they will lack a deeper emphatic comprehension” (1994, p. 211). This is similar to what adoptees say when they feel a connection with other adoptees in a way that is ‘unspoken’. In other words, it is an emotive connection that is felt through the immediacy of lived experience in a way that is pre-objective meaning that mutual understanding does not need to be spoken or objectified or explained to be understood. This draws on what Csordas (Csordas, 2002; Katz & Csordas, 2003) calls, ‘cultural phenomenology’, which points out that bodily experiences are pre-objective in the sense that these experiences are lived without necessarily needing to be articulated and thus objectified. As Csordas insists, this does not mean that these experiences are pre-cultural but that they are significant in their immediacy and indeterminacy in the moment of ‘being-in-the-world’ (2002, p. 62).

Using phenomenology to understand cultural and social phenomena is a way to understand how experience is culturally meaningful by viewing the body as subjective and already embedded in a culturally meaningful world. Accordingly, cultural phenomenology is a way to use phenomenological concepts while “engaging them in light of the empirical data of ethnography” (Katz & Csordas, 2003, p. 278). Taking this approach, Jackson focuses on bodily meaning and shared experience:

Pain sufferers often report that only other pain sufferers understand their pre-objective, pre-abstract experiences of pain, but not through the normal medium
of communication—everyday-world language. Patients claim that other forms of communication, intuitive and involving a kind of communitas facilitate mutual understanding (1994, p. 213).

One of the sufferers commented, “'[I wanted to be in a place] ... where I would be surrounded by a group of people who I would not have to explain my pain to. And that is exactly what I found’” (Jackson, 1994, p. 213). This is strikingly similar to the way Korean adoptees I spoke with described the experience of coming to KoRoot and finding other adoptees that could understand where they were coming from and how they were feeling. Importantly, these connections that adoptees talk about and this oftentimes inexplicable feeling of mutual understanding characterise a sense of belonging through shared histories and shared experiences. Importantly, this connection is not just a just a conceptual thing; it is grounded in experience as something that has been lived.

Another sense: Feelings of belonging and understanding

KoRoot is like a liminal space on the ‘threshold’ between fully being in Korea and the familiarity of being at ‘home’ among other adoptees, some of which are from the same adoptive country. In an informal discussion with some adoptees, KoRoot was described as a transitory and somewhat isolated place because living there is not like daily life in Korean society and it is characterised by people frequently coming and going. Another aspect that gives KoRoot a transitory feeling is that for many of the people staying there, it is a shift from their normal lives ‘back home’. They do not
have the same kind of responsibilities that they temporarily left behind. Furthermore, adoptees I spoke to talked about how they went to great measures in order to come to Korea such as organising leave from their jobs, saving money to finance their trip and arranging it so that they can put family duties on hold. Others come at a turning point in their lives when they are in-between, for example, finishing university and starting a career or a new job.

At KoRoot, an adoptee from Denmark noted that he is much more social in Korea than back home. He explained to me that because people are always coming and then leaving again, oftentimes for short trips, he feels the need to go out more often. He said that because of this, socialising is more accentuated and that ‘it is extreme [being here]’. With this comes a sense of temporality in which the structural divisions of past, present, and future are not as important or do not play as strong a part in their lives as it does back home where they have responsibilities such as school, careers, and family. At KoRoot, it was common for people to stay out until early morning and sleep for most of the day, thus disrupting ‘normal’ work schedules. Indeed, because of the constantly revolving social atmosphere at KoRoot, time is not as relevant as people enjoy just being there in Korea. Some adoptees that had been to Korea a few times before said they were happy just to be in Korea and did not have any set plans. Turner discussed this quality of liminality as something that is often experienced in leisurely activities. He describes liminality as something that brings people together in a way that fosters “direct, immediate, and total confrontations of human identities”
In other words, in liminal settings, there is more potential for experiencing a sense of oneness in social interactions when sameness is favoured over difference.

At KoRoot, leisurely activities such as late night conversations and going out in the evening with other adoptees provided the setting when instances of spontaneous communitas were more likely to be experienced. As Turner insisted, “In industrial societies, it is within leisure ... that this way of experiencing one's fellows can be portrayed, grasped and sometimes realised” (1982, p. 46). Spontaneous communitas tends to be more fleeting and refers to an instantaneous sense of oneness in which social statuses that divide individuals into a social structure become temporarily irrelevant. It also “may arise unpredictably at any time between human beings who are institutionally reckoned or defined as members of any or all kinds of social groupings, or of none” (V. Turner, 1969, p. 137). An example of this was during late night conversations at KoRoot, between about 10pm and the early hours past midnight. This time period is also a time of liminality between the end of the previous day and the beginning of a new day. Importantly, during these hours, KoRoot is quieter, exhausted after the day's activities. Many people have usually gone out by then so those remaining have more of an opportunity to have more in-depth conversations when interruptions are less frequent. I found that the quality of conversations during this time was characterised by a sense of immediacy and an intense focus that brought the people involved in the conversation closer together
with little attention to time or place. Sitting on the couches or around the dining table, time passed by unnoticed and topics especially around our shared experiences as adoptees were emphasised over any individual differences, whether that was cultural, socioeconomic or simply different personalities. Of course, usually once a mobile rang or someone else entered the room, the spontaneity of that feeling of communitas slipped away.

KoRoot is a place that emphasises similarity by bringing people together on the basis of them being adopted. Within this setting, the ideological aim is to minimise difference and emphasise a common sense of belonging. Additionally, it is a liminal setting that provides the backdrop for adoptees to connect with each other through their shared experiences. After staying at KoRoot, you become part of the ‘KoRoot family’. Staying at KoRoot connects you to people that you may have never had a chance to meet in other circumstances. The bonding experiences that many have during their stay at KoRoot extends beyond the confines of the guesthouse itself. Life-long friendships are formed. As mentioned earlier, adoptees that are new to KoRoot are often immediately welcomed and invited to socialise with those that have been there for awhile. Turner's (1969) description of initiation rituals can be loosely applied in this situation. At KoRoot, the newcomer or ‘neophyte’ must go through a rite of passage, usually a night of drinking in Seoul that goes into the early hours, to emerge sleep-deprived and ‘transformed’ as a member of the social group. The point of this kind of ritual is to emphasise group belonging over the separateness created by
individual backgrounds; it is about being people that were adopted, coming together under unique circumstances.

This emphasis was also expressed at the 2007 Gathering when the organisers implored adoptees at the opening ceremony to interact with adoptees that were not only from the same adoptive country. The Vice President of IKAA and Korean adoptee, Liselotte Hae-Jin Birkmose stressed that “many voices and experiences can coexist”. As discussed earlier, while differences between people sometimes created divisions, there were also instances when a common identity and a sense of belonging were more important. A feeling of cohesion and oneness, what might be called, ‘communitas’ (V. Turner, 1982), arose in spite of any differences.

Turner explains ‘communitas’ as something that happens between people and ‘flow’ as an individual experience, but something that is also a part of communitas and a way for communitas to be experienced (1982, p. 58). He points out that people will often seek flow “outside their ascribed stations in life if these are ‘flow-resistant’” (1982, p. 58). For adoptees, a sense of flow can be felt when they are able to talk about their experiences with other adoptees, especially for those discovering for the first time that they are not alone in their feelings and thoughts. When they find this common ground on which their experiences are understood by other adoptees, they talk about this encounter in ways that are akin to the experience of ‘flow’.
Adoptees that I spoke with expressed that adoptees can just ‘get it’ because of a sense of mutual understanding. Steph described what it was like talking with other adoptees:

*For most of my life I had a craving to be fully understood by someone else, and by talking to other adoptees, I felt this kind of comfort and contentedness to just sit back and think, ‘Yes, this person understands me’. There was no need to explain myself to the extent I need to with non-adoptees—adoptees just knew how I felt. It was very refreshing to not be misunderstood.*

As Marie mentioned earlier when she described this affective connection between adoptees: *It’s almost like we have one more sensory or one more feeling.* After finishing her undergraduate studies, Marah was working at her university when she discovered that a co-worker was also adopted. She had made a comment after she met her co-worker's mother who also worked at the same place. She said that her co-worker had gotten *‘the short end of the stick’* because her mother was tall and thin compared to her shorter height and stockier body shape. Marah described her co-worker's reaction to her comment:

*She just smiled and uncomfortably said, ‘Yea’. I know that reaction. About a week later we were sitting in the car after a movie just talking and she told me she was adopted. I told her I knew and she was very surprised. I told her I’ve given people that same uncomfortable reaction when people asked me about my family. We were instant friends … Everyone thinks we grew up together when the fact of the matter is we’ve only known each other for a year.*

Marah explained that it was this connection they felt as adoptees and through a feeling of unspoken understanding that created this immediate bond between them. She described it in this way: *She and I talk about things we wouldn’t ever talk [about] to anyone who wasn’t adopted. We understand each other without having to say anything. This is why we got so close so quick.*
Another situation when a feeling of camaraderie among adoptees is prevalent is when adoptees arrange to meet up in the evening, oftentimes for dinner and drinks afterwards. The act of going out and eating together, drinking and dancing and talking together emphasises group belonging. As a group, there is an air of confidence and strength rather than feelings of isolation or loneliness. Brea described this: [In Korea], I think one of my favorite experiences for me was when I went out with just the other Korean adoptees and we could go out in the streets and be normal and we didn’t look different. And I wasn’t the only Korean in the group. During these social gatherings, feelings of communitas among the group often arise when differences are momentarily set aside. The focus is placed on the one aspect that adoptees share because they can share that part of themselves with each other knowing that they will find support and understanding.

During these moments, differences that might normally inhibit the experience of communitas are temporarily removed as the focus turns to the significance of being together and moreover, being together in Korea. As Turner noted:

Yet communitas does not represent the erasure of structural norms from the consciousness of those participating in it; rather its own style, in a given community, might be said to depend upon the way in which it symbolizes the abrogation, negation, or inversion of the normative structure in which its participants are quotidianly involved (1982, p. 47).

On my last night in Seoul, adoptees that I had become good friends with and those that were mostly acquaintances came out to help me celebrate. I was only going to have a
quiet night, but a few insisted that I could not spend my last night alone and that we would go out together. We went to a cozy vegetarian restaurant in Insadong (인사동) which served Korean Buddhist ‘temple food’. Afterwards, we sang together at a noraebang\(^{30}\) and finished the night at Mike’s Cabin. Later that night, a Korean adoptee from Belgium told me that we are like family because we have each other. He said that even though there are things that annoy him about some adoptees, we still support each other. After we returned to KoRoot in the early morning hours, some of us stayed up to talk so that we could spend some more of our remaining time together until I had to leave. Gathered around the dining table, there was a feeling of togetherness that is difficult to describe, but the sincerity of the people there and the sense of communitas left a long-lasting memory of the experience.

**Concluding remarks**

If communitas occurs through the experience of it, then the memory of it is brought to existence through description and representation in order to make sense of it. This, as Turner argues, is the paradox of communitas in which “the experience of communitas becomes the memory of communitas, with the result that communitas itself in striving to replicate itself historically develops a social structure” (original emphasis) (1982, p. 47). By trying to replicate these experiences of communitas through ethnographic description, communitas paradoxically, becomes socially structured and historically

\(^{30}\) *Noraebang* (노래방) refers to group ‘singing rooms’, similar to ‘karaoke’.

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and temporally bound. While the feeling of closeness among adoptees is known through the immediate experience of it, it is also known through the representation of it, by sharing those experiences with others even after the moment has passed.

Based on these expressed feelings about the connections adoptees experience, the communities and groups adoptees create such as at KoRoot could be an example of what Malkki refers to as “accidental communities of memory” (1997, p. 91). She explains that “it is the communities that are accidental, not the happenings” and it is this “indeterminacy … [that brings] people together who might not otherwise, in the ordinary courses of their lives, have met” (1997, p. 92). Through the experience of communitas and the shared memory of experience, adoptees feel a sense of mutual understanding toward each other. Hanna described this:

[Being at KoRoot] was like coming home, a feeling of belonging. Every time when I travel and meet new Korean adoptees, I feel that we have some kind of connection. I do not feel the same level of connection with everyone, but with the group. It feels like we are related somehow. We share the same history, destiny, experiences.

Adoptees are brought together especially when they return to South Korea because of their shared history and connection to the country.

Places such as KoRoot are spaces in which 'accidental communities of memory' are created as Korean adoptees from different countries form relationships with each other based on this common aspect of their lives. Within such spaces, stories are often exchanged and an unspoken understanding permeates the conversations. There is a common sense of understanding based on similar feelings, experiences and the
knowledge that we all once began in South Korea. As Hanna remarked, *Even though I do not get equally well along with all Korean adoptees, I still feel we are connected.* While adoptees are individuals with different life histories, personalities, and socio-cultural backgrounds, there are also moments when these differences are temporarily placed in the background and are overshadowed by the sense of sameness that the shared experience of communitas imparts.
Chapter 9
Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a synthesis of the main arguments presented in this study. I highlight key points discussed in the thesis in order to demonstrate that an in-depth understanding of Korean adoptees’ lived experiences helps to disrupt conventional views about identity and belonging. By examining the adoption process as a culturally specific social practice, my aim has been to show how the kinds of issues that adoptees face and the issues that are made relevant in adoption discussions, especially pertaining to identity and belonging, are constructed within this context. My research findings contribute to the shift in adoption studies in the social sciences by using an anthropological approach, thus bringing a different perspective to the discussion. Finally, given the limitations of this study as in any research project, I suggest further research possibilities that could be explored. I also call for practical measures that can be taken to increase public awareness about Korean adoptees’ lived experiences that could help alleviate some of the difficulties they face in South Korea and their adoptive countries.

The first half of the thesis centred on disrupting common assumptions about identity and adoption. Chapter 2 focused mainly on how previous adoption studies, the majority of which were in the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry, left cultural constructions of identity unquestioned. This was problematic because
it affected the ways adoptees’ identities were represented. Based on the idea that
an ideal identity is determined by its relative ‘wholeness’—a complete composite
self—adoptees’ identities were considered to be lacking and thus pathologised as
being in a state of ‘crisis’. I argued that this largely ignores the complex processes
that Korean adoptees engage with in order to make sense of their identities.

As mentioned earlier in the context of some of the psychological literature,
adoptees are not necessarily striving toward ‘complete identities’ in the process of
understanding their identities. Instead, going to Korea and learning more about it
is a way to make an unknown part of their lives more familiar. As Pia commented,

*Learning more about Korea and Koreans in general has made me want to know more
... but not because I feel incomplete not knowing.*

Furthermore, being adopted is
recognised as a situation that cannot be reversed. Therefore, understanding the
impact of adoption is about working with its complexity. Young Mi explained:

> *It’s really hard to reconcile these two identities [Korean and Australian] so I just
have to package it up as my adoptee identity. I don’t want to be glass half full
about things, ‘I’ll never be completely Korean. I’ll never be completely
Australian’ [because] I am complete like this.*

An anthropological analysis provides a way to understand this complexity by
considering identity to be dynamic and changing as well as situated. In this
analysis, I questioned the way hybridity theory considers people with multiple
identities, often due to migration, as being ‘in-between’. This seemed to view
identities as existing in a suspended space, sometimes termed ‘third space’, rather
than looking at how identities are also situated and negotiated.
Rather than viewing identities as existing in different spaces, it is useful to understand identity as something that is experienced as situated and yet also subject to change. This approach is based on how Korean adoptees experience identity. In other words, the *experiencing* of identity is a process that is dynamic as well as situated and is worked out in specific contexts. Importantly, identity has contextual significance as different aspects of a person’s identity are highlighted depending on the situation and depending on how it is perceived. A common theme among the participants of this study is that how they see themselves depends on however they feel at a particular point in their lives and how they represent themselves to others depends on the situation. This is not always a particularly easy situation to be in and as Louise pointed out, *I think identity is rather important, but identifying yourself can be a difficult process!*

As emphasised in chapter 3, it is important to analyse identity in relation to how it is lived. Rather than imposing theoretical frameworks, it is useful to look at how theory can emerge out of qualitative data, thus maintaining a strong empirical basis. Too often in previous adoption studies, adoptees have been analysed and scrutinised without considering the primary knowledge of their experiences. This research project has strived to speak alongside Korean adoptees rather than at them. As a Korean adoptee, I have had to take into consideration issues of positionality throughout the research process, from collecting interview data to my position ‘in the field’ to considering ways to approach writing ethnography. Overall, each methods decision was informed by aims to include a certain amount of reflexivity and collaboration. These are issues that every researcher should take
into consideration, not only those considered to be ‘insiders’ or ‘native’ anthropologists.

In chapter 4, I examined issues associated with adoptees’ identities, especially issues of loss and uncertain (biological) belonging, by analysing the specific cultural constructions of adoption and kinship. I used the Hague Convention’s definition of adoption and the adoption procedures that are outlined in the document as a way to reveal the cultural specificity of this process. By examining the Euro-American valuation of kinship that underlies this particular adoption practice, I suggested that issues such as loss and a need for biological belonging are structurally built into the way adoption in Western countries is practiced. This is due mainly to different ideas about parenthood and kinship. Most notably, a distinction is made between birth parents and adoptive parents and birth parents are legally replaced by adoptive parents. The contradiction this adoption practice presents to a kinship ideology that places such high social value on biogenetic ties is revealed in the slippery act of juggling substance and rights. To get past the ‘cultural discomfort’ involved in separating a child from the child’s (birth) parents, adoption discourse talks about rights to the child and the ‘best interests’ of the child. Instead of biological ties being ‘broken’, it is the legal ties that are being transacted. As a result, the idea is that the biological ties remain even though the legal ties have been cut off and transferred to a new set of (adoptive) parents. This rationalisation also plays into the view that adoptees will naturally want to seek out their birth parents because of this culturally constructed connection that values the substance and permanence of biogenetic ties.
To sum up, Chapter 4 introduced and explored the argument that Korean adoptees' experiences are also in some ways affected by different cultural values that inform a specific way of practicing adoption. In a similar vein, Chapter 5 considered the relationship between how Korean adoptees experience identity and how identity, specifically cultural and ethnic identity, is culturally constructed. One of the conventional ideas about identity is that it is something a person is born with and born into, thus suggesting that the foundation for identity is biological and is located within the (biological) family. In other words, this idea assumes that a central aspect of a person's identity involves having a biological reference point and that biological relatedness supports this.

Despite the fact that adoption is a common practice, this biological premise for kin relations continues to hold steadfast. Specifically, a kinship ideology that places strong emphasis on biogenetic ties also assumes that identity and belonging within the family means sharing similar physical features, often exemplified in family portraits. This conventional idea has affected the way Korean adoptees consider their sense of identity and belonging, not only within the family but within wider society. Most of those I interviewed had been adopted into white families and raised in communities with a proportionately larger white population. Chapter 5 demonstrated how based on their physical attributes, Korean adoptees were represented as 'different' in relation to 'whiteness'. The impact this had on their sense of self was most evident by their expressed desire to be 'White', read as 'normal', and not 'Korean', read in a negative way as 'different'. I argued that it was
confrontational to be seen as ‘different’ since they had embodied a ‘White’ identity and did not see themselves as ‘Korean’.

When Korean adoptees went back to Korea, it was their physical appearance that removed their outward feeling of ‘difference’ as they blended into the rest of the population. However, their cultural upbringing pointed to other differences. Based on phenotype, they were expected to be Korean, to be culturally and linguistically fluent in Korean society. Some Korean adoptees explained that an acute awareness of these cultural differences made them feel more Australian, American and so on, rather than Korean. As Katie expressed, *I think this trip for me has been really different. I think the more time I spend in Korea, I realise how American I really am*. Sarah added:

*Not knowing the language, however, really highlighted for me that I looked Korean but didn’t act, speak or think Korean. I would always go into restaurants or cafes and be talked to in Korean. I would say, “Hello” or something in English, and then they would understand that I wasn’t Korean. So it reinforced my ‘Australian-ness’, and made me confront that I grew up in Australia, and not Korea, despite being of Korean heritage.*

In Korea, their sense of belonging was challenged again, but in a different way. Outwardly, they appeared to belong, but inwardly, they felt like outsiders. In their adoptive countries, they were frequently judged based on their physical features and deemed to be from ‘somewhere else’. In Korea, they were also judged on their physical features, but were considered to be Korean, to belong. However, situations that revealed they could not understand Korean language often pointed to their ‘foreignness’.
Having a Korean identity is considered to mean having Korean ‘blood’, first and foremost; it also means having cultural knowledge and being able to speak the language. Chapter 6 examined the cultural and historical context of how Korean identity developed during the rise of nationalism and then in the present context of globalisation. This provided a way to understand the importance placed on ‘bloodlines’ and ancestral lineage and how this forms the basis for Korean identity. By taking this historical background into account, it is possible to have a clearer understanding of the reasons why the symbol of ‘blood’ continues to be such a strong factor in the South Korean government’s support for a unified Korean identity, not only nationally, but globally. Since President Kim Young Sam’s introduction of *segyehwa* policy, the Korean government has attempted to include people living overseas that have Korean heritage into a national ideology that recognises Korean identity on the basis of ‘blood’.

Based on fieldwork that I conducted at the 2006 Gathering and the 2007 Future Leaders’ Conference, the *segyehwa* legacy continues to play a strong role in the state’s vision of global connections between Korea and other countries. In speeches given by government officials, the message rang clear; overseas Koreans which now include Korean adoptees should know that they are Korean and they always will be. This assuredness is based on sharing a common identity founded on shared ‘Korean blood’. Through this argument accompanied by the Confucian value of filial piety, the government is able to impart a sense of duty among overseas Koreans by connecting them back to South Korea and imploiring them to recognise their role in helping to make South Korea a great nation.
The main point overlooked in this state discourse, perhaps deliberately, is that for Korean adoptees, Korean identity is not so straightforward. They were legally orphaned and sent away, cut off from an ancestral lineage, and adopted to other countries in Europe, North America and Oceania. Then, many years later, they come back as adults and are told at such events that they should embrace their Korean identity in addition to acting as cultural and economic brokers between Korea and their respective adoptive countries. Most troubling is that contradictions and tensions are overlooked as they are told to forget their pasts. Meanwhile, it is these ‘pasts’ that Korean adoptees often come back to Korea to understand by going to their adoption agencies and looking at their adoption records and sometimes going on to try to find their birth families. I argued in Chapter 6 that the ‘unknown’ of the past is a reality for how Korean adoptees experience the present. Their Korean identity, beyond the fact that they were born in Korea, remains for the most part ‘unknown’ as it is largely dependent on the accuracy and availability of adoption records kept by the adoption agencies. Therefore, Korean identity cannot simply be rationalised as something that can be automatically accepted as a whole, biologically determined by having Korean blood.

Chapter 7 goes on to explore the ways Korean adoptees try to (re)embody a sense of Korean identity that is relevant for them beyond just the physical appearance of their bodies. For most of their lives, Korean identity was vaguely known as a composite of facts, scant facts from their adoption records, biological facts evident
by their physical bodies and sometimes material facts known through cultural aspects pertaining to Korean food, dress, holidays, sport and so on. However, those that I interviewed explained that they did not really ‘feel’ Korean. As a way to ‘feel’ Korean or to embody this feeling, one of the ways they tried to do this was by going to Korea and just being there—being able to take it in through their senses, including the smells, foods, atmosphere and vibrancy of the place. By directly experiencing Korean culture in everyday life, Korean adoptees are able to enliven what it means to have a Korean identity. At the same time, what this means goes beyond cultural tours and homeland tours. It is not simply about being told to be Korean either directly or through carefully planned tour schedules. Instead, the ability to go to Korea on their own initiative and to have the chance to experience life in Korea for themselves is meaningful because it works to enliven an identity that goes beyond ‘just the facts’.

Finally, Chapter 8 concludes by looking at how Korean adoptees create a sense of belonging based on shared experiences, not determined by blood and not dependent on geographical location. This chapter draws mainly on ethnographic field work at KoRoot to describe the sense of belonging created in this particular space. I pointed out instances of communitas when a feeling of oneness among Korean adoptees was more important than the cultural differences that set them apart. Other times, the differences among Korean adoptees showed how diverse they are as people with different social and cultural backgrounds. This demonstrated how their identities are not simply defined by being adopted from Korea and that in many ways they are more than Korean adoptees. This is
important to keep in mind so as not to overlook their diverse identities and to
avoid homogenising representations. However, at the same time, Korean adoptees
also express a sense of shared identity as Korean adoptees, not just as overseas
Koreans or kyopo. Identifying as a Korean adoptee can be empowering as it
recognises the unique experiences that they share. Importantly, this shared
identity creates a sense of belonging that they may not be able to find either in
their adoptive countries or in South Korea.

Toward reconciliation and further research inquiries

In South Korea, it is important and commendable that the government has worked
to recognise Korean adoptees’ claim to a Korean identity. However, this
recognition is granted with the assumption that Korean identity is incontestably
based on shared blood. This approach assumes that Korean adoptees can just
readily accept that they are Korean without really questioning what that means for
them. In their adoptive countries, the government recognises Korean adoptees’
legal citizenship and cultural belonging. However, despite government rhetoric of
inclusion, Korean adoptees experience real difficulties that do not neatly coincide
with such statements. Too often, their lived experiences are engulfed by sweeping
generalisations that construct an overarching sense of belonging based on shared
blood, nationalism, or multiculturalism. For example, issues of racism associated
with ‘difference’ that Korean adoptees experience in their adoptive countries, such
as Australia, are subsumed by an emphasis on multiculturalism’s acceptance
(tolerance) of difference and cultural diversity. However, Korean adoptees continue to experience situations that question their sense of belonging and this is frequently due to their ‘racial difference’ constructed within a normative ‘white’ framework of cultural and national belonging.

In South Korea, Korean adoptees are told to ‘forget’ the past and move on with Korea into the future unified by a Korean identity that is determined by shared blood. Again, this overlooks the difficulties they face trying to understand ‘the past’ as they try to come to terms with what Korean identity means for them. It is important that the past be remembered so that present issues relating to Korean society and transnational adoption can be discussed and addressed accordingly. One particular volunteer supported organisation based in Seoul is TRACK31, which is doing investigative work to support a national inquiry into South Korea’s overseas adoption practices. TRACK states that it is not anti-adoption and that its main goals are to advocate transparency concerning the past and to foster dialogue between Korean nationals, Korean adoptees and other overseas Koreans. The hope is that those that have been marginalised in Korean society, including adoptees as well as the mothers and families that relinquished children for adoption, can reconcile the past to be able to move on toward the future (TRACK, 2009). This involves much-needed public discussions among all those involved so that there can be greater public awareness and acceptance rather than hiding behind national shame or continuing stigmatising attitudes.

31 TRACK stands for Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea.
This is not to undermine the Korean government’s efforts to provide support for Korean adoptees to adjust to living in Korean society. The Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF) has offered programs and assistance, especially through language scholarships and homeland tours. However, this has been done mainly along the lines of supporting one particular representation of Korean identity that is ultimately based on ‘blood’. While OKF’s assistance is an important form of support for Korean adoptees, it also overlooks other everyday difficulties Korean adoptees face due to lack of public awareness about their situations. The two following statements reflect some of the issues adoptees face in Korean society:

*There are just so many things ... different nuances, like how you’re supposed to bow which I didn’t even know. I thought you just bent your torso but then I did that and then ... they [Koreans] just started laughing at me ... and then my friend was like you’re not supposed to maintain eye contact when you bow and you’re supposed to put your hands on your stomach cause you’re young and I was like this [demonstrated bowing gesture], and they just started laughing and I didn’t understand why, and you know there are just all these nuances. (Hee Su)*

*I think that I realised, especially like the attitude of the Korean society and I guess the Korean adoptee society, you know, how it’s affected people and how the lack of awareness has affected people and the lack of response by the Korean government and Korean people. (Katie)*

Instead, of trying to make Korean adoptees fit a particular monolithic representation of Korean identity, it would be more helpful if their identities could be recognised as diverse and valid on their own terms. In general, there needs to be more flexible understanding of Korean identity that does not necessitate assimilation but one that is open to alternative perspectives and approaches to identity. A way to do this would be to increase public awareness about the diverse experiences of Korean adoptees by supporting the idea that there are many ways someone can identify as Korean, which is not determined by one’s phenotype. As
Young Mi so aptly put it, *I'm Korean in a funny, remote but unavoidable way.* Korean adoptees should be able to claim a Korean identity in a way that makes sense for them that is socially recognised and supported.

Overall, by emphasising Korean adoptees’ lived experiences throughout this research project, I hope to have contributed to the anthropological discipline in a way "that seeks to understand as best as possible how human beings shape their experiences of themselves, individually and collectively, in the context of shifting circumstances and convictions" (Goulet & Miller, 2007a, p. 12). I take the position that identities need to be viewed as complex in all of their contradictions, not by pathologising them or by analysing them within normative frameworks but by acknowledging that identities can be in their own way ‘certain’ and situated within creative and shifting processes (Ang, 2001).

I propose that further research could be done that not only looks at adoption in other cultures (Bowie, 2004b) but also considers the lived experiences of people that have been adopted according to other ways of practicing adoption. Perhaps through cross-cultural comparisons, we could better understand how different adoption practices may create other kinds of issues that may differ from those associated with transnational and domestic adoption practices in ‘the West’. This could help us to see that social practices often play a part in creating the kinds of problems that are too often attributed to individuals as a result of not recognising the social and cultural context.
It is important to understand the lived experiences of those affected by such practices as adoption because it recognises some of the difficulties that they face as well as a need to look toward ways that foster empathic understanding and social acceptance in the wider community. For Korean adoptees, this includes recognising that their identities were affected by adoption, not necessarily in a negative or positive way, but in a way that is complicated and located in the lived experience of it. I would like to end with the following statements that resonate with the present and future paths toward reconciliation and understanding:

I may feel that without some recognisability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognised make life unliveable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation (Butler, 2004, p. 4).

I realised that this is a challenge that I actually can choose for myself. Like all growing up it was a challenge that was chosen for me that I never really had any control over but if life is supposed to be a challenge in general for everyone then at least now I feel like I can choose my own ... I’m not going to say adoption or anything is a good thing or a bad thing but I have no regrets I guess and ... what I’ve learnt like throughout my experiences [is] that you just have to go on and make the most of what you have and I do have something so I’m gonna go with that. (Anne)
References


Baby Exporting Nation: The Two Faces of Inter-Country Adoption (2005). In G. H. Lee (Producer), In-depth 60 Minutes. South Korea: KBS.


## Appendix 1

### Korean adoptee participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant name*33</th>
<th>Adoptive country/state34</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age35</th>
<th>Age at adoption</th>
<th>Returned to South Korea</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alyson</td>
<td>USA/Connecticut</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6 mo.</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8 mo.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Australia/NSW</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9 mo.</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>USA/Massachusetts</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11 mo.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brea</td>
<td>USA/Wisconsin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2 yrs.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Australia/WA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4 yrs.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanna</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4 mo.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hee Su</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.5 yrs.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>USA/Hawai‘i</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3 mo.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>USA/Missouri</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5 yrs.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>Australia/NSW</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4 mo.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marah</td>
<td>USA/Colorado</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3 mo.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1 yr.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>USA/Arizona</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Australia/NSW</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6 mo.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</table>

*32 All information included in this table is based on information acquired at the time of the interview.

*33 All participants were given the option of using their actual name or a pseudonym. Pseudonyms have been used when participants chose not to identify themselves using their actual names.

*34 Indicates adoption placement location. Specific state information is included for Australia and the USA as the majority of Korean adoptee participants were from these countries.

*35 Indicates age at the start of the interview.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant name</th>
<th>Adoptive country</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age at adoption</th>
<th>Returned to South Korea</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Natacha</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5 yrs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Australia/NSW</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6 mo.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pia</td>
<td>Australia/WA</td>
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<td>3.5 mo.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.5 mo.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steph</td>
<td>Australia/NSW</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7 mo.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>Australia/NSW</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4 mo.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Mi</td>
<td>Australia/NSW</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5 mo.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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