

Loss and Reclaimed Lives:

Cultural Identity and Place in Korean-American Adoptees

Dani Meier, PhD, ACSW

Introduction

This article is an exploration of the interrelationship between cultural identity and place in the lives of adult Korean adoptees living primarily in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. Using life histories derived through multiple semi-structured interviews, a web of related themes emerged which reveal the interplay between ethnicity, identity, gender, and place. From childhood to adulthood, most Korean adoptees followed a similar developmental trajectory of denial, self-awareness, and emerging cultural consciousness about their Korean heritage. These journeys were mediated and nuanced by individual adoptees' particular configurations of internal strengths and environmental factors such as their pre-adoption and adoptive family experiences, cultural norms, and places adoptees lived or visited in Korea, the U.S. or elsewhere abroad. This study highlights the limitations of previous studies that focused only on adoptive parents or adoptees as children, an approach which loses the life course perspective of intercountry adoptees' search for identity, belonging, and a sense of home.

Overview

A number of themes and patterns emerged and reemerged throughout my interviews with Korean adoptees. One way to frame the life stories of these young adults is to see each one as a journey of sorts, a developmental pathway not unlike what many middle-class Americans go through in early adulthood, but decidedly nuanced and shaped by being Korean-born, adopted, and raised within particular family configurations and in particular places.

Most of the adoptees grew up in places that did not afford much experience of racial or ethnic diversity at least until high school. They came from predominantly white areas in Minnesota or surrounding midwestern states. Most grew up in suburbs or small towns, though several spent parts of their childhood or currently lived in the cities of Minneapolis or St. Paul. Interestingly, sometimes the only other child of color in the town or in the school was another Korean adoptee, reflecting the ubiquitous phenomenon of intercountry adoption in the state of Minnesota, and particularly the adoption of Koreans. Adoptees experienced varying levels of racism and it can be said across the board that no adoptee escaped childhood without pejorative references to their being of Asian descent. For many, this experience has continued into adulthood.

As a rule, the adoptees (as children) did not experience this lack of diversity as something they were aware of missing at the time. Indeed, even if there was a presence of other Korean adoptees, other Asian children, or any other children of color, most of the adoptees I interviewed (with some notable exceptions) found themselves avoiding

association with these students of color and becoming immersed almost completely in white culture. Their playmates, friends, and early dating partners were all white. This is developmentally consistent with adolescents' needs--during this critical period of identity formation--to fit in and to be in step with their peer culture. Many adoptees denied or said they "forgot" that they were Asian.

This began to change for most adoptees however once they left their adoptive homes and went to college. Again consistent with the developmental trajectory of most young, middle-class American adults, leaving home for college signaled a new level of independence and autonomy which allows for further growth, maturity, and a deepening sense of identity. Moreover, college often involves a geographical relocation, the leaving behind of a smaller, familiar, often more homogeneous place and being transplanted to a place that is unfamiliar, larger and sometimes (but not necessarily) more diverse and more accepting of difference. New prospects and challenges await young adults in these new places and Korean adoptees face these as well.

Though in Minnesota the opportunity to come in close contact with other Koreans is limited, many adoptees found their own journeys of self-discovery were catalyzed by a relationship with someone or someplace else that would be identified as "other" within mainstream American culture. African-Americans, expatriate Europeans, and Hispanics, as well as visits to places like Belfast, Israel, China, and Mexico, triggered buttons within some adoptees that awakened their own sense of difference, of cultural consciousness, and of wanting to reconnect with who they were and where they come from. For some, these other cultures served as surrogate sources of cultural identification.

For most of the adoptees interviewed here, college life was a time of expanding identity, of growing intellectual curiosity about birthplace and ethnic origins, and the beginning of an active process of becoming acquainted with one's past. This past often predates memory, but lives nonetheless in the hearts and minds of many adoptees and is inextricably linked to their birth country as is revealed in the excerpts of interviews that follow. Yet adoptees' relationship to Korea is not a simple one involving romanticization or sentimentalism. For some the relationship is ambivalent, sometimes bitter, and laden with fear, rage, or sadness. For others, the relationship to that place is hopeful, full of promise, and a source of wholeness and closure between past and present.

The nature of adoptees' relationship to Korea is mediated by a number of variables, geographical, psychological, and environmental. The places where adoptees grew up or are living today helped shape who they are and who they are becoming. Their sense of comfort, of stability, and of home (being where they live now in the U.S.) offers a counterpoint, if not a stable counterbalance, for exploring their relationship to this place called Korea from which they are separated by thousands of miles, many decades, and faded or suppressed memories. More narrow environmental variables--particularly the families in which adoptees are raised--have a huge impact not only on adoptees' relationship to Korea and to their willingness to explore that relationship, but on their overall strength, stability, and capacity to navigate life's challenges whatever they might be. Needless to say, an adoptee's personality--the product of the child's innate strengths

and weaknesses shaped by the influential role of family dynamics, parenting, and broader environment--was critical to how each adoptee moved through his or her journey towards self-discovery and towards self-realization (to whatever extent that involved becoming reacquainted with Korea and with his or her cultural identity). In more than one case, adoptions were terminated or somehow disrupted and these adoptees would reexperience the loss of home and family. There was a range of responses to these disruptions however, and one cannot easily generalize about their impact on the adoptees in this study or on their sense of cultural identity.

The notion of homelessness was another recurring theme. Though not homeless in the literal sense, many adoptees felt a sort of "in-between-ness", a "neither here nor there" phenomenon, a sense that they don't really feel accepted in their adoptive home in the U.S. or in Korea, the home of their birth. This was not the experience for all the adoptees interviewed for this study, but it was a recurring sentiment nonetheless.

Finally, most adoptees felt it was important to live in a racially and ethnically diverse place. Though unaware as children, the adults looked back on their childhoods as difficult if there were no other Asians they could look to and see a mirror of themselves. While as children most adoptees eschewed or opted out of participation in Korean cultural experiences (if they were even offered or available), many adoptees wished in hindsight that more could have been done to help them retain a sense of their culture and their language. The language barrier is for many the single greatest obstacle to their believing that they could reestablish an easy relationship with the country of their birth.

The role of gender emerges as significant at many levels in the life stories of these Korean adoptees. From the entrenched patriarchy of Korean culture which gives rise to so many Korean infants being placed for adoption, through to the stereotypes of Asians in the U.S. that are distinctly gendered, one cannot ignore the ways that men and women have differing experiences of issues of adoption, loss, and cultural identity.

What follows then is an expansion of the ideas summarized above supported by the richness of the life stories that were so generously shared with me during the summer of 1997. I have organized the narratives thematically into the following broad subsections: 1) Childhood and place; 2) Leaving home, place, and cultural awakenings; 3) Korea as a place; 4) Sense of home, place, and the town-city dichotomy; 5) Gender; and 6) Making Sense of the Exceptions.

Childhood and Place

The participants in this study were adopted from Korea at ages ranging from a few months to nine years. In all but a few cases however, any memories of Korea were almost entirely buried, even if adoptees were old enough when they left to have had any clear memories of the place. For most adoptees, therefore, their accessible childhood memories began in the U.S., in their adoptive homes in midwestern America. The interviewees

were quite evenly distributed among those who spent their childhoods growing up in small towns, those who grew up in suburbs, and those who grew up in cities like Minneapolis, St. Paul, or in smaller cities like Alexandria, Minnesota, or Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Overwhelmingly, adoptees described these places as homogeneous and lacking in diversity. Even in cities, the urban neighborhoods were described as predominantly white and the early years in school mirrored this experience of cultural sameness.

Many adoptees talked about how they had a sense of themselves as white, they strove to fit in and/or be white or, at the very least, they denied being Asian. At the same time, the disjuncture between that sense of self and how people reacted and related to them made them feel different.

Alex is a 24 year old adoptee who was living with his parents in a small Minnesota town when I interviewed him. He was raised in the Twin Cities until his family moved to the smaller town when he was fourteen. His description of how he saw himself was a common one:

In my early, early years--elementary, middle school--I never really thought of myself as being Asian, I just thought of myself being me. And I really didn't come up to that typical identity--'who am I?'--until my freshman year [of college] ... I remember a long time before, my siblings used to tease me because I was slanted-eye or whatever ... Now I understand it but before I hated it and I hated being Korean because ... I was different. And I just kind of put that in the back of my mind (Alex, 30).

Isaac, another adoptee now thirty-one years old, came from Korea to the U.S. at age five. When he arrived, he spoke only Korean but says "I think I learned pretty quickly (the English language) ... Maybe inside myself I wanted to put that past behind me subconsciously and to fit in as much as possible with everyone else in the neighborhood" (Isaac, 86). He grew up in a northern suburb of the Twin Cities where, like most adoptees, he experienced little diversity and a gnawing discomfort with being different.

I guess it was a little different growing up there because ... [in] the neighborhood, there weren't too many Asian people in the northern suburbs ... In elementary school there were no kids of color at all ... I think I got used to it but it was hard. ... Kids being that age, I got teased a lot...It was hard for me, but

I think I kept it inside most of the time and I ... maybe built some anger inside because, I don't know, because--why was I different from everyone else? (Isaac, 29)

Evan is a 32 year old adoptee who came to the U.S. at age five. Notwithstanding his first year of college, he has lived his entire life in Minneapolis, mostly in white neighborhoods. He linked seeing himself as white to "his surroundings" despite an awareness of difference:

You look in the mirror, you interact with your mom and dad, you interact with your brothers and sisters, you interact with all your relatives, and those are your roots and then you look in the mirror and there's obviously conflict. You go, fuck, I don't look like any of these people ... But that's what I've always associated my life to be is my surroundings (Evan, 98).

Mary, a 27 year old adoptee, came to the U.S. when she was nearly four years old. She was raised in a rural Iowa town of under 3,000, attended college in St. Paul and now lives in Minneapolis. She described a more focused and gender-specific sentiment about wanting to fit in:

When I grew up ... I wanted to be a white, blundered Norwegian girl like every other girl in my class so that's what I tried to be ... I was real active in high school. I was a cheerleader, I was in sports ... in a small town you can be active in everything. And that's exactly what I did ... I tried as much as I possibly could to convince myself that I wasn't Korean...I tried to fit in as much as possible thinking I was Norwegian or Irish or whatever (Mary, 155).

As Mary describes, participation in extra-curricular activities especially sports in high school was a common theme with many adoptees and being in a small town in particular seemed to offer many opportunities to excel and to stake out an identity. Isaac went to a very homogeneous school in a suburban district:

I did track and soccer and developed friends ... I think that that's one thing that I took to as a safety net, I tried to excel in sports as much as I could because I knew that would be one way that I could be accepted was in my ... athletic abilities ... and so I tried as hard as I can in all the sports that I play... and I think that was a good way for me to get to know other people. If they didn't accept me for who I am, at least they could get to know me for what I did (Isaac, 75).

Though sports participation is not gender-neutral, girls also participated in sports that were open to them or in cheerleading. Vicky, now twenty, came to the U.S. at the age of three and lived in a small town south of the Twin Cities. She found gymnastics was a way to fit in and to be recognized for something other than her racial features but racism prevailed: "Growing up here was a little hard because it's very, very predominantly white. Very white. When I was in kindergarten I got introduced to the word 'nigger.' I didn't know what it was but I found out real quick" (Vicky,70). Gymnastics was her vehicle for being active, socially involved, and for feeling as though she belonged. It could not immunize her however from bigotry and from how racism would bluntly remind her that she was different.

When I was younger, I used to forget that I was a Korean. It wouldn't dawn on me until I encountered a racist remark because most of my friends were white. And most of the people in my school were white. I mean, I knew I was Korean but it didn't hit me full in the face until something happened. I'd be in a group of people and I wouldn't think I was different until someone would say something. And then I'd start to feel embarrassed and like I didn't belong (Vicky, 390).

Henry, a 22 year old college student who grew up and currently lives in Minneapolis, came to the U.S. at the age of nine months. He also discussed how racism and the reactions he encountered accelerated his process of becoming culturally self-aware:

I went through an identity struggle at an early age... [Racism came from] white kids for the most part ... It was tough... I think I don't vent my anger until it builds up and then I just

explode sometimes. I encountered a lot of racism. That's why I think I know who I am right now. There's a lot of people--teenagers who go through self-identity later on but I think I did that early on (Henry,70).

Tracy, a 20 year old adoptee who came to the U.S. when she was eight years old, also experienced considerable racism but in her case, this forced her Korean identity even deeper into hiding:

Elementary [school] was hell. I would never do it again unless I was in Korea or a heavily Asian community ... [so] I omitted the fact that I was Korean. I kind of blended myself in as though I was Caucasian. Why not? My family was Caucasian, all my friends except for one [another adopted Korean] and if you didn't see her from the outside you would think she was Caucasian also. I basically lost my identity as a Korean and just wanted to be like everybody else (Tracy, 145).

Yvonne, a 21 year old adoptee, says she didn't fool herself into thinking she was white but she would "forget" that she was Korean and that she was different from her peers:

I knew I wasn't white. I didn't try to pretend to be white. But there were times when I would forget that I was Korean. I'd be with my friends and I'd be hanging out and having fun and going to football games and then I'd catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror or in a reflection in a door and I'd be like 'Whoa, wait a second. I'm Asian!' and you realize you don't blend in as much as you feel like you do (Yvonne, 180).

A common experience for many adoptees was the rejection or avoidance of other adoptees, other Asians, or other children of color particularly in their schools. Again, wanting to fit in, Ophelia, a 22 year old college student at the University of Minnesota described the common sentiment that even if there were other Asians with whom there was an opportunity to associate, it felt awkward to do so:

If you were with another Asian you thought you were attracting attention to yourself because other Asians--it was a negative connotation somehow. It was never explicitly said but it was kind of implied ... so you gravitated more towards white people and it wasn't a conscious thing. You just felt more comfortable with them (Ophelia,50).

Mary concurred saying "I didn't gravitate towards [other children of color]. If anything I tried to keep away from them. I was probably scared of them thinking I was more white than they were." (Mary,150). Mary's comments are particularly interesting for the ways she assumed that other children of color were doing the same thing as she was in terms of being white-identified. She felt a competitive challenge might exist among non-whites who functioned within some sort of invisible hierarchy of white-assimilation.

Cliff, a 29 year old adoptee, described himself as "American" as opposed to "Asian": "Everything from my clothing to my habits to my friends to my food to music, it was all American, I mean, that was the environment I was comfortable being in. I chose not to get too much involved with the Asian community because I wasn't comfortable. It was just an unfamiliar setting to me" (Cliff, 38). James expressed the same feeling and only befriended one other Korean adoptee because of activities which they shared: "We didn't speak to each other too much. I think a lot of it was because we didn't want to be stereotyped, to be different. I kind of became friends with one of the Korean guys because we used to wrestle with him and I used to know his sister pretty well " (James,111).

Many adoptees experienced greater diversity when they went to high school. This was especially true in urban areas. In the Twin Cities metro area, there was exposure to African-American, Native American, and Southeast Asian students primarily. Some students however were tracked into advanced placement (AP) classes which meant their classmates remained largely white. In other schools, these advanced classes were quite diverse as well. Don, for example, recalls the following about his high school experience:

I was always in the AP classes and so on. That helps out a lot and usually those people have more sense and are more open to diversity. So the group of people I hung out with were ... a Japanese guy, a Korean adoptee, some Indian people from India ... and then white American students also. And the class that we had we basically went through high school together because we were stuck together in these classes... I got a real good understanding of differences in culture (Don,120).

Moreover, in Don's large suburban high school, tensions emerged between white students and both the Southeast Asian and African-American populations prompting workshops and open dialogues about issues of race within the school.

Henry's experience of diversity in high school was important to him and shaped his choices about where he went to college:

I had a lot of different kinds of friends, from different neighborhoods, different cultures. I think [my high school] was a good experience because I was exposed to a diverse student body and I also thought I got a good education. It wasn't like a suburban school where you have your white preppy kids and that's about it. We had black, Native American, Asian, white, you name it, we had it ... I think that's another reason why I chose the University of Minnesota because it was diverse and because it was close to home. I looked at one other college ... but after visiting there, I decided not to go there...It was in the middle of nowhere and it was all white and I wasn't willing to deal with that. I just wanted to surround myself by a more diverse population (Henry, 235).

Pae Lim, a 21 year old adoptee and the only interviewee who goes by a Korean name, was similarly influenced by a diverse urban high school. Though she remained white-identified, her exposure to that level of diversity made for a rather traumatic first year in college in a very homogeneous place in rural Minnesota: "That's when it hit me big time. It was like a culture shock basically. Coming from a high school of 60 percent minority to a school that's 2 percent minority was a big shock to me in the way I got treated and how people acted towards me and how they acted in general" (Pae Lim, 270). Pae Lim transferred to the University of Minnesota after her freshman year and was still a student there at the time we did our interview.

Although the extent of exposure varied, one thing many adoptees had in common in their childhoods was their adoptive parents' interest in paying some attention to exposing their children to Korean culture. The variation reflected three primary factors: parental sensitivity and openness to cultural issues, access to resources related to Korean culture, and the reactions and interest of the adoptees themselves to being "educated" about their heritage.

A few adoptees described how their parents paid little or no attention to exposing them to their Korean culture but this was not the dominant experience. Still, even the most conscientious parents found few resources or support infrastructure for their adopted Korean children. Moreover, the prevailing wisdom at the time was to "not force" cultural

education on the children. Don, an adoptee who is now involved in a local Korean adoptee organization, describes the old philosophy and how it has shifted today:

A lot of parents were told 'don't force your kids to go to these things because they won't like it' and now the attitude is changed. ... Talking to kids now that I work with, they have a real good understanding of who they are and where they come from, and I was not that way ... and it's good because they develop role models now and we're developing mentoring programs (Don, 140).

A majority of adoptees described their parents as very receptive to and supportive of their Korean children becoming educated about their heritage, despite few resources being available. Adoptees described how they resisted their parents' encouragement to participate in various Korean-related activities. Susan, a 24 year old adoptee raised in a suburb of St. Paul and now living in Minneapolis, describes the influence she had in getting her parents to drop the issue of educating her about Korean culture:

They once took me to a Korean dinner and of course I was at that stage where I was already being teased ... They took me [to this dinner with all these Koreans] and I wouldn't talk. I [thought] 'none of these people are like me, this food is disgusting' and I sat there and pouted. And my parents took me home and said 'well, I guess that's the end of that.' And they never exposed me to it anymore. When I asked my Mom about that, she said 'you didn't have any interest so we just didn't want to push it (Susan,705).

Other adoptees participated for a while in Korean activities--particularly Korean culture camps--but then they too would reach a point when they lost interest and their parents would stop sending them in deference to their children's wishes.

Pae Lim went to Korean culture camp as a child and says she loved the fun activities with other Korean children. But when as a preadolescent she participated in a preteen "rap group" in which they discussed issues like adoption and identity, this was too much for her:

I started to realize who I am and I didn't like it ... I didn't like talking about adoption, about the fact that I was adopted, and that we were different from other people. The way I took it in back then was 'you're making us sound so different, and I don't like being different. I'm already getting picked on at school, I don't want to be any more different.' And that's when I said 'Mom and Dad, I don't want to go to this group anymore. We talk about the same thing all the time. I don't like it.' So my parents let me drop the class (Pae Lim, 135).

Pae Lim was also one of two adoptees interviewed for this study whose parents hired a Korean nanny to do daycare. Pae Lim became very close to the woman who evolved into a grandmotherly figure for Pae Lim. Over time, the Korean woman became integrated into the family and educated them all about Korean culture.

By contrast, Liz had the opposite experience when her parents tried to integrate a Korean woman into their adopted daughter's life:

It was terrible. It really backfired. I was terrified of the woman. I ran screaming from the room whenever she came in. I was four and I couldn't stand her. The idea was that she'd be somebody I could talk to ... but I never did ... I don't know if it was my having been in the orphanage and if I thought she was going to take me back to the orphanage ... but somehow that felt like a threat to my new situation (Liz, 185).

In her statement above, Liz may have identified the critical distinction between her experience and that of Pae Lim. Liz was four when she came to the U.S., old enough to remember where she had come from and to have experienced some trauma in the transition. Pae Lim was six months old at the time of her adoption, too young to recall her birth country, too young to see an older Korean woman as representative of someone or someplace from which she'd been torn, and too young to have integrated a notion of a place to which she could be sent back.

Liz's sense of her own fears is consistent with the findings of a Korean-American psychologist who worked with young Korean adoptees and published her findings in *Birth is More Than Once* (1985). Hei Sook Park Wilkinson worked for several months with eight adoptive families with young Korean children. After her first meeting with a little boy named Tae-ho, the boy's mother described what happened when they got home:

As soon as he walked into the house ... he 'burst into tears and bawled and bawled in a very upset manner' ... The next day, when he felt better, he was able to tell his mother that he had been afraid that I was going to take him out another door of the playroom, that his mother would not see us leave, and that I would take him back to Korea (Wilkinson, 1985).

Tae-ho's experience sounds remarkably similar to Liz's fears. Wilkinson summarizes her sense of what underlay this reaction and how the same motivation may underlie the more general "denial" of one's Korean identity as described above.

Behind their initial apprehension lay a fear of another possible disruption to their lives. I, to them, represented the people of Korea who had interrupted their lives in the past. One way they dealt with this fear was to deny their ethnic background, refusing to identify with me in any way. Initially any mention of Korean food, language, songs, or even the word 'Korea' was met with silence or an attempt to change the topic ... The fact that I was Korean seemed to have provoked feelings of insecurity and fear about their past life in Korea (Ibid).

Wilkinson concluded therefore that it may not be helpful for adopted Korean children to associate with other Koreans until they're developmentally able to integrate this new information. "Unless the children are ready, encountering a Korean adult may disrupt rather than assist their adjustment to the family" (Ibid). Korean culture camps, on the other hand, where adoptees can associate with other children in an unstructured, playful way may be more conducive to adoptees' gradual acceptance that there are others who share their "differences." And again as Liz pointed out, adoptees who come to the U.S. at a younger age may be able to more easily integrate a Korean adult into their lives than older adoptees.

Most adoptees described how as adults they truly wished that their parents had been more insistent about their participation in Korean cultural events and education. Though the resources were limited, one adoptee described, for example, how in college she met another adoptee whose parents would drive several hours from their small, rural community to a larger urban center where their child could participate in Korean cultural

activities. Ophelia described her reaction to hearing this and to how it made her realize that parents can transcend the limited resources in a given place:

I think it depends half on geography but half on your parents. I know a girl who was raised in Wisconsin in a relatively small town and her parents were great. They took her whole class to see her get naturalized. They were very involved-- they were the ones who drove hours to get her Korean food-- so I think it's half geography and half your parents ... there are limitations [of geography] but you can overcome those limitations (Ophelia, 260).

In fairness to adoptive parents however, even those adoptees who say they wish they'd had more exposure to Korean activities, language, and to other Korean people acknowledge that this was not how they felt as children, that hindsight is always "20/20," and that even if their parents had tried to 'push' Korean cultural exposure on them, they would have likely refused to participate.

Leaving home, place, and cultural awakenings

For most adoptees, a departure from their childhood home for college signals an opportunity for early forays into Korean cultural consciousness. College often means a geographical relocation from a familiar, homogeneous place to a place and a community that is often larger and more diverse. Though most adoptees did not come into immediate contact with other Koreans, the exposure to other cultures--often non-Asian--triggered interest in becoming more self-aware with regard to their own cultural origins.

Bill, for example, was adopted at age five, and lived thereafter in an upper-middle class, predominantly white area of South Minneapolis. A high school trip to Israel where he met a Jewish girlfriend was the cultural highlight of his high school years till graduation when he left for University of California at Berkeley. There he lived in "ethnic theme houses" for all four years of college. He began in a Hispanic theme house and thereafter lived in an Asian-American theme house where, in his junior and senior years, he was a staff person in the theme house with students of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Cambodian, and Vietnamese descent. After college, his time spent in the military resulted in contact with a racially diverse military population as well as in duty served overseas in Asia.

Not all adoptees find college quite such an immersion in Asian culture however. Cliff attended a predominantly white college in St. Paul and felt uncomfortable with the Asian population there which was mostly Hmong. In his senior year, he dated another adopted

Korean woman but even then kept the relationship "low profile." His girlfriend introduced him to Minnesota Adopted Koreans, an adoptee organization, but he continued to be tentative about his feelings towards acknowledging being Korean. It was not until after college, when an adoptive parent approached him about being a counselor in one of the local Korean culture camps, that Cliff became involved in the Korean adoptee community leading ultimately to his going to Korea and searching for his birth family.

More than one of the adoptees I interviewed started out at one college, found themselves frustrated with a lack of diversity there, and transferred to a more diverse institution, often the University of Minnesota. Susan went to a small women's Catholic college in Milwaukee. She found both the city of Milwaukee and the college itself to be highly ethnically segregated. The college population was nearly 65 percent Euro-American and 35 percent African-American with a small Hmong population.

She was placed on an all-black floor in her dormitory with an African-American woman who was also an adoptee. Tension between the black and white college students in her dormitory was one of the defining events of Susan's early awakening of cultural consciousness. She found herself pushed to "choose sides" which she resisted. Moving back to Minnesota and attending the University of Minnesota shifted her sense of self greatly:

Going to the 'U' was when I realized I wasn't white, when I started to identify as Asian, when I felt comfortable where I lived. It was the first time I felt comfortable where I lived and I felt comfortable at school. I went to school and I felt happy that I saw this diverse group of faces. I was really comfortable (Susan, 325).

Still Susan didn't put herself in situations to meet many other Asians much less Koreans.

I had met a couple of Asian people in classes. And Asians would always act very odd around me--Asians from Asia--they didn't know what to make of me because I speak perfect English, I have this weird name, they didn't understand. And they wouldn't ask and I wouldn't give any information (Susan, 350).

Though Susan did not feel connected to other Asians, she (like many adoptees) felt identified with different non-Euro-Americans who might be considered outside the mainstream in the U.S., people who might be seen somehow as "other." This included her African-American friends in college and later a strong identification with Europeans living in the U.S. "What I realized was that I could identify much more with Europeans who were from Europe that were living here ... I just felt more comfortable with them. And I developed friendships with them" (Susan, 411). Her academic interest in Irish literature ultimately resulted in her living in Ireland where again she identified strongly along lines more removed from her Korean identity, but connected nonetheless to being different from the mainstream, in this case, a Catholic in Northern Ireland:

When I went to Belfast, it really changed my life ... I went to Belfast because I was interested in Irish literature and I was interested in taking a class at Queen's University ... and I also had a friend who was from Belfast ... I lived in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood and it was interesting to me because I felt I could really relate to Catholics in a way that I've never related to Catholicism in my life (Susan, 860).

Like Susan, Mary found her journey toward cultural self-awareness accelerated by a relationship with a European living in the U.S. She was romantically involved for several years with a Dutch man who had a strong sense of his Dutch heritage and who similarly encouraged Mary to explore her Korean heritage. Her initial resistance to embarking on that self-exploration eventually gave way to her unfolding curiosity about her Korean heritage and a growing desire to live somewhere with a more diverse population and a larger Korean population.

James, a University of Minnesota 21 year-old undergraduate, has two college roommates who are non-white students and their awareness of their ancestry highlighted for James that he had a lot to learn about his own cultural heritage: "One is pure Lebanese and one is Chinese and a lot of things they do are cultural, like they eat Chinese food and they are very in their culture so every time I went to their families to eat, I would see that and think I don't even know my culture and I should learn more" (James, 490). Newly motivated to learn about his heritage, James bought a book to teach himself Korean and he took Korean classes at the University. He became progressively more interested in Korean students and in dating Korean women who were his only dating partners at the time of our interview.

Several adoptees chose colleges with a particular religious affiliation (Lutheran or Catholic) and given a choice, most chose to attend a religious college in the Twin Cities rather than in a small or isolated community. Being in an urban setting however did not mean one could expect more diversity or greater tolerance for difference on campus. Liz

attended a small Christian college in Minneapolis and recalls being struck by what "a huge disappointment ... a Christian college meant, in how unchristian it was, in how racist people were and I definitely didn't think that was Christian" (Liz, 290). On one occasion, a group of white students at the next table in the cafeteria laughed boisterously at racist jokes. Having been raised by white parents, she felt unprepared for how to deal with the prejudice (which is one of the arguments against transracial adoption promulgated by the National Association of Black Social Workers). Liz sought refuge in the most progressive department in her college, the social work department, where she met another adoptee.

That's when I really started that journey and met another Korean adoptee and she was a little older. She was a counselor, an academic counselor at the college in the department. She was the first adoptee I ever sat down and talked to about what it was like growing up and being different within your own family, what that was like, how somehow in your family you were treated sort of like an oddity (Liz, 333).

Moreover, Liz' assigned college roommate was a Puerto Rican woman from New York who--like Liz' childhood friend who'd been strongly aware of her African-American identity--was very culturally Puerto Rican. Through living with her, it became clear to Liz that culture is "lived in everyday life," not just by celebrating or recognizing holidays. This exposure to a strongly identified person of color during her college years moved Liz that much closer to becoming culturally self-aware as a Korean woman.

As described earlier, Pae Lim attended a small homogeneous school in rural Minnesota for her freshman year of college. After growing up in Minneapolis and attending a very diverse urban high school, her first college experience was a jolt of homogeneity and raised feelings of isolation. She transferred after her first year to the University of Minnesota and was still there at the time of our interview.

Rachel had a similar experience within Minnesota's state university system. She attended the predominantly white Mankato State University where she felt very out of place. "I didn't want to be in the mainstream because I wasn't mainstream ... so I left and went to New York for a year. And that's when I understood that I was different and that it was OK to be different" (Rachel, 350).

Tracy grew up on the Illinois-Iowa border but rejected the Universities of Iowa or Illinois and instead chose the University of Minnesota because of its large metropolitan setting. As she became more open to exploring her Korean cultural heritage, she became involved with the local adoptee organization Minnesota Adopted Koreans, she volunteered with a

local adoption agency to work with Korean children adoptees, and she continues to work as a counselor in Korean culture camps both in Minnesota and out-of-state.

As these young adults negotiated their emerging cultural identities, their sense of self, and their place in the world, most found themselves inevitably confronted not only with their being Korean but also with this place called Korea and with what their relationship was to that distant place. What follows then is some exploration of the space in adoptees' minds that Korea as a place held from early childhood into adulthood when these interviews were conducted.

Korea as a Place

Though some of the adoptees interviewed for this study left Korea when they were only a few months old, virtually all the interviewees had feelings associated with Korea as a place. These place associations and feelings are categorized below into 1) Pre-adoptive childhood memories, 2) post-adoption childhood associations with Korea, and 3) adult associations, feelings, and--in some cases--experiences of Korea.

Pre-adoptive childhood memories: As mentioned earlier, many adoptees who left Korea at an age where they could have had memories, had virtually no memories whatsoever or blurred memories at best. Zoe, for example, left Korea at age four and remembers nothing about Korea or even of her first few years in the U.S. She has no memories at all that predate when she was six or seven years old. Similarly, Evan came to the U.S. when he was five years old. He has vague memories of an orphanage but describes his first six or seven years as a "blur." Tracy described her memories as a dream or a "mosaic" though she was older than many adoptees when she came to the U.S. at age eight (Tracy, 308). Don came to the U.S. at the age of four and had no memories of Korea at all but did have a recurring dream:

I had a recurring dream when I was younger and I still remember it. It's from a second person perspective ... sort of looking out the door of an airplane and you have the stairs that go up and the stairs look huge because, you know, I'm this little guy. And I'm walking up the stairs and I have to turn around because I forgot something and I run off and that's the end of it. It's weird. And I think I figured out what it is. It's the search for my parents [in Korea], that's what I forgot behind (Don, 185).

Don has no way of knowing if this dream is his last childhood memory of Korea as he departed or if it is a metaphorical amalgam of memories and feelings.

Isaac, who came at the age of five, has only the recollection of an orphanage, of sleeping on the floors, and of it being cold in the winters but he similarly questions where his memories have gone: "I don't know if I'm blocking it out or if I don't want to remember or I just can't remember," he concedes (Isaac, 88).

Liz stayed in an orphanage and then a foster home in Korea prior to her adoption at age four, but she could remember nothing of those years till she went back to Korea as an adult. Since then memories have been filtering through.

Some adoptees had stronger childhood pictures of life in Korea which they had retained in memory. Bill, for example, recalls that he grew up on a strawberry and watermelon farm. "[I remember] the house and the fence and the little shed where we had the tools and seeds and stuff ... a very small field with a creek at the bottom. I think from that period I got [that] I like being alone fairly often, just going out and wandering and seeing what things are like. I like being next to a source of the water still" (Bill, 15). And of the orphanage he was in prior to his adoption at age five, he recalls "[It] was a building complex, a playground on the roof, a small pool with very cold water, lots of kids" (Ibid).

Wendy also recalled the orphanage she lived in until she came to the U.S. at the age of five. Run by a Christian family and many of their own children, the orphanage had several rooms with roughly a dozen children in each room supervised by a "room mother." In addition, she recalls a military base in her town and remembers enjoying performing for the American G.I.s there.

Gordie, a 27 year old adoptee who left Korea with his twin brother at age nine, recalled his clay house in a poor, rural village with no running water. His father died when Gordie and his twin brother were about five and their mother struggled to support seven children on her own, but ultimately chose to place her two youngest, the twin boys, for adoption. What's unique about Gordie's situation was that a correspondence was maintained between the boys and their birth family resulting ultimately in a reunion when Gordie and his brother were in their early twenties. In certain ways, this was like an open adoption in that birth family and adoptive family maintained contact (though the birth-mother did not choose the adoptive parents).

Rachel, a 32 year old adoptee who came to the U.S. at age six, had perhaps the most vivid memories of all. She recalled distinctly where she lived in Seoul and how unhappy she was with her Korean parents:

The problem was my parents never showed us any love. My father was an alcoholic and a drug addict. He had access to drugs [because he was a pharmacist] and plus he was in poor health ... And my mother ... was a child! She was 16 or 14 years old when he [my father] saw her out in the fields. He bought her from the farm. [There were] eleven children and

they were so poor, the crops were not coming in ... so he bought my mother and paid for my grandfather's crops so they could all live. And I got to visit my grandparents every once in a while. And then when I was six years old, my mother left one morning ... and the third day I knew I was never ever going to see her again. And she never came back (Rachel, 50).

Rachel spent the following year caring for her dying father and for her younger brother. When her father died, she and her brother were sent to an orphanage.

It's easy to speculate why adoptees might repress memories of Korea. Relegating to subconsciousness a place associated with loss, disruption, abandonment, and traumatic change seems a logical coping mechanism. For several adoptees, the repressed memories even continued into their early years in the U.S. when the trauma of change and readjustment was still fresh. It is less obvious however why some children so completely obliterated any memory of Korea while a very few, like Rachel, grew up with vivid memories of early childhood in Korea.

Thoughts about Korea after adoption: Most adoptees described Korea as a place to which they gave little attention during their childhoods in the U.S. If early childhood memories were repressed to help the child cope with the traumas of loss, displacement, and severe cultural changes, most adoptees went about the task of fitting in and being "regular American kids" during this phase of life. This was the dominant experience for most of the adoptees interviewed for this study, (and adoptees' testimonies about the importance of fitting in and denying their heritage have already been described above). Despite this overwhelming pressure to fit in--both internal and external--as children a few adoptees found Korea and their being Korean a nagging question that would not go away. "As far back as I can remember, I'd sit and daydream what were the circumstances of why I was adopted ... and what kind of life would I have lived if I'd have stayed in Korea," Cliff (130) recalls. For others, another experience of "difference" would trigger thoughts of Korea. Liz, for example, described her early friendships:

Most of my friends growing up were either African-American or Native American. At the time that seemed really random ... looking back on that it was obviously not random. It was really trying to figure out, it was the sense that I knew that I was different and I didn't really know what that meant but I felt more comfortable with other people who were different. I really didn't know what being Korean was. I just knew that it meant you weren't white. And that I would never be white (Liz, 55).

Her close friendship with an African-American girl made Liz aware of 'something familiar' in their family that she didn't have in her adoptive Euro-American family, perhaps tapping a repressed memory of Korea:

Just the home environments were so different. And when I think about it my [black] friend's home was probably more similar to what my Korean family was like ... a lot of people in a small space. Nobody had their own room ... which is very similar in a Korean family where there's just more bodies per square foot than in American homes. Whereas my family, we had a big house, a lot of the kids had their own room, you could have three people at home and never see each other. And so there was literally another physical environment. It didn't feel as warm. And her parents were always home and my parents were always gone. So it was just more interesting to be at her house ... That process [of cultural self-awareness] started then (Liz, 380).

For other adoptees, childhood thoughts about Korea took the form of curiosity which could be expressed most easily in school. Henry, for example--who described above how he felt racism forced him to face identity questions earlier than many adoptees--says he always had an interest in Korea and did school projects focusing on Korea as a country. James, a student at the University of Minnesota, recalls a book on Korea that was "lying around" at his home as he grew up. He'd periodically pick it up and leaf through it but it was not a source of burning interest for him. Even Gordie, who came to the U.S. at age nine and with whom his birth family maintained a correspondence, described his thoughts of Korea once he was in the U.S. as vague at best: "It seemed like a dream. It almost seemed like I was born in this country" (Gordie, 40).

Again, most adoptees in this study avoided much deliberation or thought about Korea or being Korean during the phase of their childhood when they were being raised in the U.S. This is consistent with earlier studies such as Wilkinson's 1985 study of adopted Korean children, which found that one way children dealt with the adjustment and the change of families and of countries was to deny (consciously and unconsciously) any links to Korea.

Thoughts about Korea in adulthood: As described above, once adoptees moved away from home, many of them found themselves searching and questioning who they were and where they came from in an entirely new way. This included a distinctly new interest in and curiosity about Korea. There was, by no means, a uniform rush to study or visit

Korea in adoptees' freshman year of college. But as their identity struggles unfolded and took shape, many adoptees did--on their own timeframe--find themselves signing up for Korean language classes or going to Korea. For most adoptees however, becoming reacquainted with Korea was a process fraught with ambivalence, fear, or anger.

Liz woke up on her 21st birthday and thought for the first time that she had a Korean birth mother somewhere in Korea who was also aware of this day. But it was only years later that Liz actually went to Korea.

I think I always wanted to go in an abstract way but I think I was also afraid ... I was afraid of being incompetent. Of going there and just not being able to function, of not being able to live up to expectations ... I think there's an issue about whether I was Korean enough and I think a lot of adoptees deal with that issue. Are we Korean enough? Are we Korean at all and if we go there, will we find out that in fact we're not very Korean? Because we know we're not American and we know we're not white ... if we go and we find we're not very Korean, well, what are you? You're left with this sort of non-identity (Liz, 800).

Nora articulates a similar feeling of pressure associated with Korea which was compounded by how she was treated by native Koreans whom she met. She found herself drawn to a surrogate Asian culture (Chinese), studied Mandarin, and lived in Taiwan for two years:

Korea's like a myth. It's this mythical place. I'd like to go now, I'd like to go more than I ever did before I lived in Asia but I also have this big phobia about Korea. I don't speak Korean at all and almost all of the Koreans I knew in Taiwan, they were horrified at the fact that you couldn't speak Korean and you were Korean and 'how could you not know anything about Korean' and there was this standard set. It's not like you could go in at a lower level and learn about it. You were supposed to go in at a high level and there's a lot of pressure ... so now I feel even more strongly that I wouldn't go [to Korea] unless I had an interpreter that I really knew well and trusted a lot (Nora, 268).

Ophelia, now 22 years old, went to Korea once with her non-biological sister (also adopted from Korea) and at the time of our interview, she was preparing to go again the following fall. She too felt judged by native Koreans in Korea:

There's a lot more prejudice [there] than there is here because you're adopted and because you don't know Korean ... a lot of Asian cultures are very patriarchal so if you're adopted it means you didn't have a father. There's something wrong with your family. They look at you instantly like there's something wrong with you. If you can't speak Korean, it's really odd because you have this Korean face, you have this Korean body, and you can't speak their language: what's wrong with you? And those cultures aren't afraid to say that to your face whereas here people try to be more politically correct. There they don't have to be ... You go there thinking I'm going to fit in, they're going to accept me, they're going to be glad I came back, and that's not how it is (Ophelia, 475).

Ophelia pointed out however that geography plays a role in preparing adoptees for these kinds of reactions in Korea. Growing up in an isolated community resulted for her in an idealization of Korea that set her up for a big disappointment when she actually went there. Had she grown up with more exposure to Koreans living in the U.S., she feels she might have gone to Korea with more realistic expectations. The experience of several other adoptees supports Ophelia's proposition. Many adoptees did not have to go to Korea to experience negative reactions from Korean natives and this contributed to their trepidation about going to Korea unprepared (emotionally and linguistically). James, for example, described how "I kind of felt like an outsider ... when it came to native Koreans because I feel like they expect [something] out of you. They're like 'Oh you're Korean, shouldn't you know this?' I don't know what exactly it is, if it's pity or what but I just feel like they're downplaying me" (James, 711).

Tracy echoes James' experiences of judgment from second-generation Koreans in the U.S.:

I have friends right now who are second-generation Korean or who are studying as an international student from Korea and this past year I've gone out with a lot of them to bars or out to eat or whatever. And there is discrimination that we [adopted Koreans] are second-class Koreans because we have been raised in white society, in American society. We don't

know about our own heritage, and we don't know our language. Koreans have great pride for their culture, their country, their people. And they're very homogeneous. To see their own kind raised in a different household, it's not a really good picture (Tracy, 420).

A number of adoptees had these kinds of experiences in large cities where they visited a Korean or a Chinese neighborhood. Zoe described her puzzlement at reactions she got in a New York Korean neighborhood:

I get this a lot: 'Don't your parents speak Korean to you or do you guys just speak English in your home?' and I'm like 'No, well, I'm adopted.' and they go 'Ooooooh, that's too bad' ... I get that so much. I don't know why ... If they think I'm Chinese, they won't talk to me. But then they find out I'm Korean, then they talk to me. But then when they find out I don't speak it, then ... they grow more distant. It's not like I want anything from them (Zoe, 2:40).

Isaac received a similar reaction in a New York deli:

When I went out to New York to visit, I stopped in a deli and this old Korean lady tried to talk to me in Korean and I explained to her that I didn't speak Korean and that I grew up in the U.S. and she got very upset with me because I didn't keep my Korean culture and I didn't speak Korean and I was just shocked that she was that upset and while I didn't think that much about it, I think to her I was just wasting the Korean culture (Isaac, 322).

These reactions and a fear of the unknown (or of the repressed) continue to inhibit Isaac from making a trip back to Korea at this time.

I have every intention of going back to visit. It's just that I've got to have enough courage ... Nothing is really stopping me from doing it, because ... I worked for Northwest Airlines so could

have gone basically for free so I can't say it's the cost. I think I just have to [someday] have enough guts to do it. Maybe I'm just afraid of what I'm going to find out ... I think that's what holding me back (Isaac, 382).

Susan is preoccupied with Korea to the point that her eyes are drawn to it every time she looks at a world map. But, again, a Chinatown experience in San Francisco left her wary of making a trip there any time soon:

Korea is such an abstract place for me. I have this world map in my house and I look at it a lot ... because I'm looking at reference points for South America [related to my work]. But every time I look at it, I always look at Korea ... It just seems so abstract to me. It's just a place on a map. I know if I went there it would be really emotional ... I just don't think I'm ready to handle that right now because I went to San Francisco last summer ... and I went to Chinatown for a day and it was so weird. I literally stood on a street corner in Chinatown--it was the first time I'd ever been in Chinatown--and I cried ... Looking at all these Chinese people, all these women, middle aged, and ... I was observing all these little kids with their parents. And these mothers have these instincts about their kids ... They'd move the same, their bodies would move the same and it was really emotional for me to see that. I'd never had that in my life--ever. I think that's why I couldn't handle Korea now (Susan, 70).

This event combined with Susan's negative experiences of Koreans in the U.S. solidified her position that Korea is not yet someplace she's prepared to go:

Every dealing I've had with a Korean has been negative. Every single one. They've been extremely judgmental, extremely materialistic ... and I've thought Koreans cannot be like this but every single one I meet is like this ... making comments like 'Well, you're not a real Korean' or making comments like ... 'We tend to think of adopted Koreans not as highly as our own' ... [or] you know, 'you could never marry a Korean man from Korea because his parents would never accept you.' Things like that (Susan,40).

In contrast to Susan's fears, Henry had a positive experience when he went to Korea but realizes that he was protected by the presence of his adoptive parents and an organized tour. He too plans a return to Korea but is aware that he may be facing some of the judgment others have described:

[Korea] was pretty emotional. It was weird but at the same time comfortable to be amongst your own almost because I was no longer the minority, but the majority; and it was interesting to see how my parents reacted because they're both white and [the roles were reversed] and it was kind of fun. I enjoyed it ... When I was there, I was pretty warmly received, but some of my other friends have gone and they [said] 'that's not what it's really like, I had a bad experience because I was adopted' and they were basically ... not accepted and looked down upon almost. That wasn't my experience but I'm gearing up for that experience because I'm not going to be with my parents and I'm not going to be in the tourist places so a lot of English isn't spoken and I think there's a lot of misconceptions against adopted Koreans ... but I'm gearing up for it (Henry, 450).

On the positive side of adoptees' experiences of Korea, several adoptees echoed Henry's sentiments of feeling happy they didn't stand out, of the relief associated with anonymity which they never had in the U.S. Frank never thought much about Korea as a place till late in his college career when he met another Korean adoptee. "When people reach a certain age, they're interested in their history," Frank explained (212), and indeed when an opportunity arose for him to join a trip to Korea a few years later, he jumped at the chance.

I felt right at home. It was a great experience. The most significant thing I remember was getting off the plane at the Seoul Airport and seeing all this black hair ... just tons of black hair. And that's when it first hit home ... Wow, I've never experienced this before. And there was a certain sense ... that you'd see an old lady on the corner eating sprouts, and you think you could be right there too ... and wondering where you would be right now if you were here (Frank, 503).

Frank's experience of poverty in Korea was another common reaction adoptees had while in Korea. Mary went to Korea at age 23 and described a similar reaction: "I saw orphans who had stayed in Korea and are now my age and they were either servants or maids and have no education and that obviously impacted me tremendously, to see what could have happened to me ... That in itself made me appreciate what I had" (Mary, 135). Like Frank, Mary also appreciated the feeling of anonymity she experienced while in Korea:

[In Korea] you'd see a white person, and they'd stand out. I did kind of feel at home when I was there [in Korea] because we all looked alike. And it was a kind of a nice feeling too ... For the first time going into a restaurant and not being the only Asian. For the first time looking around and seeing other people who look like you even though I couldn't personally connect with them ... It was really a nice feeling (Mary, 530).

While most adoptees could appreciate both the benefits of being raised in the U.S. and have an appreciation for or interest in Korea, a few adoptees looked to Korea with anger or resentment. Yvonne, for example, thought: "Obviously they must be really poor if they're getting rid of all their kids like this. There must be something wrong--something really wrong--with that place if they don't want to keep something that's really a valued commodity, their future, the children. Yeah, it's no place I'd ever like to go. What jerks!" (Yvonne, 190). Still, Yvonne conceded she might go to Korea someday.

Rachel, on the other hand, had the strongest feelings in this regard:

It didn't make sense to me. It made me actually feel more different than I was. I didn't want to be part of that [culture]. I wasn't proud. I mean, that country sucked. It kind of screwed me over ... any country that doesn't love it's own children sucks ... and I know the culture, I know it's been through the Chinese and the Japanese coming in and invading but you know what? That's bullshit. These are people ... and babies. How can you not love your children? ... I left that country and I never looked back. I've never really had a desire to go back to that country (Rachel, 545).

This level of antipathy towards Korea, however, was the exception and may have been intertwined with Rachel's considerable anger towards her birth family as a result of her birth mother's abandonment when Rachel was five, her birth father's death due to substance abuse when she was six, and her uncle's sending her to an orphanage immediately thereafter so he could secure access to what she saw as her birthright, an inheritance of her father's wealth from his pharmacy chain. This is a far cry from the typical scenario that gives rise to a Korean adoptee coming to the U.S.

For other adoptees with whom a positive reconnection took place with one's birth family, Korea felt like a part of them and was a place they envisioned returning to often. Cliff (who was still being secretive about his Korean adoptee girlfriend in his senior year of college) later went on to do an extensive search for his birth family in Korea, a search that involved writing over 100 letters to agencies, governmental and non-governmental institutions, and media in the U.S. and Korea. The broadcast of his story on Korean television resulted in his birth family coming forward and he was able to meet his father, mother, and several half-siblings. Upon his return to the U.S., Cliff remained preoccupied with Korea, became involved with Minnesota Adopted Koreans, and studied the Korean language. He ultimately decided he would return to Korea on a subsequent visit for a more extended period of time, but even then he shared some of the feelings other adoptees describe in terms of not quite fitting in: "It was a different feeling being in Korea where I blended in with everybody. Here it's pretty obvious I don't look like the people of America, but here I'm a minority because of my race. But I'm a minority there because of the language. I think for a lot of Korean adoptees, they're trying to find a balance" (Cliff, 246).

Gordie's going to Korea and reconnecting with his birth family also meant the reestablishment of a relationship not just with the family but with his country and his culture.

The Korea I'd known had changed 1000 fold, it was just unbelievable. But seeing my brothers and my sisters and my mother even though we were away for that long, separated for that long, it was still there ... When we got out of the airport through the gates, with our luggage and stuff, all our family was waiting behind the line over there, y'know, it was pretty emotional. I mean we couldn't stop crying for a while ... and that trip kind of made a great impact on me ... At the end of the trip I had made my mind up that I was going to come back and study the language (Gordie, 222).

Gordie was one of several adoptees--primarily male--who envisioned a career that would somehow incorporate travel to Korea, a liaison between the U.S. and Korea of some sort,

either in a business or governmental sphere. What Gordie also found however was that his identical twin brother --adopted by the same parents, in the same family, and in the same community--had a very different reaction about going back to Korea:

He wasn't willing to give up his life here, the luxuries that we have here compared to over there, because it's really crowded and you can't go out and do a lot of the things that we're able to do here ... So he was kind of turned off by that and kind of scared actually to be there for that long. So he never decided to go back and to do the same thing that I did ... But I think eventually, hopefully, he'll come to the realization that he can't deny what's over there, our blood, our brothers and sisters (Gordie, 380).

It's remarkable that identical twins, raised in the same family, presumably under similar conditions, could have such disparate reactions to reconnecting with their birth country. It raises the issue of personality, of how different personalities contribute to the ways that identities unfold and to the place-relationships that emerge between individuals and different places in their lives.

Yvonne described similar treatment by native Koreans but also noted that in Minnesota in particular, native Koreans sometimes tried to extend themselves to adopted Koreans:

Korean society is so stratified ... and I think that adopted Koreans fall pretty much as second rate citizens ... [But here] they have respect in that they want to help you out and teach you especially here in Minnesota where adopted Koreans outnumber native Koreans. I mean we are the Korean community, they kind of have to work with us here. They don't have a choice (Yvonne, 300).

Isaac had a similar experience of feeling wooed by the local Korean community small as it is. He has been playing in a local Korean soccer league and is being actively recruited by a Korean church. He feels their interest in incorporating him into their community has to do with teaching him about Korean (as opposed to American) values:

I would say overall that I've been accepted by everyone I know and I'd say that I belong in this community ... The only people who right now are probably saying I don't really [belong] is the Korean people who are trying to bring me back into the Korean culture and away from the American culture because I think they feel the American culture has eroded all my traditional Korean values ... and changed me for the worse. I think they think the American culture is greed, disrespect, looking out for yourself, materialistic versus ... Korean culture is more family-oriented and things like that (Isaac,138).

Isaac's perception of how the Korean community sees him and their desire to 'bring him back' may in some way be an attempt to adopt him back into Korean culture. As Gary Okihiro points out in his book on Asians in American history and culture, Asian immigrants experience a "cultural tug-of-war" with their own children as tensions emerge between perceived Asian and American value differences: family responsibilities vs. individual freedom, personal sacrifice vs. the pursuit of happiness, spirituality vs. materialism (Okihiro, 1994). Perhaps as Asian communities struggle to maintain their Asian identity, more traditional members of that community will extend themselves to members of the younger generation whom they see as receptive to traditional Asian culture (especially in places where there is a large adoptee population which is open to learning about a culture it never knew). The impact of a large Korean adoptee population on a smaller Korean immigrant community--as is the case in Minnesota--remains an issue worth further exploration.

Lastly, one adoptee pointed out that the tension between Korean-American immigrants or their descendants and Korean adoptees involves a reciprocal exchange of distancing gestures. While some 2nd generation Koreans are indeed judgmental or prejudiced towards adoptees, many adoptees expressed obvious discomfort with their own heritage and thus distanced themselves from other Koreans and rejected association with them. Clearly, it appears there is room for improved communication and understanding between these two communities.

Sense of home, place, community, and the town-city dichotomy

As suggested in the above discussion of adoptees' feelings about Korea, many adoptees found themselves feeling unsure about where they fit in, about what constituted the place in the world where they belonged. Though not literally homeless, many adoptees could not identify their 'home' and felt acceptance in neither their adoptive home in the U.S. nor in Korea, their birth home. When asked where he considered home to be, Karl, for example, responded:

I don't. I consider home to be here, [tapping his chest] inside. I don't feel a sense of culture right now ... As far as a physical home, I guess where I reside right now. As far as Korea, that's where I came from, but I don't really consider it as home home. I would consider Minnesota home home right now. I'm like where a lot of 23 year-olds are right now ... which is we're kind of lost, we're wondering where we fit in" (Karl, 340).

At the same time, Karl described how a year earlier he had contemplated working with an orphanage in Korea: "I just wanted to do something important," he explained, "and I figured what's more important than going to work in an orphanage in a Third World country?" (Karl, 260). When I followed up on why he thinks he chose that particular country, he noted "I chose to go back home, [emphasis added]" but then quickly added, "But I wouldn't say it's a cultural experience for me, it's more of a curiosity" (Karl, 300).

Don, who grew up in a first-tier suburb south of Minneapolis, described a similar feeling of ambivalence about what he would call home:

It's really hard to say. I would say probably St. Paul because that's where I hang out most of the time. I really don't consider myself having a home home. I'd still have to say my real home is [the suburb where I grew up] because I've not yet moved far enough away from there and lived somewhere for a long enough time to consider that my home. Like I said, I'm a sort of nomadic person which I don't know if that has to do with my past but it just seems the way that I am, I'm always moving (Don, 522).

Liz was able to identify a sense of home with certain people: "I have a good relationship now with my adoptive family but it hasn't come easy ... I think what I consider home now is my home with my children and it's what I've created ... Anytime my kids are together, it feels homey" (Liz, 980). Like many adoptees, when asked about her sense of home, Liz considered Korea and her relationship to her birth country as a home:

And as for Korea, it feels comfortable but I wouldn't say it

feels like home either. In some ways, it feels more comfortable than it does here ... I've lived in the Twin Cities my whole life and it doesn't feel good to me. It's because of the lack of diversity ... and if I didn't have kids right now, I would probably live in New York. But I remember how important my grandparents were to me growing up and ... that's the reason why I stay. My kids have already decided one's going to go to the East Coast to college and the other's going to go to college on the West Coast so they want to get out of here too (Liz, 1025).

Like Liz (a South Minneapolis resident), many adoptees felt it was important to live in a racially and ethnically diverse place though even within the more diverse urban areas of Minneapolis and St. Paul, most adoptees continued to live in predominantly white neighborhoods. Mary, a resident of Minneapolis' trendy Uptown area, described a similar need for access to diversity which she finds lacking in the Twin Cities:

I don't think of the Twin Cities as home and I really don't think of Iowa as home. I don't think I've found my home yet. And I think that's what I'm striving for. I don't know if that's weird ... When I'm at my parents' home, I do feel like I'm home in a sense but ... my dream is to live in New York City ... I like the intensity, I like the diversity ... And to me that would feel like home because I'd be meeting different people all the time and I'd be exposing myself to different things, learning more about the world, learning more about myself (Mary, 400).

Susan--who studied Irish literature in Belfast--feels no emotional connection to Minnesota as her home and, as described above, identifies with the "longing for home" that Irish Catholics she met in Northern Ireland seemed to feel:

The [Irish] guy that I dated at the time was Catholic and I had never met anyone in my life that I had so much in common with ... I felt like he knew what it was like to feel like he didn't have a home. And he knew what it was like to feel like he could go almost anywhere in the world ... He felt like he had no ties to his home... [For me] I would call Minnesota home but it doesn't feel like it inside. Emotionally I have no

ties to it at all (Susan, 880).

In the U.S., Susan's identification with a sense of longing for home extended to expatriates: "I feel most comfortable with expatriated people because they're here, they feel completely lost, and no sense of home, and they want so desperately to get back to where they feel at home and I can completely relate to that on all levels ... I have no sense of place and obviously I'm searching for it" (Susan, 300/440).

A sense of having two homes, one in the U.S. and one in Korea, was how Henry described his sense of home:

I consider my home to be in Minnesota and South Minneapolis and I consider my other home to be Korea. They're two different places and I have pieces of me that both belong there but yet I'm torn between them. In both societies, I'm not necessarily accepted for who I am or what I am. In America I'm not accepted because I'm not white, and in Korea I'm not accepted because I'm adopted so really I am a hyphenated-American but I consider both of the places to be my home. I came from Korea but I live here now but both of them are pieces of my life. For other people it might be different but because I've made both places a part of my life, they've become a part of my life (Henry, 620).

Gordie, who came to the U.S. with his twin brother at age nine and maintained a relationship with his birth family, was one of the few adoptees who said he felt more at home in Korea: "As of now, I'd say over there [feels more like home]. I don't know, I just feel better over there, I'm more comfortable over there" (Gordie, 270).

A number of adoptees liked the idea of feeling at home in Korea (or its being a second home) but this was more an expression of a wish than of how they actually experienced their sense of home, primarily because they felt so Americanized. Cliff did a search and found his birth family in Korea: "I could live in Korea but I would not be completely happy ... Because I'm so Americanized, America's where I want to live my life. I have a lot of reasons to live in Korea--my Korean family obviously, learning the Korean language--but because of the things I want in life, America's where I want to live" (Cliff, 470). Ophelia was more explicit: "I want [Korea] to be somewhat of a second home," she remarked longingly (Ophelia, 560). Vicky too wished that she could call Korea home: "I'd like to say that it's my home, but it's not because I don't know anything about it" (Vicky, 120). She continued, moreover, that she's heard that many adoptees struggle with questions about how to fit in and that going to Korea can exacerbate that struggle:

I have talked to other people who have gone back and some say they loved it and that it helped them a lot. Other people say they hated it and it only made them more confused. Because we're sent over here because the country couldn't support us ... and then when we come over here we're so Americanized. Then when we try and go back, it's like we're foreigners to our own land or to our own country even though we're still foreigners here ... Maybe it would go good, maybe it wouldn't. Right now, I don't want to go back ... I don't want to deal with finding out that I don't belong there and I don't really belong here, I don't belong anywhere (Vicky, 190).

Yvonne, like many adoptees, was also unable to name a place that felt like home: "I don't know if I'll ever really have a home ... I know Minnesota isn't the last stop on my list. I want to live abroad, I want to work abroad, I want to study ... everywhere." Despite her international outlook however, Yvonne's thoughts about a future home sound decidedly American:

I've always thought about returning to [Illinois] around a larger area ... for the nice suburbs. Because if I have children, I want them to live in a nice area even though that's kind of what I'm against. I guess it's being kind of hypocritical but I want them to have the nice school system that that place has to offer ... See I thought about going home and I think I'd like to be closer to my family sometimes. If I have children, I'd like them to have grandparents and be around my family (Yvonne, 40).

After living in an orphanage with lots of children, Wendy found a feeling of familiarity which she called home in her adoptive family--a group of females including her adoptive single mother and several adopted sisters, one Korean and two white. This 'collectivity of females' became her world and was able to compensate a great deal for the dearth of community and provide the sense of belonging which she found so lacking beyond the walls of her family home in a St. Paul suburb. Today Wendy, 28 years old, lives in another suburb of St. Paul, where she finds that important feeling of home is met--not by the larger community or neighborhood at large--but within the walls of the house she built with her husband: "How I feel it's home is because when I come home from work, I put on whatever clothes I want and I don't care how I look, and I can do whatever I want.

I can ... do anything basically. I feel like it's my private space ... And I feel most comfortable there. It's my own [refuge] (Wendy, 90). For Wendy, diversity in the place she lived was a minor consideration and she chose the community she lives in much as any other new homeowners might, by following friends who'd built a home that she liked in that town and by finding a lot she and her husband could afford in the same area. In Wendy's future, she envisions a home in a place where she "would be somewhere warmer, have a couple of kids, have other same-age kids in the neighborhood, have a church nearby in which [she] felt comfortable ... an excellent school district, and be in an upper-level income bracket, a suburb with maybe a little bigger house or a little bigger yard" (Wendy, 180).

This range of experiences of home--from those who live in South Minneapolis but wish they could live someplace more diverse like New York City or Los Angeles to those who live in very homogeneous suburbs and feel no desire to move--captures the inner conflict many adoptees feel. It reflects the tension between, on one hand, being "raised American" and feeling culturally very much like mainstream Americans and, on the other hand, feeling an internal pull towards unearthing one's origins and/or external societal messages that they are "different" and don't completely belong. It offers further evidence that there are no simple answers or uniform responses to being adopted and of Korean descent.

The same can be said of the city-town dichotomy and the tendency to assume that adoptees necessarily find broader acceptance in more diverse urban environments. Nora, for example, came from a small Minnesota farming town near the North Dakota border.

I felt more [racism] when I moved to Minneapolis. There's a sort of code in small towns where people knew who my parents were and I knew who their parents were. It tends to isolate you a little bit but I remember coming to Minneapolis and at that time there were a lot of Hmong refugees here and, you know, people can't tell where you're from. But there were these assumptions that I couldn't speak English. And I remember people making these really racist comments in supermarkets and thinking I couldn't understand and you get interactions like that within daily life on campus or wherever [here in Minneapolis]. I remember being surprised by that because there's also a politeness code because you're going to know the person saying something really obnoxious and they're going to have to see you again. Whereas here, [racists] can be anonymous (Nora, 123).

In thinking about where she'd like to settle down, Nora was unsure: "I don't know that I want to live here for very long. Maybe three or four years. I don't know ... I have lots of

really close friends, but I still feel sort of unsettled like I'd really like to travel more and live in other places. I don't think I feel particularly place-bound right now" (Nora, 318). Nora's experience was consistent with the finding of Feigelman and Silverman (1983) who found the largest number of well-adjusted Korean adoptees were in rural settings.

By contrast, Karl grew up in South Minneapolis but went to a Catholic school where he was the only Asian student in the school. The school, however, provided a subculture within the larger urban setting where he felt he belonged. He felt particularly accepted there because, he says, "My parents were very close to the pastor and the pastor in a very small church is very tight with the parish. If the pastor accepts you, the parish thinks nothing of it. And that's basically the way it went" (Karl, 70). But when he switched to the public school in fifth grade and he was exposed to the diversity of an urban school, like many adoptees he had an aversive reaction to other Asians (Hmong, Laotians, and Cambodians): "I would notice the differences before I would notice the similarities. The fact was that 'I'm one of these guys, I've been one of these guys all my life. I'm not one of those guys and in a fifth grader's mentality, it's very normal to be like that" (Karl, 90). Karl now lives in an older Minneapolis suburb and, like Wendy in a St. Paul first-tier suburb, the homogeneity of the place is unimportant to him. While Karl and Wendy were two of only a handful of adoptees who were explicit that diversity was unimportant to them, many adoptees proclaimed the importance of being in a diverse, urban setting, but lived nonetheless in fairly homogeneous neighborhoods where they had access to--but distance from--the more diverse populations of the Twin Cities. This may be related to issues of socioeconomic class which are discussed further below.

Gender

There are several ways that gender emerged as a relevant issue in the lives of Korean adoptees both at the macro and micro levels. Some of these gender issues exist for adoptees generally, not solely for Korean adoptees. At the 1997 Orthopsychiatry Conference in Toronto, a paper on adoption and gender was presented by the University of Michigan Center for the Child and Family's Adoption Study Group (of which I was previously a member). Their findings suggest that the adoption process is one that unfolds along gendered lines for both parent and child--birth parent, adopter and adoptee. Their findings include the following: 1) The primary driving force to adopt usually comes from the woman and therefore in discussions between parent and child, women usually take the lead in discussions about adoption and thus frame the discussion; 2) Men often feel more discomfort with the topic of adoption (as with emotional material generally) and thus are more dismissive of its importance or simply avoid the subject; 3) Females' struggle with adoption is more explicit and thus they are more likely to raise the topic so the dialogue again is more one between females, adoptive mothers and female adoptees; and 4) Adoptees' discussion of birth parents usually focuses on birth mothers not birth fathers. Moreover, since women are usually the driving force behind adoption, a desire for continuity and the perception that girls are "easier" than boys creates a greater demand for female adoptees than for male adoptees (Rosenberg et al., 1997) though this may vary with the ethnicity of the child. There is significant demand for white male babies, for example, but a greater demand for female Asian children.

A number of these findings resonate in the life stories of the Korean adoptees interviewed for this study. But gender is significant for Korean adoptees at an earlier point in the adoption process and at a more macro-level than these findings capture. Gender plays heavily in the sociocultural, political, and economic contexts in which children become available for adoption whether in the U.S. or abroad. A substantial economic transformation has taken place in South Korea in recent decades from being a primarily agrarian economy into one of the "Asian Tigers" or newly industrialized countries (NICs) (World Bank, 1993). This industrialization has resulted in a concomitant process of urbanization and a realignment of traditional gender roles with millions of industrial workers--male and female--moving to live alone in cities and no longer living on farms with traditional social supports and constraints on behavior (Spencer, 1998). The inevitable rise in sexual activity that accompanied the breakdown of traditional living arrangements was not accompanied, however, by any significant weakening of Korea's entrenched patriarchal culture which defines "fatherless" children as sub-standard people, a tradition rooted in the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910):

Women had no names of their own. They were identified relative to men, as so-and-so's daughter, so-and-so's wife, and so-and-so's mother. When she married, not her name but her family name was entered into her husband's family registry, and her name was removed from her family registry ... Having no name thus meant being defined in relation to men, and having no name meant erasure and ostracism (Okihiro, 1994).

This perpetuated an atmosphere of fear and shame associated with out-of-wedlock children and a concomitant outflow of children placed abroad for adoption. Unmarried mothers in Korea envisioned a better life for their children if they could escape the stigma and ostracism of Korean patriarchal culture.

This reality did not go unnoticed by Korean adoptees as they reached adulthood. As a rule, however, women focused more on this issue than men. Rachel, for example, described her anger about how women are treated in Korea and how she would have been treated had she remained in Korea.

I think that society is very abusive, they're abusive to their women. I mean, they treat their dogs better than they treat their women. It's still a very Third World country. Women work in sweatshops and they have shit jobs. If I would have stayed there, my brother--who's a total idiot--would have run

my life ... I would not have a say-so in what color clothes I want to wear or who I wanted to marry or how I was going to get from point A to point B ... Even though I had hardship here, I had freedom to be a woman, to be a business woman, to marry who I want vs. being controlled by society and a man telling me what to do. My brother probably would have controlled my destiny if we had stayed there, you know, telling me who I should marry and what my professional identity is. So I am glad I'm here because I have the freedom to choose (Rachel, 545).

Nora described what she's come to understand about Korean patriarchy and how it contributed to high rates of Koreans being placed for adoption:

You're talking about a society where men hold almost all the political power. These women can't legally register their children on their family register so these children essentially don't exist to the government ... It's hard for an American to imagine what that household system is like where you're dependent on the government for rations of money, food, housing (Nora, 130).

This extends to getting one's child an education and to getting into school, which is also very difficult without the formal recognition and legitimization of having a documented father. Nora went on to describe her attendance at an event sponsored by her adoption agency where two Korean women spoke about placing their children for adoption to the U.S.

One of the women [who placed her child for adoption], the story she told was she was planning on getting married to this guy and something happened between them. He told her she had to have an abortion or he would go to her parents and tell them that she was pregnant and that he was going to publicly shame them by saying it wasn't his child. So then her parents would have forced her to have an abortion. You're talking about a society where one gender holds an enormous amount of power ... And she didn't want to have an abortion so she told her parents she was going to the U.S. to study. She was

clearly upper middle class. She was well educated, well dressed. So they thought she was in the U.S. for 8 months and she was really in Seoul ... and she told [the boyfriend] she had had an abortion (Nora, 160).

Nora acknowledged that many women who place their children for adoption do not come from privilege and for them the primary issue is sheer survival as well as social stigma. This was the case even with some adoptees whose parents were married but whose father died leaving the mother--economically dependent as she was--on the margins of being able to raise their families. This was true for Gordie, for example, who came to the U.S. with his twin brother after his father died. For Bill, born on a strawberry and watermelon farm in Korea, it was the death of his mother which signaled the turning point for his being placed for adoption abroad. Bill lived with his grandmother briefly but she could not afford to raise the children and within six months they were in the U.S. Bill's story begs a recurring question however: Where was the father? Bill, who had distinct memories of the farm and of his mother, had no memory of his father and when his mother died, a grandmother took over care for the children.

One of the themes that emerged in the Orthopsychiatry Conference paper was that of absent fathers. Fathers were missing not only in terms of their sometimes abandoning their responsibilities as fathers, but even from the memory or consciousness of their children who became adoptees. An example of this is Zoe's feelings about doing a search for her birth parents: "I don't know about the birth parent thing because only my Dad would be alive. My biological Dad would be alive ... If it was reversed, then I'd have a stronger feeling to try and find [my birth mother]" (Zoe, 325). In Me-K Ando's essay in *The Adoption Reader* about her trip to Korea, she echoes Zoe's sentiments: "Whenever I had thought about searching for my birth parents I thought only of my birth mother. I never imagined a reunion with my father. So when [I heard] 'your mother had died,' the energy I had accumulated for a search began to dissipate. I didn't know why I wasn't interested in searching for my father" (Ando, 1995).

One way to understand this phenomenon is that Korean adoptees have been raised in a culture where women's status is considerably higher, a fact that was not lost on many adoptees. It was clear to several, moreover, that birth mothers may not have had any choice but to relinquish their children for adoption. Thus, the feelings many adoptees experience of loss and, at times, anger associated with a mother's rejection through adoption may be mediated in the case of Korean adoptees because it is understood on some level that "it wasn't entirely her fault" and, in fact, birth fathers likely had distinct social advantages which may have been exploited. The absent birth father in the adoption process is not limited to the experience of Korean adoptees, however, as reflected in Tim Green's *A Man and His Mother: An Adopted Man's Search* (1997), the recently published memoir of a white American male's adoption, search, and reunification with his mother.

Beyond the role of patriarchy in contributing to Korean children's becoming available for adoption, and the conspicuous absence of birth fathers from the collective consciousness of many adoptees, gender played out on a more micro-level in terms of the day-to-day experiences of many Korean adoptees. Stereotypes about Asians in some cases cut across gender lines--the notion of the 'model minority' for example. This particular stereotype is captured in the following quote from a 1966 article that appeared in the mainstream press amidst the upheavals of the civil rights movement and race riots across the U.S.

In any Chinatown from San Francisco to New York, you discover youngsters at grips with their studies. Crime and delinquency are found to be rather minor in scope. Still being taught in Chinatown is the old idea that people should depend on their own efforts--not a welfare check--in order to reach America's 'promised land' ... At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation's 300,000 Chinese-Americans are moving ahead on their own--with no help from anyone else (U.S. News and World Report, 12/26/66; in Okihiro, 1994).

This stereotype however is also time and place specific. The 1960s signaled the end of Europeans dominating migration flows to the U.S. and the ascendancy of Asians and Latin Americans as the dominant immigrant groups to the U.S. The diversity within the new Asian-American communities extended beyond Chinese and Japanese immigrants and some populations--the Hmong, for example--had a far more difficult time assimilating into an advanced, industrialized society. Moreover, despite government attempts to distribute these populations, they clustered in certain geographical locations, and Minnesota and Wisconsin received a disproportionate number of Hmong refugees due, among other things, to the settlement of Hmong leaders there and to a host of public, private, and church-based institutions involved in refugee resettlement (Meier, 1992). Thus the 'model minority' myth described above existed in these places despite the presence of a less assimilated population that did, in fact, need to access welfare and other social services not traditionally associated with Asian-Americans. The traditional stereotype of the 'hardworking Asian,' did directly impact some adoptees in Minnesota who felt there were unduly high expectations of them at school or work. Wendy, for example, felt she was taken advantage of at her workplace in a major Twin Cities' corporate office where the assumption that she was a hard worker became an excuse to dump work on her desk and exploit her goodwill (Wendy, 70).

Other stereotypes, however, are distinctly gendered with very different preconceptions attributed to Asian women and Asian men. This is rooted in Asia's own patriarchal divisions and, later on, in Europe's colonial history in Asia, resulting in the 'feminization

of Asia:' "Europe's intellect and vigor in contrast to Asia's sensuality and softness were the counterparts of the Asian "yang," or male attributes of light, strength, agency, and the endowments of the 'firm nature of heaven,' as opposed to 'yin,' or female traits of dark, weak, passive, and the 'yielding nature of the earth' " (Okiihiro, 1994). The European social construction of Asia as 'feminine' became part of the Euro-American conception of Asians with all the connotations of 'feminine' as alluring and passive on one hand but threatening and dangerous on the other. This was reinforced in the U.S. through its wars in Asia against Japan, Korea, and Vietnam in which millions of U.S. military personnel came into personal contact with Asians as 'the sly enemy,' yet Asian women were also a source of 'relief' from the stress of battle: prostitution flourished in Asian cities frequented by U.S. servicemen and many Asian women came to the U.S. as 'war brides.' The substantial U.S. military presence in Japan, South Korea, and (until recently) the Philippines has perpetuated the relationship between American military personnel and the exploitation of women in those countries (Ibid).

Many female Korean adoptees were aware of the perception--and had personal experience of the notion--that Asian women are highly sexualized and exotic yet supposed to be passive and submissive. "Yellow fever" is the phrase many used to describe white men who only dated Asian women. Liz described how when she became a teenager, she noticed that suddenly adult men were constantly trying to 'pick her up.' Often, she noted, they had on Korean 'military jackets' and they seemed to think she'd react like the women they'd met in Seoul or Bangkok. Ophelia had the same experience, with strangers--white men--accosting her in restaurants or supermarkets, trying to guess her national origin as an opening to initiate a conversation with her. She noted, moreover, that in her small suburban hometown she'd never had this experience but it was upon coming to Minneapolis that the frequency of these incidents rose. This again highlights that one cannot make easy assumptions about how place impacts on Korean adoptees' sense of comfort with urban settings being necessarily more tolerant or accepting.

Susan dated a white man whom she came to learn had "yellow fever." She discovered a cache of Asian pornography in his room, and upon ending the relationship with him found that within weeks, he was dating another Asian woman who looked very much like Susan. She attempted to get counseling to deal with--among other things--the interrelationship between her sexuality, her ethnicity, and her relationships with men. At the University of Minnesota's counseling service, however, she could find no therapists of color. She began to see a white female therapist whom she found to be unaware of the impact of race and ethnicity: "Take me back to the time when your Dad locked you in a room and beat you,' the therapist would say. And I would say, 'OK, but this all has to do with being an adopted Korean.' And she would say, 'No, no, no, this is a separate issue.' And I was like, 'It's really not.' And that's what she couldn't get" (Susan, 660). At the time of her interview, Susan was still feeling unresolved about the intersection between her sexuality, ethnicity, and potential for intimacy. The search for an Asian female therapist was still under way.

While a majority of the Korean adoptee women I interviewed were revolted by men with "yellow fever," some acknowledged that the Asian female stereotype had a silver lining.

There is a perception of Asian females as "cute" or "exotic"--China dolls--which is likely to have contributed to a greater desire for Asian female adoptees. Rachel described how, as an adult, receiving attention for being 'beautiful and exotic' when she lived in New York was critical to her in her developing a sense of self-acceptance: "I had never had so much attention in my life. Men were dropping like flies and I was like, 'Oh my God, this is so fun!' I got so much attention and they thought that I was so beautiful and exotic and, 'Oh my God, this is so cool.' And I really learned that it was OK, that I was OK" (Rachel, 360). In her book, *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher points out that American culture pressures most females to be beautiful and attractive to men. Despite Rachel's positive comments, "lookism" is a negative force in the lives of most American women and results in a host of maladaptive responses from eating disorders to depression, chemical abuse, and low self-esteem. Moreover, Pipher addresses the geographical dimension of lookism arguing that urbanization exacerbates this pressure in ways that rarely coincide with Rachel's experience of New York City: "Girls who lived in smaller communities were judged more holistically--for their character, family background, behavior, and talents. Now, when more girls live in cities full of strangers, they are judged exclusively by their appearance" (Pipher, 1994). The intersections between gender, lookism, ethnicity, and place (cities vs. small communities) are ripe for further exploration.

While Rachel's glee about the attention she received in New York was the exception, Yvonne too noted that there was some slim advantage for females to the sexual stereotyping of Asian women as pretty and exotic, an advantage which Asian men didn't enjoy:

I think it's harder for an Asian male ... than for Asian females ... I think in high school you're always looking for acceptance obviously and one of the things is dating and you want to, of course, be attractive to the opposite sex. You want people to like you and date you because then you feel like you're an adequate person. And I think that adopted Korean [females] have an easier time with that because Asian females are seen as small, petite, and those are attractive features for a female to have ... and all those different 'lotus flower' and 'beautiful little innocent Asian girl' and like we're going to rub oil on your back or something ... And Asian males, they are smaller in comparison to their white male counterparts and they have a harder time finding dates maybe because they're not as tall, not as large or muscular build (Yvonne, 535).

The male Korean adoptees whom I interviewed echoed some of the views expressed by the women. Several were clearly aware of the stereotype about Asian men being small, "wimpy," non-athletic, and "nerdy."

Bill, a former high school teacher, described how he was able to counteract this stereotype, for example, by telling his inner city students about his experiences in the military using a 50 millimeter machine gun or rocket-propelled grenade launchers, a fairly macho activity.

Gordie said he has developed a "self-consciousness" about being Korean that has inhibited him and left him wondering if women would really be interested in going out with him because he is an Asian man. Gordie is very involved in sports, does construction work, and appeared at our interview looking like the classic young, American male: jeans, sweatshirt, hiking boots, and a baseball cap on backwards.

Henry also feels his being Asian has affected his dating patterns though he can't articulate why: "I kind of think it's had an effect on if I date a lot or not because ... I don't know why. But I think it does have an effect that, because I am Asian, I can't get a date necessarily" (Henry, 505).

Some men commented on the stereotype of Asian men having smaller penis size and Don noted that the issue of Asian male sexuality was prominent enough to have been specifically addressed by an Asian New York theater group in a play called "Big Dicks, Asian Men." The need to counteract these negative images of Asian men expressed itself in a variety of ways. Some male adoptees talked about internalizing their anger and keeping it suppressed while others discussed externalizing it. "[Guys] take it out more physically," Henry noted. "If someone says something that's racist, they don't necessarily try to talk to them, but they want to kick their asses" (Henry, 590).

Several men talked about how they immersed themselves in traditionally male activities like sports as a way to fit in as a male in American culture. Frank sees himself as a bridge to getting white men to deconstruct their negative images of Asian men:

I've kind of taken on the role of being a bridge because when I interact with white males, I think they have this stereotype [of Asian men] in their mind ... and I think it's interesting for them to interact with me because I can talk about basketball, I can talk about baseball, I can talk about football ... and I don't have an accent. Besides the way I look, I'm like a typical white male (Frank, 371).

For both male and female Korean adoptees, early dating partners were white (or, in a couple of cases with women adoptees, African-American) but not Asian. Several women struggled with identifying whether potential dating partners were Asia-philes which was not an issue for the Asian men who dated white women. Over time, several men and women found themselves gradually becoming more open to dating other Asians. For the

women, this involved transcending some of their own culturally derived stereotypes about Asian men as not sexually attractive. Ophelia, for example, is now dating an Asian man but had to overcome her own bias about their being non-masculine. Liz too noted that she has been in social situations with Asian men who are actively flirting with her and she has subconsciously de-sexualized them so completely that she hasn't even realized that they are 'coming on' to her.

At the time that I conducted these interviews, the adoptees ranged from those who still do not date other Asians (Karl or Susan, for example) to those who now prefer to date other Asians (Pae Lim, Bill, or Tim) to someone like Frank who had only dated white women but noted that "Overnight all of a sudden I found Asian women attractive" (Frank, 317). He is now married to another Korean adoptee with whom he has a daughter, perhaps the first baby born to two Korean adoptees in Minnesota. Of the other adoptees who had children, all three had their children with a white spouse. Only one adoptee was married without children and she too has a white husband.

As Bill pointed out, however, the Asian community in Minnesota remains fairly small. While he is now dating another Korean adoptee whom he met through a Korean adoptee organization, he has found the Twin Cities a limiting place in terms of the opportunities to meet and interact with other Asians, either as friends or as dating partners. Several other men and women echoed this observation saying that their dating patterns were only partially an issue of choice and were also influenced by geographical and demographic limitations.

Work was another issue where gender emerged as significant. Midway through my interview with Frank (which up till that point had focused on the twists and turns of his career path), he suddenly stopped himself and noted: "Isn't it funny how guys relate their work history ... and I forget about my wife and kid?" (Frank, 142). Here Frank is calling attention one of the ways that adoptees' life stories were distinctly gendered. Men generally spoke more about their work than did the female adoptees reflecting, no doubt, the general tendency of men in this culture to feel that their identity is linked closely to their work. What distinguishes them from the average American male, however, is the way that several Korean men had plans (or at least the desire) to eventually incorporate Korea into their work life, and to thereby reestablish a linkage to their birth country.

Gordie is the young man who never completely lost touch with his birth family and was reunited with them upon his return to Korea in his early twenties. His wish to return to Korea reflected a desire to become closer to his birth family but also to reconnect with the culture: "Going back to what I was saying before about being self-conscious lately, I felt really, really comfortable in that I could go out and see people and, y'know, I would be one of them ... I'd like to go back and live there for a while, maybe work there for a while" (Gordie, 264). He described how he'd like to work as some sort of liaison between Korean and U.S. business.

James would also like to shuttle between the U.S. where he currently lives and Korea where he would teach English. Ideally, he'd also like some sort of job that would allow

him to be a bridge between Korea and the U.S. in either the public or private sector: "That would be the perfect job for me," James says (James, 121).

Even Karl who proclaims that his Korean ethnicity is not a major issue in his life contemplated a trip to Korea though, again, it was through a work venue (albeit volunteer work). As noted earlier, he described how "About a year ago I was going to work with Hope [Adoption Agency]'s program of working with their orphanage ... I just wanted to do something important and I figured what's more important than going to work in an orphanage in a Third World country" (Karl, 260). Ultimately, Karl didn't make this trip but it's worth noting that the closest he ever came to reestablishing a relationship with his birth country was through an impulse to work there.

Bill, a somewhat older adoptee, was the one person who actually had a job awaiting him in Korea, a teaching position in art history at Yonsei University.

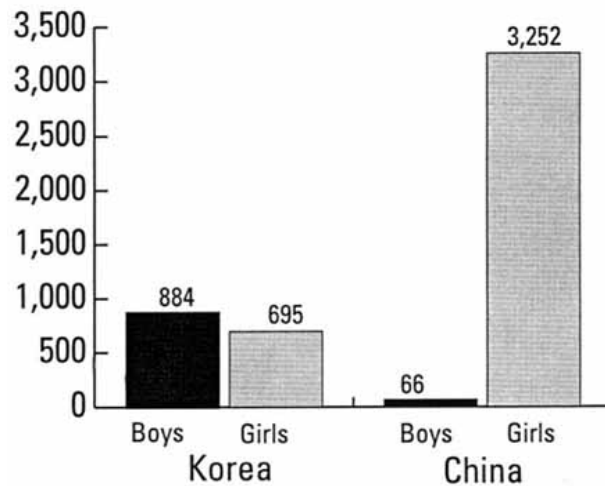
Lastly, Alex was another male adoptee who was planning on using his military career to get him to Korea. After going through officer training, Alex intended to request a year of remote service in Korea as a way for him to find himself back in the country of his birth.

It should be made clear that work was not unimportant to the women interviewed in this study. Those who already had careers underway valued their work and the independence it afforded them while the women who were still in college had professional aspirations towards which they were working. The point here is, first, that men focused more on the issue of work, and, second, it was men exclusively who saw work as a mechanism or a means by which to reconnect to Korea as a place.

While gender and geography intersect in Korea through patriarchal structures that have given rise to the world's largest international migration stream of adoptees, it intersects even more strongly next door in the People's Republic of China. In 1996, 29 percent of total intercountry adoptees came from China in contrast to Korea's 14 percent (INS, 1996). In that year, Korea's ratio of 884 male adoptees to 695 female adoptees reflected a shift from the historical trend of more female than male adoptees; China by contrast sent 3,252 girls and 66 boys (See figure 7 below). In China, patriarchal pressures are also at play which clash with an aggressive government-sponsored population control program mandating one child per family. Social pressures to have a son have contributed to huge outflows of Chinese girls (as well as high rates of female infanticide) with a relatively negligible number of Chinese boys leaving for the purposes of adoption (INS, 1996).

Figure 7

Sex of Intercountry adoptees from Korea and China, 1996



Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service

Making Sense of the Exceptions

Not all the adoptees in this study followed the trends described above of denial in childhood and adolescence, gradual awakening in early adulthood, and growing interest in and appreciation for their Korean cultural heritage as they matured. Out of 23 adoptees, three in particular fell outside of this general trend, Evan, Rachel, and Karl. A closer examination of these three cases, however, suggests some insights into the reasons why their development may have been stalled early on in the process of cultural (and personal) self-awareness.

Though he knows nothing about his birth parents, Evan described himself as probably biracial because he has "black features," yet he made clear he has no strong feelings of identification with either culture. He lives and works within a predominantly white milieu in Minneapolis and he is married to a white woman with whom he just had a child: "I don't identify with Asians, I don't identify with blacks. I just don't, even though I may not look altogether too dissimilar from these people. Culturally I just don't" (Evan, 45). Moreover, Evan has some sense of the status he would have had within Korean society and how different it would be from the privilege he enjoys in the U.S.:

I've been afforded these opportunities ... Koreans are so homogeneous ... and they're a very racist group of people (Not that Americans aren't). Koreans have a ... very defined caste system, and anybody of mixed ancestry, you're just shit in that country ... So I would not have been afforded those

opportunities that I have now. You think about it intellectually and you think 'yeah, but what if' ... ? And then I say, Thank God, that 'what if' never happened. Thank God, the situation is what it is (Evan, 75).

While this perception of exclusion from Korean society was not unusual among adoptees, Evan, a bright and accomplished professional, had invested little thought to his ethnic heritage (or at least, thoughts he was willing to share in the interview). He admitted in the interview, however, that six months earlier he had gone through treatment for alcoholism in response to the intervention of his wife and family and in anticipation of the birth of his child. Whatever paradigm one adopts in understanding alcoholism, most would agree that any chemical addiction severely impairs and inhibits one's access to major emotional issues related to identity, family, culture and so on. Evan spent years of his early adulthood in total denial, quite literally anesthetized to feeling much of anything and less able to explore parts of himself that his healthier adoptee counterparts had long since uncovered in themselves. His recovery from active alcoholism, however, and the birth of a child who is also biracial may accelerate Evan's process of "catching up" in terms of cultural consciousness. A year or two from now Evan may have changed a great deal in terms of his understanding of himself and his place in the world.

Rachel, on the other hand, had done a great deal of thinking about her Korean past and, of the adoptees interviewed for this study, remembered more than any other adoptee about her life in Korea. Her traumatic childhood in Korea however--a mother who abandoned her, a chemically addicted father who died, and an uncle who separated her from her brother and sent her off to the U.S.--was followed by more trauma in her adoptive family in the U.S. Her adoptive mother was physically and emotionally abusive, a reality which left her full of rage about her past. "For many, many years, I was in turmoil, I was angry," she explained. "It wasn't until I was able to let go of my past that I was able to live my future" (Rachel, 150). Part of "letting go of her past" in Rachel's case seemed to necessitate cutting ties with any attachment or feeling for her birth culture. A non-biological adopted Korean sister with whom she was raised in her adoptive family, on the other hand, has great interest in her Korean heritage, a fact which Rachel viewed with disdain: "My sister's ... totally into being Korean ... It's like, you know what? Then go to Korea and live there and don't come back ... All the energy you spend on that [Korean identity] stuff, why don't you spend it on yourself?" (Rachel, 185). For Rachel, like many children of alcoholics, complex issues become very "black and white." She also had anesthetized herself from the pain of that which she left behind, and finds it easier to completely disassociate herself from that past so that she can move on with her life.

Lastly, Karl was the third adoptee who distanced himself significantly from any interest in pursuing his Korean identity even in adulthood. When asked about his sense of cultural identity, Karl elaborated on his own philosophy of culture:

The classic example is Native American culture still claiming that we raped and pillaged their land and that we owe some retribution for it. And my feeling about it is that they're hanging onto a culture that's no longer theirs. Their culture is now turned into history. There's a very fine line between what is culture and what is history but over time culture turns into history. The things that we value now are not the same things that we value back then although it may be the same bloodline coming through. An example would be a lot of the Polish community, how their families still harbor hatred towards families they've never met in their life. That's not culture, that's history. Culture for me is a sense of what's around you ... Culture's a very current thing. That's why it's not history. We're obligated to learn from history, it's a piece of our current culture. But it's not culture itself (Karl, 150).

Thus Karl avoids association with his Korean cultural identity attributing his roots to "history," something from which he's detached. One expression of this is the fact that he deliberately avoids dating Asian women: "As a moral decision, I don't date Asian people. I don't want to get into the bag of dealing with someone who maybe has a stronger sense of culture than I do ... I just would rather not tangle with it. I don't know if it's the fact that I don't want to know about myself, that I may have that in me. Or if it's just cuz I don't want to because I'm a guy and we don't do stuff we don't want to do" (Karl, 400).

Unlike Evan and Rachel who are in their thirties, Karl is in his early twenties. He may yet move to a new level of cultural awareness in his later twenties. Moreover, like Rachel who, despite anti-Asian sentiments, claimed pride in Asian tenacity and the ways that Asians are "kicking ass," Karl also claims certain aspects of what he perceives to be Korean culture.

I don't know if you've noticed with ... the Koreans you've interviewed: we're very competitive culturally, not so much with our own culture but with our own environment that we currently reside in. A lot of the Asian people I know ... we all carry a certain arrogance, a certain kind of snobbiness about ourselves. I don't know if it's because we don't have anyone to look to for comfort so it's a defense system ... We're not arrogant to be mean, we're not arrogant to be malicious, I think we're arrogant for our own safety (Karl, 210).

Even as Karl denies his own connection to being Asian, he ironically identifies an appreciation for what Asians face in the U.S., and for how that may negatively impact Asian-Americans' posture towards the world around them.

Karl, like Rachel, had some fairly negative experiences with his adoptive family. His parents are divorced, and at the time of his interview he was not on speaking terms with his adoptive mother. The role of trauma (or escaping the pain of trauma through alcohol) may lie at the core of explaining these adoptees' anomalous experiences. Yet other adoptees were similarly traumatized. Frank, for example, was placed in foster care because his adoptive mother was physically abusive. Susan's adoptive father was emotionally and physically abusive as well, yet these traumas did not inhibit Frank or Susan's interest in and openness to exploring their Korean heritage. Frank is married to another Korean adoptee and serves as a mentor with adopted Korean children in the Twin Cities, while Susan has worked a great deal on her sense of cultural identity and is very conscious of her roots and issues related to culture, class, and ethnicity.

What did not emerge as obviously apparent with these exceptional adoptees was the role of place in retarding their development towards cultural self-awareness. Evan and Karl were both raised in different parts of South Minneapolis where Evan still resides. Karl now resides in an older first-tier suburb of Minneapolis. Rachel was raised in an outlying "edge" suburb of Minneapolis and she currently lives on a farm outside the Twin Cities. The role of place in inhibiting adoptees from becoming culturally self-aware clearly warrants further exploration. One possible avenue for research is the effect of the sense of community in which adoptees are raised. A strong sense of community might either squelch an adoptee from looking beyond an insular notion of self or, conversely, it might create a sense of security and stability, a launching pad of sorts, from which adoptees feel prepared to step beyond the familiar and to explore new worlds even within themselves.