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We're Adept At It...

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

by

Dana Park Weiser

2016

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2016

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

We're Adept At It...

by

Dana Park Weiser

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Renee E. Tajima, Chair

Using three original works of art, this creative thesis acts as a personal and academic exploration of cultural identification, memory, and production, as well as US imperialism, through the lens of transnational Korean adoption. The varied material forms of these three works add to a larger dialogue of what it means to question being Korean, Asian, American, and transnationally adopted, while also placing them within a dialogue of historical artistic movements. Not only do these pieces explore the ways in which Asian American communities are represented as a departure from the cultural norm, but they also examine the additional divergence felt by transnational Korean adoptees. In this way, these three pieces act as both a form of cultural production and as a research methodology, at once querying and creating a new conversation about transnational Korean adoption.

The thesis of Dana Park Weiser is approved.

Victor Bascara

Purnima Mankekar

Renee E. Tajima, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

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These past two and a half years have been a challenging personal journey for me but I finally have answers to a lot of questions--I would not have been able to accomplish this without this time.

Introduction

As a working visual artist, my artwork situates itself between visibility and creating a dialogue surrounding memory, silences, identity, and the historical practices of transnational Korean adoption—as well as being a Korean adoptee and Asian American woman.¹ For this Master’s program, I will be presenting three of my artworks — one neon piece, one photo installation, and one mixed-media piece — all of which encompass a personal exploration of identification, memory, and US imperialism through the lens of transnational Korean adoption. The varied material forms of these three pieces add to a larger dialogue of what it means to question being Korean, Asian, American, and transnationally adopted, while also placing them within a discourse of historical artistic movements. Not only do these pieces explore the ways in which Asian American communities are represented as a departure from the cultural norm, but they also examine the additional divergence felt by transnational Korean adoptees. Utilizing Lisa Lowe’s definition of culture from her book, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Politics*, as a site where “alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and public life [can be] imagined” and where “the ability to question singular and simplified constructions of history can emerge,” these three works can be understood as a visually critical approach to the field of transnational Korean adoption studies, using artwork as both a form of cultural production and as a research methodology, at once querying and creating a new dialogue about transnational Korean adoption.²

¹ All references to Korea denote South Korea and not North Korea, unless specifically stated.

² Wendsor Yamashita. “What She Remembers: Remaking and Unmaking Japanese Internment,” MA thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2010, 17.

Being a Jewish Korean adoptee, I have struggled for many years with my identity: never fitting into the white community I was raised in nor the Korean community with whom I had no connection. I turned to making art as a therapeutic way to express my feelings on and of identity, racism, and the everyday struggles I dealt with. For me, the best way to convey my conceptual ideas was to start by having a sound background in materials. I did this by studying Fine Arts while an undergraduate and then proceeding post-graduation to a craft school, where I studied woodworking and blacksmithing, which ultimately led to me pursuing an MFA in ceramics. Although I feel most confident working in ceramics, I continue to push and challenge myself by learning new material fabrication techniques, while also reenacting the arts that are considered crafts or decorative arts. Indeed, one of my intellectual and artistic focuses is on this constructed dichotomy between fine art and crafts/decorative arts. Such a bifurcation within the cultural and social capital of the art world seems to speak to both issues of class and Orientalism.³

As an artist, I felt that there was a moment in which my work could be deepened and challenged by delving into the academic studies, theories, practices, and methods of transnational Korean adoption. To go back to school, I believed, would add another conceptual layer to the

³ For me, as an Asian American and an artist, medium is an essential in furthering my concepts on identity and race. For instance, my reliance on clay as a tool is meaningful in part because the material has such a history tied to Asia. Simultaneously, the crossover between crafts/decorative arts and fine arts speaks to issues of a transnational or postcolonial identity in which there is an acknowledgement of the Western influences is clear, but there is also an urgent need to reclaim one's own history and culture. At the same time, the crafts and decorative arts/fine arts separation speaks to a class division, as explored by Pierre Bourdieu. One role of art is as a luxury good, whose superior craftsmanship and/or intellectual prestige offers economic, symbolic, and cultural capital. Consumption of art, according to Bourdieu, is a marker of social class insofar as it is connected to cultural capital, affording the tools and ability to understand and appreciate certain forms of art, implying with that an analogous set of economic, social, and educational knowledge and an assertion of status because of that knowledge and ability. Therefore, crafts and decorative arts are often associated with working class individuals as pieces appreciated for their pragmatic value, while fine arts are the purview of the upper class who have the cultural capital to appreciate and understand it.

work that I was making. During this process, and as a point of validation, I found that the work that I had already been creating was considered an important and compelling cultural production to the Korean adoptee community. My use of and dependence on the histories and theories on and of transnational Korean adoption, colorblind approaches, and queer liberalism were an essential contribution to the work I created during the program and I therefore feel it is vitally necessary to include them within this written portion of the thesis. As the artwork that I produce is up to interpretation by the viewer, the academic research and theories on which these pieces were inspired and informed only aids in giving the viewer a clearer picture as to how I came about in creating these works. This academic process, in and of itself, has become quite an artistic journey for me, both in the performative and the methodological aspects.

Historical Evidence of Transnational Korean Adoption Practices

There are many contributing factors that have influenced both the practical act of transnational Korean adoption and our historical and cultural understanding of such acts. It has been argued the process of transnational Korean adoption started with the rescue effort of “war orphans and ‘mixed-blood’ GI children” that were products of the Korean War.⁴ Following the end of the Korean War in 1953, Korea experienced a period of rapid industrialization. But despite the long-term benefits, this abrupt shift in the economic landscape left thousands of people without food, money, or shelter.⁵ However, SooJin Pate argues in her book, From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption, that transnational Korean

⁴ Eleana J. Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 24.

⁵ SooJin Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2014), 24.

adoption practices actually began developing in 1945 following the designation of the 38th Parallel (that divided the North from the South, with the Soviet Union occupying the northern half of Korea and the US occupying the southern half), and the US military occupation of South Korea — an imperialistic relationship between the United States Army Military Government (USAMG) and Korea, creating access to the development of transnational Korean adoption practices.⁶

The increase of orphans between 1945 to 1953 offers meaningful evidence of the impact the war had on these children. Before WWII, around 2,000 children were living in orphanages and were thought to be the offspring of the Japanese colonizers.⁷ At the start of the Korean War, however, roughly 7,000 children resided in South Korean orphanages; and by the end of the war, that number had risen to over 40,000.⁸ In 1954, there were approximately 51,000 children living in over 400 documented orphanages.⁹ While many of these children were not technically orphans — meaning both mother and father were deceased — they were placed in these orphanages because they would receive the food, shelter, education, and clothing that, due to extreme poverty, their parents could not provide. Following the war, Korea devoted 75% of their national budget on reinforcing the military, while the rest of the budget was put towards “Welfare, Health, Reconstruction, Agriculture, Forestry, and other federal departments,” essentially

⁶ *Ibid*, 22-24.

⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

⁸ *Ibid*, 30.

⁹ *Ibid*, 30.

ignoring these so-called orphaned Koreans.¹⁰ It was, perhaps surprisingly, the US government that concentrated on creating orphanages to house the thousands of abandoned children in an effort to alter their image in Korea: the US wished to be seen as humanitarians.¹¹

In addition to the US' determination to be seen as rescuers rather than imperialists, Cold War politics, featuring a visceral fear and hatred of communism, enabled the US military to influence and subsequently mobilize American civilians on the home front to save these "orphans" from communism by donating money, food, and clothes. The "hungry child" image used in news programs, such as *Paramount News*, invoked "Cold War geopolitics" to rally American civilians in its fight against communism; these programs were often narrated with pro-nationalist sentiments such as: "Hungry children are susceptible to communist promises of a better future; thus hungry children threaten the security of Americans."¹² This type of imagery depended on Orientalist tropes to appeal to American's yearnings to democratize and "civilize" the barbaric East and its children, in part by defeating the communism that preceded these conditions. This campaign eventually led civilians to foster and adopt, bringing these children into their homes. The US military, therefore, once again took specific and methodical measures to alter their image from colonizers to humanitarians, using the rhetoric of anti-communism. By building and sponsoring orphanages, their actions helped to reduce the image of them as imperialistic overlords forcing democracy down the throats of other nations, even though it was,

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 31.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 31.

¹² *Ibid*, 82.

ironically, the US military's actions that created these orphans in the first place.¹³ In this way, adoptees become commodities of democracy, becoming part of the broader modernization, Christianization and democratization processes, or the "patriotic triumvirate," associated with anti-Communist efforts.¹⁴

An important figure to transnational Korean adoption history is Harry Holt, an Evangelical American farmer from Oregon who believed he was given a prophecy from his Lord to save the suffering children of Korea.¹⁵ In his efforts, he personally adopted (illegally because of the Refugee Act that only allowed each American couple two orphans) eight physically less appealing Korean orphans.¹⁶ He and his wife, Bertha, came to transform adoption into an industry, first by establishing the Holt Adoption Program (HAO) in 1956 and then by creating "proxy adoptions" that expedited the adoption procedure to get more children into other countries.¹⁷ These swift procedures not only created access for the Korean government to receive aid from wealthier foreign nations, but also shifted some of their "welfare responsibilities" onto other countries through these adoptions.¹⁸ In addition, Holt also had his own orphanage to supplement his supply of children intended for adoption. Holt's orphanage became an industry in the exportation of Korean children; they even went so far as to surgically repair any physical

¹³ Kim, 48.

¹⁴ Susie Woo, *"Home": Korean War Adoptees and Cold War Sentiments of Race and Nation*. Doctoral Dissertation, Yale University, 2010, 7.

¹⁵ Kim, 43-44.

¹⁶ Pate, 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 108.

¹⁸ Kim, 72 and 74.

defects that would hinder a child's opportunity of adoption.¹⁹ Holt also had the backing of Korea's president Syngman Rhee. Rhee was only concerned with getting rid of these children as quickly as possible without any concern for long term effects, once saying "Get these children out of Korea...(I) don't care if they throw them in the sea."²⁰ Thus, the exportation and commodification of the orphan transformed Korea into a globalized nation.

Not only were there cultural, political, and military strategies in place to fight communism on the American home front through sponsorship of a child, but also these factions employed tactics to paint the birth mother of these children as sexually "deviant" and adoptive parents as saving them from a terrible life.²¹ As historian Arissa Oh contends, these religious tenets can be described as "Christian Americanism" — a "fusion of vaguely Christian principles with values identified as particularly 'American'— specifically, a uniquely American sense of responsibility and the importance of family...it equated being a good Christian with being a good American."²² This is demonstrated in a Christian brochure given to prospective adoptive parents, using heavy pathos as proof of the mother's loose morals:

These children could have been aborted, but their mothers chose life for them. Often the mothers are prostitutes or teenagers, and they cannot take care of their own children. But these babies need homes and parents who love them...married couples...should have the opportunity to experience the satisfactions and responsibilities of parenthood.²³

¹⁹ Pate, 117.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 107.

²¹ *Ibid*, 139.

²² Kim, 53-54.

²³ Pate, 139.

According to this brochure, a mother's immorality — receiving money for sex, being too young, or being unwed — makes her an unfit parent and therefore could have a hazardous effect on her child, promulgating the fear she will pass these deviant behaviors on to her offspring.²⁴

The histories of transnational Korea adoption, then, are laden with ideologies of anti-communism, religious morality, American exceptionalism, and a dichotomy between civilized West and barbaric East. Indeed, these ideologies were often intersecting and inextricable, tying US military interests to social, political, and religious agendas.

Colorblind Approach

These Christian and military propaganda campaigns led to the acculturation processes of fitting these foreign bodies into the white American family by perpetuating the “model minority myth.” In order to spur adoption (and assuage any imperialist guilt), promoters linked acculturation to the model minority stereotype, promulgating the positive characteristics associated with Asians - such as their docility, subservience, or “educational achievements”— as a way of fitting foreign, raced bodies into a white American family.²⁵ Moreover, the model minority stereotype suggested that Asian Americans successfully assimilate themselves to life in the United States in part because they are “somehow immune from cultural conflict and discrimination while experiencing few adjustment difficulties.”²⁶ In this way, Korean adoptees

²⁴ *Ibid*, 140-141.

²⁵ Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2010), 9.

²⁶ Tianlong Yu, “Challenging the politics of the “model minority” stereotype: A case for educational equality,” *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 39(4), 2006, 326.

²⁷ Woo, 123.

acted as models of “racial harmony” and future American citizens.”²⁷ The propagation of the model minority myth, particularly through its application to Korean adoptees, was a politically motivated approach to helping ensure a specifically constructed narrative of the United States as a nation where anybody can achieve the American Dream through hard work and effort, regardless of history of oppression or systematic racism.²⁸

This dual acculturation/model minority model was not only disseminated by American adoption agencies, but was also transformed into a monolithic policy of “colorblind” transnational adoptions, which encouraged parents to disregard the race of the Korean adoptee - which could be seen as hindering and time consuming - and focus on the assimilation process of the child into the white family, ultimately enabling what these American institutions promoted as the altruistic sentiment of “the best interests of the child.”²⁹ Moreover, the colorblind approach conferred these Korean adoptees’ with “honorary white” status, which made inclusion into white families more appealing than welcoming a “black child.”³⁰ In Kristi Brian’s book, Reframing Transnational Adoption: Adopted Koreans, White Parents, and the Politics of Kinship, she claims that adoptive parents could not conceive of having a family that included a black child; their preference for a Korean child was based on the ease of fitting an Asian child into their family because they were being represented as “honorary whites” and “model minorities.” In essence, the American parents exercised “white privilege” by intentionally failing to

²⁸ Charles Park, “Between a myth and a dream: the Model Minority myth, the American Dream, and Asian Americans in consumer culture,” Doctoral Dissertation, Purdue University, 2011, 10-12.

²⁹ Mia Tuan and Jiannbin Lee Shiao, *Choosing Ethnicity, Negotiating Race; Korean Adoptees in America*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 24-25.

³⁰ Kristi Brian, *Reframing Transracial Adoption: Adopted Koreans, White Parents, and the Politics of Kinship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 54.

acknowledge the Korean adoptees' racial presence and corporeality.³¹ However, as Woo notes in her dissertation on Korean War adoptees, adoptees' very corporeal presence within the white nuclear family "forced Americans to broaden and revisit conceptions of race, kinship, citizenship, and national belonging."³² This happened with fluctuating gradations of success, but characteristically relied on compulsorily assimilating the adoptee into American culture, even at the loss of their Korean heritage. Colorblind policies, then, acted as an enforcement of acculturation and assimilation in an effort to homogenize whiteness, rather than as a policy of equality and egalitarianism.

Not only were there acculturation methods put in place to fit these Korean adoptee bodies into US society, but also policies stemming from the National Association of Black Social Workers and the Indian Child Welfare Act created space for more Korean children. These two organizations refused to allow African American and Native American children to be adopted into white families, which created a lack of accessibility for adoptable children, essentially cutting off the supply, and consequently demand, for African American and Native American children while simultaneously augmenting the supply and demand for Korean adoptees.

Owing in part to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s-60s and the advent of black nationalism and the accompanying identity politics of the 60s, by September 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers had taken a controversial stand against transracial adoption practices of white families adopting black children, stating that it was "cultural genocide" for these children, blatantly and systematically rebuffing the prized institution of assimilation and

³¹ *Ibid*, 57.

³² Woo, 195.

acculturation.³³ The NABSW claimed that these adoption practices were detrimental to the children, particularly in producing healthy racial identity formations. The NABSW also stated that the family members are the ones to provide “three levels of all human development” that form the “physical, psychological and cultural, and the nurturing of self-identity” for children.³⁴ By placing these children within white families, the NABSW contended, they would not be able to provide “coping techniques” that would help the children to live in a racist Black-White society.³⁵ They also believed that these practices were not designed altruistically to help these children, but rather catered to the middle-class white families and their desire for children. Through unfair screening processes (“screening out devices”), black families were often rebuffed for being eligible to adopt black children, and there was there no system that provided for extended family members to take in these children, such as financial assistance.³⁶ In the conclusion of their statement, the NABSW declared: “We stand firmly, though, on conviction that a white home is not a suitable placement for Black children and contend it is totally unnecessary.”³⁷

The NABSW proclamation activated other ethnic groups to reexamine transracial adoption practices, as well. In 1978 Congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act that protected Indian children from being forcibly removed from their parents:

³³ Tuan, and Lee Shiao, 23.

³⁴ “National Association of Black Social Workers Position Statement on Trans-Racial Adoptions 1972.” *National Association of Black Social Workers*. 21 Nov. 2013. Web. 6 Mar. 2015, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

Before 1978, as many as 25 to 35 percent of the Indian children in certain states were removed from their homes and placed in non-Indian homes by state courts, welfare agencies, and private adoption agencies. Non-Indian judges and social workers-failing to appreciate traditional Indian child rearing practices-perceived day-to-day life in the children's Indian home as contrary to the children's best interests.³⁸

The purpose of this act was to protect and preserve Indian culture by upholding placement of these children to extended family members within the tribes. Although these groups deemed that transracial adoption practices were "cultural genocide," academic Eleana J. Kim theorizes that it was the normalizing aspect of the concept of the family that allowed transnational Korean adoption practices to continue and increase – one in which their "membership" and normalization is achieved through these dynamics – that disavowed the foreignness of the Korean body, creating an adaptable racialization of the child.³⁹

There were other factors that accounted for the differences between interracial adoption practices; Black children and Native American children had organizations to campaign on behalf of the child; Korean adoptees did not (although many social workers "campaigned" on behalf of the child, they were still gaining profits). This may stem from the low population of Korean Americans in America. Although allowed to immigrate to Hawaii in the early 1900s as laborers, the California Anti-Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920 barred and "discriminated against Asians" from capitalizing on land profits which would increase their state of living, as well as The Gentleman's Agreement (in 1907, made between Japan and the US) which limited access to US mainland (at this time Koreans were still under Japanese colonialism).⁴⁰ It was only the

³⁸ Tuan, and Lee Shiao, 24.

³⁹ Kim, 101.

⁴⁰ David K. Yoo, *Contentious Spirits: Religion in Korean American History, 1903-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 103.

passing of the Immigration Act of 1965 that eliminated these discriminatory barriers.⁴¹ However, it was actually North Korea's constant critical antagonism of South Korea's adoption industry between 1959 to the early 1970s when South Korea's government decided to decrease the number of children they were sending abroad, and focus on promoting domestic adoptions.⁴² Ultimately, it was the embarrassment by the American press during Seoul's hosting of the 1988 Olympics that deemed children as South Korea's "largest export" that ultimately reduced the number of transnational adoptions.⁴³ Localized activism on the part of the adoptees started to emerge in the late 1980s as adoptees started to age and reach out to one another. More adoptee activism started to emerge in the 1990s in Korea, with returning adoptees seeking to navigate/live in their homeland, including campaigning for F-4 visas, language courses, employment and housing opportunities, and act as "post-adoption services."⁴⁴ More recently, biological families, specifically birth mothers, have been protesting against transnational adoption practices, seeking government aid and facilities to keep children within the family and creating support groups to help do so.

Queer Liberalism Debunks the Colorblind Approach

Colorblind approaches stress a common bond of human identity rather than one that emphasized individuals based on their race.⁴⁵ However, the pursuit of colorblindness – an attempt to unite despite differences - works to ignore, or at least marginalize, the realities of

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 3.

⁴² Kim, 32.

⁴³ *Ibid*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 218 and 222.

⁴⁵ Tuan, and Lee Shiao, 25.

difference. David Eng's critical theory on "queer liberalism," when applied to transnational adoption practices, challenges the colorblind approach of transnational Korean adoption while simultaneously affecting the idea of white, heteronormative "family and kinship."⁴⁶ As Eng states: "The refusal to see difference - to acknowledge race - marks the politics of colorblindness in our 'post-identity' U.S nation-state, which is characterized by the persistent disavowal of race in the name of freedom and progress."⁴⁷ Although the emphasis was to place Korean adoptees into white normative families, in actuality the physical Korean body of the adoptee "queers" these normative formations. Whether or not one "sees" color (race), its existence is irrefutable and its effects are palpable. Therefore, as Eng further argues:

...it must also be analyzed as a new form of passing in our putatively colorblind age...that demand the concealment of racial...difference...we witness not the suppression of difference, but the collective refusal to see difference in the face of it. In this regard, transnational adoption helps to mark the resurgence of an abstract individualism meant to shore up neoliberal claims to colorblindness in our multicultural and post-identity age.⁴⁸

By using Eng's theories we can see how taking these colorblind approaches towards transnational Korean adoption stifled and suffocated healthy identity formations for Korean adoptees. Colorblind policies, with their attempt to unify despite differences, actually act(ed) to obfuscate the corporeality and materiality of adoptees' race, thereby complicating adoptees' construction of identity.

⁴⁶ David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Pate also uses queer critique to exemplify the ways in which Korean adoptees have been “subjected to different kinds of violence...both ideological and epistemic.”⁴⁹ By examining the ways in which Korean adoption queers “normative investments,” instead of how Korean adoption is “part of the queer diaspora,” we can see how the Korean adoptee is fashioned into “white normativity” while subsequently failing at it due to their non-normative bodies: “...her very presence exposes the contradictions of white heteronormativity. Because the presence of the adoptee is what queers Korean adoptions and the white American (adoptive) family, the regulation of the adoptee’s race, gender, and sexual normativity is incomplete and therefore ongoing.”⁵⁰ In this way, the materiality of the Korean adopted body at once challenges white hegemony and also fails at white hegemony. This contradiction emphasizes the incongruities, ambiguities, and conflicts that Korean adoptees face in constructing their identity. By utilizing queer liberalism on behalf of Korean adoptees, it is explicable to see how confusing and destructive processes of acculturation can be on developing notions of identity, where adoptees have feelings of internalized racism and become racially isolated within the larger community and society.

History, Theory, and Method Within Cultural Production

Acknowledging and appreciating the ways in which a systemic acculturation process was put into place to compel the transnational Korean adoptee into white society, it is understandable how adult adoptees, such as myself, have to negotiate their identities growing up. Feelings of internalized racism, contradictory inclusive and exclusive ideologies, and confusion about one’s

⁴⁹ Pate, 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 129-130.

identity can stifle healthy identity formations. I, therefore, have often turned to my childhood memories to understand the ways in which I dealt with these issues. These understandings, memories, and processes have informed my artwork, not only in the ways in which it helps to negotiate my own identity issues, but also as an effort to inform a larger audience.

We're Adept At It...

While in this program, I began contextualizing the historical movements – including the anti-communism, America-as-savior propaganda of the 1940s and 50s - leading to transnational Korean adoption practices; through this, I began to conceptualize the words adopt, adapt, and adept in a neon piece I had designed and then fabricated, entitled *We're Adept At It...*⁵¹ This piece consists of the word “Adopt” in a decorative white neon script. Directly over the “o” letter, a bright red “A” in Ariel font sits atop it. In the past, artists such as Bruce Nauman have adopted neon for its “purpose of a critical commentary on language mechanisms.”⁵² Neon signage in businesses and storefronts act as advertisements for products, or condensed wording to highlight goods or practices. How then are the words “adopt/adapt” commodified, highlighted or produced? What relationship does adoption have to transactional process or commercialization? The play between the words adopt, adapt, and adept is recontextualized within transnational Korean adoption practice, bearing urgency as to how children must adapt in their adoptive situations—and therefore questioning the ways in which we have become “adept” at fitting in.

The neon colors chosen for this piece also parallel these words. The whiteness of the word “adopt” is soothing, soft, and calm, while voicing commentary on the transnational Korean

⁵¹ Please refer to figures 1 and 2 on pages 27-28.

⁵² Frank Popper, “Neon.” *Neon*. (Oxford University Press, 2009), Web. 17 May 2015.
https://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme_id=10130

adoption practices of placing Korean children into white heteronormative families. The decorative script also highlights the journey from Korean to white families, as it reproduces and somewhat mocks the ways in which transnational Korean adoption is considered a “privileged diaspora.” I struggled with choosing between colors for the letter “A,” finally deciding upon red neon. I thought about having the “A” be yellow, but realized it would have been too tongue-in-cheek (an aesthetic I usually enjoy); the aggressiveness of the color red, therefore, focuses on the urgency and demand of adapting.

Enacting My Koreanness (self-portrait performance) in Black, White, and Red

My second piece is a triptych of self-portrait photographs entitled *Enacting My Koreanness (self-portrait performance) in Black, White, and Red*.⁵³ In these photos, I painted my face in a stylistic manner of traditional Korean folktale masks. Originally, these carved and painted wooden masks, *Tal*, were used in dance, war, funerals, and theater; currently, such masks are sold as tourist souvenirs all over Korea. The performance aspect of this piece becomes enacted by the painting of the face, copying an image that is associated with Korea. Yet, at the same time, the flaws in the imitation of this image speak loudly to truly not understanding what it means to be culturally Korean. This inconsistent process is similar to the acculturation process compelled by transnational Korean adoption – just as the corporeal Korean body does not quite fit into the white heteronormative family, so too does the Jewish American-Korean body not quite fit the Korean tradition. The Korean dance crowns that are atop the head also speak to cultural disruption and racial “authenticity.” Traditionally, these crowns are only worn in weddings and during specific traditional dances; however, the crowns symbolize a memory from my childhood, as I received a red crown when I was a child. In this way, I am aware of – and still

⁵³ Please see figures 3, 4, 5, and 6 on pages 29-32.

participating in – the duality and inconsistencies of my identities: Korean, American, White, Other. The painted face, the crown, and the golden dragon hairpiece, all are juxtaposed with my Americanized body that is covered with tattoos and piercings, reinforcing the duality and contradictions of my identity.

This triptych of photos also speaks to the history and relationship between Korea and America, including the import/export and commodified aspects of what transnational Korean adoption became. As the subject of the work, a Korean adoptee, reenacts a traditional mask, questions of identity have to be asked. How do Korean adoptees fit into Korean or American society and culture? Kim Park Nelson states in her book, *Invisible Asians*, that Korean adoptees have become raceless because they were raised in primarily white families; therefore, adoptees “see themselves racially in every possible permutation of Asianness, Whiteness, and racelessness, even though most grow up in almost entirely White families and communities.”⁵⁴ Nelson demands that we “...question why and how the performance of race (Whiteness and Asianness), or the lack of such a performance, may be beneficial or detrimental to racialized individuals like Korean adoptees.”⁵⁵ My photographs hope to further that query, if not provide some personal answer to it as well.

Moreover, there is a long and varied history of artist’s self-portraits, using their likeness as models in paintings, sculptures, and photography. When female artists utilize photography as an art form of self-representation, it allows them to govern their own depiction — in essence, controlling “the gaze” — as the “...subject really being *the subject* and not *an object*.” In

⁵⁴ Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 10.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 10-11.

addition, “the artist-as-subject allows the artist to show the subject however the artist wishes. There are no inhibitions between artist and subject....”⁵⁶ It is through this lens that my self portraits are representations of my own self-given interpreted objectification through the history of transnational Korean adoption practices—ironically delineating the ways in which my identity became an object of consumption.

Ombre Chinoises

My final piece – *Ombre Chinoises* - is a fully realized moving sound piece that I had been thinking about and working on for the last year and a half. Two years ago, I went to an antique book fair in Pasadena, California, where I found an object that has lingered in my thoughts: an Ombre Chinoises. This object sat on a tabletop and was originally made as a replication of Chinese shadow puppetry. The highly racially Orientalized imagery on the frame bordered an interchangeable moving story in the background that was motorized by a music box. Using this object as a reference, I was able to recreate my own Ombre Chinoises.⁵⁷ I began working on this piece as a sculpture that encapsulates memory on a multitude of levels, while exploring the ways identity is formed within the private and public spheres, including the elements of visibility and invisibility.

The piece hangs on the wall and is a larger version of the original (approximately 4’ x 3’ x 6”). I employed different decorative techniques to enhance the frame, symbolic of my personal aesthetic preferences for ornate, glittery materials. This makes the piece even more visible – given the glitz and glitter – but also hides the reason for its being there – make my personal

⁵⁶ Ina Loewenberg, “Reflections on Self-Portraiture in Photography.” *Feminist Studies*, 25(2), 1999, 399-400.

⁵⁷ Please refer to figure 7 on page 33.

aesthetics and link to the material invisible. The frame is made out of cherry wood, a wood that will enhance the natural yellows, pinks, and reds of the wood with age. I also used a decorative wood burning technique, pyrography, which mimics pencil drawn markings. In this way, just as the images are “scarring” to one’s identity, the wood burning technique is physically burned into the wood, representational of the “scarring or burning” of identity. Moreover, the Swarovski crystals and gold leaf materials are appliques on the surface that act to augment the “preciousness” of the object. The falsity of these material’s preciousness also serves to mimic the process in which memory is enhanced or highlighted. While memory may appear to be one thing, it is often something else entirely. The frame is lacquered overall with a satin sheen, contributing to a (deceptive) veneer of flawlessness.

The illustrations decorating the frame are all handpicked images from my research, and have historically been used as representations of Asians in America. As a whole, these stereotypical representations have acted as a foil for the West: “...there is a long tradition of European-originated visuals representing some part of Asia as competing with and threatening ‘the West.’”⁵⁸ Using images that range from Fu Manchu characters to the *Heathen Chinees* to the Dragon Lady to the submissive geisha, and a banana, I collaged, transferred, and hand drew these images onto the wood.⁵⁹ The process of transferring the images onto the wood became aesthetically modified by the lines I distorted (by adding more or removing altogether) and the sizes that I altered (either making larger or smaller), blurring and confusing the cultural memory of Asian Americans.

⁵⁸ John Kuo Wei Tchen, and Dylan Yeats, eds. *Yellow Peril: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*. (London: Verso, 2014), 1.

⁵⁹ Please see figure 8 on page 34.

The 72-note music box that plays behind the frame is *Memory* from the Broadway musical *Cats* by Andrew Lloyd Webber. This was the first musical that I went to as a child with my parents. Symbolic of the “passing days” and remembering “what happiness was,” this song is representational of a time that was simpler and filled with happiness, emblematic for me as a child not knowing what lay ahead of me, including all of the historical and racial connotations that linked me to being an Asian American woman.⁶⁰ It once again comments on the nature of memory – how we construct it and how it filters and alters what “really” happened.

The moving story that is continually scrolling when the music is playing consists of watercolor paintings with colored pencils on an opaque Mylar. The images that are collaged together are taken from two of my favorite childhood books. Although these two books seem quite different in concept and morals, they somehow are quite similar in marking, tone and color. The first book, now an antique and out of print, is titled You Are RI-DI-CU-LOUS, by Andre Francois and has two main characters that point out each other’s flaws: “You have a big nose!” and “You are terribly fat!”⁶¹ The two characters, Mister Punch and Mister Poo, go on to tell a two-headed dragon how ridiculous he is—only to get eaten in the end for offending him. The second book was a hand-me-down from my older sister, a Korean folk tale for children published by the Seoul International Tourist Publishing Co, titled Hungbu Nolbu: Two Brothers and Their Magic Gourds, illustrated by Dong Ho Choi and story edited by Edward B. Adams. The story revolves around two brothers and their families; the eldest brother is a “miser and his wife was a selfish woman,” whereas the younger brother “was a very gentle man who would rather say

⁶⁰ “Lyrics to Memory (Cats).” Lyrics Mania, n.d. Web. 8 Mar. 2015.

⁶¹ Andre Francois, *YOU ARE RI-DI-CU-LOUS* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 4.

nothing than to cause an argument.”⁶² The older brother kicks the younger brother and his family out of the house to live in poverty, while he and his family enjoy the large family house. The younger brother and his family help a swallow, which gifts them a magic seed that grows into magic gourds; when that gourd is opened, it gifts the family with tremendous wealth. The older brother hears of the other brother’s fortune and finds a swallow and hurts it. In return the swallow brings him a seed, the gourds produce filth, plague and end up swallowing up his house. In turn, the older brother asks for forgiveness from the younger brother—who readily gives it to his family.

The original *Ombre Chinoises* that I saw in Pasadena was a plaything that mimicked a theater—creating a disconnect between object, story, and music; it was created for amusement and not necessarily as a cohesive object. The *Ombre Chinoises* that I created therefore duplicates that mimicry in style and design. However, there are notions of myself that I purposefully utilize in this recreation. I therefore knowingly create a subtle disconnection between story, music, and object, but utilize my chosen aesthetics in creating a piece that is mine. I believe that this can be seen in the blending of these two book’s illustrations—which is not only my own artistic interpretation of these images, but also points to the blending of some of my happier moments of childhood. You Are RI-DI-CU-LOUS, was a book that my dad would animatedly read to my sister and I before bed, while Hungbu Nolbu: Two Brothers and Their Magic Gourds attracted me to a past time and land I had a distant connection to and depicted characters that “looked like me.”

⁶²Edward B. Adams, ed., *Hungbu Nolbu: Two Brothers and Their Magic Gourds* (Seoul: Seoul International Tourist Publishing Co., 1981), 8.

A thin clear membrane is mounted behind the frame and in front of the moving imagery. On the original *Ombre Chinoises*, this consisted of a piece of clear Mylar that had palms trees and black strips, giving the moving imagery a somewhat 3D effect. I therefore used an opaque Mylar, cutting out Asian stylized flowers, gold-leafing the edges, and embellishing them with Swarovski crystals.⁶³ The images from the moving scroll become obscured by the opaqueness of the Mylar and can only really be seen through the cutout petals, making the viewer come closer to the piece and engage with it longer. A ghosting effect occurs from the opaqueness of the Mylar on top of the colorful images, leaving a lot to the viewer's imagination—an effect that I was looking for. This ghosting effect or mask creates a sieved barrier to my private memories from childhood—allowing viewers glimpses and moments of recreated illustrations—which I believe speaks loudly to the identity I constructed in my youth—moments of familial happiness and struggles with my Korean racialized identity. And just as the viewer must step closer to the piece to engage more thoroughly with it, so too is this true in my real life—as my identity is not just face value.

Discussion of Creativity

One of the greatest tools that I have at my disposal is my memory, not only in the ways in which I think I remember a moment, an incident, a story, but the ways in which my present self may or may not alter these memories. I question the ways in which I remember or fantasize a memory. This contradiction of memory/fantasy is at constant play within the work that I create and is often represented in the insertion of hidden imagery that means a great deal to me. Before starting this program, I often viewed my work as gestures in which I wanted to convey—utilizing human figures as vehicles for these gestures. But now, after almost completing this program, I

⁶³ Please refer to figure 9 on page 35.

see how the academic forces have come to inform my work, utilizing more language and theory as the concept to convey further thought to the audience.

As an artist I am often inspired by the classics, such as Baroque painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio—for his use of rich dark tones or anonymous illuminated manuscripts and incredibly detailed ornateness. I also enjoy contemporary artist's work such as Olafur Eliasson (*The Weather Project*—for its all encompassing transformative effect) and Edward Kienholz (*Five Car Stud*—as a racially charged moment that pulls the viewer into its piece), not only for how they make me rethink social issues, but how they influence my own way of conceptualizing my work—in form, materiality, concept, and essence. However, these artists and these works speak loudly to the systematic white male privilege that dominates this field as evidenced in art history and contemporary work. And I often question the ways my work holds validity and will have a history within this vast arena.

Blurring the lines between academia and art, I am excited to have been included in two shows in my career that were “adoptee artists” shows. Not only for their inclusion and validation in the work I make, but because they also included artists Natalie Mi-Hee Lemoine and Kate Hers—both artists that I feel are contemporaries in my fields, and have often been utilized within the adoptee texts I used as research. Both of these artists have been used as references of adoptee cultural productions in more recent transnational Korean adoption critical studies literature. Lemoine is frequently referenced in the texts utilized in this thesis, as both an artist and as an early activist of transnational Korean adoption practices and policies. Both hers and Lemoine's work also integrates the production of work in Korea with the histories of Korean adoption practices. While Lemoine has an immense catalogue of work, she is frequently known for her contribution to producing imagery for sociopolitical activism. On one of her t-shirts, the image is

a cartoon “of a crying baby being held upside-down by its ankles, as if newly born, with a large plunger-like stamp printing on its buttocks the words ‘Made In Korea,’” raising issues of commodification and consumption.⁶⁴ One of hers’ pieces reinterpreted Adrian Piper’s *Calling Card*; hers distributed calling cards that “literally translates the adoptee’s identity for the Korean public by challenging dominant assumptions about ethnicity that equate blood with culture and nation.”⁶⁵ These two female Korean adoptee artists validate the work I create not only within the adoptee community but also within the larger field of contemporary art, allowing for marginalized voices to be heard that are often ignored.

Conclusion

This past November (2015), I went to Seoul for my second “adoptee artist” show, not only because my work was included, but also to give the introductory speech for the show’s opening. I wanted to witness the artwork, but also the performative aspects surrounding the show – in ceremony and through the audience. I realized on my visit that this was my fifth time back to this country – the only country that I have visited that many times – and I wondered what it was that compelled me to want to return, as I often still felt like an outsider. After my third visit, back when I was only 15 years old, I stopped looking at everyone’s faces — trying to see a little bit of me in someone else. As I have gotten older, I have given up on the pursuit of finding my biological family, realizing that it was not about reconnecting with my biological family, but having a desire to acknowledge the ways in which their bodies occupy a given space. Through the research I conducted in this program, I often found myself angry and disillusioned at the history and practices that were revealed. I was often saddened by interlocutors’ admissions of

⁶⁴ Kim, 162.

⁶⁵ Kim, 190.

emotions surrounding their identity, but felt in league with what a lot of them were saying. I cried at all of Deann Borshay Liem's film, at DanAKADan's web series, at Tammy Chu's film, *Resilience*, and at the newly released *Twinsters* adoptee film. But through this program, I also gained a community and a fuller understanding of the importance of that community, not only within the academic field, but also within the Asian American and transnational Korean adoptee community.

As my work has always been focused on issues of race, identity and adoption, I have been inspired by the juxtaposition of my childhood memories with everyday conversations and gestures. I am intrigued by passive prejudice that is found in conventional language and dialogue, while also looking at historical references that enhance the techniques and push the boundaries. In the past, I continued to make work about my identity and adoption, yet felt very much in solitude. It is exciting for me now as an artist and a Korean adoptee to have a multitude of critical theory and practical history texts that include artistic cultural productions as evidence of this small percentage of adoptees — which acknowledges my presence in this movement and considers me as part of their community. I look forward to getting back to making artwork fulltime, and am excited to utilize what I have learned throughout this program to channel into a new body of work.

Figure 1

We're Adept At It...

36" x 18" x 2"

Neon

2015



Figure 2

We're Adept At It... (Detail)

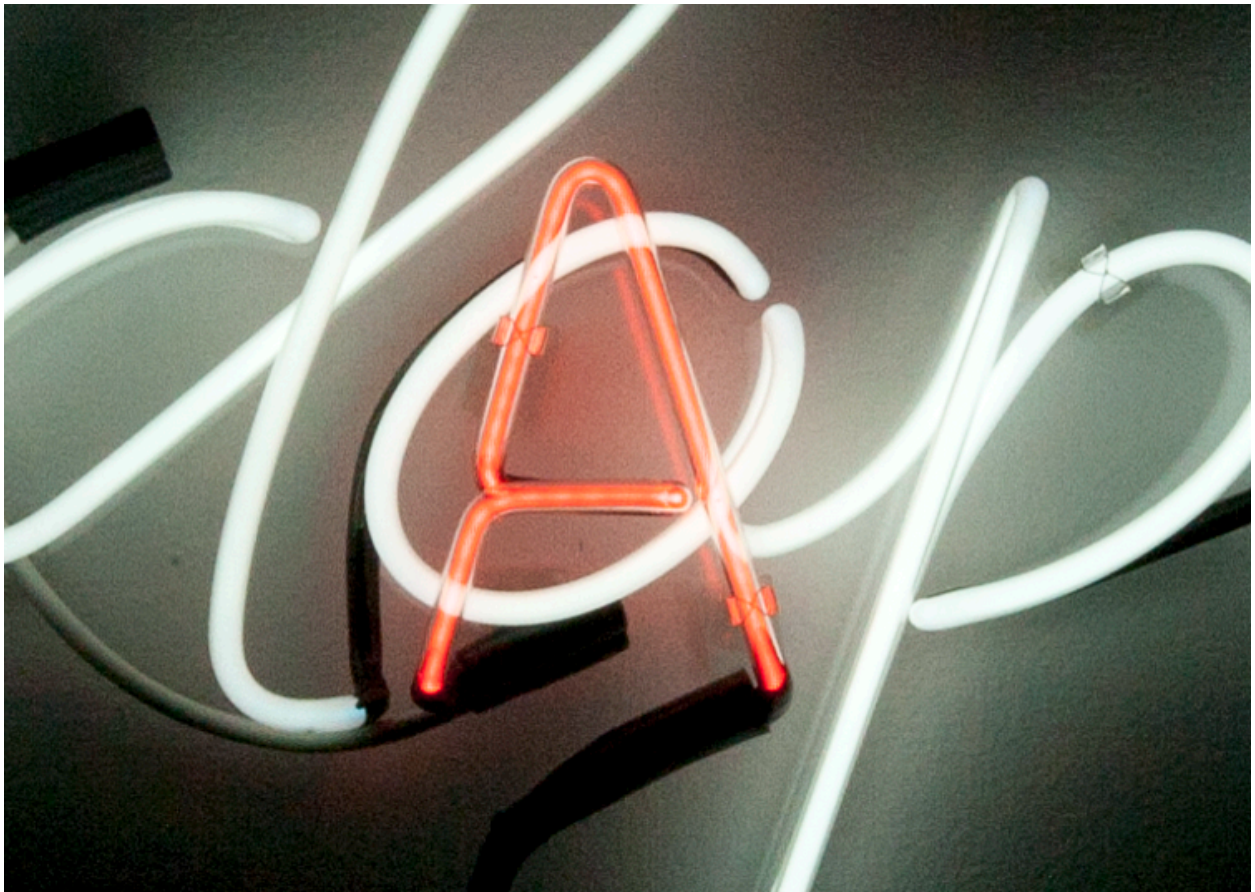


Figure 3

Enacting My Koreanness (self-portrait performance) in Black, White, and Red

Each 30" x 30"

Photo

2015



Figure 4

Enacting My Koreanness (self-portrait performance) in Black (Detail)



Figure 5

Enacting My Koreanness (self-portrait performance) in White (Detail)



Figure 6

Enacting My Koreanness (self-portrait performance) in Red (Detail)



Figure 7

Ombre Chinoises

4' x 3' x 6"

Wood, Mylar, gold leaf, Swarovski crystals, paint, miscellaneous

2014-2015



Figure 8

Ombre Chinoises (Detail)



Figure 9

Ombre Chinoises (Detail)



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