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Adoptee Aesthetics: A Gendered Discourse

Aino Rinhaug

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow,
University of Oslo/University of London UK

*I seek a balance between
the East where
I was born
and
the West where
I was raised.
But not in those places.
A neutral place where
I can just BE.*

Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine

The present article seeks to explore how aesthetic discourses by adoptee artists from South Korea can be said to place the adoptee figure at the intersection between race and gender. By looking at how the adopted self uses art as a site in which to negotiate the question of identity formation, I hope to make apparent the constructive relation between adoptee aesthetic discourse, gender, and race. The analysis thus intends to challenge our notions of identity, gender, and self, precisely by looking at how discourse is performed in order to transform and, eventually, engender our selves.

Introduction

On the basis of how adoption studies—quite literally understood as research focused specifically on human adoption as a phenomenon—is in the process of becoming a discipline in its own right, the present article seeks to examine some of the ways in which the experience of being adopted transnationally establishes in individuals a particular sense of subjectivity. Furthermore, the intention is to see how this notion may be exposed and explored through discourse. I develop this by way

of first seeking to establish the status of the adoptee as similar to yet different from that of a migrant or a postcolonial subject; second, focusing on the performative and gendered aspects of adoptee discourse; and third, bringing the previous observations together in a broader discussion of adoptee aesthetics as a social discursive practice, by way of which a sense of the queer self is both constituted and adequately critiqued. The concern with the adoptee discourse is guided by the following questions: How can adoptee genealogy be interpreted or performed as “gendered” in aesthetic discourse? To what extent can adoptee aesthetic discourse contribute to a new perspective on the notion of queer as “unidentifiable,” and what kind of self are we referring to in this regard? In order to qualify my examination, I will now turn to a brief historical overview of international adoption. Because they formed part of what is still being regarded as the largest enterprise of intercountry adoption, my focus is on adoptees from South Korea (hereafter Korea).

Background: Becoming “Transversal”

The present examination is based on a view of transnational adoption as a politicized social practice, which, in a crudely summarized way, uproots the individual from a given set of laws, in order to transfer and, in turn, resettle him or her in a new environment. Since the end of the Korean War (1950–1953), the international community came to establish a view on Korea as the nation of baby export, and more than an estimated 200,000 babies and children have been sent out, mainly to the United States, but also to countries in Western Europe, predominantly Scandinavia, France, and Belgium.¹

As Jodi Kim (2009) observes:

Since the end of the Korean War (1950–1953), the international community came to establish a view on Korea as the nation of baby export, and more than an estimated 200,000 babies and children have been sent out, mainly to the United States, but also to countries in Western Europe, predominantly Scandinavia, France, and Belgium.

This intersection, or conjoined genealogies of cold war imperialisms in Asia and transracial adoptions out of Asia, impels us to reckon with the complex politics and affects of transracial adoption as not simply or solely an individual private matter motivated by altruistic desires to form new kinships and to provide better lives for orphaned and abandoned children. It is also a highly racialized and gendered process implicated in the United States’ imperialist, capitalist modernity and indeed its foundational or constitutive projects of racial formation and “nation building” both domestically and internationally. (856)

Kim’s observation places transnational adoption right at the center of world politics, where, indeed, it has its roots and to whose capital it will remain inseparable. Also in Korea is this fact made obvious: in recent years, with the development of a democratized welfare state and the launch of the country’s globalization policy in the mid-1990s, the Korean nation underwent a tremendous economic and societal change, which led to a fun-

damental reorganization of social structures, among them the role of the family and the position of the individual.² In light of Korea's striving for economic growth and openness toward the international community at large, the discussion of the controversial status of the adoptee as an overseas Korean has reached the political agenda, leading to the inclusion of adoptees in the "Overseas Korean Act" (OKA). Apart from granting eligible overseas adoptees a special visa, which secures their right to live in Korea for up to three years, this may also be seen as part of an effort to facilitate a return of the adoptee to the country of origin. However, as Jung-Sun Park and Paul Y. Chang (2005) argue, legal national identity is confounded with ethnic identity. Indeed, as I will argue, legal, ethnic, and even ethical concerns are being challenged in the case of Korean adoptees. Recently, an increasing number of adoptees have chosen to go back to Korea for shorter or longer periods of time to find their birth families, to learn the language, to study, to work, and even to live. For those who stay for extended periods, small adoptee communities are now being created in Seoul, providing the returnees with a common ground of shared experiences. What interests me in this respect is that the act of going back takes on a major ambivalent significance. For, one must ask, what is it a return to? Given the experience of first having been sent out as a baby or a child in a state of poverty and bereavement and then of coming back later in life in a state of relative prosperity, the encounter between Korea and the "Westernized" adoptee self can be seen to initiate a new stage in the adult adoptee's identity-formation process. In terms of what socially determines a self and its position within a social structure, the adoptee baby, or child, suffered, as J. Kim notes, a "'temporary' social death" and was legally registered in a separate orphanage register (aside from the family register), thereby stripped of his or her Korean citizenship in preparation for adoption (Kim 2009, 857). In the second stage of the adoptee's identity-transformation process, as Kim rightly points out, the experience of a former "social death" is negated by the fact that the child is being restored and legally included in a Western environment. Here, he or she is given a new name (in some cases together with the Korean name), a passport, and a place in the social discourse. As a result, it becomes evident that going back to one's country of origin underlines the transversal position of the adoptee as a migrant.

The Adoptee as a Postcolonial Migrant

In light of the above observations, it does not seem wrong to suggest that the Korean adoptee community—worldwide or in Seoul—may be said to bear strong similarities to other groups of postcolonial migrants. If, as Angelika Bammer has observed, "the migrant experience is defined by the continual play between loss and gain" (Ponzanesi and Merolla 2005, 152), where migrancy is defined through the modalities of nomadism and exile, then it is clear that the shared characteristic of "otherness"

befalls the adoptee as well as any other migrant. However, there are some aspects of the adoptee figure that support the suspicion that the differences between the adoptee migrant and the postcolonial nomad or exiled subject are fundamental in one particular respect: whereas the migrant in general is knowingly in exile, since his or her memory or experience of a past home is still alive and, as such, a constant reminder of the outsider position in the present “new” home, the adoptee’s transversal position is based on a form of exile, whose origin—to a great extent—remains in the dark. As a consequence, the migrant would position himself or herself in a chain of coherent events, leading up to the present, while the adoptee’s chronology seems often to seek an explanation for the present in the hypothetical and imaginary. Hence, it does not seem wrong to suggest that the creation of the migrant adoptee community would seem to be much in the line of Benedict Anderson’s (1983) notion of the “imagined community,” that is, where members of a given community (or a nation) are unlikely to ever meet or know each other, but who, nevertheless, share a sense of communion. More specifically, evidence for a fundamental difference between Korean adoptees and, say, “other” Korean communities abroad has been given by Kira Donnell’s study of the relations between the general Korean American community and Korean adoptees in California (Rasmussen 2009). Donnell points to the fact that many adoptees find it difficult to integrate into the larger Korean community, due to judgment and lack of acceptance (108). Beyond obvious reasons for this difficulty, such as lack of language skills, little or no knowledge of Korean culture, and so on, I would argue that the main reason for the absence of understanding between the two groups is of a particular linguistic nature, and also, that it has a lot to do with the position of the adoptee, not necessarily vis-à-vis Koreans in particular, but with *others* in general. The adoptee experiences a unique notion of sameness, yet difference, which requires a language that is

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not Korean or English, but rather a means of communication simultaneously able to unmask, yet mask the self. By playing on the sense of a double belonging, the adoptee establishes himself or herself as a participant of an articulatory space in between sameness and difference. Or, as Franz Fanon has written, “to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the mor-

phology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (Fanon 1986, 17–18). As such, and according to Fanon, mastery of a language is an expression of power, with the consequence that for a colonized people or subject, the loss or burial of one’s original culture leads to a sense of inferiority or marginalization. In the case of Korean adoptees, it is in many (but not all) cases not so that one has first known one language or culture, and then been forced to learn and master another. If the adoptee has no or very

little recollection of a “first” language, then he or she is more like a queer figure, whose quest for identification and belonging is not necessarily to that of a community (white, Korean), but rather must be regarded in terms of being seen and understood as a transparent figure in its own right, mastering, thus, oneself in any given context. One way in which to approach this kind of transparency with the help of language is to look at the characteristics of an “adoptee discourse.”

Toward an Adoptee Discourse

The most obvious consequence of having been uprooted from one’s land of origin is, obviously, that the adult adoptee, if he or she returns to Korea, rarely finds anything “recognizable.” This form of finding oneself in a situation of ambivalence in terms of belonging may, furthermore, lead to a sense of adherence, yet disobedience to two constituting discourses, one known (Western), the other unknown (Korean), both equally right and somewhat equally wrong. The resulting ambivalence as to “who am I” and “where do I belong” may, in turn, cause a need for carving out a place for oneself in perpetual transition between the two realms.³ The question is to what extent this experience of adoptee dislocation bears similarities to that of other transitive, unidentifiable, hence queer subjects. The overall assumption is, moreover, that discourse as a social practice offers a way of seeing how we experience our being in the world, in part through the representational capacity of language, that is, from the constitutive, hence constructive, aspect of discourse (Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002). My use of discourse is based on what Deborah Schiffrin (1988) writes in terms of the communicative aspect of language, which is always intimately connected to its context.

Moreover, discourses are regarded as a “social practice,” and, in a Foucauldian sense, are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002, 13).⁴ With that in mind, I am interested in looking at adoptee aesthetic discourses as a performative act of queer subjectivity. If aesthetic discourses articulate our ways of seeing the world (as subjects), but also determine how others see us (as objects), then art in general and visual art in particular offer a possibility for the adoptee figure to undergo a kind of transformation, demonstrating a process of becoming self-as-other. In this regard, aesthetic discourses, be they visual art, literature, performance, and so on, can be seen to represent and constitute a particular kind of discourse of representation, constitution, and even a sense of “homecoming” where the notion of adoptee identity can be renegotiated, engendered, and politicized anew. Aesthetic discourse, in other words, helps to demarginalize the hitherto “hidden” figures, whose “fake” identities have—quite literally—been determined, fabricated, or produced by dominant discursive apparatuses. In reclaiming one’s sense of control over the past, the assumption is that

the discourse of adoptee aesthetics provides the adoptee with a means in which to articulate a sense of double belonging and therefore represent (or constitute) a sense of self, similar to that of so-called queer selves.⁵ Moreover, I seek to show that the adoptee figure is discursively placed in a position at the intersection between race and gender. As concerns the former, in regard to the question of race and ethnicity, the adoptee discourse is one of ambivalence, mirroring a sense of double belonging (Asian-white); and as for the latter, in terms of gender, or genus (male-female), adoptee discourse destabilizes our views on given categories of identity by taking on a performative and transformative function in the aesthetic realm.

This performative aspect of discourse—as famously analyzed by John L. Austin in 1955—derives from the idea that one can “do something with words” (1971). In light of my analysis, I will look at what aesthetic utterances do with words and selves. If words can be said to create a new social reality when addressed or performed to a community, then they are self-referential and constitutive in so far as they bring forth the social reality to which they refer (Fischer-Lichte 2008). It is my belief that this idea of bringing forth and of revealing a social reality by way of performative discourse, or speech acts, can also help in understanding the (trans)-position of the transnational adoptee.

Adoption, Performativity, and Gendered Discourses

In this regard, we return to the notion of performance as a discursive act of representing and constituting the self. As there is a certain association with performativity and the indexing of identity through linguistic and other forms of performance, a so-called “gayspeak” (Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002) may indicate a desire to construct, or perform oneself

Indeed, as mentioned above, discourse as a kind of defacement also becomes a masking of the self, whereby the “mask” can take on a number of faces. As with acting, “speech acting” becomes synonymous with “masking with words.” Whereas migrants—through their exile—may be said to wear masks (of difference), adoptees may come to acknowledge that the face in fact is the mask.

in the presence of the other, whether this is intentional or not. The main point here is that discourse (in a broad sense) constitutes a certain image of the self in the eyes of both the subject as well as of the other, as spectators. Indeed, as mentioned above, discourse as a kind of defacement also becomes a masking of the self, whereby the “mask” can take on a number of faces. As with acting, “speech acting” becomes synonymous with “masking with words.” Whereas migrants—through their exile—may be said to wear masks (of difference), adoptees may come to acknowledge that

the face in fact is the mask. In order to investigate this act or acting—whether it is intentionally theatrical or not—as a way of first unmasking, and then reconstituting the self *as mask* in the case of adoptees, I turn now to a closer examination of how gendered, or queer, discourses operate. My investigation is led

by the suspicion that both queers and adoptees form groups that strive to communicate a certain experience of being in a position where they are being “hosted,” or taken hostage by others (Ekins and King 2006).

Queer Bodies—Performative Discourses

In regard to “gendered discourse” Joan Swann (Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002) understands a practice of communicating identity according to a notion of discourse as guided by a more fluid model of language and gender. This view underlines diversity, context-dependency, and gender as a contextualized social practice, in view of which there is a certain ambiguity or uncertainty in terms of what speakers say or do. Swann, referring to observations made by Deborah Cameron, notes that:

... language is *radically* contextual. It is not just a matter of context affecting the system; the system has no existence outside a context. Thus language cannot be abstracted from time and space, or from the extralinguistic dimension of the situation in which it is embedded. Just as modern biologists regard even simple organisms’ behavior as produced by incredibly complex interactions of genetic and environmental phenomena, so even the simplest linguistic exchange involves a constellation of factors—linguistic, contextual, social, and so on—which is always more than the sum of its parts. And this also implies, of course, that meaning is radically indeterminate and variable. (46)

For Swan, this model suggests that the cause of women’s sense of alienation from language, which has been dominated by men, is based on linguistic or social practices, which in turn, we can observe, emphasize the aspect of performativity in the discursive constitution of a gendered, or marked self.⁶ As is supported by discussions of Ann Weatherall (2002), language constitutes gender and produces sexism as a social reality. Weatherall notes that norms about speech influence how men and women are perceived by others as well as by themselves, so that raising questions about these norms also exposes the power structures of a higher social order. Significantly, as Weatherall observes, “a social constructionist sense of gender as discourse offers a radical critique not only of biological determinism but also of the sex/gender distinction” (81). The hierarchical differences between the two aspects are, in light of the discursive turn, made more ambivalent. The important thing to note is that the biological cannot be separated from the social, but instead, the former is a contained part of the latter. Moreover, an understanding of the existence of “two and only two sexes” is equally a social construction, or, more precisely, a normative social construction, based primarily on the existence of “male” and “female,” thus leaving out the categories of everything or everyone “in-between” (82). As Weatherall observes,

the negative connotations often associated with [tomboy, sissy, bisexual, gay, lesbian, hermaphrodite, androgyne, transvestite, transsexual, transgendered] suggest that, although multiplicity exists, these are aberrations and departures from a basic dichotomy of female and male. (82–83)

A disfigurement of bodies, thus, can be seen as an attempt or desire to physically reconstruct a self in order to adhere to given sets of opinion of who we are, or ought to be at any given time or place.

In light of these observations, our attention is drawn to a model of identity formation, which allows for a coexistence of biological and social structures to create our sense of being contained in a body as a carrier of social meaning. In turn, these bodies underline their performative capacities as discourses of self. In this sense, bodies become constructs that are either accepted or rejected, fitting or unfitting for given social categories. A disfigurement of bodies, thus, can be seen as an attempt or desire to physically reconstruct a self in order to adhere to given sets of opinion of who we are, or ought to be at any given time or place. As Susie Orbach (2009) observes, it is a sign of our times that bodies are deemed out of control and must be disciplined, for example through consumption:

Eating is one manifestation, sexuality another, drinking and drugs yet others. The flip side of this attitude is that we seem to believe that almost everything about the body can be changed by the individual. Biological designation apart, pigmentation, noses, lip contours and signs of ageing are all subject to improvement. The pull to refashion comes from categorising bodies as raced—white, black, brown, Asian—and then, once raced, as classed—working-class, middle-class and upper-class bodies used to look, move, dress and speak distinctively—after which each body was differentially accepted and treated depending on age, size and notions of beauty. (24)

These observations suggest, on the one hand, that a notion of multiplicity of gender identity ought to be appreciated as it is, indeed, as natural; on the other hand, the idea of multiplicity is challenged by the question of construction, intervention, and manipulation of nature according to perceived norms of what is considered “right,” “beautiful,” and so on. However, again, it might be a question of altering our views on discourse, in order to effectuate a differentiated view of the body and its behavior. In regard to transgender discourse specifically, Judith Halberstam (1998) notes that

Transgender discourse in no way argues that people should just pick up new genders and eliminate old ones or proliferate at will because gendering is available as a self-determining practice; rather, transgender discourse asks only that we recognize the nonmale and nonfemale genders already in circulation and presently under construction. (162)

Halberstam contends that the question of “picking a gender” is not merely one of choice; rather, that some transsexuals

do take control of their bodies, while others may experience the desire to be trans or queer more strongly than the desire to be male or female. She writes:

If the borderlands are uninhabitable for some transsexuals who imagine that home is just across the border, imagine what a challenge they present to those subjects who do not believe that such a home exists, either metaphorically or literally. (164)

In light of this absence of home, and, as a consequence, of the notion of willing one's own place, it will inform our analysis to look at the relation between the body as discourse, cross-dressing, and transformative performance.

Cross-dressing: Aesthetic Discourse as Social Practice

If, as Halberstam argues, "cross-dressing, passing, and gender transitivity work in and through other forms of mobility," (168) then the act of cross-dressing—as that of masking referred to earlier—may be used as a motif, trope, or discursive gesture for a desire to unsettle an entire system of identity figuration. Not surprisingly, therefore, to borrow a term from Erika Fischer-Lichte, we can detect the close link between cross-dressing and play, demonstrating the transformative power of performative bodies. My question is, to refer back to observations already made, whether this bodily performance is guided by some form of willed necessity, taking both social as well as biological factors into account. As such, will is human nature; it is desire and, more importantly, a will and quest for oneself.

As Bullough and Bullough (1993) have observed, it is not so much the act of cross-dressing as the social meanings attached and attributed to it by others that is important for indicating resulting interactions. As they argue, self-concept is a double notion with a public as well as a private side. The latter—our personal identity—is associated with individual qualities specific to a person, whereas the former is based on a sense of belonging to a certain social group. As the authors point out, although these two aspects often work side by side, there is a possibility that the social identity can operate to the exclusion of the personal identity, especially in cases of discriminated groups.⁷ As Judith Butler (1990) has argued, gender identity is based on bodily, stylized acts, and Fischer-Lichte (2008) concurs:

Performative acts (as bodily acts) are "non-referential" because they do not refer to pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence, substance, or being supposedly expressed in these acts; no fixed, stable identity exists that they could express. (27)

It becomes clear, thus, that the bodily act and enactment is also a gesture of "doing something with bodies," or, as Fischer-Lichte notes, as allowing the body to generate identity, "individually, sexually, ethnically, and culturally marked" (27). Fur-

thermore, this indicates important observations in regard to a “third” articulation for a “new” *queer* noncategorical identity. The latter, so I contend, would also provide a mode by which it would be possible to articulate a self (social and individual) that *defies its own marking*, precisely by shedding light on it through this very articulation. Performance is, thus, performed by performative acts, and at this point I will turn to the constitutive discourse of the adoptee as a generated figure, *taking place* at the intersection between gender and race.

Adoptee performance

We have seen that adoptee identity formation relies on the obvious fact that the adoptee self (both socially and individually) has migrated across boundaries and comes to perform a kind of discursive masking, or cross-dressing of the self that goes right across political, social, biological, and ethical categories.

As noted above, the adoptee takes on a double identity and becomes, as a consequence, a double figure, based on the fact that he or she is “naturally” (ethnically) Asian, yet “socially” Western, whose memories of the birth place remains obscure, or at best, foreign.

By looking at how this form of performance act is manifested in aesthetic discourse, we are making the assumption that the adoptee figure challenges the notion of gendered discourse in intricate ways. As noted above, the adoptee takes on a double identity and becomes, as a consequence, a double figure, based on the fact that he or she is “naturally” (ethnically) Asian, yet “socially” Western, whose memories of the birth place remains obscure, or at best, foreign. As such, the individual (*genus*) is embedded in, or hosted by, a cultural realm to which he or she will adapt and hence adhere to in terms of a governing discourse.

As a consequence, the adoptee figure, as a body, is manipulated and disciplined by an order that is Western. In this regard, my contention is that whatever may constitute the suppressed biological aspect resurfaces *within* the aesthetic realm *qua* trope (mask) and, as such, ties in with the social and discursive construction of the self.

A selected number of artworks or aesthetic discourses by adoptee artists illustrate how the adoptee figure comes to represent a transient, migrating, fluid, queer, nongendered, discursive body, which to a greater or lesser extent challenges the paradigms according to which a self is created.⁸ These works demonstrate, first, the strong creative relation between adoption as a form of transitive migration and creativity as a constitutive practice of identity performance; and second, the desire to work for—through art—a borderless freedom for the expression of self.

Acting Out: Performance of Self as a Discursive Body

The present selection seeks to exemplify what the previous argument has endeavored to establish as a queer, adoptee discourse and to give an idea of the range of ways in which the question of a transversal identity formation and the “mask” as



Figure 1. "A Love Nest." © Danjel Nam, knapptysty.blogspot.com.

defacement can be addressed, as the works demonstrate the move from explicitly autobiographic concerns to a more general experience of a transient subjectivity in a global context. As such, and referring back to the topic of the status of the migrant, adoptee art also picks up on and reflects current tendencies of contemporary art to explore and expose its own nomadism or mobility in so far as aesthetic practice is concerned. As James Meyer (Coles 2000) has observed, contemporary art can be seen to reflect on two types of nomadism—one lyrical, the other critical: while the first suggests a random and poetic mobility or circulation of bodies in real time and among everyday occurrences, the second kind seeks to "locate travel [and the traveler] itself within historical and institutional frameworks" (11). The fascinating characteristic of adoptee artworks, however, is that it is precisely as if their practice points to an aesthetic mobility that is located—once more—at the interface of these two forms of contemporary nomadism, and, temporarily speaking, in between a perpetual present and a historical framework. Questions of belonging, identity, and subjectivity are explored by way of art's own negotiation over its functionality and representational power. The following examples of adoptee aesthetics will demonstrate this further.

A.q.s

Interestingly, in regard to the discussion of masking and unmasking a queer adoptee discourse, the artistic statement of Korean Swedish artist A.q.s. reads: "I am an Asian Queer Swedish"; and "in the land of the Vikings, in their ice cold, white, white, white hearts and souls, I was raised to be—the

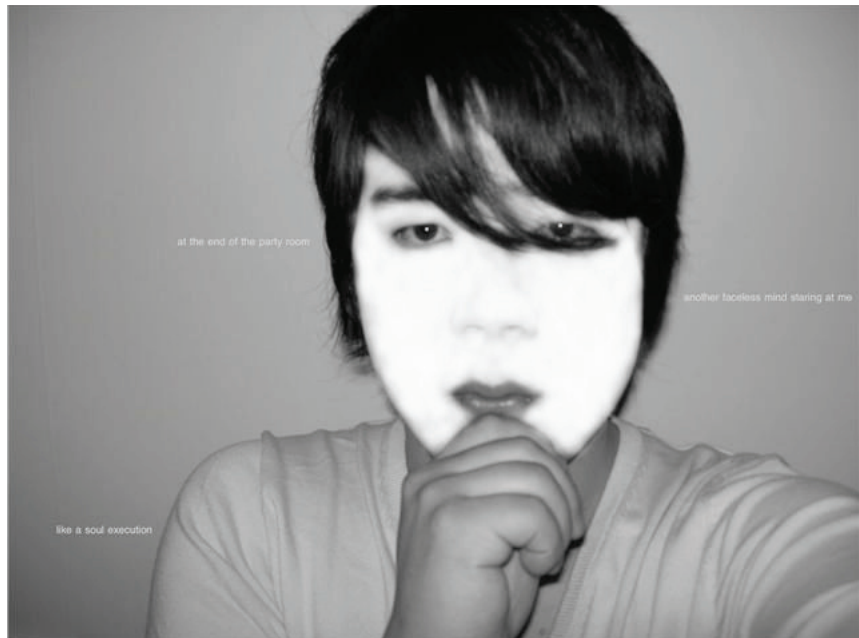


Figure 2. "Soul Execution." © Danjel Nam, knapptysty.blogspot.com.

Fucking-Chinese, the Saffron Face, the Gook, Karate Kid, Yoko Ono, the Geisha and the Faggot!" (star-kim 2009)

If such "nicknames" can be seen as discursive masks, then this is a statement of what happens when a body has been taken hostage by a Western culture and, as a reaction, comes to play with the question of performing a self and a given identity. This is also illustrated by two of the artist's photographs, or images: first, in the photograph entitled "A Love Nest" where we see an Asian person, whose face—like a mask—is painted white with red lips, and wears an expression of profound sadness. Inserted in the upper-left corner of the image is a smaller "nest" or cluster of Asian babies together with, or perhaps inseparable

In other words, these images seem to suggest that when the Westernized Asian self puts on an often exaggerated, carnivalesque Asian mask (either by his or her own choice, or by that of others), it points to and plays with the fact that this Asian face is, in fact, the natural face; however, as such, it is only visible (to the self and to others) as a mask, a double-layered face.

from, an Asian white facemask. The second image, "Soul Execution," similar to the first, shows the same masked self staring into the camera, again with a sad face; the right hand is supporting the chin which gives the impression of holding up a mask in order to keep the face covered, and the image is accompanied by the text, "At the end of the party room another faceless mind staring at me a soul execution." The images—and verbal statements—of A.q.s. explicitly suggest that the notion of identity for many Korean adoptees may be experienced as something

profoundly constructed; the "natural self" becomes equated with the constructed self. Here, as noted earlier, the mask is the self, glued to the face, suppressing, or even executing, the "soul" of the individual. In other words, these images seem to

suggest that when the Westernized Asian self puts on an often exaggerated, carnivalesque Asian mask (either by his or her own choice, or by that of others), it points to and plays with the fact that this Asian face is, in fact, the natural face; however, as such, it is only visible (to the self and to others) as a mask, a double-layered face. Hence, an “Asian Swede” is unmasked in discourse as a multivalent construction, performed by the self as a naturalized masquerade, whose explicit cross-dressing intends to demonstrate that the painted mask (name, nickname, etc.) is as glued to the self as is the “Western” dress (discourse) to the “Asian” body.

Jette Hye Jin Mortensen and Susan Sponsler

The same topic of defacement and autobiographical concern, demonstrated by way of unmasking the self, is the main focus in the works of Korean Danish artist Jette Hye Jin Mortensen and Korean American artist Susan Sponsler. Both question the process of identity formation in terms of “crossing boundaries” by way of adoption, by juxtaposing signifiers of East and West. In Mortensen’s installation *Songs of My Great Grandfather* (2008) as well as in the performance *Banana Power* (2006), the topic of adoptee genealogy and heritage is explicitly addressed as an act of transformative performance. In the case of the former, Mortensen asks how Danish she is (or is not) if she has knowledge of the songs, language, and musical legacy of famous Danish composer Carl Nielsen (1865–1931). The audience is invited to dress up in uniforms, pick up the songbooks provided, and perform the songs by Nielsen, which are being displayed on video. If, as is stated on the artist’s Web site, songs are symbols of national identity, then Mortensen questions this symbolism by questioning her own Danishness. Conversely, in the performance *Banana Power*, Mortensen installed a banana-baking stall outside the exhibition hall of the Gwangju Biennale. Here, she baked bananas in a “Danish” way, foreign to the Korean passers-by, who had never tasted sugarcoated bananas before. Suggesting, thus, baking as an act of transformative performance, Mortensen seeks to point to the fact that the banana, as a signifier, is not always what it seems: playing on the “yellow on the outside, white on the inside” notion of Korean adoptees, the banana becomes a figure in transition, handed over from person to person, and thereby undergoing a process of transformation of meaning.⁹

With the same play on the “yellow” vs. “white” dichotomy—and in the effort of breaking it down—American artist Susan Sponsler asks what happens to discourse when it is transposed to, hence defaced by, a different context. In one of her photographs, titled *Piecing Together Our Histories Quilt*, Sponsler, by juxtaposing American and Korean signifiers in a “quilt”-like image (showing American and Korean flags, black-and-white adoptee baby photographs) demonstrates that the migration of the adoptee figure from its place of origin to the place where

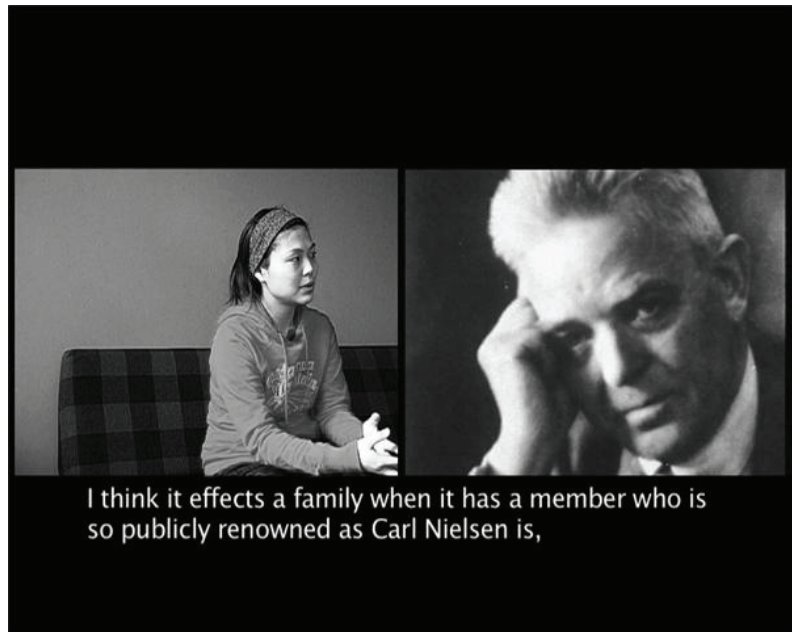


Figure 3. From *"Songs of my Great-Grandfather."* © Jette Hye Jin Mortensen.

it is being "hosted" creates a layered sense of identity and a lifelong search for what could have been. Her criticism of how Asian signifiers are systematically being oppressed or silenced or—again—masked by a "white" schema is further displayed.¹⁰ Sponsler thus explores what can be seen as the multivocal "quilt" of adoptee autobiography and, as she writes, intends to bring back the power, or value, of a marginalized "yellow." As such, her work—as those of the other adoptee artists—can be seen to respond to the sensation of having been marginalized by the political mechanisms of an entire Western state machinery and, thereby, of being taken hostage by the normative policies of its hegemony. In this regard, it is worth noting the desire expressed by adoptee artworks, to reject an authoritative, adopted culture to the detriment of another. By reclaiming "yellow," as it were, the adoptee masks also intend to deface an entire authoritarian discourse.

All of these works question in various ways the notions of gender, performativity, and identity formation by looking at how adoption—and, by extension, the adoptee as a multivalent figure—performs as queer in the sense of questioning and challenging norms of gender and identity formation. Hence, adoption uses the aesthetic realm as a space in which formation of a third form, or genus, can take place. This, in turn, shows how identity is to a great extent also a stylized, processual practice and that in the performative act of identity the realm of the performance is shared by the self and others. As Fischer-Lichte (2008) observes, performance contributes to a reversal of roles, and hence, of the conventional subject-object

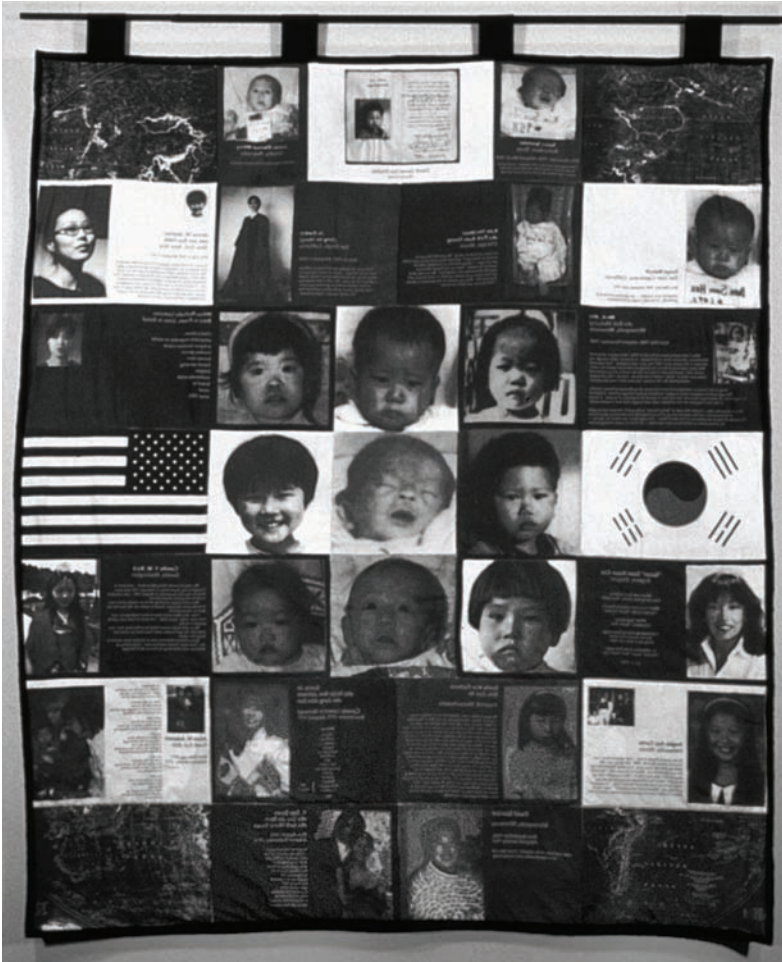


Figure 4. "Piecing Together Our Histories Quilt." © Susan Sponsler.

relation. Art, as space, has become a setting for a social practice and, as Ina Blom (2007) has noted, a site for political, ethical, and social exchanges. Here, as Blom argues, "biopower is not just a matter of taking care of health issues on a large scale, but of encouraging continual self-fashioning or self-creation" (25). In a climate where bodies have become unsettled and individualized, biopower influences the notions of the subject to the extent that they become highly politicized and invested with a new meaning in relation to other subjects, and indeed, to the concept of *otherness*. As Blom observes, "for this is a political theory that starts with the body and its potential, and regards the political subject as an ethical subject rather than a subject of law; here, the aesthetic dimensions of existence clearly also take on a new political centrality" (25). In so doing, adoptee aesthetics expresses not only the contemporary aesthetics' political concern with and turn to the notion of ethnography; it also explores the limits to this practice and seeks—simultaneously—to identify what could be seen as new boundaries and territories of its own practice.

By way of conclusion, I will comment on this aspect of the migrant, queer subject as a body of ethical responsibility by returning to the opening question of how a model of an ambivalent, transversal identity performance takes place at the crossroad between gender and race in adoptee art.

Conclusive comments: "Special being"

In my examination of the adoptee aesthetic discourse, I have sought to show that the adoptee figure comes to represent a hybrid engendered self, migrating right across paradigms of race, ethnicity, and gender. In a double sense, therefore, the image of the adoptee is and is not an objectified subject, who, in turn, is subjectified in art. As such, paradoxically speaking, the adoptee constitutes a substantial image. In order to look at how this image represents a "kind" of *queer*, we can refer to some observations by Giorgio Agamben and his notion of "specie." With Agamben (2007) we can say that the adoptee is a *species*, whose form is that of a usage, or gesture.¹¹ For Agamben, the image "is a being whose essence it is to be a *species*, a visibility or an appearance," and, "[a] being is special if its essence coincides with its being given to be seen . . ." (57). The point for Agamben here is that the special being is fundamentally insubstantial; it lacks a proper place, "but it occurs in a subject and is in this sense like a *habitus* or a mode of being, like the image in the mirror" (57). Moreover, the being becomes *special* if it coincides with its own revelation, or visibility. If special beings, thus, experience the sensation of otherness as one of coincidence and recognition (of that otherness and separation), then that, as I have argued, is what happens in adoptee aesthetic discourse, where otherness, as we have seen, the insubstantial, or imaginary (dress, the construction) is equated with being (biology, nature). In the aesthetic realm, there is a possibility of mastering one's own natural being *qua* image, and in this respect, we could also refer to what Agamben (1999) notes on another occasion in regard to *species* as *intentio*, or intention in the Middle Ages:

The term names the internal tension . . . of each being, that which pushes it to become an image, to communicate itself. The *species* is nothing other than the tension, the love with which each being desires itself, desires to persevere in its own being. In the image, being and desire, existence and *conatus* coincide perfectly. (58)

In this respect, *species* as an expression of will or desire for one's own perseverance becomes something like the energy and will of humanity itself, and as such, as Agamben observes, *species* makes itself visible within the genus so that, more importantly, specialness is made *personal* by way of our need to reduce visibility to identity. We have seen, in the course of our analysis of adoptee art, that this process of identification has been reversed, and that the self, in turn, has become pure specie, or

special being. Could this represent a new way of looking at governing discourses of gender and race? Would it be possible to suggest a reversal of the process of identity formation whereby the specialness of being human would be given an unidentifiable voice and, as such, speak for itself? Special beings communicate nothing but their own communicability and make visible the tremendous potential and possibility for engendering selves by way of discourse. Aesthetic productivity mirrors a biological cycle, or *poiesis*, which is central in Agamben's essay on praxis and poiesis. Agamben (1999) observes how production in modern times has come to signify the will and vital impulse of sheer human life and, as was the case for Marx, that man's ability to produce is precisely what makes him a genus, or *Gattungswesen*. *Gattungswesen*, as gender, in this sense points precisely to the human aspect of sheer being and indeed of *willing* a presence to oneself. Contained, thus, in a body of production (praxis and poiesis), performative adoptee discourse becomes productive of one's own, unique potential.

Endnotes

1. See online statistics at <http://oaks.korean.net/> (last accessed July 12, 2010). For a more detailed historical account of international adoption from Korea, see Tobias Hübinette, "Adopted Koreans and the development of identity in the third space," *Adoption and Fostering* 28(1) (2004): 16–24; Eleana Kim, "Our adoptee, our alien: Transnational adoptees as spectres of foreignness and family in South Korea," *Anthropological Quarterly* 80 (2) (2007): 497–531.

2. The Korean *segyehwa*, or globalization policy, was launched on January 6, 1995 by President Kim Young Sam (1993–1998) and later embraced by the Kim Dae Jung administration (1998–2003). For more details on *segyehwa*, see Samuel S. Kim, *Korea's globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

3. For an account of the notion of an adoptee "third space," see Hübinette, "Adopted Koreans and the development of identity in the "third space."

4. See Michel Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London, Tavistock Publications: 1972).

5. I refer to "queer" as a term of identity formation, which challenges dominant norms of sexuality, gender, and race. This perspective, as Rob Cover observes, also underlines the fact that much of queer theory has been too focused on Western culture and unable to admit its ignorance of non-Western desire, class, need, and position (see Faith and McCallum, *Linked histories: Postcolonial studies in a globalized world* [Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005]). Cover, by referring to Dennis Altman's early work *Homosexual oppression and liberation* (1971), notes how Altman's analysis suggested how a more prolific awareness of gay existence would "drastically disrupt the system of patriarchal capitalism in the West" (52). The relation between capitalism, politics, and identity formation, evoked by Cover, will also become evident in the case of the adoptee.

6. This is a reference to a fact that is also referred to and adequately critiqued by other feminist writers, most prominently by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who in their works challenge what is often defined as *phallogocentrism*, or the fact that general discourse is centered on the man or the male as a universal referent.

7. For Majorie Garber, as Bullough and Bullough observe, cross-dressing is itself a tradition of a bipolar thinking and leads to a “category crisis,” not just of male and female, but of the category itself. See Majorie Garber, *Vested interests: Cross-dressing and cultural anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

8. The first O.K.A.Y. (Overseas Korean Artists Yearbook) was published in 2001, edited by Belgian Canadian artist and activist Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine. The publication series intends to show the tremendous scope of adoptee artists, and now, in its 6th publication (as of July 2010), comprises adoptee aesthetic discourses of all kinds (writing, photography, film, performance, video installation, and interdisciplinary discourses).

9. <http://www.jettehyejinmortensen.com/Song%20of%20My%20Great%20Grandfather.htm> [Mortensen’s website. Last accessed February 28, 2010].

10. <http://susansponsler.vox.com/library/photo/6a011018121492860f011018131a0d860f.html> [Sponsler’s website. Last accessed February 28, 2010].

11. Agambens point out: the Latin term *species* meaning “appearance,” “aspect,” or “vision” derives from the same root as “to look, to see,” the same as “in *speculum* (mirror), *spectrum* (image, ghost), *perspicuous* (transparent, clearly seen), *specious* (example, sign), and *spectaculum* (spectacle),” 56–57.

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