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### The In-Between Place: Navigating Racial Identity as a Neoethnic

The United States has been home to people of different races, ethnicities, and family backgrounds since its conception. The country is no stranger to racial tensions; its citizens continue to reckon with a long history of hierarchical racial oppression that often forces people reckon with their own racial identity. A relatively new form of racial formation has emerged in the last century, and that is one of transnational adoptees. Transnational adoption (adoption in which white parents adopt a child from a different country, and often a different race) has been a heavily debated topic in its causes, intentions, and outcomes, but it cannot be denied that it has taken a significant role in many American families' lives. The type of transracial adoption I will be discussing is that of Asian countries, and the effects adoption has on the Asian-identifying adoptee's development. As a transnational adoptee myself, I am constantly curious about ways in which I can better understand my racial standing within the society I inhabit, and ways that other Asian-American adoptees have done the same. I will be exploring how Asian-American transnational adoptees can better understand and cope with their own racial identities, and how other people in their lives can be a more foundational piece in that process.

In this essay, I will be using the terms 'transnational' and 'international' interchangeably to refer to children who were adopted from a different country than the the one that the adoptive parents reside. Pamela Anne Quiroz coins the term 'neoethnic' to mean almost the same thing: "Neoethnics are people whose identities have been literally recreated through the act of adoption and who typically do not experience direct links to their culture and ethnicity of origin"

(Quiroz 435-436). I will also be using the term 'transracial,' and this concept often goes hand-in-hand with transnational adoption; it implies that the adopted child identifies as a race that differs from their adoptive parents. While this is often the case in transnational adoptions, domestic adoptions can also be transracial. For the purposes of my research question, I will not be discussing domestic transracial adoption, however I recognize that domestic transracial adoptees often face similar struggles as international adoptees. I am particularly interested in the internal struggle that comes from Asian international adoptees lacking any memory or emotional connection with the country from which they were adopted, and this cannot be applied as accurately to domestic adoptees.

Beginning in 1953, Americans began adopting orphaned Korean children caused by Korean War. An evangelical couple, Henry and Bertha Holt, founded the Holt International Children's Services, which was the first organization dedicated to large-scale international adoption ("History of International Adoption"). The rate of adoption from Asia only increased when China implemented its one-child policy. This attempt to mitigate China's ever-rising population caused an enormous influx of abandoned infant girls due to the preference of raising boys in Chinese society. The height of international Chinese adoption lasted from 1992-2004, and since then it has tapered off as a result of the Chinese government limiting the number of children sent abroad, as well as the end of the country's one-child policy in 2016. Even so, China accounts for 78,257 adoptions out of 267,098 total adoptions made between 1999-2016, or 30% of total adoptions ("Amid decline in international adoptions").

The history of international adoption from Asian countries has a complicated and controversial reputation. The ethics behind adopting transnationally have been questioned by many; some believe that adopting a child without a family or home should be seen as an act of kindness no matter the race of the child, while others view transracial adoption as a new form of

colonialism. My research does not seek to determine which of these opinions I believe to be truer, but rather my intent is to better understand the social and psychological effects of transnational Asian adoption after the fact.

While every adoption is different and should be acknowledged as such, it is important to study the trends of how transracial adoptees typically develop their sense of selves. Dr. Amanda Baden is a professor and a counseling psychologist who specializes in the topic of transracial adoption, and she is a Chinese adoptee herself. In her article “Reclaiming Culture: Reculturation of Transracial and International Adoptees,” Dr. Baden explains a very systematic development procedure that transracial and international adoptees (TRIAs) experience that often includes “reculturation” — a rediscovery and reclaiming of the adoptee’s birth culture after spending the majority of their life assimilating into their adopted (often white) culture (Baden 389). The process of reculturation involves a series of life stages that ultimately leads to the TRIA gaining interest in their birth culture “when [they] become adults and are no longer under the protection of their honorary White status” (Baden 393). While not all international adoptees go through every stage of this reculturation process, it is important to note the unique and complicated ways that TRIAs attempt to navigate their identities.

As essential as it is to understand positive instances in which transnational adoptees can explore their selfhood when they are emotionally ready, it is also necessary to examine times in which Asian adoptees were forced to reckon with their race due to harassment and lack of emotional support. Dr. Sara Docan-Morgan, associate professor at the University of Wisconsin La-Crosse, writes about personal experiences of verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse from the perspective of Korean-American transnational adoptees. Her interviews include a wide age range of subjects, and their accounts reflect a different era of racial prejudice than the present (bias against Asians due to the Vietnam War, the war in Korea, etc.). However, the sentiments

are still very relevant in terms of how they dealt with the emotional trauma, often in elementary and middle school. The majority of the interviewees recalled that they did not feel comfortable telling their adoptive white parents about the harassment at the time it occurred, and this was caused by previous interactions that made them doubt that their parents would react in a constructive way (Docan-Morgan 348). One respondent did have a positive memory of engaging in dialogue with their parents about their racial identity, and this was because the parents were willing to address the complicated issues of racism and transnational adoption to their child at an early age. The article concludes that open and honest conversation about the child's racial and ethnic and adoptive background could be the best way to help neoethnic children adjust to microaggressions, and that more research must be done to hear from adoptive parents' perspectives.

The research that Pamela Anne Quiroz performed from 2006-2008 answers this very wish by observing transnational adoptive parents' posts in adoption forums. Through her collection of online forum posts, she labels four specific actions that parents tend to take when raising neoethnic children: choosing (the decision about which race parents choose to adopt from), cultural distancing (parents' lack of addressing the child's birth cultures), keeping (choosing to engage in certain activities to maintain the child's sense of native identity), and purchasing (use of cultural symbols and objects to provide the child a racial identity). Much like the road-map laid out by Dr. Baden that transnational adoptees tend to follow, these are forms of cultural guidance that parents tend to employ; however, not all parents will inhibit all of these behaviors.

Equally as integral to Quiroz's study is the qualitative data recorded at adoption workshops. Quiroz poignantly displays a misunderstanding between a neoethnic woman and her mother about what childhood activities helped retain a sense of cultural identity.

The social worker/mother offered examples of what she deemed to be culture keeping, such as learning about the history of India, learning to cook Indian food, and enrolling her daughter in Indian folk dance classes, which she claimed that her daughter loved... The daughter assessed her experiences as lacking real cultural understanding... Far from feeling accepted, the daughter claimed that the other Indian children in her folk dance class regarded her as white, and therefore, she was socially ostracized. (Quiroz 435)

This discrepancy between the lived experiences of the mother and daughter in this situation implies that transnational adoptive parents may be out of touch with what their adopted children need in order to feel an authentic connection to their birth culture. This quote also exemplifies the dissonance and lack of cultural belonging that transnational adoptees often feel in both their adopted environments and their ethnic ones. The fact that the mother confidently declared that her daughter loved the Indian dance classes when that was not the case delivers some pointed messages; adopted children may not be expressing their cultural disparities at the time they occur, adoptive parents may not be listening to the pleas of their children regarding feelings of ethnic ostracism, or a combination of the two.

So far, we have observed many different behavioral tendencies that internationally adopted children and their adoptive parents exhibit, and many of these can be examined through the Structure and Agency model. A 'structure' qualifies as an institution (social, political, economic, etc.) that works to help or hurt certain groups of people. An 'agentic strategy' can be viewed as any type of action that someone takes to confront their position in society. As discussed previously, many policies allowed an influx of Asian adoptees to enter the United States: the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Asian countries opening their borders to America for

adoption, the formation of international adoption agencies, the one-child policy, and gender norms in China that cause families to put more girls up for adoption.

The agentic strategies of transnational adoptees vary across the board. These involve assimilating to the dominant culture in order to pass as White more easily, reclaiming their birth culture, identifying as bicultural, and identifying with adoptee culture (Baden 395). Many transnational adoptive parents attempt to alleviate their children's loss of birth culture by enrolling them in language classes, ethnic dance classes, and celebrating their child's birth culture's holidays (Quiroz 433). While the actions international adoptive parents take are often from a place of love and hope for inclusivity, there is a stark difference between the agentic strategies of adoptees and their parents, suggesting a need for reconsideration by adoptive parents as to what their children truly need in order to develop their sense of racial identities.

Through my research on Asian transnational adoptees, I can conclude that adopted children withstand a significant amount of internal and external conflict regarding their race and ethnicity, and they often do so on their own. No matter how much white adoptive parents sympathize for their children and want them to succeed, they will never be able to fully empathize with the disjunction that transracial adoptees face every day. In addition, as Dr. Docan-Morgan suggests, I believe that transracial adoptive parents could benefit from reexamining their own racial opinions and biases so that these issues can be more constructively conveyed to their children in early childhood. Since I was young, I have felt as if I am walking the line between worlds, but somehow I don't entirely belong in any of them. Although I have observed that Asian-Americans can move with more ease through white spaces compared to people of other skin tones, this does not diminish the times that I have felt utterly misunderstood due to assumptions made about me based on my appearance. Alternately, I cannot relate to my Chinese or non-adopted Chinese-American peers due to having been

raised by white parents. If the Chinese language class I attended every Saturday of my childhood were replaced with workshops or counseling sessions that addressed the internal clashing that comes with transnational adoption, I do not believe I would have felt so isolated. Existing in the world as a neoethnic involves reinventing racial boundaries and making a home out of the in-between spaces, but we need not be alone in this process.

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