

7-2-2018

## Inside and Outside Perspectives: A Review of Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences and Racial Exceptionalism

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### Recommended APA Citation

Byun, J. (2018). Inside and Outside Perspectives: A Review of Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences and Racial Exceptionalism. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(7), 1547-1549. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3572>

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## Inside and Outside Perspectives: A Review of *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences and Racial Exceptionalism*

### Abstract

The following is a review of the book *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences and Racial Exceptionalism*, written by Kim Park Nelson. In the book, the author used ethnography and collected oral histories, and critical race theory and a post-colonial approach were employed as theoretical frameworks. In particular, as not only an insider (an adoptee) but an outsider (a researcher), she maintained a well-balanced view in describing vivid lived experiences of Korean adoptees and diverse sociocultural environments that impacted them. This book would be a great guide for novice qualitative researchers who want to be ethnographers and study minorities in U.S. society.

### Keywords

Korean Adoptees, Ethnography, Critical Race Theory, Postcolonial Theory, Oral History

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## ***Inside and Outside Perspectives: A Review of *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences and Racial Exceptionalism****

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### **Introduction**

The book, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, Racial Exceptionalism*, is by and about Korean American adoptees (Park Nelson, 2016). The author, Kim Park Nelson, is a Korean American adoptee and an associate professor in the American Multicultural Studies program at Minnesota State University, Moorhead. This book tracks the journey of the author's study on Korean American adoptees to explore their transnational and transracial stories and to help understand her and other adoptees' experiences. By doing so, she attempted to explore Asian American identities, American race relations, historical changes in the American family, and U.S. and Asian foreign relations.

This book is significant because of its focus on Korean American adoptees, a group that has received little attention from researchers. Additionally, the author used ethnography and gathered oral histories to conduct the study, and she describes her overall research processes very thoroughly in the text. The author effectively presents diverse data gained through interviews and document analysis. The flow of the book is logical and smooth, and the overall research design is well-constructed. Therefore, this book is highly recommendable for readers interested in studying minority groups in the United States by using qualitative research methods, especially ethnography.

### **From Inside and Outside Perspectives**

As mentioned above, a key point about this study was that Park Nelson is also a Korean adoptee, and she explained her position as not only an insider (an adoptee) but also an outsider (a researcher). Regarding her role as a researcher, she discussed the advantages and disadvantages of being a Korean adoptee herself, making a contribution to methodology by exploring the benefits and drawbacks of conducting research as a within-group researcher.

In terms of methodology, this study uses ethnography, and Park Nelson (2016) gathered oral histories from adult adoptees born between 1949 and 1983. She selected this method since she wanted to give the participants as much autonomy as possible in telling their experiences

and stories. Because of her insider status, the author stated that she tried to reduce the possibility of interference in gathering data. In her study, Park Nelson (2016) gathered stories from 66 Korean American adoptees' in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota, when she served as a board member of the local adult Korean adoptee nonprofit organization, AK Connection. The researcher divides the Korean adoptee participants into groups such as the first generation of Korean adoptees, Korean adoptees in Minnesota, and return migrants in South Korea. By doing so, their oral histories are highlighted by the author based on socio-cultural environments.

### **The Story of the Invisible in Minnesota**

In understanding and interpreting the Korean American adoptees' experiences, as theoretical frameworks, Park Nelson (2016) employed critical race theory and a postcolonial approach. The author vividly describes not only the lived experiences of Korean adoptees but also the sociocultural environments that influenced them. She describes in her study how American society saw Korean adoptees as aliens and shows how the isolation of Korean adoptees has transpired in U.S. society and culture by analyzing documentary data (e.g., newspaper articles). Even though adoptions from South Korea (and the move to the U.S.) tend to be painted as an escape from a poor and less developed country to the wealthiest country in the world, the Korean adoptees in Park Nelson's study paid a price for their "salvation." That is, they had a hard time adapting to mainstream America. Although most of them were adopted by and raised in White families (of the sixty-six adoptees who participated in the research, only two of them were not adopted by White couples), they were considered Asian. The stories of these Korean adoptees convey their experiences with racial discrimination in the schools and society, so they began to understand their own identities as people of color only after becoming adults, especially in college. Even though their parents were White, the Korean adoptees started to recognize the differences between them and Whites. This resulted in their loneliness and isolation in U.S. society, because they were neither Asian American nor White. They were there, but they felt totally invisible.

In addition to the individuals' experiences, Park Nelson (2016) broadly discusses key sociocultural conditions that influenced the experiences of the adoptees. In particular, the geographical location, Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota, was very important, since there were 10,000-15,000 Korean adoptees in Minnesota. Additionally, the author discussed the progressive political and social environments of Minnesota and how the environments were deeply related to the adoptees' experiences. Thus, given the large number of Korean adoptees and the sociocultural conditions of the city, the setting chosen by Park Nelson was very appropriate for her exploration of the experiences of Korean American adoptees. In Minnesota, where adoption is very common, the multiculturalism should have limited the potential for social issues and problems that might occur in the adoptees' families. However, the author strongly implies that multiculturalism actually provided an excuse for the racist discrimination that the Korean adoptees faced. That is, the author argues that the idea of multiculturalism was promoted by state governments in order to mask the negative impacts of transnational and transracial adoption on adoptees, which included racial discrimination and identity confusion.

### **Conclusion**

Even though most parts of the book are well-organized, I also found something that can be improved in the text. For instance, as discussed in this review, the author interviewed a number of participants for an understanding of vivid Korean American adoptees. However, there was no table or visual presentation describing the interviewees. Thus, it was difficult to clearly understand the information concerning the research participants. Considering that the

interviews with Korean American adoptees are the key data for this book, it would have been helpful if the author had presented a general overview of the interviewees for readers.

While reading the book, my feelings were quite complicated. I sometimes felt sadness and anger when I read about the experiences of Korean adoptees in the U.S. I think that the reasons for my complex feelings are related to the quality of the book. As a Korean, before reading the book, I was curious about how the author, a Korean adoptee, would describe other adoptees and Korean society. To be honest, I was even suspicious and doubted that she could provide correct information about Korea. However, after completing the book, I am sure that the author successfully described Korean society and Korean American adoptees' experiences. In particular, in chapter 6, in which the author discussed the experiences of Korean American adoptees who returned to South Korea and currently live there, I was surprised that she correctly explained Korean society and people's perceptions about Korean adoptees. Moreover, I was even able to learn about and understand Korean American adoptees' motivations and experiences in Korean society.

The author of this book, Kim Park Nelson (2016), maintains a well-balanced view in discussing the topic, even though she herself is a Korean American adoptee. She effectively makes the key points of the book through providing a wide range of data collected from interviews and documents. Furthermore, she focuses on Korean American adoptees as a minority group. Thus, I am sure that this book can be a great guide for novice researchers who want to be ethnographers and study minorities in U.S. society. Those who teach ethnography and multiculturalism can also use this book as a textbook in their course. Anybody who has an interest in ethnography and related issues can get some meaningful ideas by reading this book.

I expect that this book can make a significant contribution by helping researchers produce additional studies that provide insight into the experiences of minority groups in American society. By reading the book, even those who have little knowledge on race and identity in America can easily understand the difficulties "invisible Asians" ran into, which should be visible to be openly and seriously dealt with in a globalized world.

### References

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### Author Note

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### Article Citation

Byun, J. (2018). Inside and outside perspectives: A review of invisible Asians: Korean American adoptees, Asian American experiences and racial exceptionalism. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(7), 1547-1549. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss7/4>

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