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## Koreans, Americans, or Korean-Americans: Transnational Adoptees as Invisible Asians, a Book Review

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## Koreans, Americans, or Korean-Americans: Transnational Adoptees as Invisible Asians, a Book Review

### Abstract

The book, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism*, explores the personal narratives and histories of adult adoptees who were born between 1949 and 1983 and who were adopted from Korea by White parents. Using oral history ethnography, Nelson (2016) seeks to correct, complicate, and contribute to current discussions about transnational adoptions. In this book review, the author provides an overview, a personal reflection, and recommendations for potential audiences of this book.

### Keywords

Korean Adoptees, Transnational Adoption, Identity, Racial Exceptionalism, Contact Zone, Oral History Ethnography, Post-Colonial Theory

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### Acknowledgements

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## **Koreans, Americans, or Korean-American: Transnational Adoptees as Invisible Asians, a Book Review**

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*The book, Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism, explores the personal narratives and histories of adult adoptees who were born between 1949 and 1983 and who were adopted from Korea by White parents. Using oral history ethnography, Nelson (2016) seeks to correct, complicate, and contribute to current discussions about transnational adoptions. In this book review, the author provides an overview, a personal reflection, and recommendations for potential audiences of this book. Keywords: Korean Adoptees, Transnational Adoption, Identity, Racial Exceptionalism, Contact Zone, Oral History Ethnography, Post-Colonial Theory*

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Imagine walking on a college campus and suddenly being asked to join the campus Asian American Association without being inquired about your age, ethnicity, identity, or anything about you—you were only asked because you have skin with yellow undertone, brown and almond eyes, and straight dark hair. Encounters similar to this scenario took place in the lives of many adoptees who were adopted by White families from Korea and who were participants of Nelson's (2016) research project reported in *Invisible Asians*.

This book is oriented around the analysis of oral recounts of Korean American adoptees being raised in predominantly White communities by White parents. Through the meshing of history, theory, data, and reflections, Nelson (2016) illustrates robust and dynamic pictures of the strife of Korean American adoptees with racial and ethnic identity, their feelings of being neither an insider nor outsider, their experiences of colorblindness at home and then racism in school, the desire and expectations to assimilate into their White families, and challenges to fulfil the ideologies of transnational adoptions.

Chapter One describes Nelson's (2016) positionality as a within-group researcher in depth. Chapter Two is a retrospection of the life experiences of the first generation of Korean adoptees, who were mostly orphans in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War conflict. Chapter Three reviews and synthesizes existing research on transnational and transracial adoptions from the 1970s to 1980s to identify ingrained biases and assumptions in these adoptions, as well as absent literature on the exploration of race and identities of transracial and transnational adoptees in American society. Chapter Four describes the lived encounters of the participants of Nelson's (2016) project, who mostly resided in Minnesota. Chapter Five discusses colorblindness and Asians as model minorities and theorizes the racial and identity struggles of Korean adoptees between being Asian and White. Chapter Six cast light on stories of American Korean adoptees who chose to work and live in their nation of birth, but face “exclusion as foreigners” (p. 187) in both Korea and America.

Kim Park Nelson (2016) is an associate professor of American Multicultural Studies at Minnesota State University at Moorhead. In her book, she seeks to personally comprehend and help others understand the experiences of Korean adoptees. Using these experiences as lenses, she aims to explore the “multiplicities of Asian American identity, American race relations, U.S.-Asian foreign relations, and historical changes in American family” (p. 17). Additionally, she wants to expand and correct stories about transnational and transracial adoptees, by

emphasizing voices of adoptees, rather than adopters or mainstream media. Furthermore, through the course of her project, she discovered her goal to develop “a methodological niche as a within-group researcher, and to understand and describe the benefits and liabilities of such a position” (p. 17).

Applying postcolonial theory, postmodernist ideologies, and decolonizing methodologies, Nelson (2016) collected oral history narratives of adult adoptees born between 1949 and 1983 who were members of Korean adoptee associations, over the course of four years. As a part of a multi-sited and community-based ethnography research project, Nelson's (2016) participants had lived experiences in three areas: Twin Cities, Minnesota, Pacific Northwest of the U.S., and Seoul, South Korea. Their oral histories were supported with and conceptualized by “history, traditional narrative studies, popular culture studies, economics, and political theory” (p. 12). To give the adoptees as much autonomy as possible, Nelson (2016) organized the adoptees’ narratives based on thematic coherence and presented excerpts of the transcripts of their stories.

Nelson (2016) ascertained that instead of seeing their adoptive parents as their saviors and living a better-off life with White privileges (like how popular culture, history, and mainstream media portrays interracial adoptions), these adoptees more often struggled with determining their identities because they felt like they were in-between two ethnicities and cultures where they were neither Asian nor White enough. They experienced depression because of the strong demand for gratitude from the White community; because of the mismatch between their self-perceptions and how they were raised, and how the world perceives them; and because of their White parents who cannot sufficiently guide them through racist incidents that took place in these adoptees’ lives. “Asianess” was indeed invisible in these Korean adoptees’ lives, to their families, and sometimes to themselves. However, it was also very much visible to people whom these adoptees come in contact with and at many times, to themselves.

As a Chinese woman in her early twenties who was born and mostly raised in China by her biological parents, I feel like I could never fully comprehend the struggles, fear, and confusion that transnational adoptees experience. However, in my opinion, the organization and presentation of this book efficiently provide raw snapshots of first-hand experiences of these adoptees, with genuine and original synthesis and analysis by the author, who was also adopted from Korea by White parents. As a result, mixed emotions, inevitable challenges, and silenced voices of Korean American adoptees can be comprehended and heard by readers who are outsiders of the transnational adoptee community. I was saddened to read about the parents' emphasis on the power of love over racial differences and their irrational colorblindness, instead of attempts of exploring racial inequities and violence with their children who do not look White. I was surprised that Korean American adoptees felt emotionally traumatized upon finishing interviews and how they did not feel lucky to be adopted and, indeed, did not escape race.

On the contrary, I am also a person who lived in Canada for several years in elementary school and who had lived in the United States for over seven years. My transnational learning and immigration experiences have allowed me to personally connect with the identity struggles of the individuals presented in this book. As an immigrant in Vancouver at a young age, migrating back to my home country during my adolescent years, and studying abroad again after reaching the age of eighteen, I sometimes feel exclusion as a foreigner in both the East and the West. To some of my family and friends in China, the language, manners, customs, dress, and knowledge I am accustomed to is too “laowai<sup>1</sup>.” To individuals I encounter in

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<sup>1</sup> This is a Chinese word that is used to refer to foreigners; it could be directly translated as “people from the outside.”

America, I am an Asian student from China who could be anything but American. I feel like I am a contact zone, where beliefs, cultures, knowledge, and perceptions that I encounter become a part of me and meet, clash, grapple, and negotiate with each other within me (Pratt, 1991). In some senses, the Korean adoptees in this book are living in contact zones and are contact zones themselves as well, even though their environment growing up may seem homogeneous. On the surface, they are raised as White. However, they experience racism and other identity struggles that push them to explore different cultures and various societal perceptions.

This is a well-articulated and thoughtful book. However, a critical critique of this book is that “Korean American” and “Asian American” were used interchangeably throughout the book. However, the umbrella term “Asian American” includes distinct populations with nuanced and dynamic understandings of their unique historical, cultural, economic, and political representations (Chang, 2017). It may be more appropriate if the author clarified her intentions of using “Korean American” and “Asian American” interchangeably, or if she operationally defined “Asian Americans” used in this book.

To conclude, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* genuinely entails (1) synthesis of a broad spectrum of historical, political, social policies, and changes in America, (2) telling narratives of Korean American adoptees about their experiences living in White families and growing up in this racially diverse country, and (3) analyses of themes that emerge from these personal recounts. I would recommend this book to students and scholars of transnational studies, Asian American studies, interracial adoption studies, or anthropology. This book would also be a fitting example for oral history ethnography of postmodernist methodology.

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### Author Note

Tairan Qiu is a doctoral student in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia. She received a B.A. in English Education from Purdue University and an M.A.Ed. in Bilingual Education from the University of Florida. Her research interests include the digital literacies, bilingual literacies (Chinese and English), and content-area literacy (specifically STEAM) development of emergent bilingual adolescents and young adults. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [tqiu19@uga.edu](mailto:tqiu19@uga.edu).

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