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## Indian “Native Companions” and Korean Camptown Women: Unpacking Coloniality in Transnational Surrogacy and Transnational Adoption

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### Abstract

The article argues that transnational adoption and surrogacy from South Korea and India are shaped through US and British imperial and colonial histories in Korea and India respectively. We focus on the reproductive labor of ‘native companions’ in early British India and *kijich’on* (camptown) women in post–World War II Korea. The management of native women’s sexuality was crucial for maintaining social order, political stability, and for consolidating capitalism through the commodification and devaluation of colonized reproductive labor. The configuration of historical legacies is unpacked through the idea of coloniality, the constitutive dark side of modernity, which reproduces subalternity and exploitation of racialized bodies. The reproductive labour of Korean birth mothers and Indian surrogate mothers is formed and shaped by the colonial and imperial formations of gender, sexuality, kinship and family, in which white supremacy and exploitation of Indian and Korean women was at the core. We argue that these formations are re-configured in the present through three mechanisms that enables contemporary practices of adoption and surrogacy: the transformation of waste into profit, the erasure of non-white mothers, and the trope of the white savior.

### Keywords

Coloniality, race, reproductive labor, India, Korea, transnational surrogacy, transnational adoption

### Introduction

Transnational adoption and surrogacy are commonly perceived as opposites on a moral spectrum ranging from humanitarianism to exploitation. Transnational adoption in its modern form started as a war relief effort, with the adoption of mixed-race children fathered by American GIs in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–1953). The language of altruistic rescue and love instituted during this formative period still frames the practice, while commercial surrogacy—especially when it involves the reproductive labor of women in the Global South—is perceived as controversial. Though adoption stakeholders emphatically distance themselves from any link to the commodification of children, there is a growing consensus among scholars that it is fruitful to analyze adoption through a market framework (Raleigh 2018). Furthermore, fraud, corruption, and child trafficking have been acknowledged as major challenges to transnational adoption since its very beginnings. Scholars such as US law professor David Smolin have argued that the recurrent “scandals” featured in media reports on adoption are not exceptions but point to the very structure of the adoption system (Smolin 2006; 2010; Nelson 2006; Raleigh 2018).

In the present, transnational adoption is being scrutinized and problematized, in the aftermath of a critical debate, sparked by the discovery of illegal adoptions in Chile in 2019 (Nelsen 2021). This has created unprecedented legal and political repercussions in some of the largest receiving countries. In 2020 an independent investigation on transnational adoption commissioned by the minister for Legal Protection in the Netherlands was published (Government of the Netherlands, Committee on the Investigation of Intercountry Adoption, 2021), followed by the publication of similar reports in Denmark (Ankestyrelsen, 2021), and Switzerland (Bitter, Bangerter, and Ramsauer 2020), and in Sweden, the parliament voted for the commissioning of such an investigation (Sköld and Lundberg*,* 2021b). As a consequence, all transnational adoptions in the Netherlands and Denmark have been halted, and the Swiss government has issued an official apology. The Dutch report emphasized that the illegal and unethical practices—alongside the governmental complicity—pertain to transnational adoption as a system. It also identifies the social and political imagery of adoption—the good deed of “saving children”—as crucial in the emergence and upkeeping of abusive practices: “Because of the deep roots of this image, abuses such as age falsification were accepted or even considered normal. Also, anyone who helped promote adoption was seen as a benefactor, and politicians fought for (rapid) intercountry adoption. Research has uncovered repeated patterns of passivity and whitewashing. The view that any adoption, even an illicit one, is better than no adoption at all was indisputable” (Government of the Netherlands, Committee on the Investigation of Intercountry Adoption, 2021, 3). Significantly, the committee recommends that lessons learned from transnational adoption be considered in the case of surrogacy. The ways in which perceptions of morality (“doing good”) can gloss over social injustices is a dimension that will be addressed in the following analysis.

This article explores the continuities between transnational adoption and transnational surrogacy through a shared history of imperialism and colonialism. More specifically, we argue that imperial and colonial regulations of native women’s reproductive labor are reconfigured in current practices of surrogacy and adoption. The centrality of the gendered colonized body in the articulation of imperial ideologies has often revealed fraught dynamics of cross-cultural contact. Adding to previous scholarship on the imperial/colonial lineages of adoption and surrogacy, we focus on the reproductive labor of “native companions” in early British India and camptown women in post–World War II Korea, as historical and epistemological templates for surrogacy and adoption. Thus, our article contributes to a more robust understanding of how US imperial history and British colonialism—in which white supremacy and the reproductive exploitation of native women were at the core—shape contemporary globalized reproduction. Our main contribution lies in reading these two archives together, which enables us to discern the workings of the colonial matrix of power (Quijano 2000) across different geopolitical and temporal sites.

In the next section, we will situate our study within postcolonial feminist research on transnational surrogacy and critical adoption studies. We will then present the theoretical perspective and methodological approach of our analysis. The first part of our analysis deals with the regulation of inter-racial intimacies in early British India, the (in)visibility of native women and the regulation of native motherhood. We will then proceed to map the regulation of inter-racial intimacies between US servicemen and Korean women in post–WWII Korea. Finally, we argue that these historical regulations of native women’s reproductive labor are reconfigured in the present. We develop these findings through three mechanisms that characterize contemporary globalized adoption and surrogacy: (a) the transformation of waste into profit, (b) the erasure of non-white mothers, and (c) the trope of the white savior.

#### Genealogies of Stratified Reproduction

Postcolonial feminists and feminists of color have emphasized the stratification of motherhood, that is, the ways in which race, ethnicity, and migration status shape women’s reproductive roles (Colen 1995), and how the present international division of reproductive labor is conditioned by racial hierarchies and Western colonialism. Black US feminists see transatlantic chattel slavery—in which the reproductive labor of female slaves was engineered for profit—as a precursor of surrogacy (Twine 2011; Weinbaum 2019). Drawing on Alys Weinbaum’s notion of the “imperial/colonial episteme” (2019, 59)—which posits racialization as a mechanism through which extraction and commodification is facilitated (also see Collins 1990)—we aim to explore the workings of this episteme in contemporary practices of adoption and surrogacy.

The pivotal role of racial hierarchies and Western colonialism has been highlighted in previous scholarship on Indian surrogacy (Vora 2009, 2015; Banerjee 2014; Deomampo 2016). Kalindi Vora argues that British colonialism constitutes the condition of possibility for Indian surrogacy. British colonial medicine, the classical Western mechanistic understanding of the body, more recent visual technologies that instrumentalize the uterus, the historical devaluation of reproductive labor, and neoliberal globalization are discerned as significant components in Indian surrogacy in Vora’s work (Vora 2015). Furthermore, she draws parallels between surrogacy and Indian indentured labor, arguing that the system of Indian indentured labor and Indian surrogacy both illustrate the strategic and racialized use of critical notions such as freedom, consent, and autonomy (Vora 2009). Analogous to contemporary contracts regulating surrogacy in India, the contracts regulating Indian coolie labor were fraught with significant omissions that make ideas about freedom and consent difficult to maintain; “consent” glosses over the absence of choices; the lack of information and the many binding circumstances that uphold the fiction of non-coercion underpin Indian indentured labor (Vora 2009).

In our analysis of Korean adoption, we build on research within the field of critical adoption studies that attend to the historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts of transnational adoption (Trenka et al. 2006; E. Kim 2010; Briggs 2012). While previous scholarship on transnational adoption has focused on health, medical issues, and socio-psychological questions of adjustment and identity formation, scholars within this field place the practice within histories of Western colonialism and military violence, thus challenging the dominant narrative of adoption as child rescue. Transnational adoption is seen as a paradigmatic example of how “imperialist processes ‘over there’ and social relations ‘over here’ intersect” (Eng 2010, 95). Hence, the emergence of Korean adoption is not seen as the “natural” solution to the orphan crisis, but as an expression of Cold War politics and US empire building, with the Korean War marking the initial stage of global hegemony. The opening up of adoption programs followed US military invasions in Vietnam and Thailand, which then became the next major sending countries after South Korea (Hübinette 2006, 145). When transnational adoption spread to other countries, South Korea, which has the longest and largest adoption program in the world, was used as a model.

#### Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach

We draw on the key analytical concept of “coloniality” (Quijano 2000) to understand how configurations of gender, race, and sexuality that were institutionalized during various phases of colonial rule have reconfigured in current typologies of labor and capital. Coloniality is “still the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed” (Quijano 2007, 170); we have moved from a period of “global colonialism” to a current period of “global coloniality,” implying the continued subordination and exploitation of peripheral nation-states and non-Europeans.

In his conceptualization of “coloniality of power,” Aníbal Quijano (2000) highlighted the centrality of race, which justified the superiority of the European as the dominant subject and in relation to whom other social categories were subordinate and inferior. The invention of race gave rise to new social identities (Quijano 2000, 216), first using “physiognomic” traits of people as external manifestations of their racial nature (whites, Indians, Mestizos, Negroes, yellows, olives), and then, on that basis, “geocultural identities” were produced (European, American, Asiatic, African) (see Quijano 2007, 171). As Quijano states, “the relation between European culture and the other cultures was established and has been maintained, as a relation between ‘subject’ and ‘object’…[in] a relation of externality” (2007, 174). Sylvia Wynter draws attention to the ways in which “human” refers to a particular ethnoclass; Man (i.e., Western bourgeois) ‘‘overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself’’ (2003, 260)—securing its own well-being, but denying humanity to those excluded from this globally hegemonic construct (2003, 262). Nelson Maldonado-Torres explains how the uneven distribution of humanity among groups that appeared human became “the foundation of the differentiation between the idea of human being as *humanitas* as opposed to human being as *antrophos*, the first one referring to human beings as subjects, and the other one to a sub-set of beings…entities that generate anxiety, fear, desire, and rage” (2017, 433). On a similar tack, Lisa Lowe suggests that the “uses of universalizing concepts of reason, civilization, and freedom effect colonial divisions of humanity, affirming liberty for modern man while subordinating the variously colonized and dispossessed peoples whose material labor and resources were the conditions of possibility for that liberty” (2015, 6). If coloniality was one axis in global Euro-centered capitalism, structured through a hierarchical international division of labor, then modernity was the other. There is “no modernity without coloniality” (Mignolo 2011, 3). In fact, the achievements of modernity are inseparable from “colonial humiliation’’ (Sakai 2010, 443).

Building on Quijano’s framework of coloniality of power, María Lugones develops an intersectionality of race and gender, positing gender “as constituted by and constituting the coloniality of power” (2008, 3–4). Thus, in specific historical geopolitical contexts, gender was instrumental in the colonial domination over non-Western racialized bodies and subjectivities—a structure that structured power. The colonial gender system ordered lives into heteronormative and hierarchical structures, justifying the dehumanization and enslavement of those that fell outside these frames.

Our analysis is based on existing postcolonial literature and inspired by Lowe’s (2015) methodological approach of reading across archives: we posit British colonialism (India) and US neo-imperialism (South Korea) as two archives on transracial intimacies, through which we identify convergences in contemporary regimes of reproductive labor. This approach enables us to see how colonial/imperial histories in two seemingly disparate and dissimilar geographical and social contexts yielded similar outcomes—identifying unifying themes pertaining to the reproductive labor of native women. Our reading establishes a link between the archives without obliterating their differences. We investigate how discursive conceptualizations that underpin exploitative practices acquire legitimacy. To borrow from Lowe, ours is an “analysis [that] does not accept given categories and concepts as fixed or constant, but rather takes as its work the inquiry into how those categories became established as given, and with what effects” (2015, 3). In other words, analyzing contemporary practices of globalized reproduction through these colonial archives enables us to see the history of the present.

### “Native Companions” in Early British India

#### Regulating Transracial Intimacies in Early British India

In this article, we focus on the period between 1700 and 1858 during which the English East India Company established and consolidated the foundations of British colonial rule in India. During this period, transracial cohabitations or concubinage between European merchants and servicemen and Indian native women were commonplace, although not publicly recognized. The forms of cohabitation ranged from domestic and sexual services to conjugal relations. As opposed to previous understandings of this early stage as an era of creolization, cosmopolitanism, and carelessness towards racial boundaries, Durba Ghosh (2006) demonstrates how anxieties about racial purity and fears of racial mixing are present from the outset of the Anglo-Indian encounter, reflecting Ann Laura Stoler’s observation that “who bedded and wedded with whom in the colonies was intensely debated and meticulously codified from the very beginning of the Imperial Era” (1989, 636–37). Regulations and practices of transracial intimacies shifted during the British colonial regime. The progressive colonization of India, during which the East India Company claimed greater political authority, was accompanied by legislations to end Anglo-Indian social intimacy under the rule of governor general Lord Cornwallis (1786–1793). Distance between Britons and native people was seen as necessary to uphold the racial, national, and religious superiority of the colonizers (McClintock 1995; Ghosh 2006). Nonetheless, interracial relationships continued in the post-Cornwallis era.

The Indian rebellion of 1857 was a watershed moment in the political and social history of India (Procida 2002). The Government of India Act of 1858, which marked the beginning of the British Raj, the improved communication between Britain and India (including the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869), and the widening distance between British and the Indians, fueled by the rebellion, interrupted the racialized, gendered, and sexualized economies that existed in the pre-British Raj period. Practices of concubinage were pushed to the margins and replaced with a different set of relationships with domestic servants, housekeepers, and nursemaids. Efforts were made to foreground British morality and the establishment of British monogamous heterosexual households, with the British “memsahib” (wife of a high ranking British official) as the upholder of this morality within the intimate space of the home (Chaudhuri 1988, 1994).

As Ronald Hyam argues, the memsahib became the new “instrument” for maintaining the social distance between the ruler and the ruled (1990, 19). Furthermore, domesticity, childhood, and Britishness became intimately linked. Within the imperial home the female servant’s (ayah) surrogate motherhood and the native wet nurses’ (amahs) lactating body threatened to re-order the domestic familial organization, while simultaneously exposing the vulnerability of English reproduction. Though predicated on a race/class superiority of the memsahib, the ayah’s closeness to European children was a cause of colonial anxiety as it threatened to destabilize the power hierarchies within the colonial nursery and contest the British ideal of childhood. On the other hand, due to their low class and caste, wet nurses were projected as physically and morally dirty, betraying the racialized, caste, and classed character of the relationship between the British and native Indians in the colonial home (Sen 2009; S. Banerjee 2010). Thus, the colonial-domestic space became a site of negotiation and contestation, with the native female body arousing ambivalent feelings of fear and disgust, on the one hand, but also seen as a necessary inclusion within the British household, on the other.

#### Exploitation and Non-recognition of Native Women’s Reproductive Labor

Cohabiting with a native woman was often regarded as a socially and sexually transgressive act by the emerging colonial state (Ghosh 2006, 31), but served imperial interests in several ways. These arrangements eliminated the responsibility and economic expense of the Company to “import” British women. Furthermore, by remaining legally unbound, their men were free to move on to respectable marriages with European women who would potentially bring wealth into the marriage. European men were thus able to maximize both sexual and economic opportunities. Concubinage was also seen as both politically and medically beneficial, as a way to form strategic bonds with powerful indigenous families, while at the same time keeping “men in their barracks and bungalows, out of brothels and less inclined to perverse liaisons with one another” (Stoler 1989, 637). Not the least, it enabled colonial societies like British India to imagine itself as being uncontaminated by racial and cultural mixing (Ghosh 2006, 30), and to maintain the racial hierarchy on which colonialism rested. As Ghosh argues, interracial intimacies were camouflaged by the fact that indigenous women living in colonial households were given new names: “the absence of native women’s names [or the erasure of her identity as an indigenous woman] in colonial archives correlated with the state’s interests to suppress the visibility of subjects who threatened the whiteness of colonial society” (2006, 18–19). By obscuring indigenous forms of identification, the colonial archive systematically erased the identity of native women.

Indrani Chatterjee (1999a) has explored slavery in colonial India, which is an under-studied theme in South Asian historiography. She argues that a significant number of the native women cohabiting with Company men during the early colonial period were slaves in the legal sense—that is, they received their freedom on the death of their master. Continuous wars over succession within provinces and battles between the British military and local rulers created a population of women and children available for purchase. With their homes destroyed, they would turn to the cantonments of the Company for protection and livelihood opportunities (Chatterjee 1999a, 64). Other women were supplied by the system of regimental bazaars, itinerant markets that followed each military unit and provided the troops and the regiment as a whole with domestic and sexual services. Although prohibitions of coerced labor were put in place at this time, exceptions were made for the category of women and young girls recruited by force to perform these services in the bazaars. This later developed into the *chakla* system (government managed spaces for prostitutes) in which indigenous middlemen were allocated funds by the local commander to deliver purchased young women for the regiment’s use.

#### Savage Mothers

While erased in the colonial archives, the “native companions” of European men become visible through their children. The growing number of mixed-race children become a palpable threat to the authority of European rule—as concrete manifestations of the permeable boundaries between the native population and the imperial rulers, and as colonial subjects with a compromised loyalty (Stoler 1989, 2010; Ghosh 2006, 213). Thus, in 1782 the Military Orphan Society was founded by officers of the East India Company with the purpose of managing the effects of racial mixing. This group of children was seen as the literal incarnation of the harmful effects of miscegenation, including excessive sexuality, and the influence of the native mothers was seen as detrimental to the children, particularly in upper-class families, where a perceived lack of chastity, fidelity, and other moral qualities made them unfit to parent the offspring of English gentlemen. Therefore, the orphanages also served the crucial purpose of separating children from their native mothers.

Native women with biracial children were systematically targeted with a range of legal and administrative measures that undermined their social recognition as mothers. For instance, before the age of four, at which admittance to the orphan school was compulsory, every child was entitled to a monthly allowance, a prerequisite being that the child was cared for by a close relative. However, the native mother or her family were not eligible as such. Instead, in the absence of close relatives, it was required that a serviceman in the regiment registered as the child’s guardian, or the child would commonly be taken into custody. Tying financial aid to a particular regiment made native mothers’ prospects of supporting and living with their children dependent on their ability to find a European guardian—a precarious position which pushed them into a series of intimate relationships with soldiers of the same regiment. Native mothers “circulated through the households of soldiers in a regiment in order to maintain their livelihoods and their ties to their children” (Ghosh 2006, 232). These women were perceived as promiscuous, which further sedimented the idea of native women as unfit mothers.

Chatterjee (1999b) demonstrates how this undermining of native women’s motherhood becomes manifest when compared to indigenous systems of slavery. In the latter, the child born to a slave-concubine inherited the father’s legal status, which allowed for filiation, status-reckoning, and incorporation into the slave-holding household. This entailed advantages in terms of status and continued protection for the mother of the child. In contrast, according to colonial law and practice, the offspring of slave-women inherited the mother’s juridical status. Mothers of children fathered by European free men were seen as “illegitimate” and could make no claims to their children.

These practices were bolstered by imperial ideologies of race and gender. Colonized women deviated from the norm of both *humanitas* (Maldonado-Torres 2017) and the norm of womanhood modeled on white bourgeoisie women. Thus, for native women, colonization brought both “racial inferiorization and gender subordination” (Lugones 2008, 8). While white European women were seen as fragile and sexually passive, colonized women were constructed as sexually aggressive and perverse (Cott 1978). Felicity Nussbaum (1995) argues that the eighteenth century marks the formation of the cult of domesticity, wherein hierarchies of class and race among women were expressed through their quintessential role as mothers. An “English” and “civilized” motherhood was ascribed according to class position, and further distinguished in opposition to the savage motherhood of the racialized women in the colonies: “women of the upper and middle classes are pitted against lower-class women and ‘civilized’ English mothers against ‘barbaric’ mothers—their difference a proof of racial and class superiority, their sameness an indication of their gendered inferiority in an interlocking network of hierarchies” (Nussbaum 1995, 126). Capable of killing, eating, or giving away their children, native mothers, otherwise pictured as closer to animals and a regime of primordial instincts, were paradoxically seen to lack maternal instinct. As Stoler (1989, 647) has shown, the idea of native mothers as harmful to their children and the subsequent removal and institutionalization of mixed-race children is a recurrent pattern not only from British India but also from French Indochina, the Dutch Indies, and white settler colonies in North America (the American Native Indian boarding schools in the United States, the Indian residential school system in Canada), and Australia (the Stolen Generations).

### US Neo-imperialism and Korean Birth Mothers

#### Post–WWII Korea

In Korea, the victory of the Allied forces over the Axis powers at the end of WWII put an end to thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule. Drawing up an arbitrary border at the 38th parallel, the Cold War superpowers—charged with the task of overseeing the retreat of the Japanese army—divided the peninsula, with the Soviet Union (backed by China) taking charge of the northern part and the United States (supported by the UN) claiming the southern part. In September 1945, the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) was created. But the process towards independence was stalled as post-WWII turned into Cold War politics and the conflicting interests of the two superpowers, who stood face to face on the Korean peninsula, escalated. The USSR and US each installed ideologically attuned Korean-led governments, turning Korea into a testing ground for democracy versus communism. Because of its proximity to the Soviet border, the American military presence was seen as a way to both ensure Korean independence and prevent communist expansion in East Asia. In the years after WWII, South Korea received massive war relief from the international community, in particular the US, to rebuild its shattered economy. The US economic assistance became increasingly geared towards making Korea a strong yet subordinate partner in the Cold War. A system of dependency was mounted, in which political and social problems were solved by economic contributions. As South Korea gained independence in 1948, the Republic of Korea–US Agreement on Aid preserved the structures established during the rule of the USAMGIK.

#### Camptown Women

The establishment of US military camps throughout the southern peninsula was accompanied by the construction of camptowns, or *kijich’ons*—areas adjacent or in close proximity to military bases that provided services, not the least sexual services, for soldiers. In some cases, the American troops would take over and expand already existing “comfort stations” set up by the Japanese army, including the women who lived there. Thus, as suggested by scholarship on Korean comfort women and early camptown women, there is no clear distinction between the two categories (Moon 1997; Cho 2008). The first generation of camptown women (1950–1970) came from poor rural areas where the war had created a large supply of girls and women without families and livelihoods, and for whom prostitution became a means for survival. Some considered themselves to be “fallen women” even before entering the camptowns, having lost their social status as a result of divorce, rape, or sex and/or pregnancy outside wedlock. A few of these women would marry American servicemen, while others entered into “contract cohabitations,” in which women were provided living expenses in return for a monogamous relationship (Moon 1997, 25–26). As Akeia Benard (2016) notes, these Cold War–era relationships were similar to the forms of interracial domestic arrangements that flourished in British India and other colonial settings during the imperial era.

Myths of the sexual availability and compliance of women of color were pivotal to sustain white masculinity and white male supremacy during both the European imperial era and the Cold War (Benard 2016, 3). In the case of US-Korea relations, orientalist stereotypes were used to attract young American men to enter into military service on the peninsula (Moon 1997, 33). To the emerging South Korean state, camptown women’s sexual labor was perceived as a guarantee for the safety and the honor of the nation as kijich’onwomen were seen as protecting the virtue of innocent Korean national womanhood from the perceived predatory sexuality of American soldiers. Nevertheless, working as a military prostitute was deeply stigmatized, as it breached against both neo-Confucianist norms of female chastity and the idea of the Korean people as a racially homogenous nation (Hübinette 2006; H. Kim 2016, 50; Moon 1997, 3). Camptown women were commonly also rejected by their own families, even when it was through their labor that the family was able to survive. Although officially outlawed by the USAMGIK in 1946, prostitution increased during the American occupation: by 1953 there were 350,000 prostitutes in Korea, with 60 percent working around US military bases throughout the 1950s and 1960s (Cho 2008, 104). However, the link between prostitution and the American army was never recognized by the US Department of State (Cho, 2008, 101). In 1948, following South Korean independence, prostitution was banned by the South Korean government, but an exception was made for camptowns. During the military dictatorship of Park Chunghee (1961–1979), kijich’onwomen were officially recognized and encouraged to act as “diplomats” for their nation (Cho 2008, 110). As Katharine Moon notes, although most countries have prostitution, what sets the South Korean case apart is that it was both sanctioned and sponsored by the government (1997, 41).

#### Unwed Mothers, Mixed-Race Orphans, and Racial Discrimination

The Korean War had devastated the country, killed over one million civilians and displaced tens of thousands of children. The majority were mixed-race children who had been abandoned by their parents. According to Korean law, mothers were not recognized as the legal guardian of children born out of wedlock, which made the children illegitimate. Both women and their mixed-race offspring, particularly the children of African American servicemen, were seen as social outcasts and exposed to racial discrimination (Okazawa-Rey 1997; Cho 2008, 118). Camptown mothers carried the double stigma of miscegenation and illegitimacy (E. Kim 2010, 51). In both colonial India and South Korea, mixed-race children were seen as a problem. However, as Tobias Hübinette explains, adoption as the “solution” to this problem represents a historically significant shift from “the way the French, Dutch and British empires in Asia dealt with the problem of mixed children fathered by European settlers before World War II. Few, if any of these were ever adopted and moved to metropolitan Europe” (2006, 144).

The task of rehabilitating the country was assigned to the US military, through programs such as the Armed Forces Assistance to Korea, and the military unit, the Korea Civil Assistance Command. In reconstructing the social welfare system, the construction of orphanages became a top priority, which illustrates how geopolitical agendas were framed as humanitarian interventions. As SooJin Pate and others have observed, “the acts of recovery performed by the U.S. military worked to cover over the acts of state violence that necessitated the need for recovery in the first place” (2014, 39). American news media contributed by broadcasting footage of GIs rescuing children from ruins and handing out presents at Christmas parties, which represented the American soldier as a kind of “pseudo-missionary” (Pate 2014). The emergence of Korean adoption was intimately linked to anti-communism and “Christian Americanism”: a patriotic ideology that conflates Christian principles with “American values,” articulated as a specifically American moral authority (Oh 2015). The Korean mixed-race children were seen as humanitarian orphans to be rescued, rather than as children abandoned by their American fathers (E. Kim 2010, 53), and as opposed to the native mothers in British India, Korean kijich’on women were not entitled to any legal protection or practical assistance from the US military (H. Kim 2016, 49). Interestingly, the sense of responsibility and entitlement that transnational adoption builds on was facilitated by an erasure of the ways in which the US was complicit in creating “the Korean orphan crisis.”

Early orphanages and adoption policies specifically targeted mixed-race children. Hosun Kim (2016) has shown that kijich’on mothers were persistently solicited by adoption agency workers who actively counseled them to relinquish their children. Only 25 percent of camptown mothers raised their children themselves (H. Kim 2016, 46). The overseas adoption of mixed-race orphans became a way to remove a population that challenged the ideas of Korean patriarchy and of Korea as a pure and racially homogenous nation, articulated through the ideology of one nation and one people (Hübinette 2006; H. Kim 2016, 50). Thus, in this initial phase, transnational adoption was established as a technology for population control and the removal of “excess” populations (H. Kim 2016, 50, 66; Hübinette 2006). The US involvement also aligned with the new South Korean government’s economic interests: national security and the building up of military forces, not social welfare, were top priorities. Furthermore, not only was it a practice that lowered state spendings, it became a significant source of foreign capital to the emerging South Korean state (E. Kim 2010, 32).

Previous research has highlighted demographic shifts in the US and the conflation of anti-communism, evangelical Christianity, and US paternalism on the global stage as driving forces behind Korean adoption (E. Kim 2010; Oh 2008; Nelson 2006; Briggs 2012). Christina Klein (2003) suggests that the family becomes the dominant metaphor for understanding US-Asia relations in the 1950s. Viewing foreign relations as sentimental familial bonds made it possible for white Americans to imagine non-white Asians as part of their family. The creation of this group of privileged migrants is particularly noteworthy against the history of US anti-Asian immigration policies: the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) and the 1924 Immigration Act, which had practically made it impossible for Asians to immigrate legally to the United States (Lowe 2015).

A crucial step in transforming the social orphan into an adoptable child was to erase the native mother. The birth mothers were subjected to a process similar to that of their children: exposed to “social death” through the stripping of all social recognition and rights, reflected in their lack of “the right to ask for rights” pertaining to the child” (J. Kim 2009, 857; H. Kim 2016, 9). In the early period, it was primarily Christian, white, middle-class families who adopted Korean children. If adoption is a technology to shore up the ideal white nuclear family (Eng 2010), it is important to add that it relies on the invisiblized reproductive labor of the single/unwed/immoral/prostitute birth mother.

Patriarchal family practices and South Korean law give mothers little power over their children’s lives. Relinquishing a child for adoption has not always required the consent of the birth mother. Lax governmental oversight has allowed adoption agencies to deploy ethically ambiguous practices for claiming custody of a child. In 1972 *Kyunghyang Daily News* reported that agencies customarily required only the father’s consent in the relinquishment process (E. Kim 2010). Birth mothers’ lack of legal protection and the broad criteria for adoptable children has made a large group of women—including divorced women, poor mothers, single mothers, women involved with married men, and mothers who leave home because of domestic abuse—vulnerable to losing their children to adoption. Mothers who leave their children for whatever reason lose all rights to their children. It has not been uncommon for mothers to discover that their child has been relinquished after the formal process of adoption has been completed.

### Unpacking the Coloniality of Power Nexus in Korean Adoption and Indian Surrogacy

#### Transforming Waste into Profit

We exemplify the workings of coloniality of power through what we understand as three intersecting trajectories: (a) the transformation of waste into profit, (b) the devaluation/erasure of non-white mothers, and (c) the trope of the white savior. First, in both cases, neoliberal state policies are intertwined with the exploitation of sexual and reproductive labor of women who do not fit the national imaginary, transforming devalued populations seen as “waste” into profit-generating resources.

In early British India, practices of concubinage lowered economic expenses while creating and maintaining racially unequal relations. This inequality has informed contemporary surrogacy practices. For roughly a decade (2004–2015), India stood as the world’s “mother destination” for commercial gestational surrogacy. Low costs, the availability of highly qualified English-speaking medical doctors and women willing to work as surrogates, together with the lack of legal regulation surrounding surrogacy arrangements, contributed to India’s flourishing fertility industry. Overall, surrogacy has benefited from the active promotion and financial support of the Indian government (Rudrappa 2015; Deompampo 2016).

The viewing of Indian women’s bodies as excessively reproductive and fertile and thus inimical to development and progress was first formulated during British colonial rule and then reconfigured by the postcolonial Indian state and policy makers in the Global North (Wilson 2018). Paradoxically, the same wombs that were seen as superfluous, dangerous, and wasteful, and thus requiring anti-natalist interventions, are now seen as profitable and lucrative sources of revenue for stakeholders within the fertility industry (Pande 2014; Rudrappa 2018).

Similarly, the sexual and reproductive exploitation of Korean women after WWII was facilitated both by the South Korean and the US government, motivated by political as well as financial gains. In the postwar construction period, the transnational adoption of mixed-race children became a significant source of foreign capital (E. Kim 2010, 32). In the 1960s and 1970s, a decline in the number of mixed-race children paralleled with a booming interest in the US to adopt Korean children, leading to practices such as baby hunting and financial renumeration to birth mothers (E. Kim 2010). The demographics of birth mothers has shifted since its initial years. Vulnerable to South Korea’s aggressive modernization policies, poor female factory workers were counseled by adoption agency workers to relinquish their children (E. Kim 2010, 72). By the 1970s, the children of unmarried college students came to dominate, and by the late 1990s, teen pregnancies became the largest group, maintaining single or unmarried mothers as most vulnerable to losing their children (Briggs 2012). Until the 1990s, family members were able to hand over children for adoption against the mother’s will or without her knowledge. Today, South Korea is the world’s twelfth largest economy and has the world’s lowest birth rates, yet adoption continues (Shin 2020). Approximately 90 percent of the children adopted oversees in recent years have unmarried birth mothers in their late teens or early twenties (E. Kim 2010, 34). News reports indicate that unwed mothers are pressured to give up their children for adoption through the guise of “counseling” organized by adoption agencies who have economic interests in recruiting children for adoption (Sköld and Lundberg 2021a).

Throughout its history, Korean adoption reflects the stigmatization and lack of social and financial support that out-of-wedlock motherhood is associated with in the country. Furthermore, these adoption practices have undermined the construction of child welfare policies in the country and been complicit in the disenfranchisement of Korean women. Overall, the history of Korean adoption is closely intertwined with South Korea’s postcolonial process of modernization and current wealth (H. Kim 2016, 36–37; Pate 2014), serving both economic and political ends. As Pate notes, adoption transformed “South Korea’s social outcasts…into useful subjects for the state. As adoptees, they became economically profitable for South Korea and politically beneficial for the United States” (2014, 103). Thus, since its beginnings, transnational adoption has turned undesired, “excessive” populations into a site of economic profit generation (H. Kim 2016, 36–37; Pate 2014, 118).

#### Erasing the Non-white Mother

Second, during the British colonial rule in India, native mothers were seen as detrimental to children and stripped of all legal and social recognition as mothers. As opposed to an ideal white motherhood, native mothers were constructed as unfit to nurture the offspring of white men. The omission of their names in the colonial archive is mirrored in contemporary birth certificates of children born through surrogacy in India, which bear no trace of the surrogate mother. Furthermore, by freighting in concepts of racial medicalization, Indian surrogates become perceived as sites of risk and danger to the fetus they gestate (Deomampo 2016). This mode of thought illustrates a colonial episteme according to which the body is commodified through fragmentation. We argue that this episteme is manifested through the myth of the empty womb as separated from the self and the rest of the body and therefore possible to “rent.” Such a construction implies “instituting artificial and rigid lines of separation between the Indian surrogate’s womb and the rest of her body…between the biological and the affective,” pushing surrogates to “completely disengage from several critical aspects of their identities” (A. Banerjee 2014, 124). We understand this violent imposition to be made possible by the coloniality of power: through the non-recognition of the surrogate as fully human. While it can be argued that processes of fragmentation and commodification are mobilized in all commercial surrogacy arrangements, we nonetheless suggest that some racialized bodies are more easily seen as dispensable. Thus, the predominantly white, heterosexual parents who seek fertility treatment in India rely on the non-recognized reproductive labor of Indian surrogates (Gondouin 2014; Deomampo 2016; Gondouin, Thapar-Björkert, and Ryberg 2018).

Similarly, the erasure of the birth mother has been crucial throughout the history of transnational adoption. Kijicho’on women were constructed as immoral, unsuitable mothers and lacked legal rights to their children. The process of turning a mixed-race child into an adoptable orphan required the erasure of the native mother, a procedure that was institutionalized in the dominant practice of “hard” or plenary adoptions introduced in the 1960s, which grants the child a new birth certificate that replaces the birth parents with the adoptive parents. Thus, importantly, transnational adoption as a means through which white middle-class nuclear families and white heteronormative kinship are created and sustained depends on the invisibilized reproductive labor of the single/unwed/immoral/prostitute Korean birth mother (Eng 2010; Pate 2014).

In her pioneering work on Korean birth mothers, Hosu Kim highlights “how racialized, working class, poor birth mothers in the Global South are disproportionately devalued and delimited to a woman’s capacity to bear a life, while their opportunities to parent that life are severely curtailed” (2016, 9). This stratification of reproductive labor is visible in current geopolitical conflicts, such as the highly mediatized example of the Trump administration’s “zero tolerance” policy at the US-Mexican border in 2018–2019, when children of asylum seekers were separated from their caregivers and placed in “tender age” government shelters, from which some of them entered the US foster care and adoption system (Briggs 2020). Laura Briggs (2020) underscores the broad mobilization against the policy, made possible by drawing parallels between the separations at the Southern border and histories of slavery. However, when the Trump administration strategically referred to immigrants as parents putting their children at risk (because of criminal records or neglectfulness), it resuscitated the historically familiar trope of Black and native women’s lack of maternal feelings and deficient parenthood. Subsequently, the critique became more muted (Briggs 2020, 165–66). We argue that a coloniality of power framework enables us to problematize practices of adoption and fostering that privilege the rights of white parents, seen as “better families,” at the expense of limiting the ability of non-white individuals *to parent*.

#### Saving Children from Brown Mothers: The White Savior

Third, in colonial India, the trope of the white savior (Hughey 2014) enabled white men and women to occupy a moral high ground vis-à-vis the colonized subjects, thus aiding those perceived as “less fortunate” while simultaneously fulfilling the “white man’s burden,” “that reputable colonial malaise, that sanctioned the subjugating of entire continents’’ (Kabbani 1994, 5–6). Though British women’s experiences of imperialism were ambiguous, they were not the hapless onlookers of the empire, but complicit in upholding the idea of moral superiority and agents of civilization (Burton 1990), drawing “their capital from others’ deprivation while refusing to accept [their] own position as endowed” (Chow 1993, 14). Chatterjee (1999a; 1999b) observes how British men purchasing children or female slaves perceived of their role as that of saviors, “rescuing” the native from a miserable life subjected to the cruelty of indigenous communities. As previous scholarship has highlighted, a similar rhetoric of rescue is often mobilized amongst commissioning parents contracting a woman from the Global South as their surrogate (Pande 2014; Rudrappa 2015; Deomampo 2016). Paying a poor woman for her service is seen as offering “help.” This rhetoric has also been understood as a way to manage anxieties regarding the potential exploitation involved in surrogacy.

In the case of transnational adoption, the trope of the white savior has been central since its inception in postwar Korea. The intersecting ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality that made Korean war orphans objects of rescue by American Christianism and anti-communism are reconfigured in contemporary media representations of adoption. Recurrent images of celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, Mia Farrow, or Lady Diana, “saving, rescuing, or adopting international children from underprivileged parts of the world” (Shome 2011, 389) construct a discourse of white women as “global mothers.” Global motherhood is a specific, contemporary reconfiguration through which whiteness articulates a new universality drawing on Christian visual tropes and culturally specific contexts (Gondouin 2015). The availability of children for transnational adoption is presented as the result of the faulty motherhood of the birth mother, formulated in terms of a lack in modernity and structured by a logic of abandonment. This understanding “obscures the historical and political context…and positions white citizens as rescuers and racial others as beneficiaries, making…the attitude towards the other a question of mercy and compassion” (Gondouin 2015, 106). In a previous study, we analyzed the critically acclaimed TV series *Top of the Lake: China Girl* (Campion 2017), and demonstrated how the discourse of global motherhood is enacted in the context of surrogacy, as the white female protagonists are represented as the saviors of passive and silenced Thai sex workers who are also surrogates (Gondouin, Thapar-Björkert, and Ryberg 2018).

The trope of white saviors and white global motherhood is associated with the rhetoric of the gift, which is a significant component in narratives of transnational surrogacy. Pande (2014) has observed how a rhetoric of the gift serves a crucial role for surrogate mothers: understanding their labor as a gift becomes a strategy to resist the commodification entailed in commercial surrogacy. While both rescue and gift indicate logics that oppose systems of commodification, the notion of the gift, in contrast to rescue, implies reciprocity, which was interestingly actively resisted by the commissioning parents interviewed in Daisy Deomampo’s (2016) study. We suggest that this refusal can be understood in the light of Maldonado-Torres’s reading of colonial subjugation. Maldonado-Torres sees the condition of the colonized as equivalent to the “damné” (the condemned) in Franz Fanon’s writing. Noting that there is an etymological relation between “damner” and “donner,” he explicates the meaning of the damné as “literally the subject who cannot give because what he or she has has been taken away from him or her” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 258). The reluctance of intended parents to recognize reciprocity articulates with an understanding of colonial subjugation as a mode of existence that makes gift-giving and generous reception impossible.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that the legacies of US imperialism and British colonial rule are reflected in Korean adoption and Indian surrogacy through three key mechanisms: the transformation of waste into profit, the devaluation and/or erasure of non-white mothers, and the trope of the white savior. The latter, with its potential ethical pitfalls, speaks to the observations of the Dutch governmental

report on intercountry adoption. Our analysis of the colonial/imperial regimes of reproductive labor in South Korea and India, two seemingly disparate bio- and geopolitical contexts, underscores the centrality of raced, sexed, classed, and ethnicized bodies as sites through which imperial/colonial power was imagined and exercised. Native women’s bodies have historically been a subject of anxiety and surveillance for imperial officials, and their management crucial for social order and political stability. Our analysis further foregrounds how the narrative of modernity is supported in and through the violence(s) of coloniality: juxtaposing notions of freedom, success, and visibility with erasure, marginalization, and exploitation. We hope that our analysis has rendered visible histories of inequality that shape women’s reproductive choices, alerting us to some of the ways in which imperial/colonial regimes of exploitation inform contemporary practices of globalized reproduction.

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