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ADOPTION MATTERS

Beyond Catastrophe and Spectacle

When Haiti experienced the January 2010 earthquake that revealed its political, economic, and infrastructural vulnerabilities to the world, many people across the globe felt compelled to give. Although the outpouring of generous and charitable giving was impressive, Haiti's embattled history with colonial and neocolonial exploitation and the suffering long imposed on Haitians through French- and U.S.-driven policies led many to question the motives behind the tremendously varied expressions of goodwill. Suspicion of one faith-based group led to the arrest of its members by Haitian authorities. Members of the New Life Children's Refuge, affiliated with the American Baptist Churches, were apprehended on charges of attempted abduction of Haitian children.

In the days following the abduction scandal, an urgent message circulated across the Internet drafted by adult transnational/transracial adoptees—Korean adoptees predominant among them. Rather than assume that Haitian children would benefit from being permanently removed from their homelands in this time of enormous loss, "the international community of adoptees of color" used their expertise and experience to caution against such reactionary charity. I have included key excerpts from this statement here[1] because it marks a profound and vital shift in the production of knowledge surrounding transnational adoption. The adoptees' statement stands not only as an admirable expression of solidarity with the Haitian people but also as an important intervention into commonly held assumptions about transnational adoption as a "solution" to catastrophe:

We are a community of scholars, activists, professors, artists, lawyers, social workers and health care workers who speak with the knowledge that North Americans and Europeans are lining up to adopt the "orphaned children" of the Haitian earthquake, and who feel compelled to voice our opinion about what it means to be "saved" or "rescued" through adoption.

We understand that in a time of crisis there is a tendency to want to act quickly to support those considered the most vulnerable and directly affected, including children. However, we urge caution in determining how best to help. . . .

As adoptees of color many of us have inherited a history of dubious adoptions. We are dismayed to hear that Haitian adoptions may be "fast-tracked" due to the massive destruction of buildings in Haiti that hold important records and documents. We oppose this plan and argue that the loss of records requires slowing down of the processes of adoption while important information is gathered and re-documented for these children. . . .

We urge the international community to remember that the children in question have suffered the overwhelming trauma of the earthquake and separation from their loved ones. We have learned first-hand that adoption (domestic or intercountry) itself as a process forces children to negate their true feelings of grief, anger, pain or loss, and to assimilate to meet the desires and expectations of strangers. . . .

. . . We offer this statement in solidarity with the people of Haiti and with all those who are seeking ways to intentionally support the long-term sustainability and self-determination of the Haitian people. . . . *All adoptions from Haiti must be stopped* and all efforts to help children be refocused on giving aid to organizations working toward family reunification and caring for children in their own communities.

When I began researching transnational adoption (also referred to as international or intercountry adoption) at the beginning of the new millennium, the practice was nearing its all-time high of an annual rate of 22,000 children adopted into U.S. homes from abroad. Transnational adoption to the United States reached its pinnacle in 2004. Adoptions to the United States from South Korea (henceforth "Korea") in particular had begun to slow down to an average of about 1,785 annually between 2000 and 2005. This was a dramatic drop for Koreans adopted by American families, which reached a peak in the mid-1980s. In 1985 alone, more than 6,000 of the 8,837 adoptees leaving Korea were placed in U.S. homes.[2]

While Korea has lost its position as the numerical leader in placing children in adoptive homes abroad, its rise and fall bring up questions about the adoption life cycles of various nation-states. Does Korea provide a shining example of how to efficiently utilize transnational adoption in times of political and economic crises and then scale back the practice in times of greater prosperity? Should adoption from Korea be viewed as a success story in social welfare policy? Or should Korea's strategy to "outsource" adoption for the sake of its national market economy be recognized primarily as a quick-fix move, causing long-term emotional trauma and loss to the individuals involved in the practice? Of course, responses to these questions will always be shaped by one's experiences with adoption, and thus the debate over adoption's potential or actualized benefits and losses will likely never cease. However, exposure to the narratives and expressed motivations of people intimately involved in Korean adoption to the United States (or Korean American adoption [KAA]; see "Names, Labels, and Terms" section below for clarification on the use of this acronym) is critical to ensuring that the discourse remains broad enough to attend to the relationship between the individual (micro-level) and societal (macro-level) problems engendered by transnational adoption.

Korea's trajectory and dominance in the field of transnational adoption offers a window into the ups and downs (both quantitatively and qualitatively) of overseas adoption in general. While the specific political economy of each sending and receiving nation influences the bureaucratic and institutional processes involved, both the joys as well as the contradictions of adoption often transcend borders, creating shared realities for adoptees born and reared in diverse places on the globe. In other words, Chinese and Ethiopian children adopted into European and U.S. families will benefit from the work Korean adoptees are doing to assess and critique the impact of KAA on their individual lives and the societies in which they have lived. Finally and fortunately, the published memoirs, documentary films, Internet blogs, grassroots initiatives, and community forums developed by Korean adoptees (and other adoptees) are dramatically expanding our adoption knowledge base so that more adoptees and their parents are better prepared for the diverse challenges of transnational and transracial adoption than they have been in the past.

While this shift in knowledge production in the field of adoption is, fortunately, occurring, the dominant views of adoption facilitators and adoptive parents, especially celebrity adopters, remain central to public discourse. Although celebrity adoptions in particular *could* serve to heighten public scrutiny around the practice of international adoption, the circumstances involving high-profile adopters, such as Angelina Jolie and Madonna, often leave out the real complexities of adoption experienced by everyday people.

Furthermore, when the complexities of the practice do start to emerge in the popular media, so too do the popular refrains about the essential good of adoption. For example, soon after Angelina Jolie made headlines in 2007 for her disparaging remarks about Madonna's quest to adopt the first of her two children from Malawi—a country where transnational adoptions were long prohibited—Jolie quickly flipped and recanted her initial criticism of Madonna (either because of outside pressure or her own instinct) and decided to keep the story simple. Presumably sensing the public's sympathy for Madonna's actions, Jolie concluded, "All that should count is the happiness of her little David" (quoted in Silverman 2007).

Ironically, Angelina Jolie's 2002 adoption of a baby boy from Cambodia was completed amid the U.S. Department of State's ban on adoptions from Cambodia resulting from allegations of visa fraud and baby brokering. During this ban, a *Barbara Walters Special* featured teary-eyed white American couples "stranded" in Cambodia, proclaiming their feelings of betrayal by their own government's interference in their adoptions. Jolie's "happy ending" adoption from Cambodia presented a striking contrast to their dilemmas. Thus, Jolie herself has been publicly criticized by some adoption advocates for not doing more to help Americans accomplish their desired transnational adoptions but also praised in the media for inspiring more Americans to "save" children from poverty as she supposedly did through the subsequent adoptions of her Ethiopian and Vietnamese children. These scenarios help us consider how our impressions of transnational adoption are constantly being formed in part by the mainstream media's spin on the glamorous, controversial, and sensationalized "success and failure" stories of adoption.

Celebrity adoptions as spectacle epitomize the troublesome contradictions at the core of today's transnational adoptions. As is the case with so many dimensions of globalization, our increased capacity to interact and connect with one another across borders, though enticing and potentially rewarding, is also steeped in long and varied histories of power imbalances and abused privileges. In the wake of her adoption controversy, Madonna did pledge to put her excessive celebrity earnings to good use in the development of education programs and orphanage refurbishing in Malawi. However, such acts of goodwill from Madonna and others like her are still juxtaposed with a hard-lined sense of entitlement and determination that allows overly privileged people to create multicultural families on their own terms—that is, according to their own demands and desires.

American adoption proceedings throughout the past several decades have been increasingly controlled by state agencies and state and federal legislators

(Patton 2000; Gailey 2010). Domestic as well as international adoption practices have also been closely associated with religious and nonstate institutions. These institutions have actualized adoption programs in line with the state's hegemonic ideas about "belongingness" in racialized, classed, and gendered terms.[3] Hence, American adoption discourses and practices dating back to the nineteenth century and continuing through to the present have been replete with ideologies fundamental to the crafting of a civilized U.S. citizenry in the image of the European-American imperialist state.

Adoptions, until relatively recently, have long been practiced with dominant constructions of family based on the supremacy of "blood"—that is, genetic inheritance (Schneider 1977; Gailey 2000). In keeping with this construction, adoption practices formerly endeavored to match adopted children with adoptive parents phenotypically to avoid suspicion and speculation about the child's belongingness in the family. While some adopters still prefer racially or ethnically matched adoptions, families participating in any form of transracial adoption (in which one or both adoptive parents occupy a racialized ascription different from the adopted child) forfeit the possibility of hiding the "multiracial" status of their families, which many are happy to do.

In addition to presenting greater transparency in family makeup, adoption culture in the United States and around the world has changed in other significant ways over the past four decades. In the United States, adult adoptees have initiated campaigns to end secrecy in adoption and gained access to their sealed birth records (Wegar 1997; Carp 2004). Birth parents in the United States have formed organizations to support and affirm one another in their efforts to make contact with children they relinquished for adoption (Babb 1999). More countries are following Korea's lead by institutionalizing and expanding overseas adoption programs. And most recently, as evidenced by transracial adoptees' response to the Haitian crisis, adult transnational adoptees are refusing to let "experts" tell the world "how they turned out" and are instead mobilizing for the sake of personal healing and to correct the flaws of the global system of adoption (Trenka, Oparah, and Shin 2006: 1). In fact, adult transnational adoptees have even shifted the terminology in the field, using more consistently the term trans*racial*—used historically to signify U.S. domestic adoptions involving white parents and children of color—to refer to transnational adoptions that also cross racial lines and that embody similar identity dilemmas. In various ways and to different degrees, these interrelated circumstances have galvanized an apparent shift from secrecy to openness in adoption. As anthropologist Judith Schachter Modell claims, adoption is now "out" and "struts boldly across the stage of American culture" (2002: 1).

Yet this supposed shift toward out-in-the-open adoption contains many nuances as each form of adoption "struts" differently across the stage of American culture. If we look specifically at shifts within the practice of KAA, we see that the discourse has been notably amended, moving away from a language of cultural assimilation for adoptees toward one that could be characterized as a form of "cosmetic pluralism" (Newfield and Gordon 1996: 87). While the multicultural aspect of transnational adoption may be out in the open, questions remain about other aspects of openness in adoption. For example, how genuinely open are adoptive families to learning about the birth origins of their adopted Korean children? How open are Korean and U.S. families to the idea of kinship networks as opposed to nuclear families? How open are adoption agencies to critiques from adult Korean adoptees who question whether the conditions of their upbringing were truly in their best interests? And what types of cultural shifts might open up and refocus attention on *how* certain children become "adoptable" rather than on the spectacle of Western adopters' eagerness to take part in global family building. I hope the ideas presented in this relatively small case study will further illuminate the ways in which adoption could open rather than contain our notions of family.

The Birth of "Sentimental" International Adoption

I focus primarily on one form of transracial/transnational adoption—the adoption of Korean children by white American parents. However, to better understand how KAA became so firmly situated within U.S. adoption culture, it is helpful to consider the social climate around adoption prior to its emergence.

After the end of World War I, domestic adoption in the United States came to be represented less in terms of a mechanism for household labor management, or civic duty, as it had in previous eras and more in terms of a means of satisfying the sentimental desire for a "normal" family. Brian Paul Gill's historical analysis, rich with primary source details from instructional social work literature, asserts that "the demand for babies to adopt began climbing in the 1920s and exploded with the culture of domesticity after WWII" (2002: 161). However, adoption's association with social engineering, which Gill and others have noted, carried on into the mid-1950s, when "matching" according to physical resemblances, ethnicity, religion, and even intellectual capabilities was still paramount. As adoption agencies became increasingly focused on identifying "nondefective" and "normal" parents for adoption, children with intellectual and physical disabilities were determined unadoptable. The prevailing idea, stated in no uncertain terms by adoption

social workers, was that for some children their "heredity" and "defectiveness" meant that they did not belong in ideally normal families (Gill 2002: 167).

Eager to participate in what Ellen Herman calls "kinship by design" (2008), the ideal couple welcomed by adoption agencies for domestic adoption was childless (infertility tests were often mandatory) and exhibited "ideal marital relationships" based on traditional gender roles. Influenced by Freudian psychology, adoption "experts" held firm to the notion that boys needed fathers to strengthen their masculinity and girls needed mothers to learn proper femininity. Both needed the marital relationship of their parents to model a "loving tenderness" that would ensure the children themselves would not have unwed futures (Gill 2002: 171). An early fear of feminism within adoption was clearly articulated in a widely read 1943 instructional text for adoption workers. The text stated that a woman who "must be entirely self-sufficient reflects a degree of independence which is unfavorable" (quoted in Gill 2002: 171). Thus, adoption workers were forthright in their emphasis on "normality," which was characterized in one text as "something that is hard to define, yet easy to feel and see" (quoted in Gill 2002: 162).

Unsurprisingly, a study conducted in the late 1950s, involving the adoptive placements of sixty agencies in nine separate communities, showed that parents accepted for adoption were remarkably similar in age (mid-thirties), childlessness, marital status, faith-based participation, and visions for family life. As Gill asserts, "Adoption agencies at mid-century are perhaps best understood as guardians of a conventional (white middle-class) definition of family against the threat that was implicit in the legal creation of unnatural kinship" (2000: 174).

The period referred to by Rickie Solinger (1992) as the "adoption mandate years," from 1945 to 1970, marks another significant era in adoption history that occurred alongside the emergence of KAA. During these years, numerous maternity homes were set up to discreetly house unwed (mostly white) mothers and to facilitate the placement of their babies into white homes. Solinger's term "mandate years" refers to the powerful stigma of unwed motherhood prevalent during this era. The stigma was so strong as to practically mandate child relinquishment for unwed, pregnant middle-class white women. Diana Edwards's (1999) research reveals that many of the women who found themselves in these maternity homes experienced great anguish related to the coerced nature of child relinquishment and the closed adoption practices of the homes. This means that the birth mothers had no contact with adoptive families or birth children. Edwards asserts that the psychological turmoil and sense of loss expressed by these birth mothers contrasted sharply with the feelings of adopters, who generally saw "adoption as a

social good and adoptive parenting as an act of altruism." Edwards maintains, however, that adoption procedures that relied on the practices of maternity homes represented "a form of social control for unapproved female sexuality and childbearing" (1999: 387–388).

The fact that many African American women were refused services from such programs speaks not only to the long-standing racism within human services in the United States (see Chapter 5 on MEPA-IEP debates) but also to the elaboration of the mythical, morally pure white mother. While the homes concealed the out-of-wedlock births of white people from the larger society, maintaining the image of intact nuclear white families, they often denied services to African American women and other women of color. These women, by contrast, would face a long history of public disparagement for out-of-wedlock birth, continuing to the present (see Ransby 2006; Bridges 2011).

In their study drawing on records from the Children's Home Society of Washington, E. Wayne Carp and Anna Leon-Guerrero (2002) characterize the majority of domestic adopters in the post–World War II era as suburban white married (heterosexual) homeowners. Many of the fathers held professional and military positions, and the couples typically stated their preferences for newborns rather than older children. With this demographic consistently replenishing the pool of adopters, adoption agencies often neglected to see the value in recruiting families of color, even as the number of children in the U.S. social welfare system increased. Carp and Leon-Guerrero argue that these factors heavily contributed to the "complete sentimentalization of adoption" (2002: 212).

Alongside the practices characteristic of the "mandate years," which represented the exaggerated nature of privacy and secrecy in adoption, the post–World War II era ushered in a slightly more public form of adoption. As a form of humanitarian relief to children in countries devastated by the war, U.S. citizens began to adopt from abroad. Many of the children adopted during this era were the progeny of U.S. military men who had served tours of duty in Japan and European nations. The first "Amerasian" children from Japan arrived in the United States in 1946, and by 1948 the Displaced Persons Act was passed to allow thousands of other "war orphans" to enter the country.[4] This act would be the first of many legislative changes that would firmly establish the United States as a "receiving" nation.

Richard Weil (1984) reports that between 1948 and 1962 at least four different short-term legislative acts, including the 1953 Refugee Relief Act, governed the adoption of internationally born children by U.S. citizens. During this period, Weil's reports show that slightly more than ten thousand

children were adopted from European countries and nearly nine thousand from Asian countries.

Operating with the assumption that child welfare agencies in the United States (in concert with maternity homes for unwed mothers) had effectively engineered families for the white middle class according to the supposed best interests of children, Americans could easily imagine that international adoption practices worked to achieve the same end. In other words, the same basic recipe that had worked for domestic family building was simply modified to include slightly more liberal ingredients.

The closed adoption model, which deposited children who were legally severed from birth families into "typical" American homes, was something U.S. institutions had mastered and were willing to export by the time the prospect of international adoption presented itself. While it may have been hard psychologically for some white adoptive parents to disregard the edict of racial matching in their adoption plans, this concern was mediated by the fact that parenthood in general was "in" and perhaps even patriotic. As scholars have observed of the late-1950s baby boom, "the media romanticized babies, glorified motherhood, and identified fatherhood with masculinity and good citizenship" (Carp 2002: 13), while "marginaliz[ing] childlessness in unprecedented ways" (May 1995: 156). Therefore, the patriotic duty of creating "normal" American nuclear families was not significantly compromised by international adoption but rather could be celebrated as extending America's prosperity and strong family values to the "third world."

The subsequent period for which Weil compiled data on international adoptions, between 1963 and 1975, reveals a decline of adoptions from Europe (slightly more than 7,000), while adoptions from Asia rose to about 22,000. More than half of these adoptions were from Korea. The drastic increase in Korean international adoption is most commonly explained as having to do with Korea's rigid family structure and rejection of "mixed-race" children (fathered by U.S. military servicemen). Some have also argued, however, "that the presence of efficient foreign adoption facilities encouraged the abandonment of children," which also increased throughout that period (Weil 1984: 282). This latter claim is difficult to verify in absolute terms, however, because of the tremendously complex and varied social and political factors in postwar Korea that affected the well-being of families and children and undoubtedly also contributed to child relinquishment.

Throughout their recovery from the ruinous Korean War, Koreans living on the southern side of the politically and militarily divided peninsula endured the authoritarian regime of President Park Chung-hee, as well as the ceaseless tension created by the steadfast presence of the U.S. military,

which symbolized the constant threat of reignited conflict with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea). Additionally, rapid urbanization and industrialization achieved through an ever-changing relationship between the South Korean state and the private sector certainly did not guarantee stability in the public service arena, especially for those organizations that might have assisted unwed women and children (Eun Mee Kim 1997). Thus, amid the iron fist–style "miracle" in development, fortified by the U.S.-supported repression of the political Left in South Korea, a very precarious nature of care for the citizenry became commonplace.

Given this context, it may not seem surprising that a U.S.-backed "child welfare" project, which generated revenue for the South Korean state while reducing the number of children dependent on the state, would be welcomed and encouraged at many levels. Furthermore, the dramatic growth in the Korean Christian church, which accompanied the postwar rural-urban migration, likely provided an additional layer of local support for the self-styled man from Oregon driven to do "the Lord's work" in a troubled land.

Institutionalizing Harry Holt's Mission in Korea

> If it is the Lord's will that my children and the childless couples of America get together, then the devil and all his angels can't keep them apart. —**Harry Holt**, *Korean Legacy*

While the history of KAA has now been documented by a variety of investigators using interdisciplinary perspectives (see Bergquist et al. 2007), most accounts in some way allude to the child rescue aspirations of Harry Holt. The story begins on an evening in 1954, when the Oregon business man turned farmer and his wife, Bertha, were invited to a lecture at the high school in Eugene, Oregon. The meeting was hosted by several Christian pastors who were committed to growing the ministry of an organization called World Vision Inc. One of the organization's leaders, Dr. Bob Pierce, spoke to the group and showed two films documenting a crisis in Korea. The first film, *Dead Men on Furlough*, detailed the martyrdom of hundreds of Korean Christian pastors persecuted by the authoritarian state of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The second film, *Other Sheep*, explained World Vision's work in South Korea supporting war widows and orphans.

The Holts and the others gathered were told of the "shameful result of undisciplined conduct" and "the tragic plight of hundreds of illegitimate children . . . GI-babies." Pierce severely criticized the men who had fathered the children and then "turned their backs on them." Emphasizing the children's

plight, Pierce stated, "The Koreans are very race conscious," and he strongly asserted, "Mixed-race children will never be accepted into Korean society. Even the youngsters, themselves, are conscious of the difference. At a very early age they seem to sense that something is wrong" (quoted in Holt 1956: 25).

As Harry and Bertha drove back to their farm several miles outside of Eugene, they discussed their reactions to what they had seen. They agreed that they would sponsor children by collecting monthly funds for individual children as the pastors had asked them to do. The Holts had long made a living as wheat farmers but accumulated most of their wealth through a profitable lumber mill they owned and operated alongside their farming operations. After being exposed to the World Vision mission, Harry and Bertha and their six biological children enthusiastically sent money, toys, and clothes to the children they were sponsoring in Korea over the following few months.

Though adoption had not been presented to them as part of World Vision's request for sponsors, Harry and Bertha eventually revealed to each other that they had both been thinking about the prospect of adopting orphaned Korean children. Harry and Bertha decided they wanted to adopt precisely eight children, as that was the number their thirteen-bedroom house comfortably accommodated. They drafted a letter to World Vision assertively outlining their plans. In the letter Harry explained that he often had to leave the farm in the first weeks of June because of his hay fever. He told World Vision "he planned to spend that time collecting and adopting his new family in Korea" (Holt 1956: 45).

While Harry was in Korea, World Vision representative Erwin Raetz urged Oregon senator Richard Neuberger to request a modification to the 1953 Refugee Relief Act. Because Section 5 of the act stated that only two international children could be adopted per U.S. family, Raetz explained that the legislation restricted the Holts "most worthy" plans to adopt several children from Korea and prevented other families from doing the same (C. C. Choy 2007: 31). This relationship between Holt and Senator Neuberger eventually led to the enactment of A Bill for the Relief of Certain Korean War Orphans (Bill HR 7043), which allowed Harry Holt to return to the United States with all eight of the children he had selected from orphanages throughout South Korea. In her memoir, *The Seed from the East*, Bertha recalled the family's excitement about the enactment of the bill: "We read the records over and over trying to visualize the greatest government on earth taking time to help some poor little orphans. It's wonderful to live in a country where great men are attentive to the needs of an unfortunate few" (Holt 1956: 83).