

HERITAGE TOURISM AND RETURN JOURNEYS:  
PLACE AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION  
IN KOREAN ADOPTEES

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the role that heritage tourism and “return journeys” play in Korean adoptee consideration of place and identity. Specifically, my research centers on the link between returns and the conceptualization of place and transnational identity. I employ mixed qualitative methodologies consisting of textual analysis and participant interviews to study the influence that scripted journeys have on adoptee perception of places of origin in relation to the adoptive countries. I analyze tour literature, brochures and media to explain the role that evocative imagery and language have on adoptee expectation of the formation of place and identity. Semi-structured interviews with journey participants and other returnees offer insight into how these tours have impacted them and inquire how they might have changed the adoptee's perspective of place, identity and belonging. This research contributes to thought in humanistic geography on the intersection of place, identity and the past in this unique diaspora.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: THE INVITATION

*“My genesis was the coordinates of 36° 58' 0 N and 127° 57' E – I couldn't end up further from the intersecting origin from where I came...if you travel just over 10,500 kilometers east of my point of origin you'll end up in Eugene, Oregon—my home. My coordinates are 44.04° N and 123.1° W.”*  
- Courtney Young (*Hyo Soon Jung*)

In October 1998, a group of twenty-nine Korean adoptees were invited to the Blue House by South Korean President Kim Dae Jung. It would be for these adoptees, all of whom were raised in American or European homes, the first return to the motherland. The newly elected president offered the adoptees an all-expense paid trip to Korea, a tour that included a formal visit to the president's residence where he delivered a formal apology as well an explanation for his overture.

*Looking at you, I am proud of such accomplished adults, but I am also overwhelmed with an enormous sense of regret at all the pain that you must have been subjected to. Some 200,000 Korean children have been adopted to the United States, Canada, and many European countries over the years. I am pained to think that we could not raise you ourselves, and had to give you away for foreign adoption...The world is becoming a single sphere. Globalization is the trend of the times. No nation can live by itself. Cultural exchanges are important. So nurture your cultural roots, and try to harmonize that with your national identities, wherever you are from. (Kim, 1999, p. 15)*

President Jung urged the adoptees to “strengthen [their] identity,” essentially attempting to imprint a sense of “Korean-ness” on the returnees from eight Western countries (Hubinette, 2003; Yngvesson, 2010).

This first “Return to the Motherland” attempted to achieve different goals for the two sides involved. For President Kim and South Korea, the event was an opportunity to perhaps right a historic wrong and assuage a nation's guilt. For the adoptees, the return was a chance to reconnect to their place of origin and negotiate their identity as outsiders/insiders in their original and adopted homes. But, ultimately, the 1998 Return

was the genesis of a unique relationship between South Korea and the children it had sent abroad over the previous five decades. Since then, approximately two thousand Korean adoptees have returned to their motherland each year via tours, study abroad programs and language immersion courses. South Korea has for the most part welcomed these returnees, allowing them to be employed in-country, buy real estate and regain Korean citizenship.

### Place and Homeland Returns

The notion of “place” plays a significant role in the 1998 Return and in thousands of other Korean adoptee journeys to the motherland. Within the context of adoptee visits to Korea and homeland returns in general, place exists on a spectrum of scales. President Kim and the host nation represent Korea as a place on a lofty notional plane, whereas for the adoptees themselves, the motherland as place is intimate and intertwined with personal identity. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan addresses this framework of scale and its bearing on attachment to place: “Place exists at different scales. At one extreme a favorite armchair is a place, at the other extreme the whole earth. Homeland is an important type of place at the medium scale” (Tuan, 1977, p. 149). On homeland journeys, an idealized concept of home is presented on a spectrum progressing from intimate to public and individual to national, but always as a profoundly meaningful and unique place.

That Korean adoptees, or any transnational adoptees, would be drawn to their place of origin is not unusual. In *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy Lippard writes that “people flock to place not because of their beauty but because of their promise” (Lippard, 1999, p. 52). For transnational adoptees, motherland return can be a vehicle through which

their sense of liminality is confronted, but with the promise of a secure ground upon which to shore up transformative identities, search for personal and collective memories, and provide the sense of belonging to a place. As such, the return to the motherland, either through personal pilgrimage or organized tour, provides a promise of the past and perhaps solidification of the present and future. More importantly, this return is a concrete encounter with place which connects a previously imagined representation of homelands to actual lived experience.

Homeland and heritage tours have grown in popularity and availability with the proliferation of diaspora and transitional communities throughout the globe. Such tours include African Americans retracing ancestral roots to Ghana, Jewish youth participating in *Mifgash* or “Birthright” programs, multiple generations of Jewish tourists visiting historic holocaust sites in Europe, and overseas Chinese sojourns to mainland China (Pollock, 2003; Kelner, 2010; Lew and Wong, 2005; Powers, 2011). In all of these cases the participants engage in *existential tourism* which allows the negotiation of “old, new, and transitory” places (Lew and Wong, 2005). ‘Existential tourism’ differs from its cousin ‘leisure tourism’ in that participants’ feelings takes precedent over gaze (Gonzalez, 2007). In the homeland tourism framework, existential tourism is significantly enriching to the returnee because it is intended to enhance personal identity and connection to place. More specifically, this style of tourism addresses the need of diaspora and transnational communities to reconcile the outsider or “Other” status in their current setting with the promise of a “home out there” (Lew and Wong, 2005). For adoptees, who are a diaspora in their own right, adopted and birth places hold aspects of both familiarity and incongruity. Homeland tours provide the means to address spatial

and temporal insecurities and make real the place of origin as an actualized location rather than a “misty faraway land” (Kim, 2007, p. 115).

At the heart of “return tourism” is the commodification of culture integrated into the representation of homeland (Powers, 2011; Edensor, 2001). Critics contend that the commercialization of tourism taints the authenticity of experience and landscape (Edensor, 1998; MacCannell, 1976; Williams, 1998), resulting in a structuralized journey and superficial cultural immersion—tours that are “packaged for convenient consumption” (Williams, 1998, p. 161). This convenient packaging conflicts with the premise of existential tourism, that of enabling displaced individuals or diaspora to seek out immersive reconnection to their origin and their past. Tourist studies contend that the blending of “culture and capital” has diminished the meaningfulness of return experiences (Edensor, 1998; Quiroz 2011). Yet, organizers of tours continue to engage in economic place-branding so they can capitalize on the fact that people have an inherent attachment to place (Kelner, 2010).

One focal point of my thesis is the commodified rendition of culture merchandized by the adoptee return industry. Transnational adoption and its associated cultural tourism generate over one billion dollars per year (Quiroz, 2011). Since its emergence on the international stage as an economic and political player, South Korea has transformed itself into a viable tourist location. The modernity and urbanization of South Korea, combined with the desire for personal cultural exploration, has made the country an attractive tourist attraction for adoptees. The Korean government and cultural and tourist organizations have seized upon this lucrative opportunity to appeal to the global Korean adoptee diaspora to participate in return journeys (Kim 2007). Essentially,

the motherland and its associated cultural heritage performances are branded, commercialized and marketed to inter-country adoptees.

This manufacturing of place and tour “performances,” while creating a stage for adoptee participants to act on within their homeland, also constrains their negotiation of the social and cultural landscape (Al-Sayyed, 2001; Edensor, 1998). My research focuses on how the manufactured and commercialized experience presented to adoptee participants during return journeys influences exploration of their birth culture. How do these homeland tours affect negotiation of individual and collective identity and connection to place? Journey organizers have the power to construct their version of a “regime of signification,” and in doing so may intentionally obfuscate controversial issues or otherwise inadequately present the adoptee’s place of origin (Aitchinson, 2000). One critical omission is the failure to fully address the unpleasant politics behind the genesis of Korean overseas adoption. Host organizations also tend to avoid speaking of the strict and patriarchal social mores that led to the creation of a significant orphan population.

Previous examinations of mass tourism practices describe how journeys to foreign places influence perceptions of space and place and derive their resultant meanings from deliberately conceived representations of the touristed landscapes (Britton, 1990; Edensor, 1998; Quiroz, 2011). By utilizing descriptive explanations of the place of origin, return tours allow participants to formulate experiential construction of place and heritage (Cressell, 2004). However, experiences on these journeys are also influenced by pre-existing social and cultural frameworks in the place of origin. This prompts a

discussion of the heritage tour organization's role in journey development and execution and how it affects the participant existential tourism experience.

### Questions of Authenticity

Do the scripted nature and managed experiences of return journeys to Korea construct an illusory rather than authentic place? This question is reflective of MacCannell's theory that tourists looking for a "vanished authenticity" are generally disappointed because of the "staged authenticity" of cultural and heritage tourism (MacCannell, 1976). In my examination of return journeys, "vanished authenticity" is defined as an adoptee's fictive parallel life experience in his or her birth country—something the adoptee is endeavoring to resolve for his or herself (MacCannell, 1976). How does the disconnect between the superficially scripted cultural tours and the genuinely desired profound connection to an imagined past affect journey participants? Inquiry into the role that return journeys play in adoptee place and cultural identity construction will be explored through the following questions:

- 1) What formative social structures and personal experiences prompted the adoptee to seek out and participate in a motherland return journey?**
- 2) To the extent that motherland tours are scripted, how illusory is the sense of place and belonging forged by return journeys? Do participants regain control of their identity narrative by excavating personal histories uncovered or perhaps even synthesized these returns?**
- 3) Does the representation of place provided in the journey conform to the adoptee's expectation of what he thought he would see and experience? Does the journey create a substantive connection to the place of origin or does the scripted nature of the tour result in spatial dissonance?**

This thesis adds to the geographical thought and interdisciplinary understanding of place, power and identity. It examines a complex aspect of inter-country adoption that



is rich with geopolitical, cultural and social themes. Although there is a significant body of academic work examining adoption, most notably in sociology and child psychology, viewing adoptee experience and identity formation through a geographical lens is instructive. Humanistic geographers have a keen sense of place-making and identity formation, and a deep understanding of the intricacies involved in the spatial and temporal processes of place and space.

Many adoptees exist in a liminal space (Hubinette, 2007) similar to refugees, homosexuals, the transgender or the homeless; place of belonging is difficult to assign due to spatial and cognitive dissonance. Adoptees are able to find significance in place construction at their geographical origin as illustrated by one motherland journey participant's musing, "There [is] something very powerful about just touching the ground you were born on." Homeland returns also address the aspects of power and memory making participants confront when they realize that they may never fully belong to a place. Anthropologist and motherland return critic, Barbara Yngvesson, voices this futility:

*This narrative illuminates the powerful pull of a discourse of identity and the 'returns' (to an origin) that identity requires, while at the same time pointing toward a more complex story of movement between (temporary) locations, of desire that is shaped by hegemonies of race, blood, and nation, and the impossibility of ever fully belonging in the places where we find ourselves. (Yngvesson, 2010, p. 163)*

However, by the very act of embarking on a return, participants refute Yngvesson's assertion and seize for themselves the process with refine their sense belonging to place.

## Thesis Roadmap

Chapter II begins with a detailed discussion of research objectives and discusses themes of place, identity, and homeland/existential tourism in the context of my research questions. Chapter II contains a review of literature associated with place construction, identity assignment and homeland tourism. Chapter II also addresses research significance and interdisciplinary contributions to geography, tourism, and post-adoption studies. Chapter III provides a historical overview of inter-country/international adoption, emphasizing various geopolitical and geographic aspects of the practice. In this chapter I also examine the social frameworks and motivations that shaped international adoption and explain the assignment of the diaspora label to the international adoptee community.

Chapter IV discusses diaspora connections to the motherland and motivations for engaging in return tourism. This chapter critically examines place construction and its relationship to tourism. In particular, I differentiate existential tourism from leisure tourism and highlight the role of homeland journeys in diaspora place and identity construction. Chapter IV also includes a discussion of the recent growing trend of international adoptee homeland returns.

Chapters IV and V re-engage my primary research questions and explain the methodological approaches used in my research. Chapter IV is a critical examination of adoptee tour literature, brochures, videos and websites. I deconstruct recurring themes, pictures, and discourse used to create evocative emotional imagery that appeals to adoptee sense of place and identity. This analysis provides insight into how adoption agencies and adoption tour organizations frame return journeys. Chapter V encompasses

data collected from return journey participant interviews and questionnaires. I address the existential aspect of returns and how tours impact participants and their personal interpretations of place, identity and belonging. Chapter V links participant responses back to my initial inquiry as to whether scripted return journeys paradoxically create distance rather than connection between adoptees and their geographical place of origin.

Chapter V is also a comprehensive discussion of the themes and observations revealed in the course of data analysis and discussions with tour participants. This chapter seeks to definitively answer whether, or how, commercially constructed homeland tours significantly affect participant identity and perceptions of place. The thesis concludes with an explanation why post-adoption studies across all disciplines are necessary in order to address the continuing practice of international adoption. Although this thesis centers on Korean adoptees, the ever growing international adoptee community encompasses many other nationalities—each with their own unique story, place and riddles of identity.

### Positionality and Significance

As a Korean adoptee, I am keenly aware of my positionality in this research. I believe that my background as an adoptee, the rapport I established on a motherland journey with other participants, and my active role in the Korean adoptee community helps foster a solid connection to my respondents. I am also confident that adhering to Geography's theories of place and identity and keeping within the limits of my research questions will counteract any positional subjectivity in my research endeavors. Specifically, this investigation will fall within the bounds of what Yi-Fu Tuan perceives as "humanistic geography," seeking to understand the human-environment relationship

and the phenomenology of “being-in-the-world.” (Tuan, 1977). Throughout the course of my research, interactions with return participants are limited to investigating particular responses to the sights and performances in the motherland. Avoided are deeply personal questions about origin and private history that might produce overly cynical or excessively grateful responses.<sup>1</sup>

My first research question asks what motivates adoptees to return to their place of origin. These reasons range from internally driven desires to external influences—including tour literature, family and friends. Discourse analysis of tour literature clarifies the varied reasons that return journey hosts offer cultural exploration to adoptees. Carefully constructed tour brochures, websites and videos are full of imagery for the participants to associate with their personal journeys. However, the suggestiveness of the literature combined with the canned journey “performances” may prevent adoptees from taking an unbiased look at their place of origin.

Emotional intensity amongst respondents and tour participants range from mild curiosity about a foreign country to deeply driven desires to address a missing life experience. In the exploratory qualitative methods project I conducted, respondents listed several motivating factors for their return to Korea including previous experiences with “culture camps,” accounts related from friends who had already participated in a return, encouragement from colleagues and classmates, and simply curiosity. I hypothesize that

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<sup>1</sup> The bulk of Korean adoption literature focuses investigations into the contravening perspectives of intercountry adoption. Such studies illicit strong responses from both sides of the debate. I wanted to distance this research from the Korean adoptee binary of “grateful adoptee” versus “militant, angry adoptee.” Instead, I focus on an aspect that can be considered apart from such emotional responses.

many adoptees will respond to the journey discourse that suggests a need to fill a void or “enhance life understanding and self concepts.”<sup>2</sup>

Motherland tours are intended to “wed Korean adoptees to an idea of Korea” and as foster a sense of “remembering” Korea (Kim, 2007). In essence, these return journeys are stages where memories of culture and place are presented to participants. However, such performances can be “ambivalent and contradictory,” (Edensor, 2001) and instead of becoming imbued with a sense of belonging to place or constructing a revised cultural identity many adoptees experience quite the opposite. They are surprised that despite being in a place where they are physically similar to others, they feel out-of-place or not related to the Korean-ness of their surroundings—that is, they experience spatial and cognitive dissonance. Moreover, some return journeys actually “provoked alienation rather than identification” because adoptees were limited to a constrained variant of cultural exploration (Kim, 2007).

Another facet of my research specifically addresses adoptee response and perception of the scripted and manufactured nature of return journeys. Although there is a significant amount of scholarship on heritage tourism, return journeys, commodification and authenticity, there still exists a need for studies centering on tourism’s experiential effect on personal identity and place attachment (Gonzalez, 2007). I hope to resolve whether, or to what extent, the presentations in these tours are temporally fixed with only marginal consideration, if any, given to the adoptee’s immediate expectation of identity formation. In *Tourists at the Taj*, Tim Edensor writes that tourist sites are “ever progressing and not static entities.” However, in the case of adoptee return tourism, one

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<sup>2</sup> [http://heritagetours2asia.com/about\\_us](http://heritagetours2asia.com/about_us)

wonders if the sites presented are assigned only stationary imagined pasts. If so, how does this temporal stagnation affect an adoptee's sense of place? Like tourist sites, identities are not stagnant; they are neither "a given nor product"—or in other words, not finite nor finished (De Fina, 2006). This thesis considers the possibility that returnees appropriate the themes and performances of motherland journeys to build upon their evolving identity; that they take from the experiences before, during and after the returns to define a membership in a diasporic group, perform identities, and negotiate a different category of belonging to place.

## CHAPTER II

### DEFINING “PLACE”

Place and identity are universally experienced and for that reason often taken for granted. However, examination of the concept of place and identity is instrumental to a thorough understanding of the complexities of inter-country adoption. Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* provides a humanistic perspective of the geographical concepts of space and place. In it, Tuan questions why and how people attach meaning to place while investigating the experiential, mythical and temporal aspects of place and space. He also presents a concise definition of place: “place is whatever stable object that catches our attention” (Tuan, 1977, p. 161). However, this succinct explanation fails to capture the deep nuances and multi-scalar considerations of place, even as it emphasizes the universal desire to establish of spatial and temporal stability. Tuan's definition of place must be expanded upon to encompass the idea that place and space do not exist passively for individuals to observe or occupy, but that place itself can be actively constructed. This is at the heart of what return journeys attempt to construct for participants and the primary themes of this research.

Tuan places significant emphasis on the experiential in his understanding of place. He writes that “Experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality” (Tuan, 1977, p .8). Reality, here, refers to a person's construction of place, a nebulous concept for many intercountry adoptees, convoluted by spatial and occasionally racial dissonance. Adoptee relationship with place is further complicated by the need to reconcile connections between the places of origin and the immediate places of adoption. Many adoptees harbor within themselves a

nostalgic longing for their place of origin, and they feel that a connection to this imagined place could ease their spatial insecurities. The return to physical origins provides a portal through which participants can construct a new reality in which they connect to a new community through the shared experiences of a homeland journey. This research examines the extent to which experiential returns create participant attachment to place and identity formation.

Tuan acknowledges this phenomenon in his chapter “Attachment to the Motherland”: “The city or land is viewed as mother, and it nourishes; place is an archive of fond memories and splendid achievements that inspire the present; place is permanent and hence reassuring to man, who sees frailty in himself and chance and flux everywhere” (Tuan, 1977, p. 154). Although a return journey is a relatively fleeting event, the intensity and quality of the experience overrides the briefness of time allowing for quickly constructed—yet staggeringly powerful—attachments to place (Tuan, 1977).

In the final chapters of *Space and Place*, Tuan addresses the complex relationship between time and place: “time as motion or flow and place as a pause in the temporal current; attachment to place as a function of time” (Tuan, p. 179). Clarifying further, Tuan writes that place is more than “what the thin present defines” and that the past must be acknowledged. Accordingly, this research finds that the past is a critical element of adoptee place and identity construction. Despite a deep and even fond connection to the present place, many inter-country adoptees eventually feel compelled to seek out their place of origin. The jarring separation of from their birth place creates a disconcerting inconsistency in place construction. This search of the past may serve to shore up a self-assured identity and sense of belonging to a place. Tuan reflects on this need: “To



strengthen our sense of self, the past needs to be rescued and made accessible. Various devices exist to shore up the crumbling landscapes of the past” (Tuan, 1977, p. 187).

Tim Cresswell employs Yi-Fu Tuan’s phenomenological approach to understanding place in his book, *Place, A Short Introduction*. He stresses that place is largely dependent on an individual’s understanding of the world: “Place is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 12). In this thesis, I examine inter-country adoptees’ meaningfulness of place that is achieved by looking to the past, at physical sources of origin. The phenomenon of searching temporal and spatial pasts is not unique to intercountry adoptees, but also occurs within other diasporic communities. What makes the intercountry adoptee return paradigm noteworthy is the lack of historical narrative that most diaspora maintain. Because of their abrupt removal from birth origins, adoptees lack the “intergenerational” memory of place that traditional diasporas possess.

The absence of intergenerational memory of place makes return particularly poignant for the adoptee diaspora—elevating the journey from a simple tour of the motherland to an existential foray into personal pasts. Adoption studies usually categorize inter-country adoptee origin as a geographic location; however as Cresswell and Tuan point out, such places can be “obscure and hard to grasp” because boundaries are fluid and continually contested. Cresswell contends that the lack of clarity in place construction is also shared by gays and lesbians in a largely heterosexual society, the homeless and refugees. All of these groups exist in places that are uncertain and impermanent, leading to frequent marginalization and ostracization. Transnational adoptees and refugees share in the commonality of involuntary displacement. The

resulting sense of being out-of-place, of “anachronism” as Cresswell defines it, causes adoptees and refugees to have ambiguous constructions of place.

Cresswell delineates a trilateral conceptualization of place: the “descriptive approach in which place is observed intrinsically as a thing in itself; the “social constructionist” approach, which explains place through systems such as capitalism and colonialism; and the phenomenological approach, which values human experience over physical descriptions or social structures. Cresswell concludes his summation of place contending that the three approaches are not separate but have overlap. Constructions of place through return journeys borrow from Cresswell’s tripartite approach. These returns include descriptive explanations of the place of origin and allow the participants to, as Cresswell contends, to experience and construct place. These return journeys are also socially and economically constructed by the host country, the tour organizers and to an extent, by the participants themselves.

One can easily argue that an adoptees current place is neither finished nor static, particularly when considered in contrast with the faraway place of origin. Cresswell briefly introduces the concept of “finished place” but discounts it because “places are never complete, finished or bounded but are always becoming—in progress” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 37). He also writes that place has meanings that “are created by some people with more power than others to define what is and is not appropriate” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 27). In heritage and return to the motherland tours, the hosting organization has a monopoly on the construction of place that is presented to the adoptee participants. This scripted display unduly influences adoptee perceptions of their origin and identity or provides a finished and pristine image of their birth place. On these grounds, these

heritage tours are rightly viewed as a commodification of place and cultural identity for returnees.

### Commodifying Place

The commodification of tourist activities and performances has created a significant “culture industry” (Britton, 1991, p. 454). In *Tourism, Capital and Place: Towards a Critical Geography of Tourism*, Stephen Britton contends that critical analysis of tourism in geography should include tourism’s relationship with capitalist systems. The bulk of tourism studies, explored later in this thesis, attend to the study of social practices, the pursuit and consumption of leisure, and the conflicting representations of authentic and commodified cultures. Tourism’s packaging of place and representation of culture, occasionally referred to as “niche tourism,” should be considered in the context of the mass amounts of capital accumulation influencing the practice (Britton, 1991). Britton also proposes that a symbiotic—and sometimes negative—relationship exists between the capitalist nature of tourism and the social meanings assigned to tourist space.

Niche tourism performances like return or heritage journeys are relevant examples of what Britton refers to as capitalist systems affecting the “social meaning and materiality of space.” In *Place and Placelessness*, Edward Relph highlights the tangible commodification of place through “kitsch”—“the mediocre, styleless, sweetly sentimental, meretricious objects that are sold as souvenirs and gifts” (Relph, 1976, p. 84). Visitors to places are distracted by the quest to accumulate things associated with tours or journeys rather than focused on absorbing the actual experience itself. Vendors capitalize on this impulse, often diluting meaningfulness in tourist landscapes. Britton and Relph argue that commodification of emotionally charged landscapes detracts from

meaningfulness and rootedness sought by participants. However, this is not to imply that souvenirs or mementoes do not have a role in the tourist experience. Such articles may serve to shore up memories of touristed landscapes and performances. The concern lies with the prioritization of “things” and the collecting of “been there, done that” badges over experience.

In *Manufacturing Heritage, Consuming Tradition*, Nezar Al-Sayyed writes that tourism has reached historical levels within the last few decades and in the process has become a significantly commercialized practice. He proposes an argument that despite the marginalization of “others,” tourism may “seem to offer the only hope of surviving in the global era.” Additionally, Al-Sayyed examines the merging of manufactured experience, consumption, heritage and tradition in modern tourism. In particular, he points out that the “new norm appears to be the outright manufacture of heritage coupled with the active consumption of tradition in the built environment” (Al-Sayyed, 2001, p. 3). The over-manufacturing of tourist sites and co-opting of tradition reflects Relph’s contention that the disinterested outsidership manifested by the lack of authentic connectivity in touristed space results in placelessness.

Al-Sayyed echoes Relph’s argument that placelessness is not a dilemma affecting only mass tourism. In many instances, cultural “integrities” of place are diminished in niche tourist experiences (Al-Sayyed, 2001). Tourism is judged primarily by economic barometers of success, thus commodification intrudes into the authenticity and meaningfulness of place. Even host countries that offer unconventional tourism experiences—heritage, diaspora, slum, and ruins tourism—experience the dilution of intimate cultural and physical ties to tourists as the result of lost authenticities. In order

to attract niche tourists, hosts create ideal, manufactured tourist landscapes because they know that travelers “want other places to be interesting but safe, exotic but convenient, tasty but digestively friendly, full of character but antiseptically clean”.

Likewise, return journey participants want to see the fascinating, imagined landscape of their origin but at the same time want to be able to return to the sanctuary of their hotel rooms in the evening. They want to visit beautiful ancient sites, but also expect to seamlessly navigate the foreign environment. In particular, return journey participants want to experience the smells and tastes of their formerly ‘native’ food, but not at the risk of sickness or revulsion from bizarre cuisine. They want to experience the ‘real life’ of their birth land but not the indignities of squat toilets. The paradox of the “safe and convenient” return tour is that the forced theme of tradition often weakens the returnees’ sense of heritage. This results in places not meeting expectations—thus locales remain fictional landscapes because returnees are unable to develop a deeper sense of identity or connections to place.

Rojek and Urry’s *Touring Cultures* diverges from the concept of tourism as a economically driven activity and explores the practice’s cultural aspects and humanistic traits. The authors expand upon a larger breadth of the “touristic phenomenon” by reconciling the blending of culture and tourism and asserting that “there is no clear frontier between the two.” Rojek and Urry then examine various cultural processes that are interwoven into tourist activities and the impact of tourism on culture itself. In their discussion of culture and tourism, they also introduce the concepts of McDisneyization and “post-tourism.” Modeled off of “McDonaldization,” *Touring Cultures* claims that McDisneyized tourist attractions are painstakingly constructed so that that the activities

within are “predictable, efficient, calculable, and controlled. In other words, the consumption of tourism increasingly resembles everyday mass consumption of goods and services. Tourists choose not seek out the exotic, the unknown or the uncomfortable. Rather, they are quite willing and grateful for an operator or crew to guide them through a recreational experience. The paradoxical and somewhat unsettling result of McDisneyization is that tourists travel to distant locations with the expectation that they will have some of the same normalized experiences of day-to-day life—familiar foods, smells and accommodations.

### “Post-Tourism”

Tourism and tourist practices have evolved with the spread of globalization and technology. The internet and social media shrink time and space while creating virtual tourist landscapes. Moreover, new tourists demands have emerged, creating a new subset of tourist—the “post-tourist” (Ritzer and Liska, 1997). Ritzer and Liska explain McDisneyization via the three characteristics of “post-tourism”: 1) the acceptance of commodification, 2) tourism as an end in itself, and 3) the attraction of post-tourists to spectacular signs or markers. Additionally, post-tourists are more willing to engage in virtual tourism (via media and the internet) and they recognize the possibility that truly authentic tourist spaces do not exist. Although the authors cast McDisneyization and post-tourism in a negative light, they contend that the concepts are still useful for understanding the cultural nuances of tourism practices—even if such activities are unable to reveal a grand “truth.”

As post-tourists, return journey participants accept that exploration of place of origin will be commodified. They usually pay airfare, lodging, food costs and souvenir

prices. They accept that their participation in cultural activities and exploration of ethnicity may entail financial obligation but that this does not diminish the meaning of the return. Return participants are well aware that money is one of the primary motivations for their place of origin, usually a lesser developed nation, invites them to return. My research into heritage and return tourism explores facets of McDisneyization and post-tourism found within. Most return tours are scripted and to varying degrees commodified. Sights seen and the heritage activities selected are carefully packaged presentation to tour participants. Far from chafing under the constraints put in place on these tours, participants prefer a controlled environment which distances them from the potential discomfort or dissonance of a foreign landscape. Moreover, for some participants the ability to escape to a familiar site (i.e. McDonalds, Starbucks) while in a foreign land can enhance the overall tourist experience.

Although they possess some post-tourist characteristics, the post-tourist label does not neatly encapsulate return journey participants. Return journeys are not simply an end but are also seen as a means to reinforce identity and construct place. While remaining cognizant of the scripted nature of the journey, return tourists seek a measure of authenticity in the sights and experiences they encounter. Compared to the pre-tour conceptions they held of their motherland, their overall existential tour experience is authentic. In this sense, heritage and return journeys are “concerned with the relational mobilization of memories and performances, gendered and racialized bodies, emotions and atmospheres” (Shelly and Urrey, 2006). Despite the formulaic and commodified nature of return journeys, participants are still able to use these forays to solidify imagined pasts and places. Post-tourism and McDisneyization have had tremendous

impact on today's tourism traditions, but certain niche tourist activities such as return journeys do not follow the pattern of post-tourism's commodification and focus on accumulation that many tourist scholars lament.

### Tourism Performances and Authenticity

In *Tourist at the Taj*, Tim Edensor investigates the role of power, tourist performances, regulation of movement and gaze and the impact that these things have on the consumption of landscape. He also examines the uneasy, and sometimes conflicting, relationship between tourists' expectations of ordered representations and their desire for a glimpse of the Other. Additional concepts that emerge from *Tourist at the Taj* include the elasticity of place and the use of a tourist places to develop or concrete identity. This idea of visiting a site to affix history and firm up an identity can be applied broadly to package tourism, existential tourism and even geopolitical tourism. Adoptee return journeys are an obvious attempt to reclaim a cultural and birth history, flesh out contradictory narratives of the birth place, to negotiate past the abandonment by their birth country and re-establish a spatial and personal connection to the motherland.

Tourism scholars Ning Wang, Dean McCannell, and Edensor contend the visceral emotions of belonging to place and the cementing of identity through visits to tourist spaces is absorbed into the global and post-modern processes mainly of consumerism and commodification. A chief concern is the manner in which power and authenticity influence tourist sites and performativity. Of equal importance is the question of ethics in tourism and representations of authenticity. The precarious relationship between capitalism, representations of exotic or Othered landscapes and the offering of leisure



through tourism brings invokes questions of morality, power and ethics in the development of tourist practices and spaces.

In *Rethinking Authenticity in Tourist Experience*, Ning Wang explores the role tourist performance and participation in the strengthening of existential authenticity—which will be explored in more detail in Chapter III of this thesis. In the context of my examination of homeland and heritage tourism, I question whether “staged” events or places can meet the authenticity threshold that participants seek. Sometimes staged events, such as cook classes and food tours, mirror everyday occurrence in the touristed place—lending authenticity to the experience. In my case study, a Korean homeland journey, participants were given the opportunity to attend an ethnic food tour and a traditional cooking class. The Korean cooking class, as seen in Figure 2.1., took place in a sterile, “Food Network-style” kitchen theater where participants tried their hand at creating traditional motherland meals. Even though many of the ingredients were pre-cut and pre-mixed beforehand, rendering actual meal preparation a simplistic affair, the experience became increasingly authentic as the participants, made with their own hands, an end product they could share and consume, and thereby use to feel a sense of belonging to their original culture.



Figure 2.1. Cooking *Bibimbap* at the Sempio Headquarters demonstration kitchen. -Photo courtesy of Gerry Poland, 2012.

In contrast to objective and constructed authenticity, existential authenticity is rooted in the “tourists’ participation in an event rather than from “merely being spectators in it.” This is reflected in my case study’s Korean cooking class as well as in the participants’ brief encounter with Korean folk dance. The heritage tourists observed a traditional Korean dance, *Seungmu*, and were given an impromptu lesson. Initial trepidation and awkwardness eventually gave way to full physical immersion in the cadence and flow of *Seungmu*’s sweeping forms and movements. Through dance, as depicted in Figure 2.2., the participants were able to sincerely recapture the nostalgia of a lost part of homeland culture despite the admittedly contrived nature of the event. The foreign tourists, during the brief choreographed moments, were (in their minds) traditional Korean folk dancers. In this context, the dancing tourists became, as Wang writes, more concerned with formation of connection to their origins than with the inauthenticity of the scripted scenes and performances surrounding them.



Figure 2.2. Return journey participants immerse themselves in *Seungmu*.  
- Photo courtesy of Gerry Poland, 2012.

Despite Edensor and Britton’s contentions about tourism’s waning of authenticity, tourists often seek out the inauthentic in order to enjoy a leisure landscape. These artificialities paradoxically serve to shore up a tourist’s individually derived sense of

authenticity (Wang, 1999). An example of this phenomenon in my case study is a scripted food tour that ventured through a busy market district in Seoul. This urban food tour, entitled *O'ngo*, consisted of carefully selected markets and restaurants showcasing traditional Korean dishes and delicacies.<sup>3</sup> The food tour guide explained the genesis of each dish and the occasions for each type of food or drink. Although the tour was tightly scripted and the participants were well aware that the native population did not regularly dine on such fare, the participants a rendition of the local Korean diet that satisfied their need for authenticity.

This feeling of authenticity was enhanced when the tour explored a dingy, crowded underground market where numerous vendors displayed their wares. Tourists were able to see, up close, “exotic” vegetables, spices, cookware, the preparation of rice cakes and *kimbap*, and were exposed to bizarre cultural props, including disembodied pig heads casually displayed on countertops and live octopi undulating in plastic buckets. The close quarters, inconsistent lighting, unsettling “developing world” smells and low level merchandizing atmosphere of the market reinforced an authentic representation of typical Korean life. The underground market was the typically unexplored and unacknowledged backdrop for the clean, brightly lit and delicious stage of the formal food tour.

Finally, authenticity is created at the individual level through the participant’s belief system (Wang, 1999). Tourists in foreign landscapes and cultures arrive with previously engrained beliefs and an established knowledge set. As they experience and gaze upon the touristed space, their construction and experience of authenticity is built on

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ongofood.com/private-tours/private-and-luxury-tours/>

top of their pre-existing belief system. Essentially, they seek out and internalize what they perceive to be crucial to their definition of authenticity. In my inter-country adoptee homeland tourism case study, belief systems play immensely significant roles. More often than not, this particular group of tourists is seeking an alternative to the persistent “liminality” between their adopted place and homeland (Wang, 1999). They hope the return tour will provide them an authentic place of belonging, and equally important, an authentic “communitas” (Wang, 1999). The communitas is formed through the shared participation in the tour and similarly constructed and experienced representations of the authentic homeland. In the end, it is the tourist, rather than the place, events or relics found who creates the sought-after authenticity.

### Placelessness

This is not to say that place itself loses importance in tourism performativity. Edward Relph’s *Place and Placelessness* articulates the significance of the individual’s intimate connection to place during experiential tourism. Place is often taken for granted and simply considered a space where things happen or that is merely gazed upon, but Relph urges humans to have more intimate connections to the places they operate in and travel to. Interaction with place, i.e. the feeling of “insiderness” and “outsiderness,” is dependent on the degree a person identifies with or is attached to a place (Relph, 1976). This doesn’t imply that outsiders cannot find meaning in a place, however their vested interest in a touristed landscape or performance may not have the same magnitude of resonance as the insider’s. A lack of authentic insiderness results in “placelessness” in which landscapes lack emotional significance. Relph argues that widespread

placelessness, spurred on by modernity and media, mass culture, and manipulative economic systems, is an inevitability.

This growing marginalization of place, of landscapes that have become interchangeable, may become so prevalent that the world becomes “a labyrinth of endless similarities” (Relph, 1976, p. 36). A contemporary example of this cultural and geographical uniformity is the “Target, Bed Bath & Beyond, Old Navy” shopping centers found on the outskirts of most large cities. Within the confines of one these shopping centers, one could be anywhere from Brooklyn, New York to Manhattan, Kansas. Tourist and leisure landscapes can also assume a “non-place” aura, with chain amusement parks like Six Flags offering identical experiences whether in Vallejo, California or St. Louis, Missouri. Such mass tourism has steadily advanced the evolution of placelessness that occurs when travelers superficially experience the sites and performances at highly marketed and heavily travelled locales.

In this case study of adoptee return tourism, I depart from Relph and Wang’s notion of placelessness in tourism and explore the significance of the connections between tourist identity, performativity, and place construction. In certain contexts, particularly in niche tourism, travelers’ sense of place is often reinforced. Heritage and return journeys in particular strengthen “regimes of significance” for participants who are afforded opportunities to connect with their homelands or places of origin (Wang, 1999). For these tourists, formerly imagined lands shed their placelessness as individuals interpret meanings of landscape and use them to add to or bolster their identities. In the context of my case study, the motherland embodies a secure ground on which to shore up transformative identities, the sense of belonging to place, and search for personal and

collective memories. As such, return to motherlands, either through personal pilgrimage or through organized tour, provides a promise of the past and perhaps even solidification of the present and future. Relph explains the importance of assigning a sense of place to home—“it is not something that can be anywhere, that can be exchanged, but an irreplaceable centre of significance” (Relph, 1976, p. 38). Tim Cresswell echoes this sentiment in *Place: A Short Introduction*, “Home is an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 24).

### Heritage Tourism and Distant Places

The effect of return journeys on identity has been widely examined. This case-study contributes to the discussion by interpreting the existential nature of adoptee return tourism through the geographic themes of identity and place construction. In *Intangible Heritage Tourism*, Gonzalez explores the notion of existential heritage tourism as a way to absorb “distant cultures” into the construction of one’s identity. This form of tourism differs from mass tourism in that it is a practice of enrichment and places priority of “feel” over “tourist gaze” (Urry, 1990). In other words, heritage tourism is more about experience than the collecting of sights and performances. Unburdened by Edensor’s anxiety over the inauthenticity of tourist spaces, Gonzalez contends that heritage tourists themselves have control over the spirit of authenticity. These types of travelers value personal learning over the “hedonist experience” that leisure tourists seek (Gonzalez, 2007). The precedence that seeking knowledge of personal histories takes over leisure and touristic gazing, makes these journeys unique in the ever-expanding field of niche tourism.

Heritage tours are intended to provide participants security and stability in a modernized, global world. In her examination of homeland tours, Jillian Powers builds upon the notion of experiential authenticity presenting the argument that these tours create communities and solidify collective identities. She writes that “Homeland tours present quintessential representations of the other as consumable moments of similarity and solidarity” (Powers, 2011, p. 1365). Powers cites two case studies (Birthright Israel and Sankofa travel to Ghana) in which return tours are used as vehicles to create connections for diasporic communities within themselves and with their motherland.

Despite their geographical, cultural and historical differences, Israeli Birthright or “Mifgash” tours have many similarities to the Korean adoptee (KAD) returns examined in this thesis. In both, participants are shown symbolic and memorial sights. They are encouraged by tour organizers to ask how the various tour markers and performances relate to their individual and collective identities. More importantly, these journeys are powerfully emotive tools that combine temporal aspects of the past, present and future in order to construct deeply profound individual connections to place (Powers, 2011). In their study of Mifgash, Sasson et al. highlight that homeland encounters, when accompanied by Israeli peers, were far more meaningful than traditional tourism. One of the significant results of the Mifgash was the dissipation of the Othering as Jewish Americans came to see themselves in the same light as their Israeli counterparts. Consequently, through their tourists performances and gazing on meaningful sites, Jewish Americans Mifgash participants were able to connect deeply to Israel as a place of significance and as their second home (Sasson, 2008). The overarching goals of KAD return journeys is the minimizing of the “Other” status of overseas Korean adoptees.

Korean tour organizers, and to an extent, South Korean society want returning adoptees to embrace a sense of Korean-ness and affinity for their birth country.

Mifgash participants are taken to numerous historic and nationally significant sites during their journey in Israel including the Mt. Herzl cemetery and Yad Vashem Holocaust museum. These visits are intended to emphasize the “ashes to redemption” narrative of the homeland and to integrate North American Jews into a shared history of Israel (Sasson, 2008). Just as Mifgash participants are exposed to revered Israeli landscapes, KAD returnees are taken to historic sites (Gyeongbokgung Palace, Sungnyemun Gate, the Demilitarized Zone) meant to invoke a shared sense of history with native South Koreans. KADs also tour the Seoul National Museum and War Memorial in order to establish “communities of sentiment” (Powers, 2011). Host countries desire to establish a collective narrative of shared sacrifice and loss between the homeland and the diasporic returnees. Essentially, like their Jewish counterparts, KADs engage in return tourism in order to instill a sense of belonging to an original place, or “symbolic kinship,” while at the same time shoring up belongings within an internationally dispersed community. For the KAD diaspora and the many other transnational adoptee groups, homeland return fulfills more than a touristic interest; it reifies formerly imagined communities.

### Imagined Communities

Borrowing from Benedict Anderson’s social construction of “imagined communities,” I contend that the international Korean adoptee diaspora occupies an imagined geographical space. An imagined community occurs when individuals share characteristics but are precluded from easily coalescing into a tangible group within



strictly defined borders (Anderson, 1991). As they navigate through their sometimes ambiguous or dual identities, inter-country adoptees look outward to their community of fellow adoptees for answers and security.

The internet and social media sites enable isolated pockets of Korean adoptees to establish networks and virtual communities on a global scale. The phenomenon of collective identity through virtual networks is occasionally referred to as “digital diaspora,” where people “re-create identities, share opportunities, spread their culture, influence homeland and host-land policy, or create debate about common-interest issues by means of electronic devices,” in most case through the internet and online communities (Alonso, 2010, p. 11). Korean adoptee groups in the digital diaspora are diverse in scale and focus. Some KAD groups operate at the local level (AKAP - Adult Korean Adoptees of Portland), others at national level (New York based AKA – “Also Known As”), and a few KAD groups have global networks (IKAA – International Korean Adoptee Association). Adoptees meet in cyberspace and occasionally in the physical world at “Gatherings” which occur periodically at rotating international venues—including Seoul. KAD’s form new identities within “third spaces” – the first and second spaces being the places of birth and places of adoption respectively. In addition to considering themselves Korean-American, Korean-Australian or Korean-Danish, these adoptees also consider themselves part of a transnational “KAD Nation” (Homans, 2011).

As a distinctive category of migrants—some would say forced migrants—Korean adoptees negotiate the Western landscapes in “ethnic drag,” encountering racism in overwhelmingly white communities (Tuan, 2011). Because of they are unable to reach

out easily to their diasporic communities, something usually available to other immigrant groups, Korean adoptees form connections in “third spaces” through their shared experiences of loss and inquisitiveness about a fictive homeland. These “third spaces” do not exist in real geographic places, but rather virtually and in the individually driven identities of adoptees. The shared sense of adopted-ness creates a distinctive ethnoscape inclusiveness of all Korean adoptees regardless of national affiliation.

Not content with simply existing in scattered virtual communities or abstract third spaces, some KADs physically seek out and occupy places of belonging in their returns to Korea. These adoptees consciously choose to remove themselves from familiar and safe adopted places in order to seek out alternate histories and attachments to place. For adoptee participants, return journeys create “a new container for situated social action, changing the grounds of self construction, creating new possibilities” (Kelner, 2010, p. 199). In these contexts, heritage tourism aids in the informal “validations of group belonging” while at the same time allowing for a formal tourist exploration of the place of origin. As a result, return journeys to Korea reshape and solidify KAD community boundaries and in many instances refines identities.

CHAPTER III  
INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION AND A NEW DIASPORA

Creating Families

The cultural tourism of adoptee return journeys, like intercountry adoption, is characterized by commodification and consumption. In *Cultural Tourism in Transnational Adoption: "Staged Authenticity,"* Paula Quiroz points out that "transnational adoption has become part of the migration of goods, services, and people in our new global reality" (Quiroz, 2011, p. 23). Quiroz also speculates that inter-country adoption is another form of global migration. To fully contextualize transnational adoption, it is useful to explore beyond the commodified transfer of children and examine the history of intra and intercountry, adoption.

Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, adoption was primarily a vehicle to acquire a young and inexpensive labor force. Government agencies, merchants and business owners placed advertisements and inquiries for children with various orphan aid societies. In 1918, one Louisiana government official requested from a children's aid society: "some white babies....a carload... We don't care to know anything about their antecedents or parentage. All we want to know is that they are healthy" (Melosh, 2002, p. 12). Public outrage over the blatant commodification of children, as well as the barbaric creation of "baby farms," eventually changed the nature of child transactions resulting in "a transition in the kind of value assigned to children, from economic usefulness to sentimental fulfillment" (Darrow, 2006, p. 50). This sentimentality and tugging on the heartstrings tactic subsequently increased domestic adoption as the population embraced the notion of rescuing poor orphans.

Eventually, the demand for healthy white babies outstripped the supply, and child placement agencies began to utilize the “fit,” or child-family specific approach when assigning orphans to families. Some of the “fit” categories included gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. With increasing frequency, prospective parents also articulated preferences in child appearance: “Mr. and Mrs. Z indicated a preference for ‘a child who is blond or light in coloring’” (Melosh, 2002, p. 89). At this point, crossing transracial boundaries within family units was not yet considered a possibility. White couples were anxious that their adopted children be seamlessly absorbed into the family. Adhering to racial limits within adoption avoided “overarching questions about what makes a family, who belongs, and how family members and others negotiate difference” (Melosh, 2002, p. 89). Although not usually disclosed, these practices promoted a type of “invisible” adoption that allowed children to be perceived as biological offspring in their adoptive families.

Placements were also made with consideration to the child’s potential to blend seamlessly within a particular socioeconomic and educational class. Working middle class parents were mostly paired with children of “average mental ability” whereas brighter children were matched with more educated and economically advantaged families (Melosh, 2002). Parents also made requests concerning the intelligence and social capacities of the adoptees. Some parents stressed their desire that the child have a spirited and independent personality (Melosh, 2002).

With matching and the desire for “ideal” child types limiting the available pool of healthy, white children, parents began to peek across racial and geographical boundaries. By the mid-1900’s, inter-racial adoptions eventually led to transnational adoption as

potential adoptive parents expressed the willingness to accept racial and physical differences in their adopted child. The first recorded incident of transracial adoption was the 1948 adoption of an African American child was by a white family.<sup>4</sup> This crossing of racial boundaries resulted in considerable social controversy. Critics believed that inter-racial adoption echoed slave exploitation and constituted a socially insensitive power imbalance. With the number of inter-racial adoptions swelling, the African-American community voiced the objection that inter-racial adoption was an affront to Black Nationalism (Melosh, 2002). Domestic adoptions of African-American infants quickly dwindled in response to the scrutiny leveled by the National Association of Black Social Workers, who equated the practice to racial genocide (Yngvesson, 2010).

Inter-racial adoption was initially a byproduct of the civil rights era which introduced an increased tolerance of racial and cultural differences. Additionally, the geopolitical climate of World War II Europe created large populations of orphan and child transfers worldwide. Several Western countries launched humanitarian campaigns to help displaced and unclaimed children; Great Britain alone took in over 10,000 Jewish orphans during the “kindertransports” campaigns from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia (Briggs, 2009). Great Britain also transferred more than 13,000 of its own unclaimed children to the U.S. and Canada (Briggs, 2009).

### Geopolitical Pawns

The post-World War II geopolitical environment continued to play a significant role in the early days of transnational adoption. The aftermath of the wide-scale conflict resulted in heartbreakingly large populations of war orphans not only in Europe, but in

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<sup>4</sup> The Adoption History Project. <http://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/timeline.html>

Asia and other regions as well. Reverberations of children's loss from war would extend into the following decades and would even have play in the U.S. – Soviet Cold War chess match in Korea and Vietnam. Post-World War II adoption practices were greatly affected by the social prescriptions and morality of the day. Society's conservative attitudes towards sexuality and wedlock played an unmistakable role in child transactions. The phenomenon of children born out of wedlock began to cross class lines with illegitimacy appearing more frequently among middle-class females. Social workers of the time considered it an indisputable fact that responsibility for child welfare should be relinquished to the institution of adoption. One worker stated: "Our society just does not accept illegitimacy. So both the mother's and the child's chances for a happy life would be hindered if they tried to live together in the community. Through adoption, they are both given a new life" (Melosh, 2002, p. 123).

Korean-American inter-country adoption has its roots in Cold War geopolitics and in the aftermath of the Korean War, when the plight of unwanted, racially-mixed war orphans entered the American consciousness. Children orphaned during the war and the abandoned offspring of American servicemen were visible remnants of the conflict. The U.S. government quickly addressed the social concern of "GI babies" during its efforts to redevelop war-torn South Korea. War orphans and GI babies were quickly sequestered in the numerous orphanages that dotted the Korean countryside (Figure 3.1.). At one point there were over 55,000 unclaimed children occupying more than 500 orphanages throughout Korea (Kim, 2010). There was concern that the existence of such large numbers of mixed-race children could be used by the Soviets as an ideological propaganda tool against the U.S., speaking to American irresponsibility in the region

(Kim, 2010). In 1955, *Ebony* published an article, “*How to Adopt Korean Babies*” which was essentially a how-to guide for prospective parents. According *Ebony*, it was apparent that “For political and humanitarian reasons, officials in the U.S. State Department hope that these children will find homes in America...that their adoption would effectively counteract any drop to America’s prestige.”<sup>5</sup>

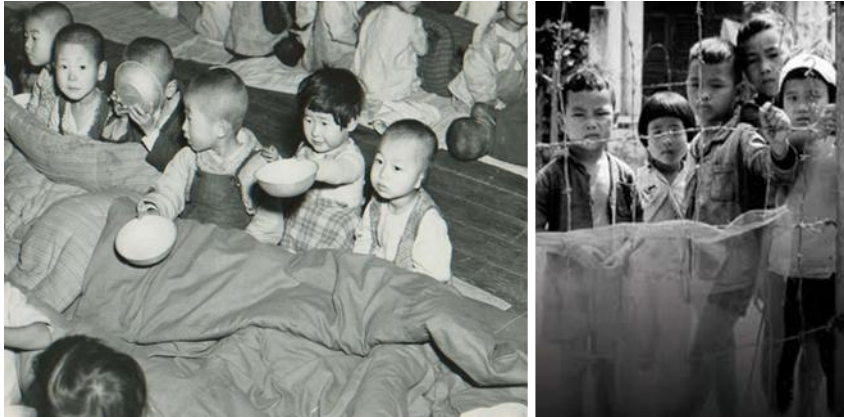


Figure 3.1. Korean war orphans – Seoul Santatorium and Hospital  
<http://www.koreanchildren.org/docs/orphanages>

The transfer of unwanted Korean children to the U.S. was a mutually beneficial solution to the growing population of war orphans and the abandoned, mixed-race offspring of American servicemembers. Transnational adoption of orphan refugees not only helped an economically ravaged Korea, adoptions also “functioned as ‘tranquilizing conventions’... helping American soldiers in Korea and ordinary Americans at home make sense of the first conflict of the cold war and converting what might have been viewed as postwar occupation into humanitarian intervention” (Kim, 2010, p. 76). In essence, the orphans became channels through which the U.S. could provide social and economic aid, while at the same time re-establishing a diplomatic presence in Asia.

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<sup>5</sup> Eleana Kim. 2012. “Adopted Territory: Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging,” (lecture, Korean Society, New York, NY, July 12, 2012). <http://vimeo.com/45990419>

Decades later, stark memories of post-war abandonment and adoption are still vivid carried by the “First Wave” generation of Korean adoptees:

*For me, it was never a “forgotten war.” It was my war. As long as I can remember, I have felt intimately connected to that history of both my birth and adopted nationalities...That was is the way it is with war. Many casualties, not all of them wearing uniforms...I was birthed by that war.*  
(Cox, 1999, p. 11)

In the 1970’s, Cold War events again played a part in inter-country adoption practices as the U.S. grappled with post-Vietnam War issues. As the conflict drew to a close, the number of Vietnamese children in orphanages exceeded 17,000 (Ressler, 1988, p. 71). The transfer of these orphans from Vietnam to the West increased yearly: “200 in 1970-1; 485 in 1972; 682 in 1973; and 1,362 in 1974” (Ressler, 1988, p. 71). Efforts to accelerate the westward movement of children heightened as Saigon’s fall became imminent. The U.S. initiated “Operation Babylift,” which was essentially a large scale evacuation of Vietnamese orphans to Western countries. The first planeload of evacuees ended in a fiery disaster and the death of 78 children after the military cargo aircraft crashed due to a door malfunction. Subsequent airlifts succeeded in evacuating 2,547 children to waiting adoptive families primarily in Western countries (Ressler, 1988, p. 71). “Operation Babylift” was bitterly controversial, with many critics believing it an unnecessary yet also inadequate response to the post-war problems plaguing Vietnam, or a government plot to bolster support for the unpopular war. Still others were not convinced that the orphans were migrated to better circumstances (Ressler, 1988, p. 71).



## The Korea Problem

The next spike in international adoption occurred in the late 1970's when South Korea abruptly increased the outward flow of its children in response to significant demand from the West. The expanding interest in transnational adoption stemmed from the era's progressive social thinking in which prospective parents envisioned themselves as anti-racist and more culturally aware than their predecessors (Hubinette, 2007). Western demand for Korean children was also attributed to a dearth of white infants resulting from "the legalization of abortion, increased availability of contraceptives, [and] a growing acceptance of single mothers who were made eligible for social benefits" (Hubinette, 2005, p. 69). Adoptee migration to the West ballooned to such a point that North Korea sharply criticized its southern neighbor, accusing South Korea of selling their children (Hubinette, 2007). Chastised, South Korea continued its adoption practices much less visibly. By 1976, South Korea announced plans to heavily regulate orphanages and ultimately end international adoption (Hubinette, 2007).

This plan was abruptly interrupted in 1980 when General Chun Doo Hwan seized power and installed himself as president, resulting in the largest export of children from South Korea to date. Hwan suspended orphanage and adoption regulation policies, spurring agencies to actively compete in the lucrative adoptee placement market. An insidious side effect of deregulation was the unethical acquisition of "orphans" lost, stolen, and forcibly relinquished children (Hubinette, 2007). Hwan's deregulation resulted in the largest migration of Korean orphans to the West with placements exceeding 66,000 between 1980 and 1988 (Hubinette, 2007). The 1980's adoption "boom" was fraught with unethical and even criminal instances of exploitation, including

abduction of children from families (Hubinette, 2005). Such shady practices were not uncommon in the realm of inter-country adoption and eventually resulted in the Hague Adoption Convention. In a 2009 speech to the Korean National Assembly, author and adoption critic Jane Trenka inventoried a list of unethical practices in the Korean adoption system. Abuses included unclear relinquishment, kidnappings, misrepresentation and forged identities.<sup>6</sup> Trenka directly attributes the growth in Korean adoptee placements to abusive practices and accuses the participants of engaging in “child laundering.”<sup>7</sup>

Further contributing to the swelling orphanage populations in South Korea were the traditional social mores that assigned deep shame to single motherhood. Would-be mothers felt compelled to give up their infants in order to distance themselves from physical evidence of their divergent behavior. South Korea employed intercountry adoption as a method of dealing with societal burdens of unwanted illegitimate children (Figure 3.2.).

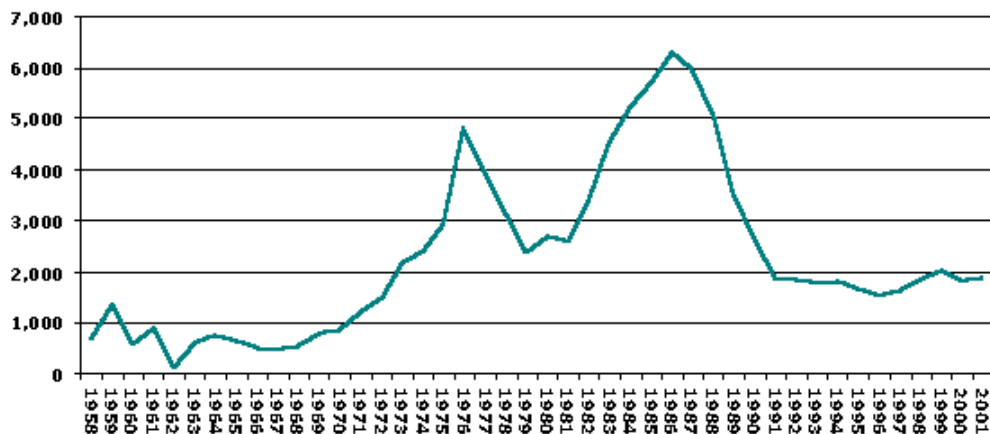


Figure 3.2. Korean Adoptee placement trends in Western countries.  
<http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/FactOverview/international.html>http

<sup>6</sup> <http://cchronicle.com/2009/11/abuses-in-adoptions-from-s-korea/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

In a departure from the altruism driven adoptions of the post-Cold War era, the past few decades have seen the development of *familial entitlement*, “the valuation of familial or parental needs above the needs of the child,” (Lee, 2006, p. 57) as the primary motivator of adoption among Western families. In other words, the prospective parent’s desire to rear a child trumped the importance of allowing an orphaned child to remain in his or her birth culture. Parents of transnational adoptees also considered their actions to be their “personal contribution to multiculturalism”— creating their own microcosm of social change. (Quiroz, 2011). These parents are unaware of the extent of their child’s dislocation. The life transformation for the parents is incomparable to what adopted children experiences in changes of name, nation, language, and all that is familiar to them, including food, smells and textures” (Quiroz, 2011, p. 20). Familial entitlement has led to an adoption paradox in which inter-country adoptee is quickly absorbed into Western, often white, cultural and social settings but at the same time experiences subtle, or not subtle, racial and ethnic dissonance due to obvious physical differences. Western parent fixation on potential adopted family creation and magnification of their individually held racial indifferences, or personal “color-blindness,” assured the continuation of inter-country and transracial adoption practices.

Religion also played a considerable role in the expansion of adoption. Early pioneers of inter-country adoption, Harry and Bertha Holt, considered it a Christian duty to bring impoverished and unwanted children from overseas to be adopted into American families. After receiving permission from the U.S. government, the Holt family adopted eight war orphans immediately following the Korean War Armistice. One of Holt’s

principle requirements of prospective parents was that of spiritual faith.<sup>8</sup> Harry Holt's spiritual convictions are apparent in his letter to friends requesting support for his overseas endeavors:

*We would ask all of you who are Christians to Pray to God that he will give us the wisdom and the strength and the power to deliver His little children from the cold and the misery and darkness of Korea into the warmth and love of your homes...They [speaking of his own adopted children] are a God-sent blessing to our family and we realize that we were complete without them.*<sup>9</sup>

Despite Holt's altruistic intentions and evident good works in the rescue of hapless war orphans, his efforts were met with criticism. Welfare organizations and the U.S. Children's Bureau considered the Harry and Bertha Holt "dangerous amateurs, throwbacks to the bad old days of charity and sentiment."<sup>10</sup> Holt critics cited the lack of screening standards and supervision in Holt practices. Regardless, the Holt's continued their religious campaign and their resultant agency, Holt International, is still active and placing hundreds of intercountry adoptees annually.

The heyday of Korean adoption was brought to an abrupt end during the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. While covering the Olympics, Western media took notice of South Korea's flourishing adoption industry and highlighted the fact that the country was "the leading global exporter of children" (Hubinette, 2007, p. 133). NBC journalist Bryant Gumbel pointedly remarked that the host country's chief export was its children and that this outflow of orphans was "embarrassing, perhaps even a national shame" (Melosh, 2002, p. 193). Western media focus on Korea's child exportation including a prominent article in *The Progressive* entitled "Babies for Sale," which claimed that South Korea's

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<sup>8</sup> Ellen Herman, The Adoption History Project. <http://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/people/holt.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

adoption market generated annual revenues of \$15-20 million (Hubinette, 2005). The unexpected international attention prompted South Korea to again implement a plan to end adoptions over the next two decades. As a result of negative press and the Olympic Game's revelation, Korean adoptee numbers dropped precipitously to less than 2,000 inter-country placements per year from a previous high of over 5,600 placements (Figure 3.3).



Figure 3.3. Pictures depicting the degrading nature of the trafficking of Korean orphans. Sources: *The Progressive*, 1988 and *Hankyoreh*, 1989.

In 1989, the South Korean government implemented new policies intended to drastically decrease the numbers of outbound adoptees and essentially end all overseas adoptions by 1996 (Hubinette, 2005). However, due to the low incidences of domestic adoption, these guidelines had to be amended and a new 2015 deadline established. The Special Law on Adoption Promotion and Procedure also limited receiving countries to eight: the United States, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, Australia and Canada (Hubinette, 2005). In 2011, only 736 Korean babies were placed into U.S. homes (Webley, 2013). Although the present adoption rates from Korea have slowed considerably, the practice itself will not be completely halted without eliminating the traditional societal strictures that over-value “bloodlines” while stigmatizing single mothers and family-less children.

Another constraint on Korean adoptee flow occurred with the 1993 as destination countries signed onto the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-Operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (Hague Adoption Convention). The Hague Adoption Convention, currently ratified by 81 countries, acknowledges the systematic deficiencies in intercountry adoption practices. The convention underscores the need for transparency to ensure ethical and professional conduct in the international transfer of children. The Hague also specifically prohibits profiteering from adoption practices:

*(1) No one shall derive improper financial or other gain from an activity related to an intercountry adoption.*

*(2) Only costs and expenses, including reasonable professional fees of persons involved in the adoption, may be charged or paid.*

Most importantly, the convention serves as a protective measure for the welfare of orphaned children:

*Recognising that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding*

Finally, the convention acknowledges the importance of culture and rootedness in global adoptees. It encourages transnationalism by encouraging a concerted cross-border connection between displaced children's places of adoption and places of origin.

The last sixty years of Korean adoptee dispersion throughout the globe has created a unique and expansive diaspora that is joined by Russian, Guatemalan, Chinese and others. The data shown in Figure 3.4. depicts the large scale and breadth of international adoption practices. The desire of these geographically isolated pockets of intercountry adoptees to connect with each other has resulted in the invention and occupation of a virtual and literal "third space" as referenced in Chapter II.

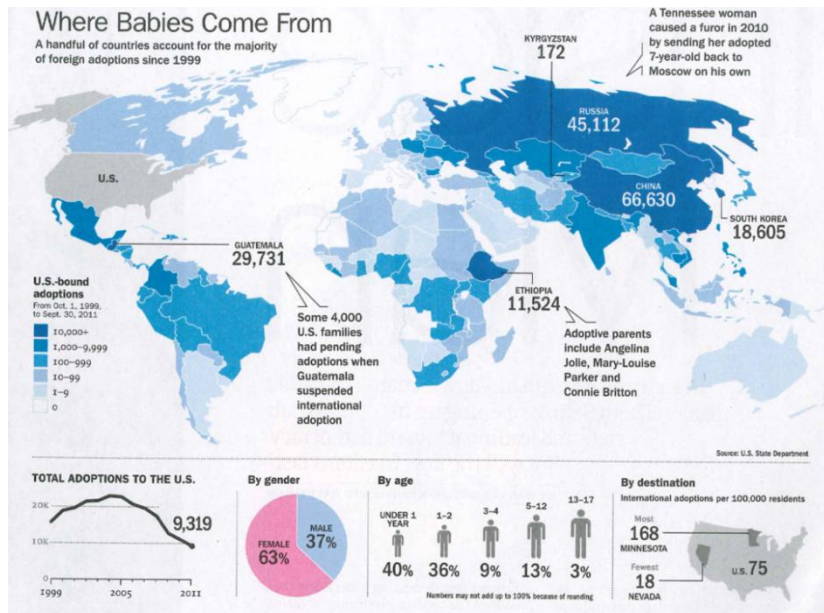


Figure 3.4. Global adoption. “The Baby Deficit” *Time*, January 21, 2013

### Adoptee Diasporas

“Is a transnational adoptee in the U.S. an exile, an immigrant, or just an American with ‘different’ face? (Homans, 2011, p. 185). This is a question that inter-country adoptees negotiate when contemplating personal identity, place and belonging. First, unlike many immigrant groups, Korean adoptees did not emigrate of their own volition—indeed it can be argued that intercountry adoptees are subject to “forced migration” (Hubinette, 2007). Although the label “exile” is occasionally applied to this group, it is not wholly accurate because the term implies a degree of self-determination on the part of adoptees: “The aspect of agency that grants a measure of rational choice to exile, even under extreme duress, is arguably of a lesser degree in kind for the adoptee” (Kim, 2003, p. 75). Second, unlike many transnational migrants, Korean adoptees routinely endured individual journeys to their adoptive locations and isolated placements. Rather than travelling with families or relatives and settling in immigrant enclaves, Korean adoptees

usually arrived at their destinations alone, aside from a guardian, and were placed in racially and culturally alien environments in which there was a conspicuous lack of geographical enclaves consisting of familiar cultural institutions, restaurants, shops and places of worship. The inability to reach out to familiar migrant pockets exacerbates feelings of isolation, spatial dissonance and insecurity of identity.

Several studies have classified groups of inter-country adoptees as diasporic due to the nature of their displacement and dispersal throughout the globe (Eng, 2003; Lee, 2006; Miller-Loessi, 2001). In most academic texts, placing the label of diaspora on a particular population carries a mostly negative connotation. Robin Cohen defines the traditional diaspora as having an emphasis on their “catastrophic origins, their mass nature and their disturbing effects” (Cohen, 1997, p.1). However, the diaspora category has been expanded to function as a “metaphoric designation to describe different categories of people—expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities” (Cohen, 1997, p. 21). Although the KAD diaspora and its inter-country adoptee counterparts may not precisely reflect the traditional definition of diaspora as defined by Cohen, they meet the metaphorical threshold for as a diasporic community. The following table captures the commonly accepted characteristics of diasporas—the majority of which are also attributes of the KAD and other inter-country adoptee communities:

*Common features of a diaspora*

- 1. Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions;*
- 2. Alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions;*
- 3. A collective memory and myth about the homeland including its location, history and achievements;*



4. *An idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation.*
5. *The development of a return movement which gains collective approbation;*
6. *A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and belief in a common fate;*
7. *A troubled relationship with host societies suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least or a possibility that another calamity might befall the group;*
8. *A sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement; and*
9. *The possibility of a distinctive yet creative and enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.*

(Cohen, 1997, p. 20)

Clearly, inter-country adoptees did not leave their homelands for economic reasons nor are they attempting to create or idealize an ancestral home. However, adoptee communities do reflect the remaining seven characteristics—particularly the “sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement.” Occupying their “Third Spaces,” the KAD community has redefined the traditional concept of diaspora while establishing an ever-expanding and strengthening group identity centered on their spatial and temporal connection to a homeland.

The KAD diaspora’s connectivity and growth over the past decade is attributable to the internet, social media and technology in general which “shrinks” time and space (Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010, p. 9). Although KADs are not generally located in geographic pockets like other diaspora groups (Basques, Jews, Somalis), they have established a strong digital nation, or “digital diaspora” which maps an “atlas of identity that occupies multiple geographic locations” (Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010, p. 11). Essentially, the KAD’s and other inter-country adoptee communities have leveraged social technology to create non-physical connections between its members. This

psychology/emotional construction serves to solidify a shared digital place between the adoptees' present home and original homeland. Moreover, the digital diaspora allows for occupants to maintain strong ties to their current nations while simultaneously embracing homeland identities.

## CHAPTER IV

### RETURNS

Like many of its diaspora counterparts, the KAD community has actively engaged in various processes of personal and collective reconnection to the motherland. Included in these activities are heritage camps, language immersion courses and return journeys. The reasons behind the strong motivation to reconnect are varied and rarely addressed in post-adoption studies and literature. Participation in motherland tours is a progression along the continuum; from being a member of a digital diaspora to an actual physical journey to a geographic place of birth (Alonso, 2010). The vast online community allows “soft assimilation” through internet exploration and virtual cultural connections which still allow individuals to retreat back to their acculturated environment or comfort zones (Figure 4.1.). On the other hand, the physical journey removes adoptees from the comfort zones and distances them from their adoptive identity and environments where social rules and conventions are foreign.



Figure 4.1. Screenshot of various Korean Adoptee groups at the local, national and international scale.

The symbolic connections that adoptees forge via virtual communities and the digital diaspora become concrete through interaction and performativity during return journeys. More specifically, the progression from simply occupying a digital diaspora to an actual homecoming allows KADs and other intercountry adoptees to meet face-to-face and experience the actual scope and scale of their community (Kim, 2010).

For many adoptees, the decision to return to their birth country is ultimately a difficult and emotionally packed choice. As will be shown in subsequent chapters of this thesis, KADs struggle with the choice of embarking on such journeys and with defining their relationship to Korea as a place. This leads to the question of the significance or role that return journeys play in adoptee identity framework. Why would one choose to engage in such an introspectively demanding venture away the confines of a known environment? This chapter examines the notion that the geographical separation and unique diaspora status experienced by KADs and other inter-country adoptees are strong motivators for such exploration. I will highlight the considerable ambivalence returnees harbor in their relationship with birth places and their decision making processes in confronting the past. This chapter also clarifies the characterization of return journeys and heritage tours as experiential and existential in nature as opposed to lumping them in with mass tourism activities.

The shrinkage of time and space through digital diasporas and online adoptee communities has spurred an increasing interest in returning to places of origin. The influence of advertisements, host organization literature and the collective experiences of previous returnees, results in inter-country adoptees that are increasingly drawn to heritage tourism or return journeys. There is a significantly larger and older demographic

of KADs participating in returns due to the longer history of inter-country adoption from Korea in comparison to other transnational adoptee counterparts. Aside from exposure via social media and encouragement through virtual connections, the recent expansion in cultural and other niche tourism has also attributed to the growing frequency of homeland tourism. Today's tourists seek to differentiate themselves from the mass market and engage in niche markets reflective of their "lifestyle, heritage, arts, industries, and leisure pursuits" (Waite, 2000, p. 838). In particular, the demand for heritage tourism is on the uptick among many would-be travelers resulting from "an increasing awareness of heritage...[and] the need to transcend contemporary experiences to compensate for their deficiencies and demands, and/or to fulfill psychological needs for continuity through an appreciation of personal family history" (Waite, 2000, p. 838).

Adoptees embarking on return journeys carry with them two types of curiosity. Like any other tourists, there is the obvious inquisitiveness in seeing a foreign land. And then there are the more reflective and somber questions of what hidden memories or emotions this type of journey will reveal. Return to a formerly imagined place of origin is often unsettling for adoptees.

*I think I had always wanted to go in an abstract way but I think I was also afraid... was afraid of being incompetent. Of going there and just not being able to function, of not being able to live up to expectations...I think there's an issue about whether I was Korean enough... "Liz" <sup>11</sup>*

It is not uncommon for prospective returnees to harbor emotions that are equal parts wonder, terror and ambivalence. Although the total number of KAD returnees is difficult to quantify, studies suggest that less than twenty percent of the KAD community

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<sup>11</sup> Respondent quote from Dani Meier, "Loss and Reclaimed Lives: Cultural Identity and Place in Korean-American Adoptees" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota 1999).

worldwide has made the journey back to Korea (Nelson, 2010). For some adoptees, the idea of an actual return is something either dismissed or locked away for consideration at a later time. Others fail to see the necessity of such a trip or diminish the potential significance of physically journeying back to their origins. For these particular adoptees, the feeling is that their identity has already been concreted and needs no alteration or reinforcement from sojourns outside of their adoptive environment. One such adoptee explained his reluctance to returns as such:

*It wouldn't be an identity thing or assimilation thing...it would be an educational thing or event. Sure, it might touch me a little more—thinking, 'oh this is how it could have been' but the fact of the matter is, it wasn't. But, the fact is it's not. It'd be like, it'd be like me going back to Europe in an exchange and going to concentration camps—an historical significance –“Jeff”*

Other adoptees express absolute refusal or antipathy towards the prospect of a return to their birthplace or any manner of birth culture exploration. Such sentiment stems from lingering feelings of betrayal by their birth mothers and birth countries. In other instances, adoptees choose to avoid the pain of a possible second rejection:

*...so for me to voluntarily place myself in Korean-American culture, I just couldn't deal with...I didn't want that. I think in a lot ways people don't want anything to do with their birth mother and birth mother and Korea is synonymous. Your birth mother and Korea did the same thing: they rejected you. I think a lot of it is fear of being rejected again, fear of, oh my god, I'm nothing like Korea or Korean people, and I'm not like Americans. Who the fuck am I supposed to relate to and associate with?  
(Jaclyn – From *Returns*, Yngvesson, 2010).*

Other adoptees find that they resent questions about their homeland and are even more aggrieved by the notion that other people retained the “self-appointed right” to ask about return visits: “personally I am not interested in biological roots...people I hardly know are very concerned about them on my behalf” (Howell, 2009, p. 138).

Reasons for aversion range from the disassociation from birth cultures, the feeling of betraying their adopted culture, to the unwillingness to confront specters of the past. The costs of return journeys are also prohibitive for some KADs. Although the Korean government and private corporations and agencies often subsidize the tours, slots are limited and many would-be returnees cannot afford the cost of airfare and lodging. Hosted tours through agencies such as Holt International or Dillon International typically cost upwards of \$5,000 for a ten day journey—not including individual discretionary expenditures.

Despite the financial and potential emotional expense, there are a significant number of adoptees for whom finding a “secure ground of identity” eventually trumps apprehension, as evidenced by the approximately 2000 annual returns to Korea (Yngvesson, 2010). One KAD, who eventually overcame the reluctance to confront her separation from her birthplace, vocalized her feelings thusly:

*Tongue-tied,  
Landlocked.  
I could not access the terrain where I once wandered.  
For years it came in dreams,  
And then came the migraines.  
And then, even the dreams stopped.  
Later, I thought that it was that life had begun,  
But things once buried have a way of turning up again.  
—“Sara”*

Such anxieties are even present even after the return decision is made and often become magnified when the returnees arrive in their birth country. However, for some journey participants, the very beginning stages of the homeland journey represent symbolic and bittersweet connections to a former identity:

*As the plane moves through the sky, I am struck by the quiet and calm. Rows and rows of Korean faces fill every seat. The bulkhead seats are reserved for parents*

*with children. Small bassinets are attached to the wall for sleeping infants. A mother picks up her crying baby, calms and soothes her and I am overcome with weeping at the sight of this Korean mother and child. I am overwhelmed by the sense of being surrounded by people who look like me, to whom I might claim to belong. I realize that have been missing this my whole life. –“Stacie”*

Aside from externally driven factors for embarking on return journeys, KADs and other adoptee diasporas consider their participation as representative of their internal decision to become “active change agents” (Lee, 2006). Returnees define themselves as “transnational and transracial individuals who can play an active role in defining and shaping their lives” rather than simply being passive recipients of the adopted culture (Lee, 2006, p. 56). Decisions to confront and embrace birth cultures usually coincide with adoptees’ departure from adoptive or racially homogenous environments (Tuan, 2008). For many adoptees, the decision to explore their heritage occurs during college when they are exposed to networks of non-whites, specifically Asians (Tuan, 2008). There, the adoptees are confronted by Asian counterparts and queried as to the extent of their racial and cultural affiliation. This in turn creates the impetus to explore beyond superficial student organization connections and to actively engage in cultural exploration.

*When I went to university, I encountered two Asian group experiences that were on my own. I never was a part of the Asian Associations at school. The first was with a girl who I met on the first day on campus. Out of all the random people, my roommate and I met her and her roommate and ended up living on the same floor in the dorms. She [was] Chinese, Japanese, and a mixture of a few other ethnicities. She and I proclaimed ourselves as the Asians of the floor and although we considered ourselves semi-‘whities’, we also embraced our Asian-ness as well. Later, an Indonesian international student joked with me and told me that he could tell I was an adopted Asian. I was amazed and asked him how he knew. He then went through a litany of reasons why I was “different” from Korean Koreans. It wasn’t to be mean, but it did make me uncomfortable a bit. I never really let myself be defined just by my race/ethnicity to decide how I live my life, but I guess I have always wanted to explore my Asian roots and perhaps one of the reasons was to feel belonging. –“Stacie”*



Return journeys allow participants to actively engage facets of their birth culture, absorb traditions and memories previously forgotten and bridge their homeland and adopted identities. Most returnees acknowledge that the journeys are not a panacea for spatial and racial dissonance yet they fulfill a partial role in personal development by providing connections to others in similar situations:

*It might not be the “final end all” discovery of who I am, but I think it is necessary to acknowledge it and not just let it be something that I ignore. It is more in how I choose to create and define my identity...I have a very strong Norwegian identity, but I am also proud of being Korean – “Trina”*

For Trina, a Korean adoptee from Scandinavia, and other globally dispersed KADs, the journeys made a broad and formerly imagined community tangible. Encounters with other internationally placed adoptees allowed them to assume unique roles as KAD “delegates” from their respective countries while at the same time creating a collective identity (Kim, 2010).

### Experiential Journeys

As niche tourism grows, tourist experiences can be categorized into various modes: recreational, diversionary, experimental, experiential and existential (Cohen, 1979). The immersive and psychologically meaningful nature of return journeys fit the experiential and existential classification. As stated previously, return tourism places the priority of experience over the seen or gazed upon. The participants’ immersive experience is what reinforces the “existential” characterization of a return—highlighting what Wang refers to as an “activity-related state” (Wang, 2000). The activities and performances that the participants engage in on these journeys go beyond simply gazing

on the landscape. The returnees get to be part of the landscape itself—existing with their whole being and breadth of feelings for a period of time in that place.

Returns to the motherlands fit the existential categorization because participants seek to redefine or strengthen their identity with their places of birth. During these returns, adoptees “seek their roots” creating Korea as an essentialized space in an attempt to minimize previous abandonment and de-kinning (Marre and Briggs, 2009). In addition to negotiating identity, returnees also negotiate “space to return to a home away from home to past homes and other homes” (Lew, 2005, p. 286). KAD returns are also experiential because participants are offered participatory encounters with their homeland culture and landscape. Rather than seeking only the recreational or diversionary façade of the tourist landscape, return journey participants, through their performances, embrace a deeper meaning of their homeland as a transformational place.

### Building Blocks of Authenticity

Returnees are repetitively presented folkloric performances and other cultural markers of their motherlands. Journey organizers carefully present the motherland on a pristine stage which rarely includes glimpses of undesirable landscapes. Instead, experiences are replete with traditional and homespun enactments like dance, Korean cooking classes and sports. All of these symbols of heritage are building blocks for individually constructed authenticity—an authenticity which may embody the returnee’s identity and conception of place.

As in mass tourism, authenticity of experience in return tourism events must be scrutinized. During his examination of experiential tourism, Cohen framed authenticity as a “personal continuum” where an individual must decipher a touristic performance

through various stages of partial authenticity to complete falsehood (Cohen, 1979). In the case of KAD returns, the participants negotiate through the obviously contrived scenes of Korean culture presented by organizers while at the same time creating their own authenticity in experience. This creation of personal authenticity is shaped through selection of journey performances and sites and matching them to conceived expectations of place. Returnees may dismiss the kitschy folk dance demonstration, however they may embrace and empathize with the stark visit to the Demilitarized Zone.

Tourism scholar Ning Wang delineates three characterizations of authenticity in tourism: *Objective, Constructive and Existential* (Wang, 2000, p. 49). Objective authenticity refers to the overall, non-critical tourist experience—where one simply “sees” objects or performances. Constructive authenticity is that which is created by the tour providers or tourist themselves through the synthesis of sites, expectations, beliefs and activities (Wang, 2000). Existential authenticity, the variant most relevant to return journeys, refers to “a potential existential state of Being that is activated by tourist activities” (Wang, 2000, p. 49). This existential authenticity is found within the performances and sites associated with return and heritage tourism; the actual visitation of birth places helps affirm “the past through insights into the emergence of a culture pertinent to one’s own understanding of his/her place in time and space (Steiner and Reisenger, 2006, p. 301). An individual sense of authenticity is reinforced through the participant’s agency in the return. Instead of passively absorbing a connection to a birth culture through pre-constructed mediums, such as heritage camps or online forums, KADs choose to actively view their birth places through physical returns. They draw from the touristed landscape and performances elements of what they have perceived as

important to their authentic identity and idea of place. They get to choose what to add to their own stories and in some cases, construct new narratives.

Heritage and return journeys are excellent mechanisms for capturing the essence of connection to place through the performativity of participants, capitalizing upon their willingness to immerse themselves in the shared culture. For the Chinese diaspora, returns fulfill the notion of *gaun-xi*, or the maintaining of familial-type of relationship with mainland China (Lew, 2004). Chinese returnees go beyond the traditional tourist forays to the Great Wall or Forbidden City. These visitors frequently return to ancestral villages and fully immerse themselves in recapturing their cultural and familial ties to China: “This often includes providing hung baos (red envelopes) with money to all relatives, which could include an entire village, providing roast pigs for the ancestral grave visit, hiring lion dances and setting off firecrackers for the house” (Lew, 2004, p. 206).

Likewise, Jewish participants in Birthright returns embrace visited sites and shared experiences as ‘signifiers’ of reaffirmed Jewishness. For them, Israel becomes an essentialized space, “a place where everything seems to have meaning, everywhere” (Kelner, 2010, p. 105). Other Jews return to Israel as part of “modern day pilgrimages...not of a traditional religious sense to pray at sacred sites, but pilgrimages performed in the name of nostalgia to places, where these may be, that have some connection, past or present to the Jewish culture” (Ioannides, 2005, p. 107). Through these journeys, the Jewish diaspora’s relationship to their homeland becomes commemorative and personally significant despite lack of kinship or economic connection (Ioannides, 2005).

Similarly, KAD returnees enthusiastically claim ownership of the culture and history of their birthplace. After visiting the Demilitarized Zone (Figure 4.2. and 4.3.) and learning the anguished history of South Korea's conflict with its northerly neighbor, one KAD seemed to be equally vested as a native Korean in the homeland:

*The DMZ will forever be memorable to me and hearing personal stories of how the separation of Korea affected and still affects individuals and Korea as a whole. I did not fully understand the devastation until I saw the derailed train that still stands after being pelted with over a thousand bullets or having seen the prayers and photos. We went to the DMZ on the first day of the Tour and that alone built my foundation in learning about Korea and what being Korean is and how this is a part of me. That put an awareness in me that was never there before, but will be with me forever. –“Brittany”*



Figure 4.2. Bullet ridden train memorial at the DMZ. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Archer, 2012.



Figure 4.3. Bridge of No Return spanning the DMZ. Photo by author, 2012.

Return journeys for any diasporic community should not be characterized as solely touristic. Rather, they are “periodic, but temporary, sojourns made by members of diasporic communities...[where] that temporary contact in the form of return visit functions as a means to renew, reiterate and solidify familial and social networks” (Duval, 2004, p. 51). The potential to add to, change, or simply solidify personal identities through return travels substantially differentiates motherland journeys from more common mass tourism activities. The existential nature of return journeys can also be considered as restitutive, where participants look inward within themselves while

experiencing the homeland's sites and landscapes (Cohen, 1979). Returns are also mechanisms with which to construct new memories of geographically distant homeland. Most participants have few memories of their birth place save perhaps foggy recollections of infancy in orphanages or hazy faces of foster parents. Adoptee's lost connection to their birthplace can be reconstructed through these journeys with newly created memories that become "portable, potent, patriotic, and available for repetitive retrieval" (Lew, 2009, p. 291). In the process, sojourns to a motherland generate even more introspection about identity and belongings to place:

*The strength of the bond that we the participants have created in the last week are unbelievable and something I will cherish until I lay flat on my back. The company and the journey created some fantastic boxes and frames for us...feelings towards the country, feelings that run both ways and really can't be described in an essay but needs several hours of thinking and explanations and more thinking and explanation because feelings will always develop.*

- "Keith"

### Peddling Places

Heritage tourism for international adoptees is a quickly growing industry as evidenced by the myriad of advertisements and literature found on the internet as well as the thousands of adoptee travelers who return each year. "AdoptiveFamilies.com," advertises several homeland journeys, heritage trips and cultural camps appealing to a wide variety of transnational adoptee families. There are also various charities, non-governmental organizations and religious groups that provide return journeys for international adoptees. As part of their post-adoption services sector, the premier international adoption agencies in the U.S., Holt International and Dillon International, also advertise a gamut of return tours overseas.

The majority of adoptee heritage tour organizations coordinate returns to Asia; however, return journeys to South America and Africa are growing in popularity as the adoptee placements from these two continents begins to increase. Seeking to include all members of the “adoptee constellation,” the “Ties Program—Adoptive Family Travel” website offers journeys to a number of countries to include Ethiopia, Chile, Columbia, Guatemala, and Peru.<sup>12</sup> “Ties” is also one of the many organizations that promote various types of return journeys to mainland China. Unlike the Korean return trips where the majority of participants are teens and young adults, Chinese return tours cater to the families of young Chinese adoptees. This disparity of age groups reflects the more recent trend of Chinese adoptees as compared to the half century of Korean adoption. For now, KAD’s make up the largest demographic of returning adoptees with approximately 3,000 participants annually.<sup>13</sup>

### Filling Voids and Building Bridges

Regardless of originating country, motherland journey promotion literature and resources vigorously express themes of filling voids and reestablishing connections with their “lost children.” The pictures and images included in informational resources also consistently paint nostalgic and traditional landscapes obviously intended to draw in prospective participants. Tour promotions frequently offer promises of experiences that might resolve adoptees’ “involuntary forfeiture of historical and cultural connections” (Kim, 2010). Journey organizers also emphasize that Motherland returns are not simply sightseeing ventures to geographic locations, but rather are intended to hold significant

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.adoptivefamilytravel.com/>

<sup>13</sup> “Grown Korean Adoptees Return to Birth Country to Fill in the Missing Gap,” *The Korea Times*, September 7, 2012. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/09/117\\_119341.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/09/117_119341.html)

meaning and construct long-lasting bonds (Figure 4.4). A video found on the “Ties Program” information page alludes to the intended deeper meaning of returns: “*A journey is more than a place we visit, it’s about the memories we create, the people we meet, the connections we make.*”

Occasionally, journey advertisements and tour information packets include factoids about the hosting organization and the catalyst behind the group’s sponsorship of motherland tours. This review and analysis of journey literature is useful in framing the initial question of what place and identity issues motivate an adoptee to return to their motherland.



Figure 4.4. Taken from a Holt-Bethany Tour Korea brochure; the panel depicts the blend of modern and traditional Seoul and a historical photograph of the “First Wave” of Korean adoptees.

The China Heritage Tours facilitated by the China Overseas Exchange Association (COEA) frames its trips as “a bridge to understanding, cooperation and friendly relations between two great countries and cultures.”<sup>14</sup> The COEA, subsidized in part by the Chinese government, works with various travel agencies in order to balance the trip’s itinerary between “leisure, history, culture and entertainment.” The itinerary titles of the various heritage tours (*Panda, Confucius, Yangtze*) provided by the COEA

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.chinaheritagetours.org/about.htm>



are indicative of the sense of place and culture that the organizers, and the Chinese government, want to impart to the young returnees:

Tour	Child (under 12)	Adult
<b>BEIJING only</b>	FREE	FREE
<b>PANDA TOUR:</b> Shanghai-Guilin-Chengdu-Beijing Sunday 15 July to Saturday 28 July (14 days + 13 nights)	\$1595	\$1900
<b>HENAN TOUR:</b> Shanghai-Zhengzhou-Kaifeng-Dengfeng-Luoyang-Beijing Saturday 16 July to Saturday 28 July (13 days + 12 nights)	\$1080	\$1230
<b>CONFUCIUS TOUR:</b> Beijing-Jinan-Qufu-Tai'an-Weifang - Qingdao Saturday 28 July to Saturday 4 August (13 days + 12 nights)	\$1070	\$1135
<b>MOUNTAIN TOP TOUR:</b> Beijing-Lijiang-Dali-Kunming Saturday 28 July to Sunday 5 August (14 days + 13 nights)	\$1275	\$1560
<b>YANGTZE TOUR:</b> Beijing - Yangtze River Cruise - Shanghai Saturday 28 July to Sunday 5 August (14 days + 13 nights)	\$1550	\$1795

Figure 4.5. COEA brochure with thematic tour package titles  
<http://www.chinaheritagetours.org/fees.htm>

Korean birthland tours also weave cultural themes throughout their informational pamphlets, brochures and itineraries. Children’s Home Society & Family Services promotes their *Dragon*, *Tiger* and *Tiger Plus* tour options which incorporate the “whole Korea” experience to include excursions into the countryside, fishing villages and resort Island of Jeju-Do (Figure 4.6).

### Making Up for the Past

The JinHueng MoonHwa Company’s Korea Journey 2012 welcome letter includes commentary about the organization’s motivation for hosting return tours for adoptees:

*During his years of business travel, Chairman Park (CEO) had taken notice of overseas adopted Koreans in Europe and the United States. He was struck by the fact they seemed completely assimilated in their new culture, and was saddened to think that they might be unaware of the history and culture of their native homeland.*

**Highlights of the Tour Korea! itineraries**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visit to adoptee's adoption agency</li> <li>• Play date with children in orphanage</li> <li>• Discussion and exchange at birthmothers home</li> <li>• Visit to Demilitarized Zone</li> <li>• Korean cooking class</li> <li>• Korean War Memorial Museum</li> <li>• Hiking/climbing</li> <li>• Visit to an active Buddhist monastery</li> <li>• Viewing of Tripitaka Koreana</li> <li>• Tour and resort stay at historic Gyeongju/Kyeongju</li> <li>• Host family visit</li> <li>• Hanbok shopping</li> <li>• Traditional and modern cultural performances</li> <li>• Optional trip to Pusan/Busan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural exchange at boys' high school</li> <li>• Korean Folk Village</li> <li>• Bullet train ride</li> <li>• Visit to large outdoor, handicraft and antique markets</li> <li>• Baseball game</li> <li>• Farm visit</li> <li>• Supportive check-in meetings throughout the tour</li> <li>• Ocean beach visit and swimming</li> <li>• Teddy Bear Museum</li> <li>• Women skin-divers (haenyu) museum and village</li> <li>• Hanlim Park, caves, arboretum, lava tunnel</li> <li>• World Cup Stadium</li> <li>• Climb to Sungsa Ilchulbong crater and sky view</li> <li>• Cheongbang Waterfall</li> </ul>
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Figure 4.6. Screenshot of Children's Home Society & Family Services itinerary <http://www.chsfs.org/tourkorea/highlights>

Beginning in 1996, Chairman Kyung-Jin Park and the JinHeung Company made it a personal mission to bring adoptees back to Korea in order to showcase their country of origin and fill in what they perceived as a cultural void. This point was emphasized in its invitation brochure, repeatedly throughout the tour and again conveyed by Chairman Park at the tour's concluding ceremony (Figure 4.7.).

*Although it [the journey] was short, I believe you were able to feel engraving of the national flag of Korea in your heart and feel your heart beat with pride of your motherland. We are proud sons and daughters of Republic of Korea. You should be proud to be of heritage that has a 5,000-year-old history, culture, root and spirit.* <http://www.1004calendar.com/journey/farewell.php>

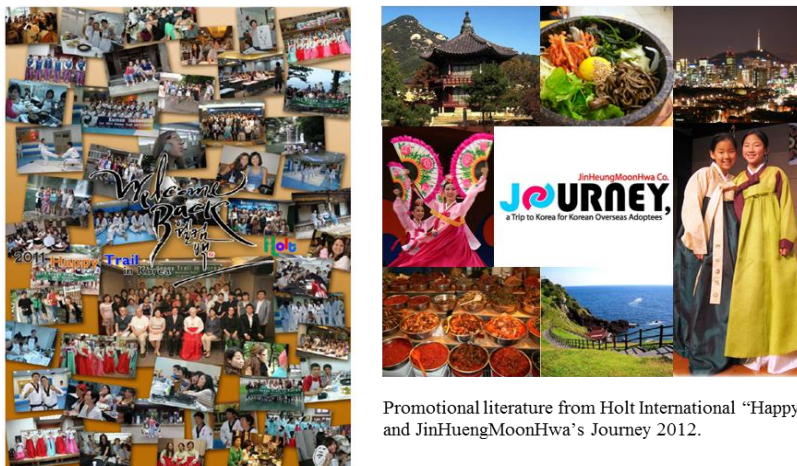


Figure 4.7. Promotional literature from Holt and Journey 2012

Without exception, the tour sponsors carefully articulate their missions as wanting to promote cultural experiences, traditional life and national/ethnic pride. Additionally, the groups underscore the fact that the trips are intended for the emotional and psychological betterment of the participants:

*For adoptees, adoptive families and persons of Korean heritage these connections and newly acquired knowledge serve to enhance life understanding and self concept for all participants. [http://heritagetours2asia.com/about\\_us](http://heritagetours2asia.com/about_us)*

At the same time, tour organizations are careful to stress that these journeys are not meant to be seen as state-associated reparations or guilt allaying mechanisms in response to child abandonment and adoption practices of the past.

*I think the opportunity is more in regards to providing a cultural experience to those who have missed out. Not driven by guilt or making up for past wrongs. Those types of feeling may be involved when meeting birth families. –“Jeremy” (JinHueng MoonHwa tour volunteer)*

Although the hosts generally skirt or carefully sidestep the topic of birth parent reunions or confrontations with the shame of abandonment and adoption, they also emphasize the importance of balancing past narratives and present cultural exploration:

*Children’s Home understands the “heaviness” of the adoption-related activities and personal services that each participant experiences, and we recognize the importance and relevance of these elements to birthland travel as well. For these reasons, Tour Korea! is balanced in a variety of opportunities that make it possible for you to encounter Korea at different levels and in a range of ways. <http://www.chsfs.org/tourkorea/highlights>*

Dillion International emphasizes themes of discovery in their tour literature proclaiming that:

*Everyone has a story to tell: Discover more of your story while exploring the rich culture and heritage Korea has to offer.*

Their brochures also include evocative imagery of Korean temples, tea ceremonies and traditional cooking classes. One of the more poignant pictures is that of a returnee interacting with orphans suggesting a reconnection to a past. Through this imagery, Dillon is promoting returns as a vehicle to reclaim heritage at the individual and national level.

On their website Holt International, cheerfully promotes their “Happy Trail in Korea” motherland journey promising a balance between sightseeing and self-enrichment:

*I sincerely hope that 2012 Happy Trail will bring you nothing but priceless learning, enriched experience, and invaluable memories.*

The agency also provides “Holt Alumni” adult tours that specifically focus on birth parent searches, and if possible, reunions with biological family members.

In their promotional video, Children’s Home Society & Family Services (CHSFS) uses imagery from previous tours with statements superimposed over idyllic scenes:

*Connect to your past....build relationships for the future.....let CHSFS provide support, answers, and guidance.*  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0002204/>

Another video linked to from a journey sponsor is a first person account of a return experience which emphasized the welcome received and the answers they discovered to questions of self-identity and belonging to place. The video shows various images of Korean landscapes, visits to places of significance, including orphanages, and deeply personal shared moments. The accompanying texts echo recurrent themes in journey propaganda:

*A country opened its doors us...to change our lives forever, A look to our beginning a look at tradition...and a look at culture...helped us connect and*

*grow. Some of us met foster mothers, birth families...but mostly we found ourselves.* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyT-Eqhp4gc>

The hopeful wording in this sentimental video reflects the tour organizations' intent to draw adoptees in with promises of fulfillment and healing. These are some of many instances in which the hosting organizations assume that the journeys will answer questions, fill voids or reconnect the participant to their motherland. Tour organizations highlight the active and empowering participation and experiential nature of the journeys:

*Instead of just looking at everything, we were actually living it, and doing it. The adoptee gets a sense of power—they begin to grasp what's inside.*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEpb78BAIcw>

The sponsor groups also emphasize their role as mentors and guides in this process of identity exploration. During an eight day "Welcome Home Program," The Korean Social Welfare Society, pairs returnees with "Korean friends" who assist the traveler in negotiating the Korean landscape and culture. An adoptee who participated in the Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (G.O.A.'L) return journey appreciated the care and attention:

*G.O.A.'L provided support and understanding. At no time was my visit to Korea framed as just a visit. The presence of strong emotions, both positive and negative, was recognized and encouraged.*  
<http://landofgazillionadoptees.com/2011/12/06/adoptees-do-it-best/>

The language of journey promotions automatically assigns adoptees dual identities – that of their adoptive country and of a Korean adoptee who has been forgotten and must be reshaped. However, some returnees bristle at the dual identity ascribed to them and dispute the need or possibility of resolve this plurality of identity:

*When we talk about cultural identity, we assume there is a split. And we waste our time trying to mend it. We talk about resolving a dichotomy, finding balance between two worlds, creating space for two cultures or building bridges. I don't think those things are achievable—or realistic.*  
-Kari "Kimchee on White Bread" (Cox, 1999)

Kari's statement indicates that her return experience did not fulfill the objectives presented by tour organizations. For Kari, and many adoptees like her, returns were not necessarily transformative events where connections to place or re-imaging of identity occurred.

### Dividing a Diaspora

The utility and ethics of homeland journeys are occasionally disputed among members of the adoptee community. Opponents of the tours cite commodification and canned nature of the pricey tours. One such criticism is found in a video posted on an activist blog, "Land of A Gazillion Adoptees," where homeland tour costs (\$3000-\$5000) are highlighted. The video then claims that birth culture is simply being peddled back to the adoptees in a very expensive and inauthentic fashion. The video also excoriates the Korean homeland tour industry as perpetuating the intercountry adoption cycle.<sup>15</sup>

*Homeland tours have become an industry in SK. The people who run them are connected to all of the agencies there, and have strong relationships with a number of US adoption agencies. Koreans who run homeland tours make good money, and hence they want to see things to continue as they are. In other words, they're all about ongoing intercountry adoption.*

<http://landofgazillionadoptees.com/2012/03/07/the-korean-war-baby-eviscerates-land-of-gazillion-adoptees/>

Other adoptees see an intrinsic value to the homeland returns and vigorously defend the tours and well as the rights of would-be participants.

*When your video attacks Heritage Tours, what the hell is that about? KADs who want to go back to visit the land of their birth with their Adoptive Families have all the goddamn right to do so. These tours give many of us who are dealing with all the issues of our lives a taste of the Motherland, seeking some physical and emotional touch with our origins.*

– Don Gordon Bell <http://landofgazillionadoptees.com/2012/03/07/the-korean-war-baby-eviscerates-land-of-gazillion-adoptees/>

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<sup>15</sup> LGA Talks Smack [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=4hidTS188n4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=4hidTS188n4)

For supporters of homeland tours, the returns provide an invaluable link to formerly imagined place. They provide an invaluable grounding encounter with roots as Kelner states in his examination of Israeli Birthright tourism:

*When diasporans are taken on a tour of a homeland, they are promised an encounter with facets of ethnic culture and history that are said to be unavailable to them where they live, or available only in attenuated, adulterated, or otherwise altered forms. (Kelner, 2010, p. 89)*

As evidenced in this chapter's exploration of return tours marketing and disparity in opinion about the usefulness of such returns, further examination of returnee narratives is necessary in order to truly unpack the value of motherland travels and resultant connection to place. The next chapter of this thesis examines adoptees' personal stories as they process the impacts of their motherland journeys and addresses the core questions of this research concerning return tourism's impact on participant constructions of place and associated identity.

## CHAPTER V

### TOURS THAT BIND?

Recurring questions that arise from this discussion of adoptees and experiential tourism include: 1) What makes adoptee return journeys different from other diaspora returns? 2) Do motherland tours hold a different significance than other historical or familial themed returns? 3) How does the nature of the adoptee experience and the experiential nature of return tourism calculate into the constructions of place during homeland tours? The answer to these queries may be found within the initial separation of adoptees from their places of origin. The childhood abandonment that compelled overseas adoption results in the adoptee community forging a unique relationship to place not shared by other diaspora. Some argue that the “de-kinning” that occurs during the placement of a child in another nation weakens the adoptee’s connection to the place of origin (Howell, 2009). Unlike most diasporic communities who are able to draw upon current or past familial ties to the motherland, adoptees are mostly bereft of identifiable kinship links to their origins. Absent this personal history, the motherland is a “naked place” (Howell, 2009).

The absence of kinship or familial connection to a place is at the very heart of what return journeys attempt to recapture for their participants. Several adoptee studies contend that this desire for linkage to place is destined to be unfulfilled because participants seek to “infuse an identified place with imagined scenery and imagined people” (Howell, 2009, p. 267). Or in other words, the places and experiences sought may not necessarily be congruent with idealized expectations held by adoptees. One Korean adoptee voiced this stark realism after her return:



*...this narrative illuminates the powerful pull of discourse of identity and the 'returns (to an origin) that identity requires, while at the same time pointing towards a more complex story of movement between (temporary) locations, of desire that is shaped by hegemonies of race, blood and nation, and the impossibility of ever fully belonging in the places we find ourselves in.*  
–Jaclyn (Yngvesson, 2010, p. 163).

Alternatively, numerous adoptees claim to have constructed deep and meaningful connections to their places of origin as a result of the experiences and authenticity presented by the tours.

*It was more than the destination, more than the food and the people and the mountains (but oh, the glorious mountains!), although those were all integral components of my experience. It was an opportunity for me to touch, both literally and figuratively, an empty void in my life that previously had no defined shape, simply a presence. Korea transformed itself from a destination to a threshold, a doorway to a new understanding of myself and where I come from. – L. Soo Hee <http://younsoohee.wordpress.com/2012/09/26/liminal-spaces-aka-post-jetlag-4am-ramblings/>*

Other adoptees report that although their Other-ness persisted during the return tour, there was a definite, albeit tenuous, bond that materialized between themselves and the land, culture and society:

*I embraced the country. With all of its greatness and wonder—as well its rude, gruff, annoying inefficiencies and what I deemed outmoded traditions...I began to comprehend this nation with its painful yet, at times, graceful transitions of defining itself. In doing so, I felt my search for 'how to fuse my two beginnings and cultures' and to define 'who I am' didn't seem so daunting. – E. Hwalan Shub (Cox, 1999, p. 128)*

This chapter draws upon the last component of this research's mixed methodology by examining the oral histories and narratives provided by Korean adoptees who have participated in a return. The analysis of the responses given will address the main query of this thesis: the relationship forged during returns journeys between homeland returnees and their geographic place of origin.

## Ambivalence and Avoidance

In order to fully unravel connections between homeland tourism and returnee identity and place construction, it is useful to explore the adoptive surroundings from which returnees embark on such introspective and potentially life-shaping ventures. As mentioned in previous chapters, many KADs and transnational adoptees express ambivalence about returning to their birthlands. For most, this uncertainty stems from the conditions of their adoptive environments which were usually racially homogenous and lacked the opportunity for interaction with ethnic minorities (Park Nelson, 2009). The bulk of American KAD's were placed into primarily white households in the Pacific Northwest and Midwest in communities that were relatively less racially diverse than larger urban areas.<sup>16</sup> In *More Voices – A Collection of works by Asian Adoptees*, one author wryly describes the rural non-diverse community she grew up in:

*I know how it feels for someone to judge you solely on your country of origin...I grew up in a little, white town called Reidland which was made up of 98% Caucasians, 0.3% African Americans, 0.7% Asians. You might wonder why there are twice the amount of Asians as there are African Americans in a small podunk town like Reidland. Me too; however, I have a theory. In my mind, the entire 0.7% of the Asian population is comprised entirely of adopted children. – Megan Brown (Cox, 2011, p.68)*

As I discovered in my interviews and questionnaires, KADs placed into primarily white communities divided themselves into two categories: 1) those who felt, as a whole, that their race or ethnic origin was not a salient aspect of identity and thus not a catalyst to begin cultural exploration and 2) those who felt significant internal and external dissonance to the extent that identity gaps and a sense of not belonging to the community and were the persistent driving factors in seeking geographic connections to origins.

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<sup>16</sup> The Donald Adoption Institute conducted a survey of 350 KAD's in 1999 and found that over 98% of adoptive parent sets were Caucasian. <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/proed/korfindings.html>

The KADs aligned with the first category found it more desirable to try to fit into their surroundings—in some cases almost forgetting or denying their adoptee and racial status in order to blend into their adoptive places:

*You know, maybe that whole thing about being different—it just wasn't something I thought about. It was weird I guess but yeah, the whole Asian thing and being adopted...I don't know, didn't seem too important. I think that I didn't want people to think I was different or that was who I was—that adoptee who...well, like the crazy adoptee who's looking for something or feels like something is missing or torn from them. I wanted to fit and show that I was, I guess assimilated. —“Kim”*

*I refused [to explore Korean heritage] because I was trying to fit in. My parents never discouraged me, but they never really encouraged me either. Through my teen years, I was not interested in pursuing my heritage...there were so many variables to being a teen that my ethnicity was not an issue.<sup>17</sup>*

The inclination to blend into their adoptive settings, or “de-racialize” themselves, ultimately caused this subset of KADs to eschew cultural activities or even engaging with other non-Whites. De-racialization in KADs and other transnational adoptees was frequently evidenced through physical manifestations; adoptees expressed the desire to appear less Asian either through cosmetic surgeries to enlarge noses and eyes or through skin lightening make-up (Robinson, 2002).

These KADs operate under the assumption that through the avoidance or denial of their Asian-adoptee status, they could more easily negotiate the social structures in which they were the conspicuous Other.

*Public school was a whole new environment, and it didn't take me long to figure out that people weren't friendly to Asians, male in particular. I had to take a good hard look in the mirror and tell myself no matter how much I think I'm of Italian and Irish descent, I look Korean. No matter what I do, I can't change the way people look at me. I did everything I could to distance myself from the other Koreans. —“James”*

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/proed/korfindings.html>

The distancing from racial minority and adoptee identity was accompanied by an aversion to Korea as a place. This trend was especially common in younger KADs, who overwhelmingly reported less interest in making returns to their birthlands. The Donaldson Institute survey found that Adult KADs were more likely to engage in heritage exploration (74%) than their young and adolescent counterparts (47%).<sup>18</sup>

That said, some KADs hold reservations about reconnecting to their land of origin well into adulthood even when presented return opportunities. For them, childhood de-racialization and assimilation into their adopted environment obviated the need to reconnect to presumably a fictive place and past. Furthermore, adoptee acculturation often removed the possibility of expanding beyond that of their immediate social setting: “All my cultural reference points were from white, middle class, western culture.”<sup>19</sup> Refusal to return occurred despite adult adoptee access to cultural connections and increased mobility. This self-imposed distancing was described by a KAD military servicemember who had ample opportunity to travel to Korea as part of his military benefits.<sup>20</sup>

*I had plenty of opportunity, even to the point where, um, I had some time off and uh a White sergeant asked me if I wanted to go to Korea with him,, you know, [on] the military transports, “We can go free” ...and I said, “Nah, I’d rather go to Spain.” And see, the mindset...and he, he even looked at me surprised, you know and [now] I look back at that and I’m thinking, “Yeah, he had the right idea. I didn’t. - Kye (Park Nelson, 2009, p. 218)*

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/proed/korfindings.html>

<sup>19</sup> Quote from respondent “Sara” describing her upbringing in a predominately white, urban neighborhood.

<sup>20</sup> US servicemembers are given the opportunity to fly “Space Available” on military transport flights to various international locations. Space Available flights are extremely inexpensive (\$15-30) and are frequently used by active duty servicemembers, their families and retirees to travel internationally for leisure or duty. <http://www.baseops.net/spaceatravel/>

Kye's dismissal of Korea as a leisure destination was not because of harbored ill feelings but rather because of the complete absence of feelings for his birthland (Park Nelson, 2009). Another KAD respondent echoed a similar sentiment about his disassociation with Korea:

*Honestly, I just didn't have any desire or dire need to go back. Even, I had several chances to go back before. I think there was a period of time...between ten and fifteen when my parents would ask me 'hey, do you want to go back to Korea? I said I would rather go to Europe....Hawai'i.*  
- "Jeff"

### Reclaiming Memory

A second category of KADs readily admit to having been perpetually fascinated by cultural and heritage exploration despite their immersion in White environments. Usually this interest coincided with curiosity about birth origins, racial or ethnic discomfort in adoptive settings, and the desire to meet others with similar life stories. Unlike other diasporic groups, KADs often find themselves isolated from others who share the adoptee experience. Moreover, the general "memory" or history that most diasporas have is absent in KADs. As KAD scholar Tobias Hubinette puts it: "We are a one-generation immigrant group"—meaning that KADs lacking an immigrant narrative must construct their own.<sup>21</sup> The transnational adoptee community lacks the rich historical memory that other immigrant groups nurture and pass from generation to generation.

One of my research respondents noted this jarring nonexistence of historical kinship and familial memory, musing:

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<sup>21</sup> From Jane Jin Kaisin. *Tracing Trades* "Tracing Trades." Malm, 2006.

*So I added it up. 2 parents, 4 grandparents, 8 great grandparents, 16 grandparents' grandparents, and 32 grandparents' great grandparents. It took 32 people to make "me," and most likely I am the only one who won't be buried in that region. Maybe I had relatives elsewhere, but likely none in the United States. But who really knows. I also estimated roughly that if everyone was 20 years old, 5 generations of my family would bring us back to 1850. Hmmm, that made me wonder what their lives were like. – "Tammy"*

In lamenting her powerlessness in reclaiming her bloodline, Tammy also mourns her individual loss of a familial land where she could return to be buried. The unlikelihood of being interred on her birth soil speaks larger volumes to Tammy's separation as whole from her geographic place of origin and birth culture.

Feelings of isolation became less pronounced as the first, second and third "waves" of KADs matured and grew aware of the rapidly growing internet adoptee community. Many KADs were cognizant of their liminality well before discovering fellow members of their digital diaspora. Throughout childhood, transnational adoptees had to confront their cultural in-betweenness and existence in "borderlands of belonging."<sup>22</sup>

*In the library at school one day I stumbled on a journal called "Third Text." It was about the third space created by those who don't belong to a particular culture, who were perhaps born in one and raised in another. I remember how deeply I resonated with this concept of third culture kids. I went on to read about "third culture kids (TCK) and how the "TCK frequently builds relationships to all cultures, while not having full ownership in any." This felt very familiar to me. – "Sara"*

Eventually, KADs subscribe to an identity "shaped by connections to fellow adoptees and by feelings of cultural and racial 'in-betweenness,' which forms the basis for much Korean adoptee network and activism today" (Park-Nelson, 2009, p. 396). Although the Korean adoptee community online takes on many different names and represents differing

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<sup>22</sup> Description by "Sara," online interview: September 18, 2012.

geographical scales, a common bond of understanding and shared narrative resonates among the groups. More importantly, the transnational reach of these groups is ever-expanding as evidenced by the map in Figure 5.1.

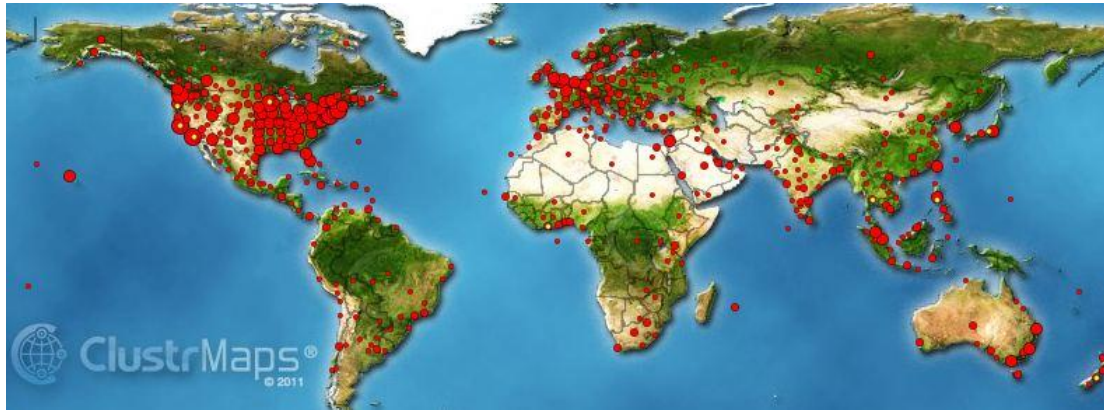


Figure 5.1. Map representing over 145,000 visitors to the “KADNEXUS” internet blog indicating the far stretch of the global Korean Adoptee community.  
<http://www2.clustrmaps.com/counter/maps.php?url=http://www.kadnexus.wordpress.com/#totals>

Many Korean adoptees consider their ties with the KAD diaspora and their returns to the motherland as a salve for the isolation and accentuated Othering that occurred during their formative years.

*During the '70s, 80s and even the 90s, we grew up in tiny towns and huge cities. Often we were the only Asians in a sea of white faces where it was in our class pictures or at the family reunion. Our moms had blue eyes, and our dads were impossibly tall. We sounded just like our brothers and sisters, yet if you were to do a Sesame Street game of “One of these things is not like the others,” invariably we’d be ones who would stand out. – Loey Wells (Cox, 2011, p. 176)*

The reality of finally being able to bond with other KADs and in the process possibly diminish life-long differentiation strengthens the resolve of some adoptees to reconnect to their geographic place of origin. Contact with other KADs makes real storied landscape of the past, a place that was previously remote and imagined.

Birth search is the primary motivation of the many KADs who decide to return to their birthland. For these KADs and other transnational adoptees, the possibility of being

able to re-establish a connection with biological family members or even uncover the story of their origin are powerful motivators for return. Over the past several decades first, second and third waves of KADs have produced written and visual accounts of their returns and birth searches. Personal memoirs highlighting adoptees' autobiographical quests, encounters with their biological families and poignant journeys to Korea include "A Single Square Picture" and "Once They Hear My Name" (Figure 5.2). More recently KADs have chronicled pilgrimages to their birthland in documentaries and short films, some of which have garnered Emmy nominations and acclaim in the independent film community.<sup>23</sup>

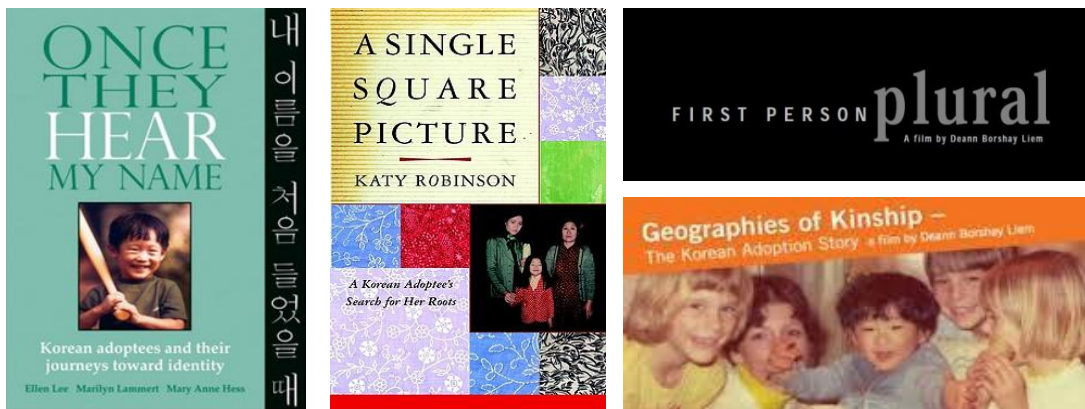


Figure 5.2. Publications and media published by KADs

However, successful birth searches are not guaranteed and are in fact very rare. Between 2000 and 2005, only 8% of adoptees who searched successfully made contact with birth relatives (Park Nelson, 2009). Despite the growing number of KAD returnees,

<sup>23</sup> Ellen Lee, Marilyn Lammert, and Mary Anne Hess, *Once They Hear My Name: Korean Adoptees and Their Journeys Toward Identity* (Silver Spring: Tamarisk, 2008); Katy Robinson, *A Single Square Picture – A Korean Adoptee's Search for Her Roots* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002); Deann Borshay Liem, *First Person Plural*, Documentary, directed by Deann Borshay Liem (Center for Asian American Media, 2000) Video; Deann Borshay Liem, *Geographies of Kinship-The Korean Adoption Story*, Documentary by Deann Borshay Liem (Mu Flims, 2012) Video.



success rates since 2005 have declined, with less than 3% of searchers actually finding biological family members.<sup>24</sup>

### Returns and “Instimacy”

Despite the improbability of uncovering personal histories or reestablishing birth family connections, approximately 3000 KADs continue to return to Korea per year via homeland journeys, personal tours, and school or professional opportunities.<sup>25</sup> The number of adoptees who return for study or job opportunities is relatively low due to the language barriers though however Korean universities and other organizations offer language and cultural immersion programs to entice overseas Koreans to return to their birthland.<sup>26</sup> Most Korean adoptees opt for return journeys and tours over the intensive nature and time commitment required of language courses. More specifically, many adoptees prefer the homeland or “motherland” type of return tours offered by various organizations and adoption agencies.

This section of the chapter focuses on the reasons why an adoptee would choose a scripted heritage tour over traditional private tourism. The unsurprising responses given were ease of access, comfort and group dynamics. What is intriguing is that returnees acknowledged and accepted the inauthenticity and canned nature of these scripted journeys. As seen in the discussion of motherland return literature, these journeys are

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<sup>24</sup> Kristy Taylor, “Grown Korean adoptees return to birth country to fill in the missing gap,” *The Korea Times*, September 7, 2012. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/09/117\\_119341.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/09/117_119341.html)

<sup>25</sup> Kim Taylor, “Grown Korean adoptees return to birth country to fill in the missing gap,” *The Korea Times*, September 7, 2012. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/09/117\\_119341.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/09/117_119341.html)

<sup>26</sup> The Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link (G.O.A.’L) provides scholarships for adoptees to enroll in intensive language courses at several Korean universities (Ewha Women's University, KyungHee University, Sogang University, Sookmyung Women's University, Geumgang University, Yonsei University and Korea University); these programs range from a semester to one academic year in duration and are sometimes fully subsidized. <http://goal.or.kr/scholarship>

widely advertised to the large transnational adoptee community. A good number of these journeys are subsidized or fully funded by the sponsoring organizations, making them that much more appealing and accessible to prospective participants. For example, The JinHeung Company's Journey and the All Services for International Adoptees and Adoptive Families (ASIA) Service Trip funds the lodging, meals and most associated fees for returning adoptees.<sup>27</sup> International Korean Adoptee Service Incorporated (InKAS) provides a fully funded tour, including airfare, for a select number of participants.<sup>28</sup> The Korean government subsidizes the Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (G.O.A.'L) "First Trip Home" journeys for first time returnees.<sup>29</sup>

Aside from the affordability of sponsored motherland journeys, returnees appreciate the psychological security and solidarity of group tourism. Instead of venturing to the birthland by themselves or with family members, adoptees surround themselves with cohorts who share an adopted identity and are able to empathize with the maelstrom of emotions that returns generate. Because of this, many return tours are adoptee-only and thus are opportune avenues to avoid friction due to the absence of immediate family member. Adoptee birthplace exploration frequently gives rise to uneasiness in adoptive parents, who feel slighted or betrayed when their adopted children go on journeys without them.

*They value the group support and the feeling of shared, normative experiences. Peer relationships loom large at this age [early adulthood], and being with others who share the international adoption experience protects from self-consciousness*

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<sup>27</sup> <http://1004calendar.com/journey/index.php>; <http://www.asia-allservices.org/adult-adoptee-service-trip-to-korea-2013.html>

<sup>28</sup> <http://inkas.org/service/mother-land-visit/>

<sup>29</sup> <http://goal.or.kr/civicrm/event/info?id=13&reset=1>

*and, therefore, frees them to be more fully engaged. While the tours have an American [or Western] presence about them that is readable, young people still report feeling less conspicuous with a tour group than they might with only their family unit.<sup>30</sup>*

One returnee referred to this sense of solidarity when he discussed his reasoning for joining a return journey:

*It was kind of a comforting thing knowing that everybody has the same background as you, everybody's been asked the same questions...and then getting exposed to the culture and the food...and getting little touches here and there about what Korea is like.*

*It was the people that make the experience unique. And that's what I'll always remember. There were Korean adoptees from all over the place. There were Korean adoptees with Texan accents, Korean adoptees that can speak seven languages, Danish, all different kinds. That was really cool to see. In fact, there were some fascinating stories. One person who went back, he was from San Francisco, who found out that he had an identical twin that was never adopted—there were a lot of interesting stories – “Jeff”*

Cohesiveness among journey participants is quickly formed—faster than the bonds created in traditional tourist groups. The reasons for the accelerated closeness, or “instimacy,” in KAD journey groups are the virtual friendships already formed prior to physical meetings via mediums like Facebook, Google + and online chats (Kim, 2010). However, one journey participant pointed out that internet correspondence alone does not entirely explain the almost instantaneous connections:

*Well, I did definitely have the feeling that people “knew” each other before we arrived in Korea – from the bonding on facebook and through the google chats, etc. But that certainly doesn't explain everything because not everyone participated in those. It seems to me that experiencing something so intense and raw and personal with a group takes it out of the range of normal experience and opens the possibility of deeper bonding. I know I felt like I was in a constant, heightened emotional state for the entire experience. –“Sara”*

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<sup>30</sup> Marilyn C. Reiger, “Homeland Tours: The Issues and the Challenges.” *The FACE Adoption Quarterly*, summer (1997): <http://www.barkerfoundation.org/homeland-tours-issues-and-challenges>.

Additionally, Korean returnees bond over their shared awkwardness in negotiating their birth culture. Knowing that their fellow adoptees might find kimchi repugnant or that some may have crippling anxieties about uncovering personal histories makes group returns less daunting than individual forays to the motherland.

An adoptee who participated in a Korean Welfare Society tour articulated the importance of the group dynamic and cohesiveness in mitigating the anxiety of return:

*It was something I had always planned to do but it would be never a convenient time or money was always an issue. Then, you always have that really big fear of doing it by yourself, not fitting in or struggling with the language. Doing it with people who are dealing with the same issues that you are dealing with makes all the difference.<sup>31</sup>*

In addition to the “safety in numbers” aspect of group journeys, the translators and cultural mentors provided by the return organizers allow adoptees to more easily negotiate the unfamiliar social and physical landscape of their birth countries. Returnees are also offered other amenities such as adoptee only lodging in affordable hostel-type houses where they can stay for extended periods of time before or after their journeys.<sup>32</sup> More importantly, these guesthouses serve as “safe-havens” for adoptee tourists if they become overwhelmed by their forays into the foreign landscape and need the familiarity of other Westerners.

The increasing accessibility of sponsored return journeys and the escalating interest results in a highly scripted, tightly programmed tour during which participants have little control over which sites are visited or which cultural experiences they are

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<sup>31</sup> Kristy Taylor, “Tears replaces on return to Korea,” *The Korea Herald*, July 24, 2011. <http://nwww.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20110824000336>.

<sup>32</sup> The Mungunghwa Guesthouse and the KoRoot Guesthouse are available solely for returning Korean Adoptees. These accommodations are affordable safe havens that allow newly arrived adoptees to bond and explore their birthland. <http://www.new-beginnings.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/easternMugunghwaHouse.pdf>, <http://www.koroot.org/>.

presented. Tour organizers predictably choose well-known attractions and highlight the most beautiful and pristine landscapes. In the effort provide a comprehensive birthland experience inclusive of numerous historical and cultural experiences, journeys begin to resemble traditional tourist trips where the snapping of photographs supersedes significance of authenticity.

Return journeys become more conventional when participants are given nametags emblazoned with the tour organizations logo and labeled with their Anglicized (or adoptive) names as well as their birth names. The participants are ferried between locations on garishly labeled tour buses and repeatedly posed in front of significant symbols of their birthland while holding up bright banners announcing the tour organization and tour purpose. Although these measures are intended by the Return hosts to increase the efficiency of travel, the nametags, tour buses and oversized tour banners accentuate the foreignness and outsider status of the returnees (Figure 5.3).<sup>33</sup> Consequently, for some participants, the experiential authenticity of Korea and connection to landscape and culture are diminished by this canned “performance” of the birthland.

Sometimes the participants themselves are partially responsible for their return’s inauthenticity when they seek the exotic or superficially commercialized aspects of their motherland. One returnee observed of her fellow travelers: “I couldn’t stand the way the tour was their *vacation*, the way it seemed that they could compartmentalize their experience in Korea into alternating intervals of group therapy and shopping”

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<sup>33</sup> Journey participants expressed their distaste and discomfort of the nametags saying that the tags “made us stick out,” and infantilized the group of adult adoptees. – “Krista” Another participant had a slightly more acerbic perspective: “Well, so much for blending in—we look like fucking tourists on a church trip” – “Jim.”



Figure 5.3. Return tour groups with organizational banners posing in front of Korean cultural sites and in traditional Korean garb. –Photos courtesy of Gerry Poland, 2012; Kourtni Rader, 2011.

(Trenka, 2003, p. 104). Return participants frequently fall into the traditional tourist role of seeking to collect as many cultural sights and staged photos of their birthland’s celebrated landmarks as possible. This causes the returns to morph from a profound journey of discovery into a superficial consumption of culture and place.

Although group immersion provides refuge while negotiating the motherland, participants frequently find authenticity and strengthen birth identity during private forays. It is an opportunity to escape from the regimented parameters of the return journey and sensually experience the surrounding landscape and “exotic” culture (Figure 5.4). Returnee and adoption activist Jane Trenka captured the intimacy of a private expedition away from her journey compatriots:

*I spoke no words and blended in, undetected for at least an hour, enjoying my experience as a “real” Korean. The shoulder-to-shoulder density of the crowd opened up and swallowed me, welcomed me into a sea of people where I could be lost in the sameness. Suddenly, everything seemed more real: edges were sharper, more in focus; colors brighter; sounds cleaner; odors more pungent. The third-person, waterproof luster that blanketed me in the tour group fell away: no longer miguk saram but hanguk saram: not an American but a Korean...just like everyone else, alive inside the belly of my motherland. (Trenka, 2003, p. 105)*

Other returnees have, like Trenka, experienced an individual connection to an authentic Korea apart from the Korea put forth on a journey's stage. Not only did she feel close to people of her birthland, return participant "Sara" found a connection to the land itself:

*Jeju - the earth here is dark and rich, ringed with stacked stone walls made of lava rocks. The sea is green gray - restless all the way to the horizon and back where it breaks against the shore. Every moment in this place has evoked so many feelings - waves upon the ocean, churning, frothing and breaking into stillness.<sup>34</sup>*



Figure 5.4. Jeju Island; Photo courtesy of Gerry Poland, 2012.

### Meeting Expectations?

The feelings of connection and authenticity derived from private sojourns in the birthland raises the question of whether group journeys are the ideal vehicles for returnees to experience their origins. This section explores the final question of the thesis: Did the return journey conform to what participants envisioned they would see and feel? Did the return create the sought-after substantive connections to the motherland?

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<sup>34</sup> Jeju-Do – also known as “Cheju” is a small island located approximately fifty miles off the southern coast of South Korea. It is a favorite tourist location for Koreans and international travelers alike. Many motherland returns visit the island highlighting the mountain vistas and local cuisine. Also featured are the *haenyo*, local women sea divers who traditionally have been the main breadwinners of Jeju-Do.

The responders to this final inquiry fell mainly into one of two groups: 1) participants who found the journey a life changing, formative step in reshaping their identity and 2) participants who did not find experience an embracing connection to Korea as an emotional or physical place of belonging. For some participants, the intersection of place, attachment, identity and memory simply was not compelling enough to substantively change their perspective of themselves or reconsider which place was “home.” However, on the opposite end of the spectrum were adoptees who found their motherland to be the vital missing piece of their identity puzzle.

“Darin” was one returnee who appreciated the opportunity to see and experience the motherland but did not experience a deep connection to place. Instead, he felt a longing for his adoptive place.

*I did not feel any sense of "coming home" or that it felt like I belonged or anything to that effect. I felt homesick for the most part. My home is my home. The only real difference that I noticed was that I was no longer the minority race. That felt a bit strange, but nothing different from being in certain parts of my city.*

“Mark” shared a similar perspective of his return. While he found Korea as a place interesting and representations of the culture and society as authentic, the return did not stimulate an embracing association with the country.

*It's authentic in that it gets you personal exposure, you know, to the country itself. But to experience Korea for a week, two weeks and then—I don't want to offend anybody—but to experience Korea and having the culture and traditions for two weeks and then say you know 'oh, I've lived in the United States my whole life, these two weeks, I feel, I identify with so much her'—I could never do that. For me, it's like looking at it through a tourist's eyes. It's cool to experience it but could I imagine doing that for the rest of my life at this point of time? It would take a big adjustment I think for me to get used to that. When I came home, I was, you know, still the same person...it didn't really....it wasn't like...a life changing experience.*



One returnee expressed her expectation that the return was not going to fundamentally alter her sense of self or redefine Korea as a homeland. Instead, she suspected that her personal dissonance would persist.

*I wanted to return to Korea not to change my construction of identity exactly, but to see if somehow the experience in Korea would intertwine with who I was as a person already. I didn't exactly feel as though I was 'at home' when I was in my place that I should be so in tuned with. I felt as though I was distancing myself from certain parts of 'home' because of it, although being in Korea I don't exactly feel like I fit as being 'more Korean.'* – “Stacie”

The insistence that the return did not significantly engender feelings of home or belonging was echoed by “Tina,” who considered the journey as more of a “holiday.”

*I didn't feel like I needed to go to feel complete or anything like that, but I did very much want to see the country where I was born, experience the culture and the Korean people. I still feel very much the same as before I left for Korea, but I have a greater knowledge and understanding of the country where I was born. For me Norway is till my home, but I am open to return to Korea at some point in my life for a visit. I would not visit because I would want to "go home", or to look for my birth mother/biological parents, but more like a holiday.*

Detached feelings toward a birthland are not unusual or even unexpected. Previous returnees have written about the emotional disconnect to the motherland and explain that the lack of historical memory or bloodline has effectively erased any possibility of meaningful reconnection.

*...because for the adoptees their country of origin is a naked place. If you cannot identify the place you were born and where your birth parents lived, if you cannot name your birth parents or their relatives, then what do “roots” tours that “return” to the “motherland” mean?* (Howell, 2009, p. 266)

Another adoptee points to the tension of reconciling identity to place which really is not his or her own and that these returns illuminate “a more complex story of movement between (temporary) locations, of desire that is shaped by hegemonies of race, blood, and

nation, and of the impossibility of ever fully belonging to the places where we find ourselves” (Yngvesson, 2010, p. 163).

The central takeaway from these accounts is that for a significant number of adoptees, return only brings participants back full circle where their liminality is reinforced. For them, Korea is just as foreign as any other destination and thus journeys are not homecomings. While these adoptees are mostly appreciative of their birthland’s sites and performances, the cultural awkwardness, language barriers and physical differences create too wide of a chasm to bridge. Despite the bonds formed with other returnees and the multi-faceted glimpse of their birthland, Korea remains an essentialized place where connection exists “only in the adoptees’ imagination” and where adoptees “create for themselves imagined kinship anchored in an imagined place, granting themselves imagined belonging (Howell, 2009, p. 268).

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In this examination of identity and place construction, I reflected the motivations and significance that inter-country adoptees associate with motherland returns. By using frameworks of experiential tourism, textual analysis of tour literature and journey participant narratives, I was able to reveal out the significance of returns and connections to place as viewed through a humanistic geography lens. I ultimately showed that for some returnees, these journeys construct a sought- after place of belonging and permanency while for other participants, these returns are simply pieces of personal puzzles of the past. Or, as one adoptee poignantly stated: “I went to Korea thinking that the past was like a puzzle that would neatly lock together once I found all of the missing pieces. But what I found instead was a picture in constant motion, one piece connecting while another falls away.”<sup>35</sup> Regardless of the impetus for returning to their places of origin, journey participants articulated some degree of geographical connection—whether it was authentic or staged or whether it was immersive or fleeting.

In order to establish context for this examination of identity and place, I highlighted interpretations of place through Yi-Fu Tuan and Tim Creswell. These authors explain association and attachment to place through a humanistic lens—a perspective that includes both spatial and temporal aspects. Following an examination of place, I explored how individuals consume places through traditional and experiential tourism. I also touched upon the commodification of place via tourism which leads to one of my primary questions of authenticity presented by return journeys and whether

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<sup>35</sup> <http://relativechoices.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/06/tracing-my-roots-back-to-korea/>

these returns to places of origin adequately fulfill the expectations of adoptee participants.

The second chapter of this thesis was a chronology of adoption practices beginning with the horrendous introduction of baby farms, the emergence of transracial adoption and concluding with the proliferation of inter-country adoption. The expanding population of inter-country adoptees creates a unique immigrant group and diaspora conspicuous in the social landscape. Like many of their immigrant community counterparts, adoptees eventually look inwardly as well as to external support networks when considering personal identity and their relationship to place. Unfortunately, for a majority of Korean adoptees and other intercountry adoptees, the ethnic enclaves that often are available other immigrant diaspora are absent. This inability to access a network of individuals with shared stories and personal histories accentuates the feeling of liminality or geographical Outsiderness.

Adoptee introspection and uncertainty of belonging regularly evolves into deliberate steps to empower themselves and engage in cultural exploration or a reclaiming of a forgotten identity. For Korean adoptees, cultural reconnections mean reaching out to the KAD community, occupying the “Third Space” between that of their adoptive and birth places, and embarking on motherland returns. During the course of my analysis, I show the progression of moving from virtual adoptee communities to seeking physical and intimate connections to places of origin. No longer content with occupying virtual places of belonging, inter-country adoptees venture on journeys to physical places of origin and memory.

After showing why Korean adoptees choose to engage in return journeys, I examined the experiential aspect of these tours. I differentiated motherland return from traditional mass tourism due to the priority of the tourists' experience over tourists' gaze in these journeys. I also argued that although tours' heavily formatted and somewhat kitschy nature is apparent to the participants, they construct for themselves an individually-based authenticity through their consumption of the motherland landscape and cultural performances. I pointed out that returnees not only seek a reconnection to past histories, but throughout the course of their journeys, they also begin to build remembrances and enduring connections to their places of origin.

The experiential aspect of motherland returns is highly touted in tour literature and advertisements. The fourth chapter of this thesis catalogues how journey are promoted through emotive language promising to fill voids and reestablish lost connections. Wistful language is intertwined with nostalgic imagery specifically aimed at enticing adoptees to return. Occasionally, in the effort to attract participants tour literature assigns dual identities to inter-country adoptees—a practice that some adoptees disdain as they dispute pluralities in identity. This type of sentiment leads to a larger discussion of the ethics and usefulness of motherland returns.

The thesis concludes with a consideration of these overarching questions of the intrinsic value of returns contrasted with the superficial, commodified takeaways that some participants' experience. One of major factors that inform adoptees' perception of authenticity in return is the impetus for exploring their past histories and places. The eventual finding was that the adoptees that did not consider the past or place as salient features of identity were also reluctant to acknowledge significance in the motherland

beyond that of an aesthetic experience. On the other hand, returnees that were chronically plagued by dissonance and in-between-ness more readily accepted landscapes and performances of the motherland as a validating experience. The thesis concludes with the contested significance of place during motherland returns. Adoptees ponder their returns and question whether the motherland is either an idealized “naked place” void of real significance or an authentic place that figures into construction of identity as well as amendments to personal stories.

These contradicting outcomes of return journey’s impact on adoptee participant speak to deeper questions of how loss, memory, power, place and identity intersect in individuals. This thesis explored how Korean adoptees negotiate these processes through a geographic and humanistic lens. This research also examined the curious role that physical place plays in human consideration. Anthropologist Barbara Yngvesson warns against attributing too much significance in meanings of place via return journeys:

*...this narrative illuminates the powerful pull of a discourse of identity and the ‘returns’ (to an origin) that identity requires, while at the same time pointing toward a more complex story of movement between (temporary) locations, of desire that is shaped by hegemonies of race, blood, and nation, and of the impossibility of every fully belonging in the places we find ourselves.*  
(Yngvesson, 2010, p.163)

Despite Yngvesson’s precautions, we found that places of origin can be powerful tangible places of connection that reinforce identities. However, on the other end of the spectrum, place can be a surrogate for an idea as well. The motherland journey significance in place construction is challenged by the proposition that “origin may be understood to be not so much an actual geographical starting point as a back-formation created by the desires of diasporic subjects” (Homans, 2011, p. 186). Homans is

referring to is the possibility that Korea may not be simply be a physical genesis of a Korean adoptee's identity, but rather an idealized place that the adoptee formulates. This idealization explains why for some returnees, journeys lack the significance, connection or answers they had anticipated.

Transnational adoption in the U.S. is a continuing and highly visible cultural phenomenon. Although the Korean government has conspicuously stemmed the flow of adoptees to the West, there are multiple generations of young Chinese, South American and African adoptees dotting the American landscape. This project provides a geographic perspective to the existing resources and literature pertaining to the framework of international adoption and dominant adoptee narratives. My thesis has primarily focused on the Korean adoptee experience, however the themes extrapolated can be applied to other inter-country adoptees as well. These diasporic communities frequently occupy tenuous places in our social landscape exacerbated by "peculiarly American contradictions around race, nationality, ethnicity and blood (Homans, 2011, p. 187). Intercountry adoptees must navigate a complex landscape where assimilation into their environs competes against conspicuous ethnic and racial structures that perpetually Others them.

Identity is "neither a given nor a product." (De Fina, 2006, p. 2) This thesis is an account of how members of a unique diaspora continue to write the story of their lives and assume agency in their previously assigned identity through physical exploration of places of origin and the past. Regardless if motherland journeys provide a substantive and authentic bond to places of origins or if they are simply tightly scripted forays into tourist landscapes, motherland journeys play some role in the intercountry adoptee

journeys of self-realization and association to place. Perhaps in the end, returnees will find that their identity is not liminal but rather doubly rooted—or as one adoptee reflected: “I will travel home. I will travel home in both directions.”



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