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Elizabeth Goode

University of Newcastle

Autoethnography from ‘In-between’: An Account of the Cultural Identity Construction of a Korean-Australian Adoptee

Abstract

This paper uses an autoethnographic methodology to examine cultural identity formation from the perspective of an intercountry adoptee. The author, a communication scholar who was adopted from South Korea by an Anglo-Australian family in the 1980s, draws on documents and memories to examine her own identity construction through various intercultural and interpersonal communications. She identifies that interactions with Anglo-Celtic Australians and ‘native’ Koreans have destabilised her identity by causing her to question her ‘cultural authenticity’ as an Australian or Korean. However, participation in global online networks of intercountry adoptees has facilitated her self-identification as an ‘intercountry adoptee’ and enabled the emergence of a cultural identity characterised by hybridity and difference. It is argued that this identity is fundamentally intercultural, continually negotiated through interaction, and subversive and empowering in its hybridity.

Key words: cultural identity, intercountry adoption, intercultural communication, autoethnography

Introduction: Intercountry adoption as cross-cultural migration

The modern practice of intercountry adoption, also known as international or transnational adoption, was borne out of humanitarian concerns for the welfare of orphaned or poverty-stricken children affected by international conflicts such as WWII and the Korean and Vietnam Wars (Grotevant, Von Korff 2011). Since the late 1970s, this ‘discourse of humanitarian rescue’ (Fronek 2012) has become supplemented by a rising interest in the adoption of foreign-born children – predominantly from Asia, South America, Eastern Europe and Africa – among infertile or childless couples in the West (Lovelock 2000; Selman 2002, 2012). It is now estimated that over 1 million individuals have been adopted internationally since 1945, constitutive of a unique migratory and cross-cultural phenomenon involving more than 100 countries across the globe (Selman 2002, 2012).

As a migrant group, intercountry adoptees have been likened to refugees – exiles who have been forced to flee their home countries due to war, persecution or famine (Kim 2003). Additionally, various scholars (e.g. Hübinette 2004; Miller-Loessi, Kilic 2001) have invoked the notion of a ‘victim diaspora’ in relation to intercountry

adoption, a term referring to populations who have experienced forced expulsion and dispersal from their homeland after a traumatic socio-political event (Cohen 2008). However, distinct from other refugees and migrants generally, intercountry adoptees tend to be unique in their solitary relocation as infants or young children into families and often whole communities who do not share their cultural, ethnic or racial background (Scherman 2010). These particular migrants may acquire the social and cultural capital of their majority-culture, middle-class adoptive parents, but can be perceived as 'different' and 'outsiders' by others based on their physical appearance (Gehrmann 2010). Notions of belonging and identity are therefore complex for many internationally adopted persons, shaped by enforced cross-cultural displacement and uncertainty about one's biological and cultural origins.

My own story involves relinquishment by a single mother in South Korea and adoption by an Anglo-Australian family in the mid-1980s. As a young adult I often felt a sense of emotional distance from Australia (whose national cultural imaginary did not seem mine by birthright) and mystified and overwhelmed by Korea, a place whose language and customs I did not – could not? – fully understand. I occupied, it sometimes seemed, an amorphous and illegitimate space of belonging neither-here-nor-there. Drawing on these experiences, the central research question that frames this paper is: as an intercountry adoptee, *among whom* do I feel I belong, and *how* has this sense of belonging been constructed?

In an effort to examine my identity construction I have engaged in an autoethnographic enquiry of my experiences as an internationally adopted Korean-Australian. In the following sections of this paper I establish a theoretical and methodological context for this discussion by examining how the cultural identities of intercountry adoptees have been theorised and popularly understood, and by demonstrating how an autoethnographic methodology enables processes of identity formation to be revealed. I then present and analyse key developments in my own identity construction which centre around particular types of intercultural and interpersonal interactions: situations of 'othering' by Anglo-Celtic Australians; experiences of 'cultural awkwardness' and dis-identification with 'native' Koreans; and online contact with other intercountry adoptees that, in intersection with my development as a communication student and scholar, has facilitated the construction of a hybrid cultural identity. I argue that this identity is fundamentally intercultural, continually negotiated through interaction, and subversive and empowering in its hybridity.

Cultural identity, intercountry adoption and intercultural communication

Cultural identity involves a sense of belonging – 'an emotional attachment . . . feeling "at home"' (Yuval-Davis 2011, p. 4) – to particular social groups (Hall 1996b, p. 596). A traditional view, aligned with modernist and Enlightenment thought, conceives of identity as a stable, collective and intrinsic attribute of people who share a common history and heritage (Hall 1990, 1994). According to this understanding, identity is a mode of collective belonging to a unified group, who are most commonly

defined by ethnic or racial categories. This essentialist view positions cultural identity as unchanging and intrinsic – a core ‘essence’ and a locus of singular ethnic or national belonging.

According to anthropologist Barbarba Yngvesson, intercountry adoption discourse has traditionally been imbued with two dominant essentialist narratives concerned with ‘exclusive belongings’ to the adoptive or birth country (2003, p. 7). She writes that:

In the clean break version of this myth, the adoptive child is set free from the past (constituted as “abandoned” or “motherless”) so that he or she can be assimilated completely into the adoptive family. In the preservation story, on the other hand, the child is imagined as a part of his or her birth mother or birth nation, imagined as being constantly pulled back to that ground (Yngvesson 2003, pp. 7–8).

The implication embedded in both of these views is that an internationally adopted person can be either Korean or Australian (or Chinese or Danish), but not both, or indeed something else entirely.

In the mid-1990s social and cultural theorists began to argue for a turn towards more fluid and open-ended conceptions of identity (e.g. Hall, du Gay 1996). Cultural identity began to be theorised as ‘a matter of “becoming” as well as “being”’ (Hall 1990, p. 225) – that is, not fixed in a single place or community of origin, but ‘open, contradictory, unfinished and fragmented’ (Hall 1994, p. 125). In contrast to static, essentialist notions of identity, this perspective advocates for cultural identity construction as a dynamic and ongoing process of positioning oneself in relation to a shifting array of social groups and discursive practices (Hall 1990, 1996a).

I have drawn upon this more recent understanding of identity in this paper, while also demonstrating how essentialist beliefs can be reproduced through intercultural and interpersonal interactions and therefore brought to bear on individual constructions of belonging and identity. Furthermore, I have focused upon a particular aspect of cultural identity – what Grün refers to as ‘ethnic and national constructs of belonging’ (2009, online) – rather than expanding my analysis to include a sustained consideration of other intersecting aspects of identity such as class, religion, gender, sexuality, etc. My (partial) account does not dispute that ‘identity theorizing needs to account for such complexities’ (Bardhan, Orbe 2012, p. xix). Indeed, the preliminary research presented in this paper will be woven into a larger doctoral study of cultural identity construction that considers how other aspects of my identity intersect with my sense of ethnic and national belonging. However, this paper seeks to recognise that nation, race and ethnicity have been particularly salient sites of destabilisation and dissonance in my personal narrative as an internationally and interracially adopted person. I chose to live and work in Korea for two years in my mid-twenties, and, at the time of writing this paper, am considering another long-term return to Korea.

This original preliminary research is therefore an investigation of how the aspects of my cultural identity related to national and ethnic belonging have been constructed through instances of intercultural and interpersonal communication. It is

important to clarify the understanding of 'intercultural communication' deployed here, as the term has previously been aligned with various analytical and theoretical traditions (see Bardhan, Orbe 2012; Piller 2011). I follow Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon in their reframing of intercultural communication as 'interdiscourse communication', an approach that:

[sets] aside any a priori notions of group membership and identity and [asks] instead how and under what circumstances concepts such as culture are produced by participants as relevant categories for interpersonal ideological negotiation (2001, p. 544).

Therefore, the focus of my analysis is on how interactants might be identifying with and participating in discourse systems: 'particular ways of thinking, treating other people, communicating and learning' (Scollon, Wong Scollon, Jones 2012, p. 8). In other words, this paper considers how 'social interactions . . . develop an internal logic of their own, and how people read those social interactions in making decisions and taking actions that have consequences far beyond those situations themselves' (Scollon et al. 2012, p. 18). Hence I also consider how the brief interactions presented in this paper, and the discourses evident in and through them, have affected my sense of belonging as an adopted Korean-Australian. An overview of the autoethnographic methodology employed for this exploratory work follows.

Autoethnography

The emergence of autoethnography as a research method can be traced to the work of cultural anthropologist David Hayano (1979), who used the term to describe the study of one's own cultural group (Reed-Danahay 1997). In its contemporary usage, autoethnography is acknowledged as a qualitative social research method that blends the methodology of ethnography with the art of writing autobiography (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011). As an ethnographic methodology, the goal of autoethnography is to illuminate or critique aspects of social and cultural life through the analysis of data relating to social interactions in cultural contexts (Boylorn, Orbe 2013; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, Chang 2010). However, while ethnography in its traditional forms is predicated on a researcher studying and understanding the *other*, the distinguishing feature of autoethnography is the use of a researcher's *own, insider* experiences as primary data (Patton 2002).

This disruption to the usual distinctions between *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) positions in social research has generated considerable scholarly debate (see, for example, Anderson 2006; Ellis, Bochner 2006; Foster 2014; Holt 2003). As Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000) have observed, critics of the method argue that autoethnography cannot reveal scientifically valid 'truth', and is merely a form of self-indulgent therapy with little empirical value. However, I argue that this perspective overlooks the analytical agenda and interpretive onto-epistemological underpinnings of autoethnography. Grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology (Poulos 2013), autoethnography operates on an epistemology of 'proximity' and

'insiderness' rather than objectivity and 'truth' (Adams, Holman Jones, Ellis 2014) and seeks credibility, verisimilitude and resonance rather than reliability, validity and generalisability (Ellis et al. 2011). A key benefit of autoethnography is that it captures 'the everyday things that people get up to in their everyday lives' (Bate 1997 cited in Humphreys 2005, p. 851) as well as 'the particularities, nuances, and complexities' of otherwise private and inaccessible identities and experiences (Adams et al. 2014, p. 16). Autoethnography 'reaches its full potential' through analytically connecting these experiences and complexities with larger social and cultural issues and concepts (Foster 2014, p. 447).

On account of its methodological strengths, autoethnography has been applied to a diverse range of lived experiences, including chronic injury (Sparkes 1996), completing a PhD (Stanley 2015), stillbirth (Weaver-Hightower 2012), public relations practice (James 2012), motherhood (Foster 2005), and violent assault (Schoepflin 2009). Reflecting the usefulness of autoethnography as a method for examining identity formation among the 'culturally displaced' (Reed-Danahay 1997), a variety of autoethnographic works has also explored the cultural, racial, or ethnic identities of multi-racial and diasporic individuals (e.g. Choi 2012; Gatson 2003; LeMaster 2013; Young 2009). However, relatively few autoethnographic studies have explicitly focused on intercultural communication (cf. Boylorn, Orbe 2013) or the experiences of intercountry adoptees (cf. Malhotra 2013; Pearson 2010). The research presented in this paper is therefore somewhat unique in applying an autoethnographic approach to the study of how intercultural and interpersonal communications have affected the cultural identity formation of an intercountry adoptee.

In order to investigate the sense of 'fundamental liminality' (Lionnet 1991 in Gatson 2003, p. 22) I have felt as an internationally and interracially adopted person, I employed an ethnographic gaze that swung both inward and outward, examining my inner impressions and lived experiences alongside the wider socio-cultural contexts within which they occurred (Adams et al. 2014; Ellis, Bochner 2000; Poulos 2013). I first collected a series of personal documents containing my thoughts about being adopted, Australian and Korean in my late teens and twenties, including: journal entries; emails to other adoptees; and posts I had made on listservs for intercountry adoptees and families. These documents were coded in a way that summarised and categorised the thoughts and impressions contained in each document (e.g. 'concerns about going to Korea'). A narrative emerged from this process, reinforced by memories and current impressions. This narrative was one of fluctuating identification and dis-identification with being 'Australian' and 'Korean', as exemplified by the following email excerpt:

I guess I feel more Korean because I don't see a lot in Australian culture that means a lot to me. I know how to act in Australian culture because I've been socialised in it, and I do act Australian, but for me at the moment it's important that I recognise that I am Korean. My Korean heritage gave me the building blocks for who I am, and especially for what I look like. Having said that . . . Korean culture and society is one big mystery to me.
(Author's personal communication)

Having recognised this narrative I proceeded, as many autoethnographers do, with introspection, writing and interpretation. Drawing on memories, as well as instances mentioned in the personal documents (and where possible triangulating my recollections with these recorded instances), I listed situations and experiences that had contributed or led to these identity movements and slippages (Ruiz-Junco, Vidal-Ortiz 2011). From this process it became evident that intercultural and interpersonal communication in (mundane) everyday contexts, had played a pivotal role in my sense-making about who I was as an adopted person and where I felt I 'belonged'.

Finally, following the work of Michael Humphreys (2005), Robert Mizzi (2010) and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (2004), I wrote short 'vignettes' – 'fragments' or 'micro-narratives' (Humphreys 2005) – describing these everyday experiences. I then turned my gaze outwards from these vignettes, asking *why* and *under what social and cultural conditions* these experiences had occurred, before again turning my gaze inwards to myself to ask *with what effect on my identity?* Hence the vignettes – of which only some are included in this preliminary research paper – serve to exemplify and provide a springboard for discussion about, how intercultural and interpersonal interactions have affected my sense of national and ethnic belonging as an internationally adopted person.

Vignettes of a Korean in Australia

I sat on a coach weaving its way through the city of Sydney. I was with dozens of other students and teachers from my secondary school, all excited about the prospect of visiting the state capital. It was midday, and crowds were busily milling around the inner-city streets. In contrast to the small city that I grew up in, many of the pedestrians were of Asian descent. As the bus rumbled past, a girl a few seats ahead murmured to her friend: "Oh my God. Look at them all. It's like you're not even in Australia." Suddenly, I felt uncomfortable, aware of what *I* looked like. I wanted to challenge her and suggest that Asians can be Australian too, but stayed silent.

As I was walking to work one afternoon, a middle-aged man who was heading in the opposite direction stopped and approached me.

"Kinichiwa," he said eagerly.

"I'm not Japanese," I replied.

"Oh, where are you from?" he enquired.

"I grew up here."

He blinked, taken aback. "Oh, no, but where are you *originally* from?"

Unsure how to politely end the conversation, I offered, "I was born in Korea."

"Oh, I know a lot of Koreans. I've met a few through my line of work, and my wife knows some Korean ladies who make fantastic food. Kimchi's really good! How long have you been here?"

"Pretty much my whole life. I came here as a baby."

"So your parents speak Korean at home?"

"No, not really. I can't speak Korean." I hesitated, scrambling for something to say next.

"Oh!" he was taken aback again. "What's your last name?"

Without thinking – still mentally scrambling for a 'way out' – I gave him my surname.

"You're not Korean!" he exclaimed, and recoiled as if I was lying to him.

It was around this time that I began to take an interest in Korea, and to dream about travelling, working or studying there.

The preceding vignettes are examples of my experiences as a Korean-born adoptee in Australia during the late-1990s to mid-2000s. In asking why and under what social and cultural conditions interactions such as these have affected my cultural identity, my analysis centred upon particular constructions of what it meant to be 'authentically' Australian, and who was *not* counted as belonging in Australia in these interactions. In the first example a white classmate commented that the abundance of people with Asian features on the streets of Sydney led her to feel like she 'wasn't even in Australia'. In the second, subtler invocation of what it means to be authentically Australian, the man's use of Japanese and his fixation on where I was *really* from positioned me as someone culturally different from an 'Australian'. To him, at least initially, I was defined as 'a Japanese' or 'a Korean' person.

Both of these interactions invoke a dominant, essentialist discourse of 'Australianness' that relates racial appearance to national belonging – a construction that destabilised my sense of belonging in Australia. From its inception, the term 'race' has been invoked in reference to people who appeared different to Europeans:

The French term *race* and the German *Rasse* derive from the Italian *razza* and the Spanish *raza*, general terms that came to reflect the discovery and experience of groups of beings very different from, indeed strange to the European eye and self. From its inception, then, race has referred to those perceived, indeed, constituted as *other* [emphasis added] (Goldberg 1993, p. 62).

'Race' is now regarded as a social construction whereby phenotypical features and skin tone are understood as signs that delineate boundaries between human groups (Anthias, Yuval-Davis 1992; Luke, Luke 1999). Hence race has become a "'readable" code of difference' (Luke, Luke 1999, p. 236) that can produce for interactants 'commonsense and taken-for-granted assumptions about the person encountered – what she is like, how he is likely to behave, and so forth' (Kibria 2000, p. 78). In other words, racial features function as 'markers of identity' that can shape the way interpersonal interactions are approached, understood and negotiated (Luke, Luke 1999).

Appearing racially Asian in Australia is framed within discourses of nationhood that have worked to delineate who is and is not seen as 'authentically' Australian. Anna Edmundson notes that by the beginning of the 20th century, 'an existing lexicon of "Australian" identity was already in place – of British subjects out of place, but re-formed and made stronger within the crucible of a new landscape' (2009, p. 97).

This adherence to a distinctly Anglo-Celtic national identity was enshrined in legislation with the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*, now known as the White Australia Policy. The Act effectively excluded the immigration of non-Europeans to Australia, and was progressively dismantled following an influx of non-English speaking refugees and migrants after the Second World War (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2009). However, the vestiges of such a strongly nationalistic and racially-informed policy, which persisted to varying degrees until 1973, remains. Ien Ang, Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Western Sydney, argues that the increasing visibility of Asian migrants in Australia from the 1980s through to the 1990s 'produced a qualitative rupture in the vision of racial homogeneity and essential Europeaness' that characterised Australia's national identity – even that of a 'multicultural' Australia (2000, p. xvii). Perhaps symptomatic of this rupture, in the mid-1990s political figures emerged who began to assert that Australia was 'in danger of being swamped by Asians' who 'have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate' (Hanson 1996).

The contention that 'Australian' has been constructed in popular discourse as necessarily 'white' and Anglo-Celtic in origin is echoed by a range of studies of the Asian (and non-white) experience in Australia (see, for example, Ang 2001; Edmundson 2009; Graham 2013; Luke, Luke 1999; Morris 2006; Ommundsen 2003; Schech, Haggis 2001; Tan 2006), and also bears similarities to work undertaken in America (Kibria 2000; Pearson 2010; Wu 2002). Furthermore, it is evident through the second vignette that where persons of Asian descent are positioned as foreigners, it is sometimes concurrently assumed that they will possess what Nazli Kibria (2000) refers to as 'authentic ethnicity' – that is, they will have strong and genuine ties to their 'ethnic community', speak the language, and be familiar with the associated culture and history. In the case above, this presumption of 'authentic ethnicity' also extended to possessing a Korean name. When I did not fit these assumptions, it challenged the man's understanding of what it meant to look (and therefore be) Korean to the point that, as I wrote to a friend by email at the time, he 'basically accused me of lying' about my Korean heritage.

Although I do not find that being 'othered' on the basis of my appearance is a frequent occurrence, or even always offensive, experiences such as those recounted above had the cumulative effect of causing me to question my 'authenticity' as an Australian. Through such interactions I became increasingly aware that I looked different to the normative image of a 'true' Australian. I therefore wondered if I may instead 'belong' in the country of my birth, reflecting Ang's assertion that 'this very identification with an imagined "where you're from" is also often a sign of, and surrender to, a condition of actual marginalization in the place "where you're at"' (2001, p. 34). I subsequently sought out contact with 'native' Koreans in an effort to discover and (re)claim my identity as a Korean person. The following section turns to this chapter of my narrative.

Vignettes of an Australian in Korea

My first lengthy visit to Korea was a three-week sightseeing trip with a Korean language school. The tour was guided, and most things we saw or experienced were explained along the way. However one day our group was sitting on the floor around a low wooden table laden with a multitude of *banchan* (side dishes), waiting for lunch. A white liquid in a wooden bowl was brought out, along with a series of smaller bowls. I ladled some of the liquid into one of the smaller bowls, thinking it was soup, and sipped it delicately with a spoon. Two Korean women opposite me burst out laughing. Apparently the white liquid was not a soup but a traditional alcoholic drink (*makgeolli*) that one should drink directly from a cup. They joked briefly with each other in Korean before one of them explained in English what the liquid was, and how to drink it.

Several years later my husband and I moved to Korea to teach English. Once, an older woman approached me on the street, presumably asking for the time or for directions. When I responded in broken Korean that I did not speak Korean she stepped backwards in shock. I could only apologise and walk on, leaving her staring after me in astonishment. After a while encounters such as this became exhausting; when I spoke English or broken Korean I would often be met with confusion and surprise. A common response was an exclamation of, 'Oh! I thought you were Korean!' The enforced silence – dumbness – I felt in public because of my inability to understand and be understood, weighed on me like a heavy, burdensome cloak and contributed to the decision to move back to Australia.

These two rather mundane examples taken from my autotethnographic writing indicate the common reality, and yet also the limits, of equating constructions of race with ethnicity and national belonging. Just as my Asian appearance tended to be interpreted as a marker for Asian ethnic and cultural belonging in Australia, the laughter of the women who observed me drinking a traditional alcoholic beverage like a hot soup and the repeated surprise that I did not speak Korean revealed an expectation among these 'native' Koreans that I would both embody *and enact* a particular identity they recognised as 'Korean'. When my behaviours or speech did not match my appearance, statements such as 'I thought you were Korean!' reflected a sentiment that I therefore *could not/must not be Korean*. It seemed that in Korea, as in Australia, I could not escape powerful primordialist discourses that assumed 'congruities of blood, speech, custom and so on' (Geertz 1973, p. 259).

However, such experiences also reveal the limits of equating 'race' with particular ethnicities and national belonging. For, contradicting the assumptions that have been made of me in both Australia and Korea, my upbringing in Australia made me wholly unfamiliar with the linguistic and cultural practices popularly associated with 'being Korean'. Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus is a useful conceptual frame for unpacking this lived disjuncture between race and national or ethnic belonging. One's habitus is a product of upbringing and socialisation, a 'conditioning associated with a particular type of existence, based on shared cultural trajectories'

(Schirato, Yell 2000, p. 45). Consequently, habitus is socially and culturally situated, and translates into instinctive and embodied ways of thinking, feeling, walking, speaking and behaving, as well as particular preferences, tastes and expectations (Reay 2004; Scollon et al. 2012; Sweetman 2003; Walker 2011).

My experiences in Korea emphasised that being raised by an Anglo-Australian family had produced a habitus that was more aligned with acting 'Australian' than 'Korean'. When my habitus was transposed into a 'Korean' cultural context, I experienced the rules, norms, hierarchies and accepted ways of speaking and relating in that context as foreign and unfamiliar. This magnified the self-realisation that 'I've been socialised in . . . and do act Australian' (author's personal communication).

Such experiences of dissonance and discomfort are not uncommon among intercountry, interracial adoptees. According to Eleana Kim:

Adoptees, like other transnational subjects who return to purported "homelands," confront the impossibility of true repatriation in the form of seamless belonging or full legal incorporation and may discover that their hybridity, which is marked by racial difference in their adoptive countries is, in the context of Korea, inverted, swinging them to the other side of what one adoptee calls the "pendulum," from "Korean," to "Danish" or "American" (2007, p. 510).

While initially choosing to visit Korea out of a desire to claim my 'Koreanness', interactions in Korea such as those described above caused the 'pendulum' of my identity to swing back towards identifying as 'Australian'. At this point in my narrative it seemed that I could not claim full and authentic belonging in either place.

Belonging 'in between'?

I first began to connect and communicate with other intercountry adoptees in my late teenage years. In subsequent years I joined several listservs for Korean adoptees worldwide and in Australia, and communicated with several adoptees individually by email. I have also joined several Facebook groups for intercountry adoptees. While I mostly 'lurk' rather than participate actively through discussion or commentary, I read posts and exchanges in these forums and have formed friendships with several individuals who I have corresponded with through email and met in person. These virtual communication channels have enabled an everyday connectivity between geographically dispersed intercountry adoptees around the world. This connectivity, together with various formal and informal face-to-face meetings, has assisted the development of a global 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) of intercountry adoptees.

Crucially, as the following excerpts from my email communications with other adoptees show, interacting with each other through these networks serves to solidify identifications as an 'intercountry adoptee' and enables feelings of mutual understanding and commonality:

I have both my parent's names and some brief info on my mother. Although I can't know exactly, because my situation was slightly different, I do understand how heartbreaking it must have been to hear what you heard about your adoption.... As adoptees there's almost an unspoken solidarity of yes, I know what you're feeling. The hard-to-put-into-words feelings of abandonment, alone-ness, loss, mixed identity, confusion... I feel like I can't explain it to anyone not internationally adopted because how can they know the funny mix of emotions and meanings it has for you?

I think that saying adoption is like a filter you live your whole life through is so true. Everything, from the way you look, to the personality you have, to the experiences that come from having your family and growing up Asian in a white country, with no knowledge of your original family, background or culture, stems from your beginnings and adoption.

My response to finding and participating in this community was initially one of excitement and relief. I felt I had finally found a space of full belonging where my 'authenticity' as a member of the community was not disputed, and my fluctuating sense of identification and dis-identification in Australia and Korea was shared and normalised. I therefore argue that 'intercountry adoptee' can be a significant site of identification, and an important and often disregarded aspect of intercountry adoptees' cultural identities. As a discourse system, it contains a shared system of meaning where, for example, language such as 'birth family search' and 'fear of rejection' have become commonplace and both implicitly and explicitly understood. Furthermore, it is a necessarily *intercultural* identity whose generative origin is the act of adoption across national, cultural and racial borders.

Nonetheless, ongoing autoethnographic introspection has revealed that my identification as an 'intercountry adoptee' has assumed differing levels of importance to my identity at different times in my life. In my early twenties I enthusiastically embraced 'intercountry adoptee' as a locus of truly 'authentic' belonging, while simultaneously seeking and then rejecting notions of belonging in either Australia or Korea when my authenticity in these contexts was questioned or problematised. In other words, in these early years of young adulthood I had allowed essentialist discourses to permeate and shape my sense of belonging. I felt I belonged where *other people* deemed me to be 'authentic'.

However in my late twenties this aspect of my identity has intersected with my identity as a communication student and scholar, bringing with it changes to how I perceive and understand my identity. Through my ongoing engagement with postcolonial, postmodern theorisations about identity (such as Ang 2000, 2001; Hall 1990, 1994) I have developed a growing awareness of the 'impossibility of "exclusive belongings"' (Volkman 2003, p. 2). I have further observed that the 'imagined community' of intercountry adoptees is immensely heterogeneous. Its members speak many languages, each claim unique 'adoption narratives', have had individual experiences in their adoptive families and local communities, and attribute varying

significance to adoption as a marker of identity (Lindgren, Zetterqvist Nelson 2014; Walton 2009). Hence in these community/ies liminality and heterogeneity is the *norm* rather than the exception, and difference is acknowledged and accepted *as a characteristic of community*. These overlapping experiences as a scholar and as a member of the intercountry adoptee community have empowered me to embrace liminality as a legitimate – rather than unacceptable – position to be in. I no longer feel that being deemed 'authentic' according to dominant discursive constructions is a condition of legitimate belonging, and this has opened up new intercultural spaces of identification such as Asian-Australian, migrant, intercountry adoptee, and Korean-Australian – spaces within which 'authenticity' can be redefined beyond singular notions of belonging.

Along with For example, Swedish-Korean adoptee Tobias HüHubinette (2004), I therefore recognise that my identity as an internationally adopted person encompasses argues that intercountry adoptees are prototypical examples of subjects who embody Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity. Hybrid cultural identities are formed in interstitial, 'in-between' spaces (Bhabha 1994, 1996) where a continual process of negotiation and contestation between cultures and discourse systems – not a harmonious and unproblematic fusion of cultures – occurs (Lo 2000). Hybrid identities therefore involve multiple points of attachment and affiliation (Felski 1997) and As Rita Felski notes, hybridity therefore encompasses notions of multiplicity, connection and difference in relation to who (and where) one identifies with: Metaphors of hybridity and the like not only recognize differences within the subject, fracturing and complicating holistic notions of identity, but also address connections between subjects by recognizing affiliations, cross-pollinations, echoes and repetitions... such metaphors allow us to conceive of multiple, interconnecting axes of affiliation and differentiation (1997, p. 12). Importantly, hybrid identities challenge and subvert hegemonic and essentialist modes of belonging in their creation of entirely *new* cultural forms (Davis 2010) that '[making possible 'the emergence of an "interstitial" agency that refuse] s binary representation' (Bhabha 1996, p. 58). As Oparah, Shin and Trenka assert, such identities are empowering and subversive in that they enable subjects to 'name [their] own experience' instead of submitting to simplistic and hegemonic ideas about cultural authenticity and belonging (2006, p. 14). Ien Ang usefully articulates the condition of hybridity as follows, acknowledging both the power and discomfort inherent in such a position:

If I were to apply this notion of complicated entanglement to my own personal situation, I would describe myself as suspended in-between: neither truly Western nor authentically Asian; embedded in the West yet always partially disengaged from it; disembedded from Asia yet somehow enduringly attached to it emotionally. I wish to hold onto this hybrid in-betweenness not because it is a comfortable position to be in, but because its very ambivalence is a source of cultural permeability and vulnerability that is a necessary condition for living together-in-difference (2001, p. 194).

The social and political potential of hybrid identities and communities is similarly captured in Nira Yuval-Davis' (1997) notion of transversal politics. In contrast to the arguably essentialising force of identity politics, in transversal politics:

perceived unity and homogeneity are replaced by dialogues which give recognition to the specific positionings of those who participate in them, as well as to the 'unfinished knowledge' that each such situated positioning can offer (Yuval- Davis 1997, p. 131).

In this perspective, notions of difference *encompass* rather than *replace* notions of equality, opening a space where the intersecting, multi-layered and heterogeneous state of identities and collectivities can be acknowledged and advanced (Yuval-Davis 1999, p. 131).

Intercountry adoptees are in a unique position to claim hybrid identities and engage in transversal politics. Intercountry and interracial adoptees exemplify that 'it is naïve to assume a simple equation between identity, nationality and ethnicity' (Ommundsen 2003, p. 193), and a variety of formal and informal groups and organisations now exist as vehicles for mobilisation and advocacy among adult adoptees. For example, Korean adoptee groups have achieved dual citizenship rights in Korea, and founded international journals and conferences that advocate for critical interrogation of the ethical, social, cultural and political contexts framing the practice of intercountry adoption (Samuels 2010). Some scholars even describe Korean adoptee communities as representative of a new and distinct culture – a fourth culture (Stock 1999 in Kim 2003) – which frees its members from 'the stereotypes and expectations of both . . . Korean and adoptive societies' (Jo 2006, p. 288) and 'legitimate[s] adoptees' "inauthentic" origins' (Kim 2007, p. 522). Through these new communities, therefore, there is a growing potential for adoptees to subvert dominant nationalistic narratives that position blood and race as constitutive of 'authentic' belonging in both birth and adoptive countries – and even among adoptees themselves.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on autoethnographic data to reveal a narrative of how particular interpersonal and intercultural communications have shaped the ethnic and national aspects of my cultural identity as a Korean-born woman raised by an Anglo-Australian family. Instances of being othered and cast as 'inauthentic' by Anglo-Celtic Australians based on my Asian appearance and by 'native' Koreans based on my linguistic and behavioural habitus, led to a fluctuating sense of belonging and identification with both 'Australia/Australians' and 'Korea/Koreans'. However through experiencing acceptance and solidarity with other intercountry adoptees in similar positions of liminality, and developing as a scholar engaged with postcolonial, postmodern theorisations about identity, my own identity has developed into a more empowering form of hybridity. I now feel that I can claim belonging with

and among Australians, Koreans, Korean-Australians, intercountry adoptees, Asian-Australians and migrants.

Importantly, this research makes a valuable contribution to the existing literature in a number of respects. First, it advances methodologies and topics that have remained largely unexplored in intercultural communication research. As mentioned previously, autoethnography is not often deployed as a research method by intercultural communication scholars, despite its utility for illuminating identities and interactions that 'dwell in the flux of lived experience' (Ellis, Bochner 2006, p. 431). Furthermore, despite being fundamentally intercultural, the experience of intercountry adoption is also under-researched from an intercultural communication perspective. The narrative presented here also suggests the need for further enquiry into the *online* communication practices of intercountry adoptees, as well as other subjects with personal histories of cultural and geographical displacement. Perhaps most significantly, however, this research adds to a multi-disciplinary body of work that exposes the realities and the limits of equating race, nationality and ethnicity. My narrative shows that essentialist discourses of national and ethnic belonging persist in everyday encounters and continue to affect the identities of transnational and transracial individuals. However concepts such as hybridity and transversal politics, claimed and deployed by communities such as those formed in offline and online spaces by intercountry adoptees, can challenge and subvert these dominant discourses, moving individuals, groups and societies further towards 'living-together-in-difference' (Ang 2001, p. 194).

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Autoetnografia „spomiędzy”: opis tworzenia się tożsamości kulturowej osoby po koreańsko-australijskiej adopcji

Streszczenie

Artykuł wykorzystuje metodę autoetnograficzną w celu zbadania procesu tworzenia się tożsamości kulturowej z perspektywy adopcji międzynarodowej. Autorka, badaczka komunikacji z Korei Południowej, która w latach 80. została adoptowana przez angloaustralijską rodzinę, posłużyła się dokumentami i wspomnieniami, aby przeanalizować, jak jej własna tożsamość tworzyła się poprzez różnorodną sieć komunikacji międzykulturowej i interpersonalnej. Stwierdza, że interakcje z angloceltyckimi Australijczykami oraz z „rodowitymi” Koreańczykami doprowadziły do destabilizacji jej tożsamości, gdyż zmusiły ją do zakwestionowania swojej „kulturowej autentyczności” jako Australijki lub Koreanki. Jednak uczestnictwo w globalnych serwisach internetowych dla osób po międzynarodowej adopcji ułatwiło jej autoidentyfikację jako osobę po takiej adopcji i umożliwiło wyłonienie się hybrydowej, niejednorodnej tożsamości kulturowej. W artykule zostaje pokazane, że taka tożsamość jest przede wszystkim międzykulturowa i stale negocjowana w interakcjach, z jednej strony destabilizująca, ale i dająca poczucie siły w swojej złożoności.

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość kulturowa, adopcja międzykrajowa, komunikacja międzykulturowa, autoetnografia