

# To be a White Swede, an Oriental stereotype, a non-Western immigrant, an Asian tourist, and an ethnic Korean. Some notes on the infelicitous performative of adopted Koreans

Tobias Hübinette

*You see, being raised in an all white environment had a big effect on my vision of who I was. I became conditioned in thinking that I was white.*

(David Scott Woods: [www.dpg.devry.edu/~akim/sck/adopt.html](http://www.dpg.devry.edu/~akim/sck/adopt.html))

*My parents dubbed me their "Asian Princess" and made me audition as a Siamese royal daughter in "The King and I"....Trotting along with my Caucasian parents I was often praised by strangers for being "adorably Oriental".*

(Elizabeth Woyke, "Growing up White", Type 2/1998)

*During this period, there was no way I would be caught dead in a group of other Asian people. My perception of Asians at the time was negative because of what many of my peers said about Asian people who they assumed were immigrants – "Oh look they are fresh off the boat." Meaning, I'd probably look like someone who only spoke a foreign group of syllables and consonants that came out the same, "Me how ping pong."*

(Jamie Kemp, "The seeds of racial disparity", Korean Quarterly 3/2001)

*Now you must forget your difficult past and renew your relations with your native country in order to work together toward common goals based on the blood ties that cannot be severed even if we wanted to...Your mother country is developing day by day to become a first-rated nation in the 21st century...I hope you maintain your Korean identity and help enhance the pride of the Korean people doing your best wherever you are.*

(First Lady Lee Hee-ho: [www.holtintl.org/gathering/eletters.html](http://www.holtintl.org/gathering/eletters.html))

This personal essay is driven by a will to understand the complex and multiple subject formation of adopted Koreans with the background of recent Swedish adoption research, indicating that all too many international adoptees obviously are suffering from severe psychosocial and socio-economic problems. I do this by drawing loosely and freely on poststructuralist understanding of subject formation and particularly performativity theory as it has been developed by queer theorist Judith Butler, using my own life trajectory as an adopted Korean of Sweden together with self-narratives of other Koreans as primary sources. By applying performativity theory to address the subjectivity of adopted Koreans, I am consciously ignoring and leaving behind mainstream positivistic adoption research dominated by psychologists and psychiatrists, which instead explain such "deviant" results among international adoptees with genetic defects, separation traumas, attachment disorders and identity crises.

Ever since the so-called linguistic turn in Western philosophy grounded within Saussure's language theories, manifested in post-structuralism and taking place from the 1960s with names like Barthes, Lyotard and Derrida, and Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray, the decentering of the autonomous subject has been one of the main objects of concern together with a fundamental critique of metaphysical thinking and linear temporality, and a questioning of previously naturalised hierarchical structures and binary oppositions. It is worth noting that the emergence

of poststructuralist language philosophy took place at a time when decolonisation accelerated and the global domination of the West started to loose ground. A milestone in this development is queer theorist Judith Butler's groundbreaking works on subject formation and her theory of performativity focusing mainly on the categories of gender and sexuality and drawing eclectically and multi-disciplinary on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Foucaultian understanding of power and Althusserian Marxism among others.

Butler adheres to a radical poststructuralist and social-constructivist understanding of language as producing and constituting subjectivity instead of reflecting and corresponding to an autonomous identity. Subject formation or subjection takes place on the very level of the body regardless of anatomical features and biological differences. The subject comes into existence by entering the social order, and sustains its subject position or subjectivity through endless repetition or iterability of what is known as performatives. In other words, the subject originates from an exterior space and not from a psychic interior, which instead becomes an effect of outside acculturation and socialisation. We may believe in an innate, coherent, independent and stable identity, but in reality it is imposed on our bodies and incorporated within our minds, governed by cultural traditions and social conventions, and maintained and reproduced by the help of constant reenactment, recitation and reiteration of performatives. This performative character of the subject simultaneously constitutes its stability and its vulnerability, as it is always possible to oppose and subvert, and resignify and transform this iterability of performatives to create new subject positions.

However, it is important to remember that performativity theory is not about advocating a strategy of individualistic or even worse neo-liberal identity politics in the form of free role-playing and funny theatrical gestures. Instead, Butler reminds that subject formation is heavily constrained by a ritualised iterability of cultural rites and social norms policing and regulating the subject under the threat of marginalisation or even death. This constraint takes place by the use of prohibition or taboo not just deciding what is socially acceptable but also creating a foreclosed desire for what is not acceptable, which in its turn results in an unresolved grief or melancholia for not being allowed to perform this desire. The constrained aspect of subject formation of course becomes extremely productive for Butler in her understanding of the upholding of gender difference and the heterosexual matrix. Lastly, Butler also admits that sometimes bodies do matter as the surface of some bodies often are inscribed with meanings, and that these inscriptions always have a history making such bodies particularly vulnerable to deeply ingrained discourses, imaginaries and interpellations. Butler borrows from Lacan, Foucault and Althusser to give an account of how the subject is formed and sustained. In Lacan's version of psychoanalysis, subject formation takes place in the mirror stage, a psychic process whereby the subject comes into being and enters the social realm by the use of mirror-images, bringing what is known as the imaginary into being. An imaginary can be interpreted as a self-image, a self-representation or a self-identification, again underlining the

constitutive character of subjectivity, and is absolutely crucial for the subject to recognize itself and to be recognizable to others, and in the end to exist as a social being. Foucault examined the relationship between knowledge and power creating what he called discourses, namely a certain way of representing a particular topic at a specific historical moment, and what we usually perceive as "truths". However, these discourses do not emanate from a sovereign power. Instead, power is decentralised and exercised between and through people on an individual level, and accordingly subject formation is a self-disciplinary and self-regulatory process. In short, we discipline and punish our bodies willingly and voluntarily because we want to be acknowledged as "normal" human beings. Finally, Althusser tried to understand how ideology is produced and reproduced on an individual level. According to him, subject formation takes place by the way of a societal intervention known as interpellation. Interpellation is when power addresses the individual, and the subject comes into being by recognizing its authority and answering to its call. Althusser's classical example of interpellation is when a police hails an individual, and the individual turns around and answers both acquiring subjectivity and subjecting itself at the same time. Thus for Lacan, Foucault and Althusser, subject formation is nothing else but a question of subordinating oneself to social power.

My own example as an adopted Korean of Sweden clearly seems to give strong empirical support for Butler's performativity theory saying that subject formation is a social construction not necessarily tied to material bodily facts. After having grown up and living in a wholly White Swedish surrounding, it is a fact that I have been subjected to a self-identification as White. Furthermore, one could say that I am upholding this White subjectivity by constantly copying, imitating and mimicking Whiteness on an everyday level, meaning that I am also usually able to pass as a Swede in spite of having a physical Korean appearance. In this regard, adopted Koreans can be likened to ethnic drags and cross-dressers, transvestites or even transsexuals who are troubling, mocking and parodying supposedly fixed racial, ethnic and national identities and belongings. This subversive and liberating interpretation of Butler's performativity theory is indeed compelling and appealing as it means that there is no real, authentic or original way of being White. Rather, as adopted Koreans have acquired a White self-identification and are able to perform Whiteness more or less to perfection, they must also be considered as Whites. So have adopted Koreans managed to break down the walls of Whiteness, which in the old colonial days seemed to be so impregnable even for mixed people who barely could pass as Whites?

To overcome this premature celebration of postcoloniality, I argue that to have a White self-identification as a non-White person coming from a non-Western country cannot be seen as unproblematic when colonialism is taken into account. The acquiring of a White subject position is also made mandatory in adoption research, and a White self-identification is even praised by an adoption ideology falsely representing international adoption as a physical bond between cultures and a symbol for racial harmony, and valorising adoptees as living diversity posters. To have a White subjectivity

makes adopted Koreans together with other transracial and international adoptees absolutely unique in the history of colonialism as never before has any non-white group ever been subjected as White. This bizarre and by all means queerish phenomenon of having a completely distorted physical self-image which naturally leads to self-hate, self-alienation and self-destructiveness, can only be likened to how mentally ill White people sometimes think that they are Black, to the grim experiment taking place in the story of the emperor's new clothes, or to how new-born ducks can be seduced to believe that human beings are their parents. It has also led proponents for transracial and international adoption to argue that a White subject position is exactly what diasporic non-Whites need to be able to survive in a world of White power, White supremacy and White privileges. Colonial subjects have of course historically always desired Whiteness, and this desiring of Whiteness particularly concerns the descendants of slaves and coolies and postcolonial migrants living in Western countries. However, even if those groups can be said to be fully Westernised on a cultural level, they are still racially subjected as non-Whites, and accordingly they are desiring Whiteness but they have not acquired a White subject position. With this in mind, international adoption must truly be seen as the final triumph of the colonial project as international adoptees are the most Whitewashed and Westernised, and the most "integrated" and "assimilated" colonial subalterns ever in the history of colonialism. Adopted Koreans are in other words in no way a danger to the upholding of cultural homogeneity in Western countries, and in this way they also become the most perfect immigrants.

So the subject formation of adopted Korean cannot be reduced to something as simple and unproblematic as the acquiring and performing Whiteness. This might have been the case in an ideal world, but having a body marked and inscribed with a long history of otherness, alterity and out-of-placeness in a Western culture and society totally imbued with colonialism and racism do matter. In spite of having a Swedish name and a Swedish family, and in spite of speaking Swedish and behaving like a Swede, having a non-White body does create limitations and boundaries for sustaining a White subjectivity. These painful and humiliating moments when I am revealed and exposed as a pastiche and a copycat are good examples of what Butler calls a misfire, meaning when a performative fails to reproduce its intended effect and instead ends up in an infelicitous performative. So when are adopted Koreans failing to maintain a White subjectivity, when are they misfiring and performing infelicitously? What is exactly interrupting and fragmenting, destroying and crushing my White self-identification? According to my own experience and the autobiographical works of other adopted Koreans, I have identified three principal and often sequential interventions when I am not being acknowledged, accepted and taken as a Swede depending on context (for example if I am in the company of Swedes or non-White people), relationship (for example if I am among friends or unknown people), temporality (for example when I was a child and when I am an adult) and space (for example when I am in Sweden or abroad). These moments occur when





the Orientalist imaginary, the discourse of Immigrantism and the interpellation of Koreanness intervene and I am being hailed as an ethnic stereotype (for example when someone utters gibberish Chinese in my presence), as a non-Western immigrant and sometimes as an Asian tourist or businessman on visit (for example when someone tells me to “go back to your own country” or addresses me in English) and as an overseas Korean (for example when someone speaks to me in Korean and I am being told to “come back to your motherland”).

With an Asian body signifying Orientalism, the sudden and powerful intervention of the Orientalist imaginary turning up at the most unexpected occasions always threatens to fetishise adopted Koreans into ethnic stereotypes. Besides, it is important to note that in practice for adopted Koreans, the Orientalist imaginary is all too often the only disposable bodily mirror image at hand for physical self-identification. In this respect, there are of course similarities to other ethnic Koreans in Western countries, including those living in interracial relationships, or being of second generation or of mixed origin as those groups usually are alienated from both their homeland and the mainstream Korean diaspora community as well. However, what makes the state of Korean adopteehood so unique is the complete severance of biological ties, cultural routes and social connections to any kinds of Koreanness at all. This is also the reason behind an ambivalent response to the Orientalist imaginary as it at least offers a bodily mirror image, while other diasporic ethnic Koreans do not recognize themselves, distance themselves and instantly takes it as a misrepresentation and as a distorted fiction. Accordingly, it is no coincidence that many adopted Koreans also uncritically are performing Orientalism, almost fully embodying the Orientalist phantasmagoria as men often have taken on a nerdish style while women hypersexualise themselves:

*I remember feeling pulled between being white and being Asian when I watched “Miss Saigon” the first time...I didn't feel Asian, but as white as the friends who sat next to me. And yet the stirrings of identity were beginning, because I was emotionally drawn to the Asian American actors...Watching the play was exhilarating...It was like falling in love. I was giddy with the American dream it presented, tearful over the hardships of war, and became infatuated with the relationship between Kim and Chris, the lovers the story focused on. It was love, and I fell hard for “Miss Saigon”...I let myself be wooed by decent music, dramatic and lavish sets, and the story of a prostitute who was sold for a night of sex with an American Marine, fell in love, bore their child, and ended up killing herself in a star-spangled flame of sacrifice.*

*(Holly Coughlin, “My breakup with Miss Saigon”, Minnesota Women's Press 7/7 1999)*

Furthermore, adopted Koreans always risk the threat of being taken for a non-Western immigrant of Asian origin by a discourse of Immigrantism dividing between native Whites and immigrant non-Whites, and in response they often perform Whiteness even more intensely and exaggeratedly by for example acquiring racist views and hang around with right-wing extremists and Nazis. The other choice is to start to identify with Asian immigrants, but this is not an easy option as adopted Koreans often end up as an outsider in both the

White world and in immigrant communities:

*My Asian friends tell me that other Korean adoptees are too white, like bananas. They tell me it is good that I am learning about what it is to be Asian American. What it is to be a person of colour. And how white people think of me. I have white parents...Twinkie, banana, sell-out. I've heard them all before, and hate them just the same...I can see the racism from all my white friends, from my grandparents, and cousins...They say that my racism is internalized and that I have been tricked into believing the great white lie. Maybe I have. But what are they telling me? That I should hate my father?... White people think I'm just some gook. White people who don't know me, that is. Can you speak English? Oh your English is very good. Where are you from? How long have you lived in America? I didn't really know what to say to that. How can I say that I feel I am more American than you, you third generation European immigrant. My family has been here since the 18th Century. My great great great grandfather was making money in New York while yours was working some field in another country. Don't talk to me about speaking English. My mother is an English professor. That is what I think when white people are racist to me. What about Koreans? I'm one of them right? Wrong. Maybe it's just me, but I really feel out of place when I am around them. I also feel very...good. I'm one of them, yet there is always a sense of exclusion...I need their acceptance. But I would rather not risk their rejection and simply just not have anything to do with them.*

*(Arthur Hinds, “Asian, Korean, Adopted, American?”, Paradox 1/2000)*

Finally, recently Korean nationalism has started to call for adopted Koreans to “come back” and “return home”. This lure of essentialism in the form of Koreanness by letting oneself be reclaimed by Korean ethnonationalistic body politics and become a wannabe-Korean is naturally also threatening a White subject position. However, again this is not an easy alternative given the almost incomplete inseparability between race, language and culture in Korean nationalism:

*This year in Korea has been a challenge for me particularly because I do not speak Korean well...Basically, people here think I'm some person who's trying to make them angry by deliberately not speaking what should obviously be my native language, based on my physical appearance. This is how most people react when they first meet me. And it always goes like this...: A guy in the street stops to ask me directions, speaking in rapid-fire Korean...After I clearly state that I don't speak Korean, the questions begin. First question: “Aren't you Korean?” Second question: “Well, then, don't you speak Korean?” Third question: “Why not? Didn't your mother-father-other Korean influences you had in your life growing up, teach you Korean?” How do you answer to this type of mentality? You can't. You will honestly go crazy if you try to. (Sunny Diaz: [www.fulbright.or.kr/eta/english/eta-perspectives.html](http://www.fulbright.or.kr/eta/english/eta-perspectives.html))*

So my argument is that as an international adoptee, I have been fully acculturated and socialised into a self-identification as White. At the same time having an Asian body, I am incessantly liable to a whole regime of Orientalist imaginaries trying to fetishise me into an ethnic stereotype. Furthermore being a non-White person, an ever-present discourse of Immigrantism wants to racialise me into a non-Western immigrant. Lastly as a biological Korean, nowadays I am also warmly interpellated by a nationalistic diaspora

policy essentialising me into an overseas Korean. I regard this acquiring of a White self-identification by adopted Koreans as a complete subordination to White hegemonic power, and as a magnificent symbol of the final triumph of the colonial project. Furthermore, I believe that this self-identification is highly problematic for a non-White person of non-Western descent living in such a heavily racialised and colonial culture and society like the Western one. Here, I go against dominant normative adoption ideology where the acquiring of a White self-identification is the primary goal of transracial and international adoption itself and even idealised as a “blessing”. I further argue that this White self-identification is constantly questioned and disturbed by the powerful interventions of the colonial imaginary of Orientalism, the racist discourse of Immigrantism, and the nationalist interpellation of Koreanness always threatening to turn adopted Koreans into Oriental stereotypes, Asian immigrants or tourists and ethnic Koreans respectively. This also sends out signals to other non-Western immigrants in Western countries who struggle to fit in, “assimilate” and “integrate” –it is meaningless as they will never be fully acknowledged as Westerners! It is my conviction that this besieged subject position as White, made fragile by having a non-White body that is perpetually under the threat of being fetishised, racialised and essentialised, results in a permanent state of tremendous stress, anger, agony and melancholia:

*While most people check in the mirror for renegade poppy seeds stuck between their teeth, I look to see if I am white: have my eyes formed wonderfully lazy lids to cover sky blue irises? Has my lost nose bridge reinstated itself to its true Nordic beauty? I do admittedly check my teeth but more to ignore my disappointment that this highly anticipated transformation has not yet occurred. I say “yet” because even though I am twenty four, I still harbour fantasies of having not been adopted, and more so, of being white like my adoptive family. As an international adoptee, I don’t know what upsets me more: that I am indeed adopted or that I will never feel a part of any culture...Exchanging my Korean face for that of a German’s is obviously a child’s solution to a much more complicated issue...Once, when addressed in Korean by a stranger at the age of five, I asked my father why the person thought I was Korean. My questions remains for me a sad punchline to a confusing story and I cannot help feeling that I was somehow the victim of a cruel joke...It is difficult to know where to direct the pain...When I was encouraged to focus on Korea for school projects I would feign disinterest, while at other times, I would hide my shame at the distasteful association made between myself and that country. No one knew of my ambivalence. No one pressed beyond my fortress of silence. I was left to turn into a self-hating, introverted teenager who could not figure out what her reflection was trying to tell her. It has taken me many painful years to overcome my multitudinous methods of coping and I am by no means through with them...Perhaps the process of forgiving has to start with myself. I am not white but I never fooled anyone but myself...My reflection will never change but my vision is getting clearer.  
 (“Thoughts of a Korean Adoptee”: [www.adoption.on.ca/koreanadopt.html](http://www.adoption.on.ca/koreanadopt.html))*

This may also explain the high preponderance of suicide rates, mental illnesses and social problems among international adoptees as reflected in the depressing and worrying results of recent Swedish adoption research. Having nowhere to

hide, no place to find solace and no free zone to rest in which other non-Western immigrants, Asians and Koreans arguably do have, death in the form of suicide becomes the ultimate way to escape from this never ending struggle to survive between all these self-identifications, imaginaries, discourses and interpellations and in the end to be left alone. This interpretation can also be seen as a critique of post-modern concepts of hybridity, nomadism and cosmopolitanism glorifying liminal existences and border crossings, as passing and transgressing and being an ethnic chameleon in-between, neither-nor or even beyond is not always neither a self-liberatory act nor a pleasant state:

***Alienation**, or the feeling that one is alien, is unavoidable when people ask incessantly, “So where are you from? No, where are you really from?” Since when is “I’m from Austin, Minnesota” not a good enough answer?...Most adoptees have an “a-ha” moment at some point in their lives when they look in the mirror and realize, “I’m not white.” A painful self-consciousness usually follows, with sometimes comical and sometimes tragic attempts to “fit in” with the majority. I know a few adoptees who, in their childhood, would have literally “whitewashed” themselves if physically possible. Feeling rejected for never being white enough, some adoptees turn their backs on the dominant culture and look for acceptance and affirmation in the Korean American community, or will even go visit the “motherland”. Sadly, many discover even more hostility from the Korean people for not being “Korean enough”...So the adoptee is left with the bewildering question: Who am I if I’m not white enough for America and not Korean enough for Korea? Where do I go from here?  
(Stan Wood: [www.kpcmem.org/resources/article.asp?contentid=61](http://www.kpcmem.org/resources/article.asp?contentid=61))*

To conclude, I have of course myself encountered and answered to all these above-mentioned self-identifications, imaginaries, discourses and interpellations; Whiteness (I once thought of myself as completely Swedish and got very upset when someone questioned my Swedish belonging), Orientalism (I once practiced martial arts, was drawn to popular cultural stereotypes of East Asians and liked to dress up like an Asian businessman), Immigrantism (I once used to befriend non-Western immigrants and pretended to be one of them), and Koreanness (I once only ate Korean food and frequented the Korean church). However, even if I am still often being mistranslated as White, misrepresented as Oriental, unrecognized as immigrant or tourist and misappropriated as Korean, nowadays I have finally come to accept that the only way to define what it means to be an adopted Korean is precisely to say that it as an endless infelicitous performative:

*I don’t fit into any pre-existing categories: I’m not Caucasian, Korean, Korean-American, or biracial...I can’t choose an ethnicity intelligibly...Is ethnicity a question of choice?...But I’ve accepted my liminal status. I’ll try to dance while trapped in this perpetual limbo.  
(Elizabeth Woyke, “Growing up White”, Type 2/1998)*