

ÖMMA'S BABY, APPA'S MAYBE

Black Amerasian Children and the Layers of Diaspora

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In March 1955, the African American weekly *Jet* encouraged its readers to consider adopting “an estimated 200 children of Negro–Oriental romances who are being ‘ostracized’ and kept ‘hungry’ in South Korean orphanages” (1955, 16). “The part-Negro tots,” the plea goes, “face a dismal future” unless brought to the United States, a future in which they would be wandering homeless, looking for food (“State Department” 1955, 16–17). This humanitarian rhetoric obscures the violence of the Cold War on the Korean peninsula by presenting the United States as a savior. More importantly, the magazine captures racial discrimination on both sides of the Pacific: the biracial war orphans “are ‘unwanted’ and looked down upon by the Orientals”; “[v]ery few inquiries have come” from white Americans (“State Department” 1955, 16, 17). *Jet* therefore appeals to African American couples, assuming a kinship between them and their prospective part-black adoptees. This gesture in fact reinforces the one-drop rule—anyone born to at least one parent of black ancestry is deemed black.

The U.S. adoption of Korean–black children reflects the push–pull factors in a global context. In the 1950s, many mixed–race boys and girls were not listed in their family registers for two reasons: those not fathered by a Korean national could not obtain birthright nationality, and their mothers often hid them out of shame (Kim 2009, 51–52; see Oh 2015, 51–52; Graves 2020, 124). Korean mothers and their black Amerasian infants born out of wedlock were not usually made welcome: for example, in Ryu Chuhyŏn’s short story “T’aeyang ũi yusan” (“The Legacy of the Sun”), Pae Saengwŏn turns away his daughter Samsun, who has finally come home after the Korean War (1950–1953), for bringing a “black bastard” (1957, 72; see Lee 2015, 13–14).¹ To maintain racial purity, the Syngman Rhee government tried to round up multiracial orphans, but after the plan failed, the authoritarian regime decided to send them abroad (Kim 2009, 53–55; see Woo 2019, 149–156). The United States passed the Refugee Relief Act (RRA) in 1953, which laid the foundation for transnational adoption from Korea. Han’guk Adong Yanghohoe (Child Placement Service) and nongovernment and religious organizations such as the Holt Adoption Program, the Sŏngyuk Orphanage, and later the Pearl Buck Foundation arranged adoptions for 10,990 mixed–race children, including 1,105 Korean–black children, from 1955 to 1970 (Pogŏn Sahoebu 1964, 362–363; Pogŏn Sahoebu

1. Coined by the writer and activist Pearl S. Buck, “Amerasian” refers to a person with one American and one Asian parent. Although I note two Koreas, I use “Korea(n)” to indicate “South Korea(n)” as a means of saving space. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.