Kaomi Lee:

Welcome to Adapted Podcast. It all starts now.

Kimura Byol:

I come from South Korea, a divided country, and then I go to Belgium, a divided country. I go to Quebec, divided country again.

Kaomi Lee:

I'm Kaomi Lee. Thanks as always for our theme music to Jae Jin. He's a Korean American singer-songwriter. You can catch his work at jaejinmusic.com, or on all the streaming sites.

Kaomi Lee:

We're in season five of Adapted Podcast. I can't believe there's been five whole seasons and more than 100 adoptee interviews. This next episode is from a recent interview I did with Kimura Byol, also known as Nathalie Lemoine, a Korean adoptee to Belgium who now resides in Canada. Kimura is non-binary and defies labels. Kimura uses the ze pronoun. I found the interview both refreshingly honest, and raw, and filled with so much insight from a perspective of someone both fighting for her identity and collectively for all adoptees. And now, here's Kimura Byol.

Kimura Byol:

I was born as Kimura Byol. I was found as Cho Mihee, and I was adopted as Nathalie Lemoine. I was born in South Korea in '68. I was adopted as born in '65. I tried to regain my real birthday, which is in June '68 and not '65, but on my paper, I'm three years older. So that's already a different story that is a bit different from some adoptees. Some adoptees had also age differences like older or younger.

Kimura Byol:

I was adopted in the second airplane from South Korea to Belgium and in the suburb area of Brussels where the international adoption from South Korea to Belgium start. It's a more Francophone area. You have to know that in Belgium, you speak French and Flemish. It's a bilingual country with a minority of German language also.

Kimura Byol:

I was adopted in a childless couple family, and I was the first one adopted there. My mother was speaking Flemish and French, but her mother was Flemish. My father was an immigrant orphan, maybe mixed from Belgium to an Italian, I guess, or Mediterranean ancestor. He was Francophone. After me-

Kaomi Lee:

He was an orphan?

Kimura Byol:

Yeah. That's, I think, very important for me because I related to him [inaudible 00:03:18]. I don't know if you have that expression in English, where we don't say, but we understand each other without saying anything. So I was the first one adopted in this family, and after, three other Korean adoptee every other year came into the family adopted from South Korea. That's the story of the beginning of my adoptive life, I would say.

Kaomi Lee:

You had how many siblings?

Kimura Byol:

Three others, another sister and two other brothers.

Kaomi Lee:

And all adopted from Korea?

Kimura Byol:

South Korea, because they wanted to adopted from Japan, but Japan refused international adoption, and so we were the closest country to Japan. Believing that it was very racist idea that Chinese were dirty, Vietnamese were violent, and Korean, we didn't know anything, so it was safer in the wider Asian, also, because they didn't like people of color too much. Japan was best, but because they refused to accept Korea and we were cheaper and faster than any other countries, it was back in the late '60s, so that's something that is, I think, very important. The way we've been raised in a colonial kind of mindset from adoptive family deny to be racist, but they were in the way they were talking to us and about other immigrant and people of color.

Kimura Byol:

That's something that really brought me for reflection and thinking that it was not right, and also helped me to maybe stand up for maybe a bit more social justice and becoming more activist. It's because of my upbringing that really helped me to voice for people who were afraid to speak, maybe. I had nothing for me, in my point of view, nothing to lose because I left very early from my adoptive family, so I felt I was really free very early.

Kaomi Lee:

And you go by the name Kimura now?

Kimura Byol:

Now, I took back my birth father's name, because in the way that colonizing a name is also Asian name, normally the name of the father, family name, is first. And then after we put the first name... How do we call that? So it's normally in the Western way, we see Byol Kimura, but in Asian way, we see Kimura Byol. I don't want to colonize my name because I'm in the west, so I keep Kimura Byol.

Kimura Byol:

It's perfect because after, I hyphenated it with Nathalie Lemoine, which is my Belgian name, because I don't want to deny one for another because both are part of my identities. Of course, for me as a non-binary person, I prefer not Nathalie and I think I will change, but I will keep Byol because Byol is a name in Korean that is for men and for women. Both can be called Byol, and Byol means star. I wish one day that I can [inaudible 00:07:09] my name Kimura Byol Lemoine, but I don't know if I do put that effort into it, but that's something that I wish maybe at half a century, maybe.

Kaomi Lee:

How would you like me to call you?

Kimura Byol:

Kimura is easier, I think.

Kaomi Lee:

Kimura. Okay.

Kimura Byol:

Unless you speak Korean and you can say Byol just the right way. Some people can't and some people can, so I don't know.

Kaomi Lee:

Oh, Byol. Byol, yeah. I wondered about this. Kimura is a Japanese name?

Kimura Byol:

Yeah. My birth father was Japanese. I mean, I guess he's still Japanese because I didn't meet him. I just heard of his name and his age, which is very lucky from some other adoptees who don't know anything. I found my birth mother in 1991, which really... I was the first one in Belgium, I think, to find my family by myself. It helped other adoptees to believe that it was possible, maybe, to find if they were searching the... not the right way, but luck. So action needs to be done also a bit.

Kimura Byol:

After that, I established an association for Korean adoptees in Belgium in 1991, right after finding my birth family, because there was a need. I think I'm the third or fourth adoptee association made in the world, which the first one was AKF in '86 in Sweden. Then you had, I think, in Norway or Denmark, but Norway was made with Holt then Norway, but Adoptees by Adoptees. It was also Denmark with [inaudible 00:09:03], and then you also had [inaudible 00:09:06] the same year as the Belgian, which was made in 1991, too.

Kaomi Lee:

It's interesting to me that the first adoptee-led organizations took place in Europe.

Kimura Byol:

Yeah, it was in Europe because we were, I think, more ostracized, alienated from Korean and Asian because I think in America, the first adoptees were mixed race or older, and they didn't feel the need to have an association. The first one in the States was in 1996 in Minnesota. It's Crystal Chapell who started, and it was with the Korean church in Minnesota because she heard of my association in Korea in 1994, 1995.

Kimura Byol:

I established the branch of the Korean Association in Korea. First, I thought only European were adopted. I mean, I knew that American were adopted, but I didn't meet anyone. The first one I met were in Korea, so meeting more and more adoptees from America, many from California and Minnesota, I understood that there were many of them over there and even more than from Europe, but the territory is bigger in the States than Europe, I guess.

Kimura Byol:

And languages, you only have one language, and we have so many different languages. So we had to deal with the issues. I think from my association that were made more for European, I enlarged it into more global in 1996 with the KOA, which is Korean Overseas Adoptees Association. And then two years later, I met Emmy [Nasgar 00:11:05] from Minnesota, and we decided to do together G.O.A.'L. That's where now people know about that, but I didn't stay very long with G.O.A.'L because we had very different point of view.

Kimura Byol:

I mean, for her as an American native English speaker, she had a different opinion of helping Korean adoptees English teacher to be set up in South Korea. For me, not being a teacher, I didn't care much about that issue, but I understand hers. It was more for me as a European Francophone, not very good in English, my issue was more about search. It was very my... what is make specific to adoptees for me was... and the energy I wanted to put in my activities was about search and the right to open file to support adoption services.

Kimura Byol:

So that's what I did with KOA, and I continue with G.O.A.'L, but G.O.A.'L was started to want to be with whole cases [inaudible 00:12:14] and for me, I didn't want to have any money from them because I felt that we were like a seller, like hypocrite in some ways. But in the same time, I understand another opinion that it was being... associating with them will help us in search because we would have better communication, but it was also a lot of tension back in the mid-'90s.

Kimura Byol:

So for me, I set to have some activities together, but search was very... Because they were hiding information and stuff, so I continued by myself doing search just as a volunteer and independent person. So people who really wanted to search contacted me because they heard of what I was doing, but not with the association of G.O.A.'L.

Kimura Byol:

So I quit G.O.A.'L, and I continued by myself with KOA. That's how I started living South Korea in 1993. It took me a year to a bit get to know Korean because I had to learn the language. I had to learn English and Korean. After that, I established... Euro-Korean League was the name of the association in Belgium that I established in Korea in 1994 with a Swedish adoptee who became the first president of the association, because she was speaking better English and she was more mature than me. She was more organized. I'm an artist, so sometime I'm very organized. But she did very well.

Kimura Byol:

It was my second case. I found her birth mother, so she believed in what I was trying to do in South Korea. And then after she returned to Sweden, and then I continue alone and sometime with Korean volunteer from foreign language department from universities in Seoul. That's how I established...

Kaomi Lee:

And you were assisting other European adoptees?

Kimura Byol:

Yeah, but then after American, too, because I did... I mean, for me, I was not against American. It's like I didn't know them. So I think it's from maybe a little note in the Minnesotan newspaper that Crystal Chapell mentioned about my association. That's how people start to contact me.

Kaomi Lee:

How did you go about doing searches? Were you doing this [crosstalk 00:15:01]?

Kimura Byol:

My first was my own experience, and then I understood that it was a lot of lies and information hidden or lost on the way. So for me, my logical way of searching was to start with my adoption part from my adoptive parent that I took here at 13 years old. And then I tried to find... It was Holt agencies. They had a branch in... I mean, the Korean branch from the Belgium association here in Belgium.

Kimura Byol:

And then when I was in Korea because I made a film, and so I was invited in South Korea because of my first short film in '89. But my film was in '88. I went to Holt and visit, and they told me that it was not my orphanage that was written on my paper. And then, so I did another finish and I went to city hall, and there they say it was not that orphanage. So I went to many orphanages.

Kimura Byol:

And then after a policeman explained to me that at three years of my age, because there were no place in the baby orphanage... I was two months old when I was found. And so they put me in a children's home, which started three years old. So I was three years and two months when I arrived at the children's home. That's why I made different orphanage names in different places.

Kimura Byol:

But then after, it was the luck, because I went on TV and then we explained where I was found, what date exactly. And it was easier because I had some information. Many adoptees go on TV without any information because they believe they don't have, but I was lucky that... It's really luck because it's like trying to find a needle in the 48 million people with very little information, and the information were wrong, except the one from where I was founded, what time.

Kimura Byol:

And I had a note that was not written in [inaudible 00:17:23], a note with my birthday, but they took up the year because it was the linear calendar. So it's very complex in some ways. But at the end, someone, the best friend of my birth mother, heard the thing on TV, and then she contacted my mother who was not living where I was born.

Kimura Byol:

And from that, it's like she contacted her and she said, "Yeah, I think it is." And then we met, and then we look alike, especially a picture from when she was 16-years-old. I thought it was me, but it was in Korea. So that's very fragment, little detail make me like, "Okay, there's a reunion. But after, what to do with that? It's like I don't speak the language."

Kimura Byol:

Then I went back to Belgium at the time because it was in 1991. I did the association. And then after I saved money to go back to Korea for a year, I thought, and then it ended up to be 13 years. So from 13 years living in Korea, every year I thought, "Oh, maybe I'm going to leave to Belgium," but I didn't like Belgium anyway. That's why I like Canada from a long time when I visit when I was a teenager too.

Kimura Byol:

So I said, "If I have to move to a new country, it would be Canada because they speak French." At some point, I thought I will live in Japan, but it's too expensive, and I'm a bit lazy. So I don't want to make a lot of money. I just want to live easy and learn a new language. So I decided Montreal because Quebec province, Canada, it was the most Francophone one and good for artists and good for queer people.

Kaomi Lee:

When you were on the show on the television searching, did you have that detail that your father was Japanese and-

Kimura Byol:

No, I didn't know. On my adoption file, it was written that my father was American. So they thought I was a mixed race kid because I had curly hair a bit, not very... I mean, wavy, not curly. So they thought I was half white. And more I grew up, more I thought I was Asian, and more and more Asian. So I didn't understand why they wrote that. Or it was a lie to make me sent away also. As a mixed race, it was easier to have a reason why I could be sent away. But then it's only in 2000 that my mother told me that my father was a Japanese.

Kaomi Lee:

Okay. And at the time, would that have been not a good thing to have a Japanese [crosstalk 00:20:08] in Korea?

Kimura Byol:

A Japanese father? But in Korea, especially when you know about the colonization of Japan on the Peninsula of Korea, but also I think my grandmother was traumatized by Japanese occupation and the fact that my mother was doing something... She had a love affair, which is good, it's not a rape or some very sad stories. But he left before he knew that she was pregnant.

Kimura Byol:

And then after she found him back in... But she did... I don't know that, and that's why I decide to not continue to meet her or to try to get to know her because she hides some information from my father.

Kaomi Lee:

Oh, she isn't sharing information about him?

Kimura Byol:

Yeah. And for me, it's like, I understand her position, but in the same time I see why she's doing it. It's like now we're older. And so I decided to not meet her. Anyway, I'm not very a family person, so I don't really care about family. It's like, I have my friends and it's enough for me.

Kimura Byol:

But it is good... I don't regret what I did. It was all in respect. It's like I was not mad at her. I didn't want to force her. I didn't think that she owed that story. It's her life. I'm not mad of the parents, it's their life. I'm not angry and mad of parents. It's just they are what they are. That's it.

Kaomi Lee:

What was it like meeting your Korean mother?

Kimura Byol:

Meeting my Korean mother was, of course, emotional because I met her when I didn't expect to meet her. I was not too old. I was not too young, which was good, I think, in some ways, because I think the experience from my adopted family toughed me up a bit. So I was not really emotional, but also I was not expecting much out of it.

Kimura Byol:

So it was a gift in my life that I provoked in some ways, but it's like it's not because you are looking for someone that that person want to meet you too. So I was lucky also. So I had many luck with me, and I think taking back at the time, I felt that I was just embracing whatever I'm going to live at the time.

Kimura Byol:

But it also gave me maybe the strength to want to understand more the female situation in South Korea and understand her position as a woman in Korea. Because I really want to understand why it happened and how a society is doing that at as large number as 220,000 adoptees over the Western world and only mostly white families also. So part of the colonialism.

Kaomi Lee:

You talked about... So I take it you're estranged from your adoptive parents?

Kimura Byol:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kaomi Lee:

Can you talk a little bit about what it was like when you were younger?

Kimura Byol:

I mean, for me, it's like... And also, I think it's good that I've been adopted with three other entities from Asia and Korean also, from different orphanages, from different part of South Korea and different... they had their own also different experience.

Kimura Byol:

I know that my adopted sister was in an orphanage and was found when she was from birth. And she stayed in the same orphanage that whole time four years. And it is because her orphanage burned that they sent the kids overseas. So she had a stable life, and she has her friend. She could speak English because many American were helping that orphanage. So she was not afraid of white people. Versus for me, I was really afraid of white people. I don't know why, but that's what my adoptive mother was telling me.

Kimura Byol:

And then I had my adoptive brother, the other one who's maybe older than what he is. Because if you had to learn something, they reduce your age to be able to adjust to the school system in the West. I think he was a street kid, so he was very violent and very, I think, traumatized, I guess. So it was difficult in the family because we were afraid of him.

Kimura Byol:

And then you had the last one who was like, I think, a kid from divorce, who had a stable life and had less trauma. He was very joyful and very nice. We were so very different kind of people for Asian. So we couldn't say all Asian are like this. Physically, we were very different also. For me, I'm tall. My younger brother is also kind of tall for an Asian at that age. And then my middle brother and sister were short.

Kimura Byol:

Then for me I was paler before and then I get darker with age, but my sister was very dark. She was not a mixed race. Then my older brother was very pale and a bit fat. Then you had my other brother who was kind of handsome kid. So we had very different experience because of our embodiment also and our character. So it helped me to not say just me and myself.

Kimura Byol:

Also, we met other adoptees at school. So because our suburb city were like the start of the Korean adoption, we had kids from different level of class, Korean also. And sometime my sister was speaking Korean to some of them, but for me, I didn't speak at all. They thought I couldn't speak when I arrived until I really shout.

Kimura Byol:

So I was labeled as a retarded because of my age. I think they thought I was three years older, so I was really retarded for them. So they didn't have much expectation with me. And so my sister, she was like very joyful and funny girl, but she was not so called clever. So they didn't expect her to have a great professional life, but they wish... I mean, my adoptive parent told us that they didn't expect much from us, except from my older brother who was intelligent, clever. So they sponsored his studies.

Kimura Byol:

But finally, among all those four kids adopted in that family, I'm the only one who's like the black sheep, I would say, because I'm more political. I'm not saying I don't believe what they tell me, I didn't believe it. I'm not capitalist as they were. They were [inaudible 00:27:48] . So it's just a different choice of life, I believe. As long as they're happy at the way that the truth is fine for me.

Kaomi Lee:

Yeah. It must have been a difficult thing to navigate though.

Kimura Byol:

You learn a lot from your own beliefs, but also you learn from other people's choices. Yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

You were mentioning that in Europe, that Korean adoptees face... they're maybe not as accepted by other Asians, is that what you were saying?

Kimura Byol:

Oh, no. I was saying that among the adoptees choice of race, ethnicity, the Korean were... Korea was known in Europe, maybe the Korean war, but very on the surface, the Vietnamese were known and the Chinese and Japanese were known. So when we were saying we were Korean, people didn't understand where we were from. They didn't know that country.

Kimura Byol:

But among the choice of other different countries, like Korea, India, Vietnam... And China at the time didn't exist at my time. But the faster and the easiest were Korean, the cheapest one. And then the Vietnamese, it was kind of the only except open adoption, but it was a bit later, it was in the '70s, '73 to... they started 73-ish.

Kimura Byol:

But some came in '69 or so, some Vietnamese, but its not the same adoption as Korean because Korean adoption is... we call [Foreign language 00:29:38] which is a full adoption where you are opharnalyzed, which is very different from Vietnamese because many Vietnamese knew their birth family and they didn't erase it from the adoption paper. So this a big difference.

Kimura Byol:

And then the Indian, they were accepted because Mother Theresa, but many racist parents would not like Indian because they were too dark. So it's like also in, I think Europe, especially at the time and I still now believe too, it's not because you adopted that you are not racist. So there's nothing.

Kaomi Lee:

Okay. You believe your adopted parents are racist?

Kimura Byol:

Yeah. They were, yeah, but they said they are not. What they say, it's like, oh, my God, who would tell that? And they believe that it's normal.

Kaomi Lee:

And you said you don't like Belgium. Why is that?

Kimura Byol:

I mean, I don't like Belgium. I don't [inaudible 00:30:41] country because anyway it's a very bad colonialist country with the Congo, and did it genocide there. For me, what I believe with Belgium is a little country with inferior complex. And so the difference between adoptees from Belgium and adoptees from France, we don't have that pride of being from our adoptive country. It's like French, like [French language 00:31:10], like, "Ooh, we are so French, and more French and French."

Kimura Byol:

But Belgium are not like that. Especially if you are Flemish or Francophone, it's so different. We have an attitude of, of course, a divided linguistically country. Like Quebec, it seems that it's my karma because I come from South Korea and then a divided country. And then I go to Belgium, a divided country. I go to Quebec, a divided country again. So I think I like that in some ways, the conflict of that, but that doesn't make people very proud of what they are.

Kimura Byol:

The only pride I can be of is to be queer, and it's international. And it's divided to so many as like the tougher versus trends and all these kind of issues. But anyways, it's a learning experience.

Kaomi Lee:

Kimura, when did you decide you were interested in activism?

Kimura Byol:

I think from the time I found my birth family and I realized really that it was so many lies in the file and why all the information were not follow up in every step of the process. And also I think with my racist adoptive parents, as a colonial mind and thinking that people of color are... like the pittiness on us, we were treated like animals a bit. Not the animal, but we were like monkey or dog, or something like that. That kind of a reflection they put on, it was not very joyful, I would say. And I thought it was not right.

Kimura Byol:

We were a human being. We were not a little dog or stuff that they could do whatever they want with. So I don't believe that every adoptive parents are doing that, fortunately, but there were a mindset especially in the, I think, '60s '70s, '80s, a bit of the third world, so called, people were the [inaudible 00:33:29] of race and colorism also.

Kimura Byol:

Even among my brother and sister, we didn't grow up knowing that... Because my sister was saying to me I was lucky because I was better than her, but she was prettier than me. So I say, "Yeah, but the prettiness... it's also a privilege to be pretty and not to be ugly." Of course, that's something that I learned on... And it was not a word of the parents. It was among us without parents saying anything. So it was that kind of jealousy, but maybe because of advertising and stuff also, and what we hear on TV or mass media.

Kaomi Lee:

What do you think when you come across other transracial families, transracially adopted kids in Quebec? Do you look at them-

Kimura Byol:

Oh, my God. I mean, my reaction is that, "I don't want to go meet." And then I say, "Okay, I cannot judge. I have to be..." Because maybe they did... I mean, it's like the fact to adopt from overseas, the way that I still believe is current [inaudible 00:34:49], and it takes two tango. So it's the same way of guilt, I think, from the adoptive country, as much as the birth country. For me, it's like Korea is as much capability of doing that practice.

Kimura Byol:

But for me, when I was living in Korea and I saw all these mostly American, I'm a bit more open than European to go back with the kids. But as kids, it's like they're controlling the kids. So seeing kids with white parents, for me, it's like, "Oh, my God."

Kimura Byol:

But in the same time, it's like, at least they did that, my adoptive parent didn't do that. But then it's like somehow they're manipulating, controlling the kids in saying, "We are savior. We help you to come back to your country." And then after whatever, they say so many things, the groups are like this, or we don't want black in our family, or you cannot date a black person or something. So you see so many layers.

Kimura Byol:

But then in Quebec, my first experience in 2006 when I was living in Montreal, and there is that area called Le Plateau, which is a bit [inaudible 00:36:16] Frenchy area, and you see those... So it was 2006, and the adoption from China started in '91 from Quebec, I think, around that time. So they were like maybe 10 years old and they were working.

Kimura Byol:

And then I remember an adopted Chinese girl looking at me like she was so surprised to see an Asian. She was staring at me. I don't know if she stared at me because I look like a boy or a girl, or she didn't know I was not typical Asian. But she almost wanted to come to me, and then her parents took back. It was just walking. So I felt the... I saw myself at the time, at that age when I was afraid of Asian, but in the same time attracted to Asian when I was passing by. And then after when I was teenager, I was afraid of Asian, more like consciously.

Kimura Byol:

And then now I meet... There is two associations in Montreal, Quebec province called [inaudible 00:37:31] which hybrid meaning. And then the other one is Resource For International Adoptees or something. So RAIS. R-A-I-S. That's the other one, but this is more for Colombian-Asian adoptees. So you have some... But they both work together now. They had hard time to start and have their own agenda, but now they are more in a good relation.

Kimura Byol:

But [inaudible 00:38:10] is a bit more Chinese adoptees, and then you have Korean. Korean adoptees here are older. We are in our 40s. But I also met adoptees from Europe in Quebec. So it's funny because I met two Belgium-Korean adoptees here, and we are kind of friend because we have the same cultural thing, but they love Belgium, and I don't like Belgium. That's the difference. But we agree on food, on everything.

Kaomi Lee:

You were in Korea for 13 years. Was your activism mostly to help adopt this search?

Kimura Byol:

Yeah. For me, it was my main concern and the energy I want to put in. It's really specific. Yeah.

Kaomi Lee:

I mean, adoptees have been loving for change for the Korean government to make the process for years, for decades. I guess, are you... Satisfied is not the word, but what do you think of the progress or lack of progress?

Kimura Byol:

I mean, it's like human rights and it always can... who does it serve? Birth family, adoptive family versus adoptees right. It's always that issue. And now I know they are in big conversation. I'm newly part of Ibyangin, which is an association that were made by member of ASK and some other group. You have also some member from Korean-Australian adoptees, and then you have [Benkos 00:40:01]... I don't know his real name, but Benkos on Facebook. But I met him. He's really nice also.

Kimura Byol:

And then you have the younger generation and the older. For me, I'm just good... I feel like a carvist because I'm from the first time... So I'm just to support them, but I'm not brainy enough to really work on the law and the specificity. And now even more, my Korean gets so bad and worse and worse. Already it was not good. But I think Boonyoung Han and [Halle Hastra 00:40:40] from Denmark, both of them from Denmark are in Korea and then doing the job with Kim Stoker, and then you have also Jae-sik. You have few members. So Angeline Lee, I think in California she is. So you have different member.

Kimura Byol:

And we meet like once a month or every two weeks. Mostly they discuss analysis on what is happening. They give us information from Korea so we can have information of what's happening there. Also, they try to do more connection with domestic adoptees because it's the same right about search, about can, example, at 18 years old have access to our file? At what condition? And stuff like that.

Kimura Byol:

So I think there is a discussion, but the lobbying and the power is still in the government. I think the law will serve the government and policy and not the adoptees yet. That's my belief. But it's good that you have a reminder and adoptee activities there continuing the job and pursuing it, and being loud, and there.

Kaomi Lee:

Do you feel like not much has taken place over the last 20 years, or do you think a lot has?

Kimura Byol:

Yeah, a lot has in the mentality. I mean, some are regressing, some are getting a bit better, but I think like for me, my first point was like to have a special visa for adoptees. That's what I thought for back in '96 before G.O.A.'L even exist. I work with NGO called CIN, Create International Network, to try to lobby with being... it was not to create a new visa for adoptees, but be sure that adoptees could be in the diasporic law. So kyopo and dongpo.

Kimura Byol:

And because we were all born in Korea, we were allowed to apply for that. So to be sure that the word adoptee was in the law and not erase from that. So it was a very big step because in 1999 December 1st, we could have. And I was, I think, the sixth one to get the visa because I'm a bit slow, but then at least it was a good step.

Kimura Byol:

And then some people want further to have double citizenship, but depending the adaptive country who are allowed or not to have double citizenship because of the military service for the guys and so on. But I think that it was a big step for adoptees to really... For me, I wanted the government to sponsor Korean language for adoptees or program to help them to settle in Korea if they wanted, or to have more exchanges. Maybe not putting money, but at least discount or something like that, that could help.

Kimura Byol:

But for me, my dream would be to have a department helping really adoptees, and they put some money to help adoptees in the search. Not for the tourism stuff, but like if they had to go to, example, Pusan to pay the ticket, to pay a translator, to follow-up the transition, to have a budget for every other piece you want to search and not being dependent from other... or paying from their pocket, because it's just... adoptees didn't ask to be adoptee. That's very...

Kaomi Lee:

What do you think will make the difference for the government to come around and really serve adoptees?

Kimura Byol:

For me, I think it's to... adoptee is to have a fight that is not... First, it's like the government has to take their responsibility. It cannot be like Holt or any private organization first. That's the first thing that I believe. Second is to have an 18 years old right to have our file and to have support in the adoptive country as much as in the birth country to have a follow-up on our search.

Kimura Byol:

After, you want to do tourism or whatever, it's a different thing. But language also to help adoptees who want to learn their language because it's part of identity for those who want, not to force, of course, but to have also in every adoptive country.

Kaomi Lee:

What are the arguments you've heard for why the government can't provide more [crosstalk 00:45:41]?

Kimura Byol:

Because they don't care. It's not important. The Peninsula is dividing in two, we are in war. It's always the excuse that they need the money for military, it's more urgent things. So adoptees, it's like for them, they feel we are lucky and that's it. It's like we've been raised by white people. It's so great to be a white person or a white cultural person. So what do we want for complain about? That's the mentality.

Kimura Byol:

That's what we've been doing for 30 years. So it's like how long? But now I think also with more like immigrant worker, it's going to be mixed race. Korea has to open their mind and not thinking like Nazi. So it's like thinking they are so pure. It's like, what is pure anyways? It's like, what is the point to be pure anyways? So that a whole mentality.

Kimura Byol:

I could see a little shift in 2002, where for the first time in advertising and being in the subway, seeing different shade of skin color, it was really huge for me because then... It's also visible that there were like introduction to it in Korea.

Kaomi Lee:

So do you feel like as Korea moves towards becoming more of a multiethnic country that-

Kimura Byol:

It's going to be, obviously. It's like when you [crosstalk 00:47:13]-

Kaomi Lee:

Yeah, the migrant workers. Yes. Right.

Kimura Byol:

It's not just Asian versus white, it's so many other layers and so many different reality.

Kaomi Lee:

So do you think that as Korea evolves into this welcoming or having more laborers and workers from other country is coming in and becoming more multi... that that is when maybe attitudes can shift towards adoptees becoming more open?

Kimura Byol:

Maybe, but I don't think Korea is welcoming immigrant. They use them. It's very different mindset.

Kaomi Lee:

In some ways, Kimura, do you think that the attitude is they just want us to die out and-

Kimura Byol:

It's like to [inaudible 00:48:03] we are going to be a better generation. After all of us, it's going to be the children of people who make children, who have children. Those ones will carry our stories, but then we're going to fade. It's like a human experiment. Is it good or bad? Is it going to be taught in school?

Kimura Byol:

I think that Korean have to learn about the thing, as much as the Korean minor in Germany, or all this kind of diaspora and [inaudible 00:48:45] in Japan and so on. I think adoptee has to... the history of adoption has to be taught at school. So also for future potential birth model, the only option of abandoning or giving the kids doesn't have to be overseas. It can be in Korea, but also we have to check who is adopting in Korea.

Kimura Byol:

It's not because they're Korean, they're better. It just adoption is already difficult. So it's not because they're Korean adoptees... Like you saw the kids where it was a kid died in Korean adoptive family. I think the safety of adoptee or so called orphan in adoptive family, it's sometime a bit scary and taken not seriously. Because if we're adopted, we are so lucky, and that's it. But no, every human is human, and they can change. They can be good-willing to adopt and save a kid or loving the kids even more than whatever. It doesn't mean the action will follow.

Kaomi Lee:

How do you take this passion for change and use it in your art?

Kimura Byol:

In my artist part of... it's like one thing together. Of course, it's like when I start my art... I mean, will not say art, but I would say work, it's therapeutic, I think. When I was younger, I was lucky to have a really nice adoptive grandmother. And she really supported me in my art or trying to... Because she saw I was a bit traumatized or a bit... I had some issues.

Kimura Byol:

So she helped me to really overcome that with the pencil and canvas and painting, and then I could do... And she didn't judge what I was doing. It was ugly as hell. But she said, "Do it, just do it for yourself. You don't need to have a [inaudible 00:51:07]." But then I was doing that, and then I went to art school, and then I learned how to draw a bit more properly.

Kimura Byol:

But I never think that I'm talented, but I think the fact that I continue to do it, it became a body of work in itself. I'm non-capitalist person. I don't want to sell my work. I just want to do when I want it, when I feel so. It's like, whatever comes up, people like it, buy, thanks. If they don't, it's okay, too. But I want to share what I'm doing if it's possible.

Kimura Byol:

I didn't study art at university, so I don't have this concept of promoting myself as much as... I think in North America you learn that at university, about tax and all those stuff, about copyright. But I think my work in videos and installation, calligraphy and digital images, really reflect what I'm thinking. People like it or not, it's a different thing.

Kimura Byol:

I remember when I was in Korea, I was doing fetus painting, a pop art fetus, calligraphy mix of media, mix with acrylic and China ink. And I remember I exhibited from my first show in 1997. The Korean guy were so shocked, and I get a lot of cactus. When people don't like your work, they give a cactus and they put in front of your painting. And so that's a very sneaky way to say, "I hate you." But then I-

Kaomi Lee:

With a cactus?

Kimura Byol:

Yeah, a cactus, not a flower. I think that I learned. I knew that I will not please everybody, and especially Christians, but then-

Kaomi Lee:

At least you got a reaction.

Kimura Byol:

Huh?

Kaomi Lee:

At least you got a reaction.

Kimura Byol:

Yeah, I did, but I had also good reaction mostly from adoptees or women, because it was never thought or brought in public in the art form or in a public space. So I think I was starting something that... I think that's how I get attention from people. I didn't mean to, because for me, from Europe, abortion or the right of the fetus, is it better that I was aborted or born as being adopted? It's like all those question, but I have no judgment of people who are against, except that they leave the right for the person who want to choose to abort to abort... That's the thing... in a safety way, I don't know.

Kimura Byol:

Anyway, so you understand what I mean? And so at the time, it was more about that, especially in Korea, I learned calligraphy and I was playing with that and not pretending that I would be a good calligrapher. I want to play with that in the way that this is part of my diasporic experience. So I will pop at it the way that I want, and they like it or not. But I sold many paintings, so I'm not too unhappy about it. It was unexpected too.

Kimura Byol:

And I continue in Montreal because, in Montreal, you have a great system where you can get grant from the government. And if your project is pleasing the jury, you get some money out of it. And that's how I live now with that. I still continue to do search support through internet. So people can email me and I can review the file and tell them what to do, or what I believe it is and what they have to look for. Because I have a good sense of orphanages, cities, adoption agencies, countries, so I can analyze a different way that... Getting more than 800 files, I think I get a good sense of [inaudible 00:55:27]. I was lucky to succeed for some... always with the adoptees request, not alone.

Kaomi Lee:

You said you are a non-binary, do you think the visibility of non-binary [crosstalk 00:55:45]?

Kimura Byol:

I think for me, it's not the fashion because now we talk a lot about non-binary. Even though before I was saying it, people didn't understand it. But I was born intersex. So already I was born intersex, so that's already, for me, non-binary. It doesn't mean that I have... For me, it's like, instead of being both of them, I'm not enough each of them.

Kimura Byol:

But non-binary because for me, I don't believe it for myself. I believe maybe for some people who are trans, who really believe the other one. But for me, it's always been, I think, from when I was five years old. In Belgium, I remember people saying, "Are you a boy or a girl?" And I say, "I'm neither one." And people say, "She's crazy. Are they crazy?" Or whatever.

Kimura Byol:

So for me, I'm not a they, I'm a ze because the Z is not in the gender letters, X, Y, so that's why I put ze. But that's how I make sense of myself in this world, but people agree on it is their issue, it's not mine.

Kaomi Lee:

But even like historically in adoptee communities, maybe queer members of our community have not really had a lot of visibility. Do you think that's changing now?

Kimura Byol:

Yeah. I think they're more organizing themselves, but often Korean adoptees would go in the Asian-Korea groups, they will not label themselves as just adoptees. So that's how some people are more interested in their queerness, some more about the adoptees, and sometime it shifts.

Kaomi Lee:

How about for you?

Kimura Byol:

For me, I don't want to choose one for another. I think I have three main communities like feminist, even I'm non-binary, the queer community, and the adopted community and Asian. Obviously, I'm Asian. So I think being Asian, especially in the time of COVID, was more important for me, because I think many of us suffered and people who avoid or blind themselves of not being Asian get a big like in the face. It's like the insert-

Kaomi Lee:

In some ways it kind of made us realize that we are Asian.

Kimura Byol:

Yeah, more than what we wanted.

Kaomi Lee:

Yeah. Even if people didn't want to, but then also that could be a negative, but also that Asian community saw that we were Asian too, right?

Kimura Byol:

Yeah. And I think in Montreal, it was a very specific situation because many Chinese adoptees were very independent because they had their own thing. But then it's the first time that the Asian community really gathered together... the Chinese, the Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese worked together for first time, because normally, they're all separated. And the adoptees were included in the...

Kimura Byol:

But then it was... out of the COVID drama or trauma, it came out something strong, and then we want to help each other. We want to support each other for mental health. It was good, I think. And then it brings some... some talk about the adoption, some are more about denying their identity of being Asian. And so we were more proactive during... and because of Zoom, it was good to resume those kind of Zoom meetings to not feel alone.

Kaomi Lee:

Okay. Kimura, if people want to see your new work and get in touch with you, where can they go?

Kimura Byol:

There is my website, starkimproject.com. And then you have on Vimeo, KimuraByol in one word. They can contact me with kimurabyol@gmail.com. So if you hate me, you can tell me, but in a nice way. It's okay, but just politely.

Kaomi Lee:

Well, thank you so much. You're a force in Montreal and [crosstalk 01:00:34].

Kimura Byol:

Let me know when you come to Montreal. I'll show you around.

Kaomi Lee:

Okay.

Kaomi Lee:

Thank you, Kimura Byol. This podcast is made possible by all of the adoptees who have participated so far in what now has become a substantial archive and resource. If you'd like to support the making of this work, please consider a onetime donation or becoming a Patreon at patreon.com/adaptedpodcast. Until next time, be well.