Tobias Hübinette:

My name is Tobias or Tobias Hübinette. And currently, I live in, well, in south of Stockholm. It's Greater Stockholm basically. I work in another city in Sweden, so I commute a lot and travel a lot. And I grew up in a small city or small town in the south central part of Sweden, which is a bit far from here. And well, I was adopted from South Korea at the age of seven months. So my Korean name, the name that I was given by the police, I suppose, or maybe the agency is Lee Sam-dol. And yeah, that's pretty much it when it comes to the background information, I suppose. I'm 50 now.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

You are a researcher?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah, exactly. I'm a teacher and a researcher at the university in Sweden or within the university sector in general. And I've been active within several different fields throughout the years. And in this case, I suppose, Korean adoption studies and critical adoption studies are the most relevant. Nowadays, I'm more into critical race and whiteness studies in Sweden. So it would be Swedish critical race and whiteness studies. And before that, well, I have a PhD in Korean studies, so that's how I started out my academic professional life, I suppose.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

How did you get interested in pursuing studies about Korean adoption?

Tobias Hübinette:

By the way, our Korean studies and because I'm adopted, right. So it turned out that, yeah, I got interested in getting to know the history of Korean adoption to the West and also within Korean history, before, I mean, in pre-modern times, and also things that at that time were not very well known. For example, corruption within the adoption system in Korea and as were, and also how Korean adoptees and other transnational adoptees were faring in terms of various outcomes. Also, a subject that wasn't much talked about at that time. So that's, I suppose, how I started. And academically, I did it by taking a PhD in Korean studies where I looked upon how Koreans in Korea look upon adopted Koreans in various Western countries.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And so did you start your studying these topics in the '90s?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Well, as an individual in the '90s, and as an academic, it was more in the 2000s. But as an individual adoptee and you can call me an activist, I did it, yeah, in the 1990s. At the time when there were, yeah, there were, of course, there were many adoptees at that time, but there were few adoptees who were politically conscious or politically active. And in my case, I suppose, I started out becoming politically active because I had another political background as an anarchist. So I was very used to doing political work basically [crosstalk 00:03:41].

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

An anarchist. Can you tell us what that means?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Well, it's libertarian socialist. You can maybe call it... So it's a strand of socialist, a strand of the workers movement, which is lesser known than social democracy and communist, and which is more, yeah, libertarian and less authoritarian.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And so Tobias, how did you start? When you started your researching and you used sort of your activism, I guess, to get interested in researching about Korean adoption, how did you get started when there were very few at that time, very few other people doing that?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yes. Yeah. I started by creating an archive in the library, which has still has, which is extremely big nowadays and which has been of use, not just in my own research or publications in general, but also for others, journalists, et cetera, other researchers. So that's maybe how I started out, by systematically collecting as much as I could. I went to the US several times at that time, for example, visiting libraries and archives and collecting everything that I could find on Korean adoption. And I did it around Europe and in Sweden as well. And of course in Korea, I went to Korea, I don't know how many times, but at least a dozen times perhaps, buying and copying and trying to meet with people who had some knowledge about Korean adoption, both its history and its current state. So that's how it started.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Yeah. And when you were uncovering things about corruption, what did you find?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah, well, at that time it was, for me at least, already obvious that it had been and still is, but at that time, well, that it had been a fully-fledged business basically. And that's also what I try to convey in various texts and also at conferences and seminars and at meetings with other adoptees. And also in the public sphere in Sweden, in newspapers, on television, et cetera, et cetera. So for me, it has always been about fact finding and also about disseminating those facts to the wider audience and the wider audience for me has always spent other fellow adoptees, but also everybody basically. And in the case of Korea, it's been about reaching out to Koreans of course, to the wider Korean audience or public. And I did that also at that time as much as I could, although of course there's the obstacle of both language and culture, but I found people, Koreans, who were very helpful at that time, supporting me in what I wanted to accomplish.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Did it make you an unpopular figure Tobias, because that we've got the larger common adoption narrative where people want to feel good about adoption.

Tobias Hübinette:

Sure. I mean, you just said what happened, right. So at that time I was... Well, there were people who liked me, but there are most people dislike me, I suppose, including adoptees, including adoptees in Sweden also. And not just Korean adoptees, but also adoptees from other countries. Because I was so active and outspoken. And perhaps also, because I was able to get a certain influence and people disliked me, I suppose. So at that time, yeah, that's really how it was, how we described it.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

But did you find that there were also people that really supported you, that you were kind of a breath of fresh air?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah, also. There were also both other adoptees and non-adoptees. And people in Korea, in Sweden and elsewhere who, yeah, did support me. And these people meant a lot, of course, especially at that time when the perspectives that I try to get out were not mainstream. Maybe they are not mainstream today either, but they are more mainstream today than before, for sure.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Can you tell us what is critical adoption studies?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Well, it's basically a way of researching and studying adoption, all different. I mean, angels of the phenomenon of adoption, right, in a way that is not the kind of traditional mainstream adoption research, which has, and still is been very focused on children rather than adults when we speak about adoptees. And on the country of... The receiving country instead of the supplying country, and on basically Western perspectives. And also very quantitatively focused when it comes to, for example, using certain questionnaires or psychological tests such as to measure, let's say adjustment in the adoptive family and so on. So critical adoption studies takes in the whole perspective of both the supplying and the receiving country and trying to look at, I mean, the whole phenomenon from both historically global perspective and critical comes in because it's not uncommon to use theories coming from, let's say gender studies or postcolonial studies or critical race and whiteness studies, et cetera, the colonial thinking. So that's why it's also called critical adoption studies.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And what were some of the backlash you got from, let's say other Korean adoptees in Sweden at that time?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Well, the backlash, I mean, it's basically I became quite socially isolated for example, and people shunned me because if they had any connection with me, they could also get hurt or punished in some way or another, or at least that's how they felt. And also there were also adoptees who tried to stop me from writing and speaking. So it became quite serious sometimes. And I've also, at that time, a member of the Korean Adoptee Association, which is by the way, the oldest in the world. AKF, it's called, that's how it's abbreviated in Swedish. The adopted Korean Association of Sweden basically. And so the mainstream members were, of course not on my side. And when I happened to come into trouble, well, I was pretty much alone because most people I think felt that I had my own... I mean, it, my own fault basically, because I had, yeah, I had written all this as people saw it, extreme texts, including my thesis.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

What do you think that made them uncomfortable? Was it that...

Tobias Hübinette:

Well, everything from the fact that, I mean to start from there, most adoptees get adopted by quite affluent people, adopted parents, right who have quite a lot of money and sometimes quite a lot of power, as they are mostly highly educated. They can be university professors, for example. They can even be high ranking or high profile politicians, et cetera, et cetera, medical doctors, lawyers, et cetera, which means that the most adoptees, if you would disclose what they vote for, so to speak. I think most of them would vote conservative, to the right. That's one obstacle why adoptees are very difficult to mobilize politically? I think because most of them grew up very comfortably, materially speaking.

Tobias Hübinette:

I know, of course that many adoptees have suffered, although they came to highly educated and affluent families and et cetera. Of course, I'm aware that it's not as simple as that, but anyway, I think it decides how you look upon things politically. And then of course, the fact that adoptees are also loyal to the whole course or the whole project of adoption, perhaps more than the other of the adoption triad. So it's also, I mean, many adoptees live with this, which I see as a lie of course, but for them it's reality that the West saved their lives, et cetera, that Korea is, yeah, is a bad country, et cetera, et cetera. And that, yeah, this was the best that could happen to them to end up in the West as an adoptee.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

What were some of the corruptions that you discovered?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah, well, it was quite simple. I mean, forging identities, manipulating identities, destroying original identities, creating new fake identities, basically destroying people's lives, destroying any traces between the adoptee and the first families. And upon that, I mean, especially in the case of Korea, but there are also some other countries that have adopted out children on that massive scale as well, China, for example. So when it comes to Korea, it's not only about identity forging. It's also about commodifying its own citizens on a mass scale and earning a lot of money from that at the very same time.

Tobias Hübinette:

And also doing it in a very conscious way. We know that today that Korea, the various Korean governments, especially during the military dictatorships, it was kind of a master plan actually to get rid of surplus population, at the time when the birth rate was extremely high. I mean, that is true. And at the time when South Korea was poorer than North Korea, and at the time when there was a lot of social unrest in South Korea, that's also true, et cetera, et cetera. But it was also a part of a master plan to get rid of surplus children and to earn money out of them. And at the same time, creating ties, political ties to the West, to the receiving countries.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And so on your many trips back to Korea, how did the Korean government officials or other [crosstalk 00:15:53] talk to you? How did they receive this information?

Tobias Hübinette:

Well, I was able to meet with quite high ranking, well, people at the department, for example, at that time. And also I was in contact with the... At that time, there were not many, but there were a few Korean scholars within adoption studies and there were some other important figures in Korea at that time who were in various ways involved in adoption and adoptees. And I think, I mean, when it comes to the Korean side and they have always known, that's the kind of feeling I have always got. So it's a kind of a cynical attitude, I think, that... I mean, it's been the official policy basically, it hasn't really been a secret, especially if you-

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

The practices [crosstalk 00:16:54].

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah, and this idea to export people that you don't need and to package the whole, I mean, phenomenon of adoption, as... I mean, in the West, it's seen as a way of creating a family, of course. It's a kind of a reproduction technique, et cetera, et cetera. But from the side of the Koreans, it's been cynical from the start, I think. And most Koreans, they know that. And that's maybe why they feel ashamed, especially those who are higher up in the hierarchy. They have always known that, also at the agencies, that's my feeling. Of course, they don't want to tell us that when we return and also they can also hide behind... I mean, it is difficult for sure to communicate because of language and culture differences. But sometimes they're also using these obstacles to, I mean, just keep the truth for themselves as opposed. Because they feel maybe that we cannot really handle if we would get to know exactly how things happened. Maybe they believe that we would, I don't know, take revenge or something or sue them, or I don't know.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Do you think a lot of this has to do with cultural differences or do you think actually they know that it's wrong to basically make identities disappear.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yes. I mean, Korea is not a Western country. I mean, now it sound very West-centric or Euro-centric perhaps, but kind of ideas about human rights or children's rights, et cetera, they, of course, they exist in Korea, but on paper, but culturally, it's country that comes from another, well, let's call it civilization. The kind of greater Chinese civilization or East Asian civilization or culture where these ideas traditionally did not exist at all. So during the heydays of Korean adoption, let's say, yeah, '60s, '70s, '80s, and '90s, those decades, and a bit into the 2000s also perhaps, well, for most Koreans, it was natural that this is something that you can do, at least for those who are involved in this business on the government level or agency level, et cetera. So I don't think they saw it as we do, as Westerners. I think that's one of the main explanations why it could happen on this massive scale.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Well, even the adoption agencies, some of them have in the titles, child welfare agency. I mean, they think of it as child welfare.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. But it's called that of course, because it falls into, and it falls within the sphere of child welfare on a kind of, yeah, technical basis, yeah. For them, I mean, for the Korean state and for the agencies to know the others who are involved in overseas adoption or international adoption, they saw, wait, that's a solution. Instead of, I mean, the children. I don't know what this was an alternative, but this perishing or languishing or whatever, they saw this as the only option and also in line with the government policy.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Is that because they themselves did not have a very well developed social welfare system?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yes. And also, that's also one of the reasons why they never had to build up a social welfare system because they exported the problem. And then they didn't have to put any money from the state budget on social welfare or child welfare. They got rid of the problem. They exported the problem, so to speak.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And you talked about some of the corruption in terms of falsified records, what was actually happening?

Tobias Hübinette:

Well, I mean, there are or there were some, I mean, logical principles behind the whole system of adoption from Korea. For example, the Koreans, they understood that the Westerners wanted younger children, as young as possible. So they started to manipulate with the birth dates. They realized that the Westerners wanted orphan children. So they started to, yeah, manipulate with the original identities. And they also had to obey to South Korean law, legislation, how you, I mean, emigrate for example, and how we emigrate as a child, without any adults with you, other than escorts. So there were certain regulations that they had to adhere to, which in a way, forced them to do this. And they overdid it also. I mean, they turned it into a whole system, basically a routine based system and everything. I mean, the overarching purpose was of course to get rid of as many children as possible. So that's why it became on this industrial-like scale.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And it was serving a... It was almost catering to the West desire for children.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. At the same time, because at the same time, the '68 movement and the women's liberation movement, et cetera, had led to the kind of, yeah, at least as we know it today, the final downfall of domestic adoption. Not in every Western country, but especially in those Western countries that were the most affected by the women's movement and the, yeah, the leftist movement basically. So that's of course, I mean, the other part of the history, the demand side, which fit with the supply side at that time.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

What is the problem? I'm sure you've gotten this, but what is the problem in terms of human rights when... Because it's not like, as adoptees, we don't have an identity, we just assume a new identity. What's essentially wrong with that?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Well, there's nothing wrong with adoption per se, for me, at least. So it has always existed, right, in every culture, everywhere in history. So, that's not the problem. The problem is when it becomes a business and when it becomes a business on this enormous scale, as in the case of Korea and Korean adoptions to the West. So yeah, adoption per say is not wrong according to me, at least.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

How much money are we talking about?

Tobias Hübinette:

No one knows, and it's probably not possible to calculate because, I mean, if you export a problem, then you don't need to cater for these children and their families, right. So it's not just that. I mean, most people get kind of fixated on the adoption fee. And of course, that's the obvious income of course, but there are other kinds of consequential incomes, I suppose, for the Korean state and the Korean society as a whole, which yeah, it's not possible to calculate. And also, I mean, if all of us had stayed in Korea, and most of us had survived as children and youth and then we had become adults, maybe some of us, I'm not saying all of us, but some of us might have ended up in a kind of a bad lifestyle or negative or destructive lifestyle, which would also have cost the Korean society a lot, I suppose. So yeah. You cannot really calculate how much money that they saved, so to speak or earned. And yeah, I don't know really how to put it, but-

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Yeah, it's one thing I've wondered. I've seen figures. I don't know how they get them, but I've seen figures in news reports before, about how much money came into the government into [crosstalk 00:26:26], and because of adoption. And I wonder, one question people had, is where did that go? Did it go just to agencies? Did it go to the agencies? And maybe you have no proof of this, did agencies give some of the money to government officials? I mean, was it corruption on that level?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. I mean, some people maybe got rich, but I think the society, the state and the agencies as a whole taken together, earned those money and also sustained the industry. When we talk about the industry, we talk about hundreds of south Koreans, maybe thousands who have once during their professional lifetime, been involved in adoption in some way or another. Generations of social workers, for example, or nurses, et cetera, et cetera. Policemen. Yeah. I mean, civil servants. So the whole system sustained their salaries, I suppose, year, by year, by year. That's how I see it. And that's how the system became self-reproducing because so many people were dependent on the system as their income, basically.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And why was it important for you personally to bring these practices to light?

Tobias Hübinette:

Most people would benefit from it, especially the adoptees themselves, and also because these were wrongdoings according to my political analysis, at least. So that's also why I think it should come out. And now it is out, I would say in a way that, yeah, wasn't the case 20 years ago. So it took many years, but now, I mean, for example, one of the two English language newspapers in Korea, right. One is Korea Times. And they have recently for over a year, I think, published almost 30 articles about Korean adoption and adoptees. In English. They cater to the Western expat population in Korea, right, especially the Americans, including us, supposed to soldiers and all the others. But Koreans also read it, those who want to practice English and that would never have happened 20 years ago. And all of these articles are taking for granted that it was a business, that it was wrong, that it had its victims, et cetera, et cetera, that the truth must come out now. And that is happening now during this year of the pandemic. I think 29 articles in total, maybe more are coming.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

So you actually see a shift happening for two decades later.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yes, exactly. Yes.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

In Korea.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. In Korea, it's been happening for quite a long time. I'm not saying that I was the only one who started the ball running or rolling. That's how we say in English, right, but there were others also. So we did this together, but those of us who were, I don't what to say, at the barricades, in the 1990s, and at beginning of the 2000s, we all remember that it was very different then from now in Korea. But when things started to change in Korea, it changed quite rapidly, I think. And nowadays, there are Korean scholars and researchers, PhD candidates, students, et cetera, political activists who are... I mean, they would all agree upon what I'm saying now. And they are Korean. So it's their country. I mean, it's about right. And it's more in a way more sensitive to them than to us because they are South Korean citizens also.

Tobias Hübinette:

But they are digging up new things now and they are... I mean, critical adoption studies has really taken off in Korea in that way. At the same time, of course we shouldn't exaggerate the number of people involved, but it's so different from 20 years ago or even 15 years ago. And I cannot really say exactly when the change happened. I've been going back and forth to Korea for many years, right. And every time usually in relation to conferences and I've been invited to speak or publish something and giving interviews to the media in Korea, et cetera. And I've always noticed that, I mean, there was something happening, right, as a kind of transformational process. And now it's here and maybe that's how Korean society works, that suddenly, most people are on board.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

As an adoptee, when you go back to Korea, often when we meet other Korean citizens the attitudes we get is of pity, but also this kind of explanation of Korea was very poor and it was sort of like nothing could be done. It was so poor and this sort of these attitudes of, well you were adopted, and so you're kind of winning the lottery. Do you think this kind of thinking is changing as well?

Tobias Hübinette:

I mean the last, they don't have to contradict each other. I think, I mean, most Koreans today agree upon that it was a business and that it had its many, many violations of human rights or children's rights, et cetera. Most Koreans agree upon that today. At the same time, the same people can also say that you are lucky that you ended up in the West because our society is crap. It's really a dysfunctional society. And it's really good for you that you are in Sweden now or in Norway or in the US, or anywhere else, France, et cetera. And that's the other side of it, right, which you find all over the non-Western world, that the West is simply the best. And not just because it's the richest part of the world. I mean, it's not only because of money. It's also, I suppose, about democracy and yeah, human rights.

Tobias Hübinette:

I think so. I think that's also what they mean. They are not just referring to the fact that countries like the US and Sweden are extremely rich, at least, I mean, compared to Korea at that time. Yeah. I think they also refer to human rights, et cetera, and equality of life in general. And that is more difficult to argue with. And I think it must be possible to, for Korean. I can understand that they can say both these on the surface contradictory things because they know that it was their dysfunctional society that facilitated this industry.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

I can see that it really is kind of going against power structures when you have... You're trying to bring to light human rights abuses and corruption and commodification of children. But at the same time, it's very hard to make those arguments, I suppose, when these same children go to affluent families and they talk about their education and now hold themselves positions of power. And it always comes about juxtaposing money.

Tobias Hübinette:

And also the kind of values that people believe in Korea, right. Materialistic values. Yeah.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

If they're in richer families or have better outcomes in terms of money, then they are happier. It is the belief.

Tobias Hübinette:

I suppose so, and also, I mean, just being a westerner compared to being East Asian right, is just better, they think. And that's the kind of colonial legacy of course.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And how have you found the attitudes in the last 20 years shifting in Korea as well? I mean, in Sweden, I'm sorry.

Tobias Hübinette:

In Sweden, when it comes to Korea.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Well, in the adoption, Korean adoption and then [crosstalk 00:35:24] the adopt the community, you said that it's at first, you were kind of really a divisive figure, but now your research has become more fully embraced.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah, definitely. And it's been happening during recent years, not the least during this year, actually. So Sweden has been a late comer. I mean, the US is interesting in the sense that, of course it's the biggest Western country. I mean, it's the most powerful country in the world. And also it's the biggest adoption country because of its population size. And I would say, although not an American, but I do follow of course, the American discussion on adoption that the US has been quite early when it comes to adopting a more critical view on adoption, in general. It happened already in the 2000s in the US and the 2010s. So it's kind of normal to see really critical articles in the big American newspapers, for example. There are critical documentaries coming out on adoption, et cetera. Sweden is similar to the US and although it's, I mean, it's so small compared to the US, but together with the US, these two countries kind of pioneered the whole practice of adoption. And Sweden has actually adopted more children than the US, proportionally the most in the word.

Tobias Hübinette:

And that's maybe the explanation why Sweden is a late comer when it comes to adopting or at least listening to critical perspectives. And during this year, because of several events in Europe, for example, the Dutch government report on corruption within the Dutch adoption system in the Netherlands media debate, erupted in Sweden, which has led to the Swedish government commissioning a similar report, which would come out in a few years on the Swedish... On the problems of corruption within the Swedish adoption system. So the kind of perspectives that I have been, yeah, trying to get my fellow Swedes to listen to are now starting to become mainstream at least. But it's very late, it's much later than Korea and much later than the US. And later I would say then compared to other European countries, the Netherlands, for example, the Denmark. There are for sure other European countries, that are still very slow, like France, for example, perhaps also Belgium.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

To be honest, how does it feel after all these years to [crosstalk 00:38:25] be validated?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. I mean, it's nice, of course, to finally... I mean, to still be alive and experience that this happens now, that finally the time has caught up with you or something like that. And it's also nice to see that, yeah, me and others contributed to this and that we succeeded eventually. In a way, you can say that we won, although, I mean, I don't know what we did win actually. But we won the discourse in the end, although it took many years and at a high price on the personal level for me and many others. So it's a kind of historical moment to see all this unfold now. I mean, all these, they are same. I mean kind of, well, we shouldn't exaggerate this, but kind of truth commissions, you can call them these kind of government reports that are coming out now, in country after country in Europe.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And so now, more truth is coming out about Korean adoption, what does it mean overall for adoptees worldwide?

Tobias Hübinette:

I don't know. I mean, I suppose that the masses of the adoptees, if you only speak about Koreans, they are maybe not that aware about this at all. I have a younger sister from Korea. She has never been to Korea. She's a mainstream adoptee, the kind of normal adoptee who represents the absolute majority. She has no interest in Korea. She will never go there, I think before she dies. Yeah. But the kind of typical adoptee and of course she has followed this media debate in Sweden, but I don't think she has an opinion on it. She has barely talked to me about it.

Tobias Hübinette:

And so I suppose there are many of these kind of not normal, but mainstream or majority adoptees, who they don't care, they just live on their lives. But for people who are at least a bit interested politically, historically, and in their own personal history, why they ended up in the West, as an adoptee from Korea, I suppose, I mean, can have profound changes for them on a personal level. I think so. So the Swedish Association for Korean Adoptees, AKF, for example has... I mean, that's a quite huge Facebook groups with hundreds of Swedish Korean adoptees. And I've seen a lot of discussions during this year, discussions that I haven't seen before due to this, I mean, the truth coming out, basically.

Tobias Hübinette:

Because these people, they have to relate to it. They have to take it in intellectually, emotionally, yeah, on a kind of psychic level, right. They have to accommodate these new facts because I do think that they believe that this is the truth now. They didn't do that before, but now they do that actually, because they see how this new kind of this course of narrative has taken such a big hold in Korea, for example. Like in the example of this articles series or in the US.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

If we're talking about quote unquote mainstream adoptees, say, one of the issues has been that to accept the findings would be also, you start to look at one's adoptive families and parents part of the system, or maybe part of the problem.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And that's often an emotional response that adoptees are unable to do.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. I mean, of course. I mean, I had this discussion with my adopted parents during this year. I mean, they also wondered if they bought me et cetera, and my sister. And they, my adopted parents, I mean, they know other adopted parents and they have together discussed this, the adopted mothers, especially, together. My adoptive mother told me that she sat down with two or three other adopted mothers at her age and they thoroughly discussed this matter actually in a way that they have never been forced to do before. And yeah, they have to accept facts. They also have to relate to this, right. And I suppose that for some adoptees, I mean their relationship to their adoptive parents and perhaps also other significant others, even maybe partners who are not sympathizing with the critical view of adoption. Because there are those people also, right, that it can be very painful also, for sure. I'm aware of that, and I can imagine that. Yeah.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

One of the things from interviewing adoptees with Scandinavia is, in America, race is something that's talked about a lot and in the news and part of the struggles with criminal justice and so forth, and social justice movements. But I've heard from adoptees in Scandinavia, that race is still not talked about.

Speaker 3:

No. Yeah.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Yeah. Can you explain, because I know some of your work is in that as well, but what happens when Korean adoptees where exported to places in Scandinavia where they land and grow up in communities that essentially don't think of them in terms of race.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Because the US and Sweden went different directions basically. I mean, race thinking was a pan-Western phenomenon, right, for hundreds of years and also of course in Sweden. But in the 1960s and during the following decades, Sweden instead took a different path and entered into kind of, yeah, poly-bland attitude to race. And that is what my, one of my recent books is about because this development happened in relation to the adoptees. So it was the coming of the adoptees that made the Swedes, you can say, color blind and changed the Swede's attitudes to race. And because when the first adoptees came to Sweden, they were not that many. But when the first adoptees came, let's say, end of the '50s and 1960s, early 1960s, before the '68 revolution, basically, before the kind of eruption of the leftist youth movement, right.

Tobias Hübinette:

They came to a Sweden that was extremely white and to a country that had cherished its whiteness and this idea that the Swedes were white than anyone else, kind of Nordic whiteness, right. And because of that belief in this, yeah, kind of race cult or this idea that the Swedes consisted the kind of whiteness, the looks. I mean the super whiteness or whiteness, right, together with the other Scandinavians, there were government officials, you can call them, who are against the Korean adoptees and the other non-white adoptees, and who didn't want the Swedes to start adopting them because they fear that these adoptees, when they become adults, they will all reproduce with white Swedes, at least most of them. And that is true. That's what they did, right. And that will read to race mixing and race mixing is bad because we are so white, basically.

Tobias Hübinette:

What happened was that a counter-reaction started against this very old fashioned standpoint. And that counter-reaction had to formulate an alternative and that alternative became color blindness. So the other camp in that battle, you can say, argue that Sweden needs the Korean because we are so white. We need them and we want to reproduce with them. We want to racially mix with them. And we want to bring in as many as possible, not just Koreans, also Africans and Latinos, et cetera, and children from the Middle East who we then, when they become adults, we can have babies with them, right. Racially mixed babies. And that's when we can finally atone for our racist past or something like that. And that side of the, yeah, debate won. And that's why color blindness has been such... There has this intimate link to adoption.

Tobias Hübinette:

It's a very weird story. And I mean, which makes Sweden different also from the other Scandinavian countries. And so adoption became seen as kind of an anti-racist stack to practice in a way that you didn't really find in other Western countries. In the US, you have the Christian element, of course, because Americans in general, both white and black Americans are more Christian than Europeans in general. Not maybe today, but yeah, until recently, no... Yeah. But the Christian element cannot really be compared to this anti-racist, leftist element, which became the Swedish way of approaching adoption. I mean, the Christian element is extremely important to understand why the Americans started to adopt massively, of course. But it's another story basically, it's an American story.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

I'm trying to understand this. So one camp thought to atone for our sort of white, the whiteness in Sweden, that we should mix with other races and by bringing children of color via adoption, that would be one solution to becoming more [crosstalk 00:49:53].

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Racially mixed.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Yeah. Racially mixed, more multicultural, but at the same time, by doing that, they took this race neutral approach?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yes, exactly. Yeah, it's kind of paradoxical, but they imagined the future where race would not matter anymore, by the way of the adoptees. So that's how they argued. And they were so angry at this older attitude, this kind of official Swedish attitude that we have to preserve the whiteness of the Swedes, et cetera, which had become outdated at that time, because of the Second World War of course, and decolonization.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And so this is very interesting. What has the outcome been?

Tobias Hübinette:

Well, the outcome is that we cannot speak about race in Sweden. Still today, it's very difficult at least. And that's why adoptees from Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries, where there is kind of similar taboo on race. Not maybe that much in, so much in Denmark, but yeah, at least in Norway. That's why adoptees from Sweden becomes uncomfortable when the American adoptees start to talk about race or talk about race all the time, right. So it has a background basically, yeah.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Yeah. I think for a lot adoptees in the US, often the people, people kind of come to terms with, or start to understand or embrace their own Korean identity. It's parallel with also seeing their place in society as a Korean person in, or a Korean American or Asian American, the same time that their Korean identity becomes stronger is sort of correlates to also kind of this empowerment that they take, that they start to identify themselves within the Asian American experience. So it really, to me, how does that work in Sweden when-

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah, well, it's not possible. So instead, what you have here, is adoptees who are against minorities and who don't want to have any contact with other non-white people, right, immigrants and minorities. And there are also adoptees who are active in the far-right movement nowadays, because of that.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

So you have Korean adoptees who are very much active in sort of white nationalist movements or in...

Tobias Hübinette:

Yes, in the kind of populist right wing movements that you find all over Europe nowadays, which is very sad, but that's a kind of the extreme reaction as opposed to not wanting to be identified with other non-white people, right. Those who are not adopted basically. So there is space, yeah.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

How do Swedish adoptees, they sort of look at American Korean adoptees? Do they find that we are a bit strange in our thinking?

Tobias Hübinette:

I think so. Yeah. At least those adoptees in the US who are hanging around with Asians and Koreans who are not adopted. Second generation, et cetera. I mean, they don't really... Yeah. It's kind of weird, I think for many adoptees in Sweden to do that, because they would say that I have no connection to these people. They're all, of course, they're all, though, individual adoptees who do hang out with second generation Koreans, et cetera, in Sweden. But the other thing is that the Asian minority in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe, except for in France and the UK, maybe Germany also, they are so tiny, compared to the US. I mean, the fact that there are so many Asians in the US is because of all the wars that the US fought in that region. That's the only reason. And the only reason why there are many Asians in the UK and France is because they had colonists there, right. But in Sweden, there are very few Asians, these very few Koreans and that affect all of Europe.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

And so Swedish, Korean Swedish adoptees, would you say that not many would say that they had difficulties growing up because of feeling different or?

Tobias Hübinette:

If you ask them, most of them would tell you that they were doing fine because they have learned to not speak about race. And as you cannot speak about race, you cannot verbalize that you have been, yeah, racially harassed, et cetera, et cetera, or verbally harassed, whatever. So it's very sad. That's how color blindness works. It might originally have had, I mean, a kind of idealistic underpinning, but the end result is that those who are victims are robbed of a language to speak about what they are... What's happening with them, right.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Yeah. I mean, because I was raised in the '70s and '80s in color blindness also. But that's certainly changed now in terms of the discourse.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

But in Sweden it hasn't changed much.

Tobias Hübinette:

Well, it has changed a bit, but it's in no way comparable to the US or the other... I mean the whole anglophone world, right. Canada, Australia, the UK where, I mean, you speak about race all the time and that's not happening here. We speak about class and gender to the same extent as you speak about race, I think

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Tobias, we are at an hour or so I'll try to wrap up here. What is the latest? You have a new book out.

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Well, actually this year I published two books. One on how the adoptees, Koreans and others, but mainly Korean adoptees changed the Swede's view on race. I mean, it's a kind of a book about color blindness and adoption and the other book is about how the Swedish media, discussed issues of race and races in the post-war period. So that is basically only on Sweden. And yeah. And apart from that, well, yeah, I have other books coming out next year and other articles in journals, et cetera. So yeah. I mean my life as a researcher is going on, I suppose. Yeah. For example, right now, before we, yeah, called each other here on Zoom, I was writing on a new application together with another researcher on Asians in Sweden actually. Because no one has researched Asians in Sweden. And that would also include adoptees, for sure. Because adoptees are such a... I mean maybe about 20% of all Asians in Sweden are adoptees actually.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

How do you identify yourself personally?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Well as a Sweden, European, et cetera. And also as adopted Korean. Asian, of course, on the racial level when it comes to how other people perceive me or treat me. And yeah, and also, yeah, adopted Korean. I mean another kind of Korean who is not South Korean or an immigrant, second generation Korean, but an adopted Korean. So I draw the line there so to speak. I think that, and of course we come from South Korea and of course there are commonalities between us and second, especially not maybe the first generation, but the second and yeah, third generation Koreans. But there are also big differences. So that's why I think that we... Of course, there's poorer Korean together with the other Koreans who are immigrants are not adopted, but adopted Korean is kind of a separate thing [crosstalk 00:58:37].

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

Do you talk as, I don't know. In the US, we talk about this adjacent thing. Do you see yourself as white adjacent?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Well, in a way I can see that Korean adoptees are white also on a kind of social constructed level, right, on a kind of performative level. I mean, it's true. Most people would say that I move like a white Swedish man when I walk. My whole facial expressions, they are not like immigrants. Not at all. They are like a white Swedish man, right, because I'm also male. There's a class element, I suppose, also in this and generation element and maybe even a regional element. But if people don't see me, if they just hear me, of course they believe I'm a white man because I speak fluent and perfect Swedish, even with the dialect. So on a performative level, we are also white. So we are many things, right, in that way.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

What would you like to see for the future of Sweden in terms of, I don't know, race or community?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. Well, I want to break the taboo one race, I suppose. That's, yeah, what I'm striving for now. So I've been one of those in Sweden within the academia in Sweden who have tried to create a feat of Swedish critical race and whiteness studies. Looking at Sweden, right, because if usually, if Swedes do speak about race, they only speak about the US. And the reason for that is of course, that we consume all the time, American pop culture, all the time. And also UK pop culture where, I mean, race is there every time, right.

Kaomi Lee (interviewer):

So if Sweden looks to America for entertainment and pop culture, does some of that influence internally ideas about race or is it, do Swedes just say that's a very American thing?

Tobias Hübinette:

Yeah. That's what I would say. That this is kind of weird things that the Americans or the Brits are fixated on. Yeah. And it would give Swedes a kind of superior feeling that we are beyond that now. So these stupid Americans, or these racist Brits, they are obsessed by race. It's that idea. And they would also include minority. So they would also say that also the black Americans are crazy, not just the white Americans because of this fixation on race. So there's even a kind of a expression in Swedish where they speak about... I mean, we don't want the kind of Anglo-American race fixation here. We are over that, something like that. But these stupid people, they are, right. They are...