

# Exploring the Interactive Space of “Outsider Within”

## – Practicing Feminist Situated Knowledge in Studying Transnational Adoption

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### **Abstract**

Central to scholarly discussions within the field of feminist epistemology is the question of a researcher’s positionality and the subsequent impact on knowledge production. In particular, Donna Haraway’s elaboration of “situated knowledge” (1999) has been highly influential. As an epistemological principle, this concept emphasises the researcher’s embodied location within the research context. Yet the question remains, how does one apply this principle within the concrete practices of knowledge production? In a research project based on Norwegian transnational adoptees’ identity work, the author, being an immigrant, was situated as an “outsider within” (Zhao, 2012). How does this positionality influence knowledge production? The concept of “outsider within” comes from standpoint epistemology (Collins, 2004) and has been taken up within black feminist thought to authorise knowledge about dominant society produced from a position of marginality. However as a concrete situatedness, can an “outsider within” position also be used to think about the production of situated knowledge? This article offers an exploration of these questions. The author argues that one way to put feminist situated knowledge to use within an empirical study is through the conceptualization of “outsider within” as a situated interactive space instead of a fixed standpoint.

The first time I visited Norway, in 2002, I took a car trip to a small village . Suddenly I saw a familiar Asian face in this unfamiliar Northern Norwegian landscape. An Asian girl was standing beside the road. I rolled down the window and waved to her. She noticed me and waved back to me. Later I was told that she was adopted from South-Korea.

The first time I showed up for the “adoption coffee” arranged by the local adoption association, one four-year-old girl adopted from China observed me for some time, and then asked her mother, “Mamma, is this Chinese lady my mamma in China?”

These were my first encounter with transnational adoption in Norway.

## **Introduction**

Donna Haraway’s elaboration of “situated knowledge” has been highly influential to the field of feminist knowledge production (Haraway, 1999). For Haraway, this concept underlines the ways in which a research subject is always situated in a specific historical, social and embodied context, from which the research object is then constructed and studied. As an epistemological principle, therefore, “situated knowledge” emphasises the researcher’s embodied location in the research context. Yet the question remains, how does one go about putting this principle to work within the concrete practices of knowledge production? Or put otherwise, how do we understand the methodological implications of this principle in relation to specific empirical studies? In this article, I will clarify this question through an engagement with my own empirical research on transnational adoption and Norwegian transnational adoptees’ construction of Norwegianness (Zhao, 2012). In particular, I reflect upon how my positionality and situatedness as an immigrant researcher mattered in the production of knowledge. Inspired by black feminist thought, I named this situatedness “outsider within” (Collins, 2004) and expected that it would provide me with a privileged knowledge position in conducting the research. However, when this turned out not to be the case in interviews, I had to rethink the connection between positionality and knowledge

production, as well as adjust my research practice according to how this positionality was concretely situated in the research context. Thus by critically examining my “outsider within” position as concrete situatedness, I illustrate a methodology of situated knowledge. In doing so, I argue that instead of understanding “outsider within” as a fixed knowledge position, it is more fruitful to conceptualise it as an interactive space within which to explore the researcher’s situatedness in relation to the research object.

### **Studying Transnational Adoptees as “Outsider Within”**

In a research project on transnational adoption and the construction of nationhood, I interviewed fourteen adult Norwegian transnational adoptees ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-nine (Zhao, 2012). In particular, I was interested in exploring how transnational adoption shapes my informants' understanding of their identity as Norwegian. At the time I started my project, there was an ongoing discussion about positionality and the knowledge work around adoption research. The critique came mainly from adult transnational adoptees who claimed that literature on transnational adoption had been dominated by white mainstream “experts” including academics, psychiatrists, social workers, and even white adoptive parents, so that their voices remained largely unheard (Trenka et al., 2006; Sloth, 2006; Hübinette, 2007). As a result of this critique, more and more adoptees have appeared in adoption studies with a voice that can speak for themselves. For adoptees, this “insider” position clearly grants them a privileged knowledge position – an authentic voice in adoption research. As a foreign researcher who had lived in Norway for six years at the time of conducting the project, I believed that my position – as neither white mainstream nor adoptee – could generate a new and interesting perspective. Inspired by black feminist thought, I name this position “outsider within” (Collins 2004). In addition to that I am a

researcher of colour studying white Norwegian society, I am also an “outsider within” in the sense that, although not adopted, I share certain common identities and experiences with my informants – looking different and being originally from a country where children are sent overseas as transnational adoptees. I believed that this position would grant me certain advantages to access rich interview data and thus develop an insightful analysis.

During the interview process, I perceived myself as located in this “outsider within” position. For example, when my informants told me about their stories of growing up in Norway, I was obviously an “outsider.” Therefore, they often explained things more explicitly or exhaustively, assuming that I would not have the same knowledge about the context or share the same background experience. This insider-outsider relation was reflected in the use of expressions such as: “You know in Norway, we...,” “It is more ... than you can imagine,” “Do you understand what I mean...?” However, when the conversation shifted to the experience of living as a person of colour in Norway, I became an “insider,” and the informants made note of our presumed commonality through statements like “Yeah, you certainly know that,” or “You know what I mean.”

In addition to the productive aspects of my position, however, I also experienced difficulties and challenges in collecting data as an “outsider within.” There were moments when I encountered difficulties guiding the direction of the conversation, when informants did not answer my prompts directly or sometimes diverged substantially from the questions I posed to them. I would have liked to hear how informants (as transnational adoptees) experienced themselves as different in relation to “native-born” Norwegians; however, the main challenge I faced was a reluctance to discuss difference. One interview with an informant named Martin stands out as particularly challenging in this regard. When I first asked if he

had any negative memories of feeling different during his childhood, Martin told me that he was once called “you damn chink!” (“jævla guling” in Norwegian). Because I was interested in the topic of racialised bullying, I kept asking Martin to elaborate on how this experience had influenced his self-perception as Norwegian, despite his unwillingness to talk about it. In the end, he interrupted my question and retorted, “I don’t think a person can live throughout his life without being bullied, right?” Later on, he treated every question concerning the experience of being different as irrelevant for him. In order to encourage him to talk about difference, I brought up my own experience of looking different and being a person from East Asia into the conversation. However, this effort was in vain; consequently I felt more and more uncertain in raising questions. Finally I made the decision to discuss my difficulties of leading the interview with Martin himself, especially given that I was aware of his participation in similar research interviews, and was curious to know how his other experiences compared. He told me that because the other researchers had been adoptees themselves, this enabled them to raise questions that emerged out of a shared experience. Martin's response again raises the question of the relationship between the researcher's identity/positionality and the subject of study. I began with the assumption that the interviews would offer insight into my informants’ perspectives, and thus contribute to my thinking on transnational adoption and identity work in relation to Norwegianness. I had also expected that being an “outsider within” (an immigrant from one of the sending countries for transnational adoption) would generate a closeness or even an intimacy to my informants which would allow me easier access to their perspectives, in comparison with white mainstream researchers. In other words, I expected my positionality as an “outsider within” to be a favourable knowledge position based on certain shared experiences and identities between my informants and myself. Yet, Martin rejected this shared experience

and identity. His statement showed that we were situated in two divergent positions: my informants' as adoptees and mine as an "outsider within." Given all of this, how do I understand and locate my position within the study? In order to answer this question, I will first undertake a theoretical exploration of my situatedness as an "outsider within."

## **Exploring "outsider within" – from feminist standpoint theories to "situated knowledges"**

Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins uses the term "outsider within" to describe the position of African-American women scholars within the U.S. academy. For me, this is a positionality I share in researching Norwegian society as a woman of colour. Collins argues that black women intellectuals can creatively use this marginalised position as both an insider and outsider in relation to white mainstream society "to produce Black feminist thought that reflects a special standpoint on self, family, and society" (Collins, 2004: 103). While I take Collins' elaboration of this concept as my point of departure, I am working with a different set of meanings surrounding the "outsider within" position in my own research. In this project, I consider myself a foreigner/immigrant researching Norwegian society. In that sense, I understood my position as "foreigner" and "newcomer" as providing an angle from which to "see" what may be hidden or obscured to those who occupy a dominant position. Moreover, I was also researching transnational adoption as a person who comes from one of the sending countries for transnational adoption, and who shares certain phenotypic features with my research subjects. I was aware that this "outsider within" perspective lent interest to my study, as I was expected to produce something "new." However, as a newly arrived immigrant, I could also face doubts about my ability to understand and productively reflect upon Norwegian society, as well as transnational

adoption. Therefore, the following question concerned me throughout this study: how do I convince the audience of the relevance of my research? Collins is instructive in this regard, in that she suggests that first, the “outsider within” position constitutes a privileged position from which to gain deeper insights, and, secondly, it is legitimate to include my own personal and cultural biographies within my study.

To fully understand the “outsider within” position that Collins casts as a privileged epistemological position, we need to return to the context of the feminist discussions from which her argument emerged. In feminist science studies, knowledge production is understood in relation to “vision”; that is, knowledge as a question of seeing, and how to see. As developed within this body of literature, vision is conceived as embodied, emphasizing the importance of location, or the position from which the researcher “sees” (Haraway, 1999: 176). In this sense, Collins’ “outsider within” can be understood as an example of a feminist standpoint. Feminist standpoint theory privileges knowledge that is produced from the perspective of women and other subordinated or marginalised people (Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1986; Smith, 1987). For standpoint theory, the positivist understanding of knowledge as objective, universal and value-neutral does not exist, because all knowledge is produced in a certain historical context, and from within specific social positions or standpoints. As a result, the standpoint theorists contend that people in oppressed and marginal positions hold certain epistemological advantages because of their view on power (Harding, 1986; Li and Su, 2005: 21).

In my reading of feminist standpoint theories, the experience of disempowerment grants a “view from below” that privileges knowledge positions occupied by oppressed people. In relating this conceptual framework to my own study, however, I was faced with the

question: whose standpoint counts as the privileged knowledge position? In the context of adoption studies, some adoptees have claimed to possess a privileged knowledge position, based on their own lived experience which can verify the validity and reliability of produced knowledge. Interestingly enough, they also position themselves as “outsider within” in the sense that they are within, yet excluded from, the dominant discourse on transnational adoption (Trenka et al., 2006). When conceptualizing my own “outsider within” as a favourable knowledge position, I in fact recognised adoptees’ privileged position. I believed that my positionality could enable me to more easily approach and include their perspectives concerning questions of nationality, ethnicity and race. However, as I described, this did not work out in the interviews. What I experienced is the large distance, what could even be posed as a gap in understanding, between their standpoint and mine. Moreover, it would be questionable to describe either transnational adoptees or myself as being subordinated or oppressed within Norwegian society. Even though standpoint theories have provided a productive framework for my research, I am dissatisfied with the description of “outsider within” as a position that is both static and perpetually oppressed, especially in light of my experience conducting interviews.

Furthermore, a narrow focus on power relations risks losing the nuances of how I mediate my relationship to informants during the interviews, for example, when we discuss topics like ethnic/national belonging, racism, multiculturalism, and immigration politics. My situatedness as “outsider within” captured the flexibility of a space in which I found myself during my informants' telling of their life stories. It is through subtle dynamics that my informants and I are positioned in relation to each other and co-produced the interviews which then came to form the empirical data for my analysis. In certain moments, I may be included in the informants’ use of the “we,” as in, we are both women who look Asian, we

both represent multicultural Norwegian society, and we are both constructed as model minorities in opposition to the criminalization of other racial groups. At other times I may be excluded from the “we,” for example, when the “we” is deployed to signify the following set of meanings: we, the transnational adoptees, are culturally Norwegian while you are not, we have a Norwegian upbringing while you do not, we speak Norwegian in a way that tells others that we are Norwegian, while you do not. In focusing on these subtle negotiations, what I see are fragmented identities, not only amongst my informants, but also in relation to myself. This point echoes Haraway’s postmodern critique of standpoint theories. In particular, she argues that there is no comprehensive vantage-point to be accessed through the condition or self-identification of subjugation (Haraway, 1999: 176-182). For Haraway, “the greatest resource for would-be ‘knowers’ is our nonessential, nonnaturalizable, fragmented identities and the refusal of the delusion of a return to an ‘original unity’” (Haraway, 1985 in Harding, 1986: 193). Instead of “locking” knowledge production in relation to a fixed condition of subjugation, Haraway provides “a commitment to mobile positioning and to passionate detachment” (Haraway, 1999: 179). That is to say, a researcher’s location or situatedness in a field of knowledge is not a static position, but rather a continual process of positioning and constant movement among various positions or standpoints.

Even though the concept of “situated knowledges” emerges as a response to standpoint theory, I do not read them as necessarily opposed to one another. Rather, I understand them as two theoretical strands that have developed in conversation with each other, and that intersect in terms of their reliance on an epistemology of partial perspectives, and critique of both positivism (seeing from nowhere) and relativism (seeing from everywhere) (Harding, 1992; Haraway, 1999). Building upon Haraway’s critique, Harding has worked to

extend standpoint theory by developing the notion of “strong objectivity”<sup>1</sup> (Harding, 1992, 1993) to bridge the gap between “situated knowledges” and feminist standpoint theory. In her mapping of different epistemological positions within feminism, Nina Lykke describes Haraway’s “situated knowledges” as a revision of feminist standpoint epistemology, one that shifts the focus *from* a certain privileged epistemological position *to* a “multiple situating” or a process of positioning (Lykke, 2008:146).

Building from Lykke's understanding, and based on my research experience, I argue that the concept of “outsider within” can be expanded from Collins' elaboration within feminist standpoint theory to examine the researcher’s situatedness and process of positioning within the practice of concrete empirical research. Rather than understanding it as a static position, it is more fruitful to conceptualise it as a situated interactive space which makes it possible to explore the process of multiple positioning as well as the relations that emerge through this process. Framed in this way, to authorise knowledge production, the emphasis is placed on how the researcher brings this concrete situatedness to bear upon the practice of research.

In a recent discussion on the question of positionality in feminist knowledge production, Lorraine Nencel emphasises the importance of reflexive analysis and writing in feminist research when she suggests a need to conceptualise reflexivity as situated (Nencel, 2014). She points out that the most common form of reflexivity is a self-reflexive exercise which deconstructs the researcher’s positionality and discloses how certain assumptions, histories and identities influenced construction of intersubjective research relations and processes

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<sup>1</sup> In her elaboration of this concept Harding writes, “Strong objectivity requires that the subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge. Thus strong objectivity requires what we can think of as ‘strong reflexivity’.” (Harding 2004[1993]: 136)

(Nencel 2014: 76). Being reflexive can thus be said to be one methodological consequence for “situated knowledges”. In the following section, I will revisit my research and illustrate how I have practiced a self-reflexive exercise by critically examining my situatedness as the “outsider within” and demonstrating how a deconstruction of it has contributed to my developing analysis. My intention here is to extend the discussion on methodological implications of “situated knowledges” by focusing on these two questions: Firstly, when a research position did not work out (say in data collection) as one expected in the research design, what would be the consequences for the further research practice, such as conducting the analysis? That is, how does one adjust the research practice in relation to the question of positionality and situatedness? Secondly, after gaining a critical purchase of the “outsider within” concept, can we still apply it as a promising location for knowledge production, and how? With regard to the question of positionality and the politics of knowledge production around transnational adoption, what is the relevance of my research as an “outsider within”?

### **Critical examinations of my situatedness as the “outsider within”**

As described, the whole discussion around the question of positionality and situatedness started when I realised that the expected intimacy between my informants and myself instead turned out to be an unbridgeable gap in understandings. To explore my situatedness, I decided to critically revisit my interview practice where such a gap was experienced, with a focus on the positioning process that my informants and I negotiate during concrete interview situations. To weave this gap into my analysis, I adopted a constructionist and interactionist perspective (Järvinen, 2005). In short, I consider interview data to be coproduced by *both parties* involved – the interviewer (the researcher) and the

interviewees (the informants). This understanding is consistent with feminist theorizations of “situated knowledges” and their emphasis on the ways in which the outcomes of the research process are inseparable from the researcher’s position. If my situatedness as “outsider within” is clearly shaping the interview data, this relationship must be reflected in the methodology. From this perspective, I approached my interviews as a kind of negotiation. In any negotiation, confrontation cannot be avoided. Margaretha Järvinen (2005: 29) speaks to this point when she describes the interview setting as a meeting “where (at least) two sets of premises, attitudes and interests confront each other.”<sup>2</sup> The gap in communication that I experienced can be understood as precisely this kind of confrontation. This suggests that in order to critically engage my situatedness, I need to investigate the underlying premises upon which the research and interview questions rely, and thus take for granted. Here, I illustrate two examples of deconstructive reading of two interview episodes which are most significant towards shaping my further research practice.

### **Deconstructing the meaning of biology – a discussion of “Tore på Sporet”**

“*Tore på Sporet*” was a popular Norwegian TV programme premised upon helping people search for and reunite with someone, often biologically related, with whom they had lost contact. Anchored by the journalist and former athlete Tore Strømøy, the programme ran for six seasons from 1996 to 2009. Despite the high audience ratings, the programme has been widely criticised by adoptees who challenge the focus on biological roots and consider it unnecessary to search for their biological parents (Follevåg, 2002; Sand, 2006). Norwegian adoption researcher Geir Follevåg describes the popularity of the TV programme as an effect of dominant biocentric thinking among the general population (Follevåg, 2002). Follevåg’s

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<sup>2</sup> My translation from Danish.

understanding of biology as socially constructed can be taken as the critical lens through which to analyze an episode of “*Tore på sporet*,” one that specifically takes up the topic of transnational adoption.

In this episode<sup>3</sup>, Tore Strømøy helps a Korean woman search for her biological son who was placed for adoption in Norway more than 20 years ago. The boy’s birth father made the decision about the adoption without the consent of his wife, the birth mother, following their divorce. The birth mother was never told about the circumstances of the adoption, and had been searching for her missing son ever since. The first part of the programme tells a moving and tragic story about a loving mother who has lost her son. With the help of Tore Strømøy, the woman finally reunites with her son in Norway. The scene of the reunion between the mother and the son was particularly touching, and I found myself strongly identifying with the birth mother.

The next day, I met one of my informants named Lisa, who happened to have watched the same episode of the programme, however with a diverging perception to mine.

*Lisa: There are so many people who have watched the TV programme “Tore på Sporet” with that guy who travels around with people to find their families. Do you know the programme I am talking about?*

*Author: “Tore på Sporet”? Yes, I have watched the programme. In fact, I just watched it yesterday. [Laughs]*

*Lisa: Yeah, right. [Laughs] And the thing is that many people expect, because of this programme, or want everyone who are adopted to travel back to look for their families. But this is not true. I don’t want to do it and I know many adoptees who don’t want to either. But of course there are those who want to.*

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<sup>3</sup> The episode was shown on 25th of October, 2009 on NRK 1.

When Lisa articulated her critique of Tore Strømøy and his programme, she effectively marked a gap *between* the adoptees – herself included – for whom biology is not important *and* Tore Strømøy's audience who feels emotionally drawn in by the programme (this audience includes myself). To some extent, the gap suggests that those of us who are moved by the programme, and thus implicitly affirm the significance of biology, cannot really understand how adoptees experience their adoptive kinship and life without biological roots. This gap also resonates with Martin's previous suggestion that because I am not adopted myself, I am unable to ask the kinds of questions that will “trigger” good stories from my informants.

Although I tried my best to think from the adoptees' standpoint, for example by watching “*Tore på Sporet*” through Follevåg's critical lens, I ultimately did not succeed. Now I was in a conversation with Lisa, and she was telling me something similar as Geir Follevåg does].

While I may intellectually understand the arguments presented by Lisa (and Follevåg), I felt that there is a collision *between* our perspectives concerning the meaning of biology. So I asked further, focusing on the episode that we both watched the day before.

*Author: Yes, I understand what you say. But at the same time I ... I, ehh... for example when I watched the TV programme, because I am not adopted myself (Lisa: Mmm.), I cannot put myself in your situation when watching it. (Lisa: No.) At the end of the programme shown yesterday, the presenter met the adopted boy and his adoptive parents in the studio. They had a very short conversation (Lisa: yes.) where the boy said that it was not the Korean woman who was his mother, but it was the mum and dad in Norway who were his parents. (Lisa: Yes, yes.). I think the words hurt a lot, because his biological mother didn't know about the adoption and she had thought of him every single day before she finally met him in Norway. As a biological mother myself, I think it is difficult to understand.*

*Lisa: Yes, but ... Can she really expect something else? She cannot expect that he will say, “They, the adoptive parents in Norway, are not my parents anymore.” You cannot expect that when a child has been with a family all his life. Whether they are biological or not, they are always my parents. When I was ill, it was they who took care of me; it was they who tied my shoes when I needed the help. It was they ... right? This is not about genes, but about everything around us, isn't it?*

Despite the possibility of tension, I chose to bring up my “biocentric” position with Lisa. When I told Lisa my thoughts about the programme, I placed myself in the biological mother’s position. From this position, I expressed my confusion and disappointment with the adopted son’s pronouncement that he did not recognise his biological mother as his mother. Responding to my puzzlement, Lisa placed herself in the adopted son’s position and saw me as occupying the biological mother’s position. Notice how she changes subject positions: “Can *she* expect anything else? *She* cannot expect that *he* would say ...” “*You* cannot expect ... they are still *my* parents. When *I* was ill...when *I* need help...” A discussion of the television programme between Lisa and I transformed into one between an adopted child and a (biological) mother who wants biology to mean something.

Through this disagreement, I was able to better understand Lisa and Follevåg’s point of view, and to understand their perspective in relation to my own standpoint as a biological mother. As Lisa pointed out, when she was ill, it was not her biological parents who took care of her, but her adoptive parents; when she needed help, it was not her biological parents who tied her shoelaces, but her adoptive parents. In other words, her biological parents have been absent in her upbringing, and it is her adoptive parents who have been consistently present. When rereading the transcript from my discussion with Lisa, I asked myself: am I *only* a biological mother? I am my son’s biological mother, and at the same time, I am present in his everyday life. In this sense, I am not only a biological mother, but also an “adoptive” mother in Lisa’s use of the term. Until this point, I had let my biological role speak automatically for my “adoptive” or social role as a mother. The kinship between parents and children is not only a function of biology but a relationship that is continuously produced and maintained through an everyday presence in each other’s lives. I had taken for granted that the social necessarily derives from, and is secondary to, the biological. By deconstructing my own

governing assumptions, I came to a better understanding of what Follevåg means by “biocentrism.”

## Deconstructing the meaning of “birth country” – my interview with “China girl”

As the name of my informant suggests, “China girl” was born in China and adopted in Norway when she was still an infant. Before the interview, I felt excited and even eager to meet her. This was mainly because she was adopted from China, where I am from. I thought that this shared background would make it easier for me to interview her and that I might be able to get some “unique” stories from her.

However, the interview with “China girl” did not go at all as I expected. As was the case with Martin, it turned out that my expectations of a shared experience and sense of commonality were a product of my own imagination. I had presumed that her origin, or birth country would be significant for “China girl,” and it would certainly influence her identity construction as Norwegian. So I tried several times to “trigger” a reflection on the “connection” to her birth country in the interview. I asked whether she was interested in knowing more about China, whether she was interested in knowing someone from China, and whether she would experience any particular emotions eating in a Chinese restaurant. But her answer to all of the above was always and simply no. She was no more or less interested in China than other Norwegian youths. I also asked whether she was interested in visiting China. While she did express interest, she noted that the trip would be more meaningful for her parents than for herself.

Hence, nothing unique emerged from my interview with “China girl.” That we were both born in China did not bring us any sense of intimacy. On the contrary, I felt there was a

marked distance in that “China girl” pushed back against my assumptions about what it means to be born in China. This made me reflect on whether origin or birth country is as important as I had assumed, and in particular, why I considered these to be meaningful components of identity while “China girl” did not. These questions sparked a process of deconstructing my own assumptions about origins.

I grew up in China in the 1980s and 90s under the communist regime. During my upbringing, I was taught to be proud of my motherland and of being Chinese. Since the 1980s, with the advent of economic reform and the opening up of the country to foreign markets and investment,<sup>4</sup> the Chinese government made great efforts to attract overseas Chinese back to the mainland. One of these initiatives sought to foster a common Chinese identity among mainland populations and overseas Chinese populations (see also Ong, 1999). Under this political and economic climate, Chinese artists overseas began to appear on stage with the understanding that their principal audience would be the mainland Chinese public. Popular songs by overseas artists such as Zhang Mingmin’s “My Chinese heart”<sup>5</sup> and Fei Xiang’s “Hometown’s clouds,”<sup>6</sup> in 1980s expressed pride in a Chinese identity and longing for the motherland. The songs were once so popular that even now, nearly thirty years later, most Chinese people of my generation can still remember their lyrics. In this way, domestic Chinese nationalism was strengthened through overseas patriotism.

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<sup>4</sup> The programme of Chinese economic reform was first launched in 1978. “Reform” here refers to the economic reform of decentralising the state control and gradually turning to a market economy. “Opening” refers to the opening up of the country to foreign investment, and permission for entrepreneurs to start businesses.

<sup>5</sup> 张明敏 «我的中国心»; Zhang Mingmin is a singer from Hong Kong.

<sup>6</sup> 费翔 «故乡的云»; Fei Xiang is a Chinese-American pop icon and musical singer.

The expectation that I would have something in common with “China girl” was bolstered by songs such as Zhang’s “My Chinese heart,” the lyrics of which consolidate exactly this sense of a common identity: *“Even though I have western clothes on me, my heart is still Chinese. My ancestors had long before determined all I am is Chinese. Yangtze River, the Great Wall, Huangshan Mountain, the Yellow River, all means so much in my mind ...”*<sup>7</sup> When “China girl” told me that she would like to see the Great Wall, I hoped to “open” up a conversation about her connection to the “motherland” that Zhang’s song dramaticises. In answer to whether the Great Wall carries any special meaning for her, “China girl” answered:

*“Ehh... no, it is nothing special. ... It is a well-known structure, worldwide. This is the only reason... I remember I saw it in the movie Mulan when I was younger.”*

This response made it clear that “China girl” did not grow up in a context similar to mine. While in my mind the Great Wall is intimately linked to the pride of being Chinese expressed in the lyrics of “My Chinese heart,” “China girl” had no knowledge of the song, and grew up singing only Norwegian songs. If the Great Wall carries such different meanings for each of us, then this suggests that there is no such thing as a “Chinese heart” or “Chinese blood.” My assumptions about the biological grounds of national identity cultivated by the Chinese nationalist project thus came under scrutiny. I came to the understanding that the notion of “origin” can be inscribed with various meanings, and does not have an automatic effect on a person’s identity construction.

### **Methodological implications of the analysis**

These two examples of my self-reflexive practice revealed that I had taken the meaning of biology and birth country for granted when framing my study. If these assumptions turned

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<sup>7</sup> My translation from Chinese.

out to be wrong, what else needs to be done in further analysis of the interview data produced? In other words, how does one adjust one's research practice according to the researcher's situatedness? This question is about the methodological consequence of "situated knowledges" in addition to being reflexive and disclosing assumptions, identities and experiences.

In this study, I tried to show how transnationally adopted persons negotiate and make sense of their identity in relation to Norwegianness. As a point of departure, I considered "looking different" (the phenotypical difference) and "being adopted" as two forms of difference that shape the experience of transnational adoptees. As a person who does not fit the dominant construction of "Norwegianness" myself, and given my reading of the literature on migration studies in Norway, I knew that phenotypical difference would have significant bearing upon adoptees' claim to Norwegianness. Yet, as a difference related to transnational adoption, I assumed that phenotypical difference also made the condition of being adopted impossible to hide or forget; that is, this difference both marks the condition of adoption, as well as its transnational constellation. Thus, even though I had formulated two *different* differences, they were intimately related in my mind. Through the practice of deconstruction, I came to see that my questions about the relationship between these differences and Norwegian identity were focused upon the condition of adoption itself. According to my initial hypothesis, the condition of being adopted, and in particular, being marked as "from" another country, would serve as the critical site of negotiations around difference and Norwegianness. This was also why I had expected that my position as an "outsider within" would generate intimacy with my informants and thus function as a privileged knowledge position. However, the two examples I discussed in this paper reveal that the assumptions surrounding my original focus and hypothesis needed to be rethought.

These uninterrogated assumptions were ultimately the source of the “gap” I experienced during the interviews between myself and my informant.

As a result, I began to reconsider how “looking different” shapes my informants' understanding of their identity as Norwegian. From this new starting point, I was able to see that the sense of “looking different” in relation to Norwegianness is *not* about the condition of being adopted, but rather concerns the production of “race” in relation to a minoritizing and majoritizing process, that is to say Norwegianness, as a majority position is a racial production of being white (Zhao, 2012). As a matter of fact, my situatedness as “outsider within” creates a space for a mutual process of minoritising and majoritising during the interviews. With a focus on meaning of biology and birth country, I intended to interview my informants from a “minority” position, and thus expected to collect stories of their experience being bullied, discriminated, or excluded from Norwegianness as a collective identity. However, some of them, like Martin and Lisa, distanced themselves from the premise of marginalisation that informed my questions, and clearly marked their “majority” position. Moreover, they each articulated their “majority” position precisely through a claim to their adoption background. For them, “being adopted” does not produce a sense of difference in relation to Norwegian identity. They seemed to tell me, “Well, although we both look different, whenever I reveal my adoption background, people consider me as white Norwegians. Unlike you, I have Norwegian parents and have grown up in Norway.” By doing so, as an “outsider within” I was placed in a minoritised position in relation to theirs as a part of the “majority”. In this way, the interview data not only illustrates the process of minoritising and majoritising, but also provides me with an insight into how “Norwegianness” as nationhood is constructed, contested and revised. This suggested a necessary switch of analytical focus, *from* the production of difference between “being

adopted” and Norwegian identity to the construction of Norwegianness along a majoritising and minoritising process. Consequently, the study was ultimately framed within postcolonial theories of racialization, whiteness and othering processes (Zhao, 2012).

## **Researching as “outsider within” – positionality and the politics of knowledge around transnational adoption**

In general, examining my situatedness as “outsider within” enabled me to rethink my research design and complete the study with a solid analysis of the relations between transnational adoption and the construction of nationhood, though with a different analytical focus than initially planned. We may now go back to the question I raised in the beginning: as an “outsider within” or an immigrant researcher, did I produce something new? How does my positionality matter in the knowledge finally produced? And how does this knowledge contribute to transnational adoption studies? These questions concern the politics of knowledge around transnational (also named intercountry or transracial) adoption. In this contested arena characterised by competing discourses and conflicting perspectives, who knows and who knows better (see Trenka et al., 2006; Gibbons and Rutabi, 2012)? Transnational adoption is also a wide and interdisciplinary knowledge field, which touches on complex issues, such as policy and regulations, demographics, child welfare, special needs education, family relations and kinship, identity, globalization, race, ethnic relations and so on. Instead of asking who knows and who knows better, it is more important to ask who knows (better) – on what?

Adoption is traditionally understood as a means to construct a family. However, my study examines the meaning of adoption in relation to construction of a national identity, such as Norwegianness, which again offers a unique insight on ethnic and racial relations within

current Norwegian society. To this end, my positionality as an immigrant researcher, or an “outsider within” was indeed a favourable knowledge position, not (only) because as a marginalised or disempowered position it provides me with a vision from below, as stated in standpoint theories, but because it provides me with an interactive space of negotiations where two different visions meet: the vision of my informants as transnational adoptees and my own as an immigrant. And, as a result, my analysis of Norwegianness progressed through the interactions between these two visions situated throughout the interview. In this way, the interview data itself illustrates an ongoing process of inclusion and exclusion around Norwegianness. Here my position as an “outsider within” is unique and significant, because it allowed the inclusion/exclusion process to turn into a process of majoritisation and minoritisation. This is the advantage I have from my positionality as “outsider within”. This advantage was made clear to me after a critical examination of its concrete situatedness in the study.

In other words, as an immigrant researcher, the “outsider within” can be both a favourable and unfavourable position, all depending on what kind of knowledge one is producing. I may not, as one of my informants pointed out, be able to collect the “authentic” inner stories of the transnational adoptees by raising questions that emerged out of a shared experience. However, for me, the relevance of the research is not a question of how “genuine” or “accurate” the interview data will be, led by a certain fixed position or identity. Instead, it is a question of what kind of relations the interview data deploys and how to deal with these relations accordingly in relation to the research question and goal. This is how positionality matters in relation to the politics of knowledge production. I argue that instead of perceiving “outsider within” as a fixed privileged knowledge position, it is more fruitful to conceptualise it as a situated interactive space within which to explore the researcher’s situatedness in

relation to the research object. This offers one illustration of how feminist situated knowledge applies to an empirical study.

## **Conclusion:**

In this article, I have used my own research to illustrate how a critical examination of the researcher's situatedness in a concrete empirical study has implications for the research process and the outcomes that are drawn. I discuss this question in relation to theories of feminist epistemology, in particular standpoint theory and "situated knowledge", that specifically engage the relationship between the researcher's location and knowledge production. My contribution in this paper is to consider the methodological implications of these theories within the context of an empirical study. Donna Haraway (1999: 176) has noted that, "Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges." But how does one practice "situated knowledge" in an empirical study? The situatedness I describe in this article concerns the positionality of "outsider within", which has been claimed as a privileged site of knowledge production within standpoint theory. However, I interrogate whether "outsider within" necessarily constitutes a privileged knowledge position. Through a discussion about my positionality as an "outsider within" and its influence on the production of knowledge regarding transnational adoptions, I suggest conceptualising "outsider within" as a situated interactive space instead of a fixed knowledge position. I argue this is one way to put feminist situated knowledge to use.

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