

# Retoryka liczb

## Rhetoric of Numbers

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**Kinship, Counterpublics, and Transnational Korean Adoptees**  
**Pokrewieństwo, „kontrpubliczność” i ponadnarodowe adopcje z Korei**

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## Kinship, Counterpublics, and Transnational Korean Adoptees

What is the *raison d'être* of a counterpublic? Theories of counterpublics are not in agreement on the question. Theories based on identity and oppositional politics have been challenged by discursive theories that extend the concept beyond that of a “reform program” (Warner 2002, 119), demonstrating that counterpublics can be identified in their discursive marginalization from dominant publics (Asen 2000, Warner 2002). Yet this definitional shift clouds possibilities of purpose based on kinship. In particular, Warner’s (2002) expansive conception of counterpublic membership as constituted by “stranger sociability” (Warner 2002, 121) untethers it from identity and agency, complicating the transformative poesis he envisions.

Eleana J. Kim’s (2010) work on transnational Korean adoptees identifies an “adoptee counterpublic” (Kim 2010, 5) whose members are joined through a non-normative kinship based not on biology or culture, but on shared “misfit identification” with dominant ways of belonging (93). Kim bases her conception of the adoptee counterpublic on Warner’s model, and she emphasizes its discursivity over a definition based on identity. Yet in linking the adoptee counterpublic to an alternate form of kinship, Kim reorients the discursive counterpublic toward a purpose, hinting at what transformative poesis could look like, a “world making” (Warner 2002, 114) that has the potential to rework altogether what it means to be kin.

For Habermas ([1962] 1989), the public sphere is a forum for deliberation and debate, an intermediate site between private citizens and the apparatus of the state in which public opinion acts as a crucial check on the state’s governance over the private sphere. Counterpublic theories originate with Nancy Fraser’s (1990) public sphere critique, in which she argues that the assumption of equal participation in Habermas’ deliberative model institutionalizes inequality based on social status. To counter the exclusion of subordinated groups, Fraser proposes the *subaltern counterpublics*, discursive sites in which subordinated groups can engage in counter-discourses with the goal of having their interests considered in the wider public sphere. Fraser’s counterpublics are contestatory, oriented toward publicity and the agitation of broader publics. It is a model rooted in a normative vision of what it

means to be oppositional: subaltern counterpublics take recognition by the dominant public sphere as their goal, which entails the reification of the “identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990, 67) of subordinated social groups themselves.

Catherine Squires (2002) argues that defining counterpublics with relation to the dominant public sphere on the basis of group identity obscures their heterogeneity. She proposes three new categories: enclave publics, or safe spaces for gathering resources; counterpublics, which have actively oppositional agendas; and satellite publics, which maintain separate institutions by choice. These differ in “how they respond to dominant social pressure” (Squires 2002, 457), with maximally oppressive conditions apparently yielding enclave publics, while counterpublics are made possible when conditions improve. Squires acknowledges heterogeneity and offers possibilities for non-oppositional counterpublics, but by linking each type to the severity of oppressive conditions exerted by the dominant public, she is unable to avoid the trap of normativity she critiques in Fraser’s model, nor does she avoid essentializing the identity categories comprising publics themselves.

Robert Asen (2000) and Michael Warner (2002) pose a discursive notion of the counterpublic that moves away from definitions based on identity, opposition, or recognition. Asen points out the insufficiency of categories of person, place, or topic in defining what is “counter” about counterpublics, locating this quality instead in “participants’ recognition of exclusion from wider public spheres and its articulation through alternative discourse practices and norms” (Asen 2000, 427). Warner similarly counters definitions of counterpublics based on essential identity or program of reform, focusing instead on their discursive difference. A public, according to Warner, is dependent on “stranger-sociability” (Warner 2002, 87): members aren’t known in advance, but are identified through their participation in discourse. For counterpublics, stranger sociability is constitutive: strangers are “marked” by their participation in indecorous discourses that “in other contexts would be regarded with hostility” (Warner 2002, 119), and it is this indecorousness that prevents the counterpublic’s lifeworld from being taken for granted as universal. Therefore, though all publics are “poetic world making” (Warner 2002, 114), it is counterpublics whose poesis has the potential to be “transformative, not replicative entirely” (Warner 2002, 122).

Yet how this transformation of *Weltanschauung* might take place, and what it could look like, is unclear. Warner admits that agency is an obstacle for counterpublics (Warner 2002, 122-23), and his expansive conceptualization, in which the nature of the counterpublic “discloses itself in interaction” (Warner 2002, 122) with infinite strangers, is potentially too diffuse to account for those qualities on which Fraser’s model leaned too heavily: kinship of membership, identity, purpose. How can a counterpublic that is constitutively dependent on stranger relationality

sufficiently cohere to form a common identity or political purpose? How can it hope to achieve transformative poesis?

Eleana J. Kim (2010) poses a compelling alternative with the “adoptee counterpublic” (Kim 2010, 139) of Korean adoptees living in the United States, a racialized subaltern group for whom existing categories of identity and kinship based on race, nation, culture, or biology are insufficient. Over 100,000 South Korean children were adopted to the U.S. between 1953-2008 (Kim 2010, 20-21). Adoptees, who fully belong neither to their white adoptive culture, where they are marked as foreign, or to their country, race, or culture of origin, are severed from traditional categories of belonging, resulting in a sense of loss, grief, dislocation, and in-betweenness. Subjected to the “involuntary forfeiture” (Kim 2010, 97) of connections to history or culture, adoptees find themselves “split between an internal white identity and an external Asian body” (92), and “mis-fit with dominant national, ethnic, and cultural modes” (Kim 2010, 94).

It is in this “mis-fit” identification that Kim locates a novel form of kinship association based on shared experiences of disidentification. “Adoptee kinship” refers to “relationships of intimacy and identification actualized through . . . continued practices of care and reciprocity” (Kim 2010, 95), forming a kinship that is “eminently collective, contingent, and most of all, social” (Kim 2010, 6). Adoptees’ contingent kinship is always being constructed and reworked; it is the continuous circulation of adoptee community discourses and performances of kinship that constitute the “adoptee counterpublic” (Kim 2010, 100), a deterritorialized social imaginary brought into being by the very impossibility of identification itself.

Kim’s conception of the adoptee counterpublic takes up the discursivity of Warner’s model, while allowing for a complex definition of membership and identity based on adoptee kinship. Stranger sociability finds a concrete manifestation in a counterpublic whose members work kinship through their interactions; identity is formed out of disidentification, creating contingent, social kinship association. Participation in the adoptee counterpublic can even lead to localized forms of collective political action (Kim 2010, 141). Kim’s concept incorporates both discursivity and identity, without resorting either to normative definitions of a goal based on essential identity or to diffuse, non-agential discursivity.

Kim follows Warner in framing her counterpublic as “a form of performative ‘world-making’” (Kim 2010, 5)—yet unlike Warner, she opens possibilities for agency, and for radical worldmaking through adoptee kinship. Jacqueline Stevens (2005) proposes an alternate, emancipatory conception of kinship based not on the genetic family but on the contingency and free will of the adoptive family. As a form that could “deepen all our connections” (Stevens 2005, 94), Stevens’ adoptive kinship offers a vision of transformative poesis rooted in Kim’s concept of adoptee kinship.

Transcending the question of whether a counterpublic is oppositional, and therefore based on essential identities, or discursive, and therefore effectively unknowable in its membership and potential for agency, Kim's adoptee counterpublic offers a complex way of conceptualizing counterpublic identity, membership, and purpose. As a counterpublic predicated on nonnormative, social kinship that is continuously worked through in counterpublic interaction, it opens possibilities for transformative worldmaking, offering opportunities not only to form a kinship community outside of dominant modes of belonging, but to rework the very notion of kinship itself.

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