

## “Loss is more than sadness”

### Reading Dissent in Transracial Adoption Melodrama in *The Language of Blood* and *First Person Plural*

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Somehow, I felt that the American adoptive parents didn't quite see the orphans and the mothers as people but rather as interesting specimens, a menagerie of personified sorrow.<sup>1</sup>

Korean adoptee author Jane Jeong Trenka writes the words “Loss is more than sadness,” in her 2003 memoir *The Language of Blood*.<sup>2</sup> She is describing her life at a crossroads of grief after the death of her birth mother, estrangement from her adoptive parents, and administrative runaround from her adoption agency. Recently produced narrative works by transracial and transnational adoptees focus on sadness, loss, and trauma as central experiences. This idea of sadness as an integral part of the transracial adoption experience stands in contrast to the other, more dominant representation of transracial adoption as an overwhelmingly positive experience marked by familial fulfillment, generosity, and unconditional, colorblind love.<sup>3</sup> However, within recent transracial adoptee-centered and/or authored works, a different characterization of the adoptee as a tragic survivor of adoption-related family and social trauma has taken shape.

These works include the written memoirs (such as *The Unforgotten War: Dust of the Streets* by Korean adoptee Thomas Park Clement,<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Sarahs* by African American-White biracial adoptee Catherine McKinley,<sup>5</sup> *A Single Square Picture* by Korean adoptee Katy Robinson,<sup>6</sup> *Ten Thousand Sorrows* by Korean adoptee Elizabeth Kim,<sup>7</sup> and *The Language of Blood* by Korean adoptee Jane Jeong Trenka, and documentary or documentary memoir on film, such as *Daughter from Danang* (on Vietnamese adoptee Heidi Bub) directed by Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco,<sup>8</sup> *Passing Through* by Korean adoptee Nathan Adolfson,<sup>9</sup> and *First Person Plural*, directed by Korean adoptee Deann Borshay.<sup>10</sup> Like many other memoirs, each of these stories

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1. Jane Jeong Trenka, *The Language of Blood: A Memoir* (St. Paul: Borealis Publications of the Minnesota Historical Society, 2003), 103.

2. *Ibid.*, 160.

3. See adoptive parent memoirs such as *The Seed from the East* by Bertha Holt, *Family Nobody Wanted* by Helen Grigsby Doss and international adoption “how to” guides such as *How to Adopt Internationally: A Guide for Agency-Directed and Independent Adoptions* by Jean Nelson Erichsen and Heino R Erichsen, *International Adoption: Sensitive Advice for Prospective Parents* by Jean Knoll and *The International Adoption Handbook: How to Make an Overseas Adoption Work for You* by Myra Alpersen Murphy.

4. Thomas Park Clement, *The Unforgotten War: Dust of the Streets* (T.P. Clement, 1998).

5. Catherine E. McKinley, *The Book of Sarahs: A Family in Parts* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2003).

6. Katy Robinson, *A Single Square Picture: A Korean Adoptee's Search for Her Roots* (New York: Berkley Pub Group, 2002), 297.

7. Elizabeth Kim, *Ten Thousand Sorrows* (Random House, 2000).

8. Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco, *Daughter from Danang*, Videorecording. Interfaze Educational Productions, Inc. 2002.

9. *Passing Through*, Videorecording. Directed by Nathan Adolfson. Center for Asian American Media, 1998.

10. Deann Borshay, *First Person Plural*, Videorecording. National Asian American Telecommunications Association, 2000.

has primary elements of tragedy and sadness at the core of its narrative, but in these memoirs, tragic elements are directly related to adoption experiences, either as causal or consequential of each subject's adoption status.

Though other transracial adoptee narratives have been produced in English and other languages, the listing I've noted here represents a majority of the currently available creative works by (or about, in the case of *Daughter from Danang*) adoptees. In this light, it appears that the genre of memoir, both filmed and written, has emerged as the predominant form within transracial adoptee cultural production, in a body of work that has been growing since the mid-1990s. Most adoptees who publish work on the adoption experience do so using autobiographical, not fictional, forms, in step with the rise of the memoir as a highly marketable genre within the U.S. publishing industry during the 1990s. While a handful of films, television shows and novels have been produced that focus on transracial adoptee characters, the novelists, screenwriters and directors who produce these works are not themselves transracially adopted (most recently, see the novels *Somebody's Daughter* by Marie Myung-Ok Lee and *Digging to America* by Anne Tyler). The genre choice of memoir and the overarching themes of trauma and sadness are related in that popular contemporary works of memoir—especially if they are authored by individuals who are not already famous—often have melodramatic narratives that focus on traumatic events and melancholic outcomes. The popularity of nonfiction forms other than memoir, such as “reality” television and television talk shows, further reflects the current popular public interest in the extraordinary (and often tragic) dramas of ordinary individuals.

While studies about transracial adoption date to the late 1960s, adoptee narrative accounts of the transracial adoption experience have only recently become available. This is probably partly because the adoptees who carry these experiences have also recently come of age, and partly because interest in transracial adoption in America has grown in the last thirty years as the practice of transracial adoption has continued and expanded. Because a surge in transracial and intercountry adoptions began to take place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the first visible generation of transracial adoptees came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Before this time, the subjects of most transracial adoption studies were still children. Today there is yet a general lack of academic and analytical narrative material on transracial adoption; most narrative accounts were not intended for use as academic or analytical texts, but to create community or awareness around the issues that transracial adoptees face.

### **Multiracial Family, Colorblind Family, Normative Family: The Landscapes of Transracial Adoption Dominant Discourses**

Autobiographical texts are filled with choices that their authors make; when I examined transracial adoptee memoirs, I wondered, why so many of these stories were marked by trauma, sadness and melodrama?. One reason may be that adoptee authors feel compelled to stand in opposition to and contestation of the dominant narrative of transracial adoption that focuses on adoptive parents instead of transracial adoptees. I argue that dominant discourses about transracial and transnational adoption in the United State are also controlled by parents and adoption agencies, who are for the most part, White (often using the U.S. publishing industry as an apparatus, a mostly White industry geared to predominantly White audiences). For parents, the experience of adoption often includes frustration with the bureaucratic and legal processes of adoption—of which most adoptees are unaware—but is overwhelmingly focused on the joy and fulfillment of becoming parents through adoption. For their part, adoption agencies and related businesses are the suppliers to this huge demand for adoptees and are responsible for much of the material designed to educate parents about adoption. While adoptees and potential adoptees might be one type of client for adoption agencies, parents and prospective parents are

definitely the consumers. As the consumers in the multi-million dollar industry of adoption, parents (or prospective parents) pay for the publications, the travel packages, the culture camp experiences, and the adoption expenses themselves. So in our consumer-based society, it comes as no surprise that adoptive parents are seen and see themselves at the center of the adoption experience.

he parent-dominated discourse supports and is supported by a more broadly neo-liberal ideal of colorblindness, that is, the refusal to see race as socially meaningful. Transracial adoption—the creation of successful multiracial families through legal (rather than biological) means—is seen, in this context, as the ultimate proof that colorblindness works. The oft-repeated, and very sincerely expressed, parental rhetoric, “I love you unconditionally and I see you as my child, not as an adopted person or a person of color,” while certainly well-intentioned, does not reflect the experience of the children who are generally unable to escape experiences of racialization outside, and sometimes inside, the home. These parental sentiments tend to be interpreted within the popular “love conquers all” trope without an acknowledgement of the very complex work of managing a White-dominated but polycultural society *and* a White-parented but multiracial home. Partly due to the general stigma around adoption, adoptive parents are broadly understood as saints and saviors willing to take in strangers as their own, and thus valorized in relation to adoptees who are become the charitable project upon which parental good deeds are bestowed. So even beyond the experiences of those immediately involved in adoption (adoptive parents, adoptees, birth parents, and adoption agencies), adoptive parents remain at the center of transracial adoption experience.

Furthermore, social welfare research generally corroborates popular depictions of transracial adoption as unproblematic. Early empirical studies of the transracial adoption experience in the late 1970s and early 1980s focused on the experience of adoptive parents and their assessment of their children’s experience (as opposed to sampling adoptees directly). At the time, a sizable group of adult adoptees was, of course, unavailable for study and consideration. Most researchers concluded that parents were satisfied with their adoption experience, and were even surprised that parents were having fewer problems than anticipated; parents generally gauged their children to be normally adjusted.<sup>11</sup>

Interviews with parents and children in transracially adoptive families were used in the Simon-Altstein Twenty-Year Study to assess the adoption experience. In a related study, Simon and Altstein also used their 1991 Twenty-Year Study interviews with Korean adoptees and their parents. Summarizing their findings, they noted that “Korean transracial adoptees are aware of their backgrounds but are not particularly interested in making them the center of their lives. They feel good about having grown up with the families they did. They are committed to maintaining close ties with their adopted families and are supportive of policies that promote transracial adoptions.”<sup>12</sup> This well characterizes most of the results of social welfare-oriented transracial or international adoption studies. Finding after finding confirms that the adjustment of transracially adopted children is equal to or better than that of in-race adoptees; that they have acceptable self esteem; and that they relate well to their families. That most of this social welfare-based work functions to support transracial adoption as a continuing and growing practice is not noted as a foundational research assumption in most studies.<sup>13</sup>

11. See Rita James Simon and Howard Altstein, *Adoption Across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

12. Simon and Altstein, *Adoption Across Borders*, 106.

13. For a more detailed discussion of behavioral science and social welfare research and its effects on transracial and transnational adoption policy, see “Misrepresentation, Appropriation and Assimilation: A Critical Literature Review of Social Work and Policy Research on Transracial and Transnational Adoption,” Chapter 3 of Kim Park Nelson, “Korean Looks, American Eyes: Korean American Adoptees, Race, Culture and Nation” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, Dept. of American Studies, 2009).

The U.S. federal government has also significantly contributed to the public perception of transracial adoption. The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) of 1994 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 mandate that transracial adoptions be handled the same way as all other adoptions, and forbids the consideration of race as the sole factor to delay adoption placement. MEPA also defined terms under which transracial adoptions can take place, including language that bars adoption agencies from considering a prospective parent's refusal to attend cultural awareness training as a factor in a transracial adoption, as this would be considered a delay to placement.<sup>14</sup> Rita Simon, a prominent transracial adoption researcher and supporter (cited above), was a key witness at the congressional hearings in support of MEPA.<sup>15</sup> The passage of these acts sent a clear message of popular and political support for the practice of transracial adoption by the 1990s.

In Europe, where transracial and transnational adoption are virtually synonymous and socialized medicine makes it possible to track the health problems of transracial adoptees over time, problems among adoptees have been more identifiable. Studies in Sweden headed by Anders Hjern, Frank Lindblad and Bo Vinnerljung concluded that transnational adoptees in Sweden, despite being raised by middle- and upper-class Swedish parents, are at the highest risk for alcohol-related hospitalization<sup>16</sup> and drug-related hospitalization<sup>17</sup> of any immigrant group, and are also at high risk for suicide compared to other Swedes.<sup>18</sup> In the Netherlands, Tieman, van der Ende, and Verhulst found transnational adoptees to be at higher risk of severe mental health problems than non-adopted Dutch of the same age.<sup>19</sup> None of these findings have been corroborated in the United States, the country with the largest population of transnational and transracial adoptees in the world—and it may not be possible to recreate these European studies in the U.S. because of a lack of nationalized medical records.

Despite these recent findings in adult transracial adoptee research, dominant public discourses have yet to change much from views developed during the earlier history of transracial and transnational adoption in the 1950s (when transracial and transnational adoption to the United States began) and in the 1970s. The dominant adoptive-parent-focused view of transracial and transnational adoption obscures the losses inherent in the adoption process for adoptees and birth parents (often, the birth parents' very existence is erased). In light of the terms under which transracial and transnational adoption is popularly understood, adult adoptees who do not have the experience of "love conquering all" to provide them with emotional, familial, and community fulfillment face a social dilemma; adoptees who critique transracial and/or transnational adoption—even on the basis of their own experiences—are seen as bitter, unjustifiably angry, and ungrateful. Even so, I argue that the themes of sadness and isolation so present in transracial adoptee memoirs are attempts to do just that; transracial adoptees who produce memoirs of their adoption experience are attempting to take control of a discourse that intimately involves them, but which, so far, has tended to ignore their voices.

Because the dominant view of transracial adoption emphasizes the fulfillment, happiness, and success of the experience *and* excludes adoptee voices, I argue that transracial adoptees have great motivation to contest dominant narratives by sharing the "true stories" of their own

14. Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA).

15. Rita J. Simon, *Stand Up and Sound Off*, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the House Committee on Ways and Means Hearing on Interethnic Adoptions, 1998.

16. Anders Hjern and Peter Alleback, "Alcohol-related Disorders in First- and Second-Generation Immigrants in Sweden: A National Cohort Study," *Addiction* 99 (2004): 229–236.

17. Anders Hjern, "Illicit Drug Abuse in Second-Generation Immigrants: A Register Study in a National Cohort of Swedish Residents," *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 32 (2004): 40–46.

18. Anders Hjern, Frank Lindblad, and Bo Vinnerljung, "Suicide, Psychiatric Illness, and Social Maladjustment in Intercountry Adoptees in Sweden: A Cohort Study," *The Lancet* 360, no. 9331 (2002): 443–455.

19. Wendy Tieman, Jan van der Ende, and Frank Verhulst, "Psychiatric Disorders in Young Intercountry Adoptees: An Epidemiological Study," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 162 (2005): 592–598.

experiences of loss, sadness, and tragedy. Transracial adoptee stories of discontent, especially those focused on the racial dissonance they experience as a result of being isolated as people of color in largely White family and (sometimes) community settings, also critique the ideal of an American colorblind society that holds sway in many adoptive families and in popular discourses of contemporary multiculturalism. Specific to transracial and transnational adoption, the idea that transracial adoption could be a “cure for racism” by creating colorblind kinship ties is caught in the paradox of the current configuration of these adoptions, where mostly White, middle class parents from Western nations adopt from racial and/or national groups in economically depressed or politically oppressed socioeconomic positions. The specifics of transnational adoption practice place an unmistakable neo-imperial and neo-colonial stamp on these adoptions, both currently and throughout historically. Christina Klein points out that the trope of American adoption in Asia was born out of a Cold War anxiety that spurred Americans to acts of symbolic “adoption” through charitable sponsoring of starving Asian children.<sup>20</sup> She writes that “[t]his representation of the Cold War as a sentimental project of family formation served a doubly hegemonic function. These families created an avenue through which Americans excluded from other discourses of nationhood could find ways to identify with the nation as it undertook its world-ordering projects of containing communism and expanding American influence.”<sup>21</sup> The practice of today’s transracial and transnational adoptions only highlight the extreme power differentials between parents and children, institutions and individuals, Whites and people of color, and rich and poor nations. The stories of pain, trauma, and discontent told by adult transracial adoptees serve as solemn evidence of the human toll of these practices.

### **Transracial Adoptee Melodrama as the Voice of Dissent: *The Language of Blood* and *First Person Plural***

In this essay, I want to focus on two works from the adoptee memoirs listed above: the written memoir *The Language of Blood* and the documentary film memoir *First Person Plural*. Both are autobiographical works by adult Korean American adoptees. These two works have enjoyed, arguably, the widest distribution and greatest acclaim of any of the Korean adoptee-centered memoirs. *The Language of Blood* has a high public profile as the result of numerous reviews. It was included in the Barnes and Noble Discover New Great Writers Series, won Minnesota Book Awards in the “Autobiography and Memoir” and “New Voice” categories, was voted best new book by a Minnesota writer in 2004 by the Twin Cities weekly *City Pages*, and has been a Minnesota Library Association Selection. *First Person Plural* has been released at limited theatrical screenings but has aired several times on public television as part of the Public Broadcast System’s *POV* documentary film series. The film has a companion website with copious additional information, including an education guide for use in the classroom. Both works have been widely recommended in transracial adoption circles, within adoptive parent, adoption agency and adoptee settings. *First Person Plural* is regularly screened at transracial and/or transnational adoption conferences, gatherings and meetings, and *The Language of Blood* is often for sale at book tables at these events. Trenka’s follow-up memoir, *Fugitive Visions*<sup>22</sup> about her experiences repatriating to Korea, and Borshay’s follow-up film were both hotly anticipated in transnational adoptee communities.

Trenka’s and Borshay’s accounts are not the first examples of transracial adoptee voices standing in opposition to dominant images of happy adoptions. Early works on transracial and

20. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middleboow Imagination, 1945–1961* (London: University of California Press, 2003).

21. *Ibid.*, 159.

22. Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee’s Return to Korea* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009).

transnational adoption include several narrative accounts of the transracial adoption experience. These works were focused on or including accounts from adolescents or adults, or from adoptees as children with the accounts of their adoptive parents as well. Five of these publications—*Adoption and Race: Black, Asian and Mixed Race Children in White Families* by Owen Gill and Barbara Jackson,<sup>23</sup> *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak* by Constance Pohl and Kathy Harris,<sup>24</sup> *Adopted from Asia: How it Feels to Grow up in America* by Frances M. Koh,<sup>25</sup> “Self and Alma Mater: A Study of Adopted College Students” by Sandra Kryder,<sup>26</sup> and *In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories* by Rita J. Simon and Rhonda M. Roorda<sup>27</sup>—use or appear to use accounts based on interviews. Two others, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, edited by Tonya Bischoff and Jo Rankin<sup>28</sup> and *Voices from Another Place*, edited by Susan Soon-Keum Cox,<sup>29</sup> contain accounts that have been collected as anthologies of work submitted by adoptees for the publication. Perceptions of self, family and racial identity are typical parts of adoptee accounts. The narratives also contain common elements that are not mentioned in other social welfare research findings, such as adoptees’ feelings of loneliness and sense of alienation from their birth race groups. These stand in contrast to the majority of social welfare research studies, which have largely failed to document adoptees’ feelings of loneliness, alienation from both adoptive and birth cultures, and loss of birth culture.

A core element of my research work on Korean adoptees has been the collection of oral life-course histories from adult Korean adoptees. While the experiences (and demographic backgrounds) of my informant group vary greatly, I can draw some generalizations from their stories with respect to feelings of isolation. While most adoptees do seem to cope with these feelings successfully, these details are important parts of the transracial adoptee experience. Most adoptees relay experiences of feeling alone and feeling misunderstood, as if they were and are the only ones in their situations. Being different, and in the absence of transracially adopted siblings, being the *only one* different also led to feelings of loneliness not reducible to typical adolescent angst. Many transracial adoptees also discuss alienation from others of their birth race as well. Adoptees in my study describe not fitting in or not meeting expectations placed on them by others of the same race. Many say others of the same race could tell they were different, which led to their rejection. Some say they themselves could pick transracial adoptees out of a room by appearance and manner. Other adoptees, mostly Korean, describe feelings of loss and grief about their birth culture. This is more understandable for adoptees who remember their birth parents, but this feeling is present even for adoptees who have no memories of their birth country. So, experiences of loneliness and isolation, usually absent in social welfare research, are prominent in both oral histories and in published narratives from adult Korean adoptees.

Trenka and Borshay, both Korean adoptees to the United States, reveal the sadness of their experiences with great intimacy and in great detail. The results are melodramatic narratives with heightened emotional impact; both works can be accurately characterized as “tearjerkers.” I use the term *melodrama* as defined by Harmon and Holman in *A Handbook to Literature*: specifically, melodrama is “A work...based on a romantic plot and developed sensationally, with little regard for motivation and with an excessive appeal to the emotions of the audience. The

23. Owen Gill and Barbara. Jackson, *Adoption and Race: Black, Asian, and Mixed Race Children in White Families* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983).

24. Constance Pohl and Kathy Harris, *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak* (Franklin Watts, 1992).

25. Frances M. Koh, *Adopted from Asia: How It Feels to Grow Up in America* (Minneapolis: East West Press, 1993).

26. S. L. Kryder, “Self and Alma Mater: A Study of Adopted College Students,” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 16, no. 5 (1999): 355–372.

27. Rita James Simon and Rhonda M. Roorda, eds., *In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

28. Tonya Bischoff and Jo Rankin, eds., *Seeds from a Silent Tree: An Anthology By Korean Adoptees* (San Diego: Pandal Press, 1997).

29. Susan Soon-Keum Cox, *Voices from Another Place: A Collection of Works from a Generation Born in Korea and Adopted to Other Countries* (Saint Paul: Yeong & Yeong, 1999).

object is to keep the audience thrilled by the arousal anyhow of strong feelings of pity, horror, or joy. [...] Though typically a *melodrama* has a happy ending, tragedies that use much of the same technique are sometimes referred to as melodramatic.”<sup>30</sup>

Although there has historically been some disregard for the quality of melodramas as literary work because of their emphasis on emotional sensationalism, that judgment does not apply here. While I read Trenka’s and Borshay’s works as necessarily melodramatic, my sense of both pieces is that neither author intended to produce a sad narrative solely for emotional effect, but rather that both felt it necessary to truthfully cover sad events that were central to their adoption experiences. In a lecture presenting her film, Borshay emphasized the autobiographical nature of the work and the importance of personal truth in its content for her; personal conversations with Trenka also support this interpretation of authorial intent. Although both Trenka and Borshay have become recognized and celebrated figures within Korean adoptee communities, both were largely unknown when they were working on their respective projects. However, Borshay’s screenings and Trenka’s readings are well attended by other adoptees, and in this context, their personal truths operate within Korean adoptee communities as dissenting voices, validating the difficulties of being raised Korean in White families and communities amid the din of dominant representations of adoption as unproblematic and of adoptees as fortunate chosen children.

Transracial adoptee memoir is a sub-genre ripe for Oprah-style melodrama: two mothers, two races and/or nations (in the case of Korea and Vietnam, nations involved in military conflicts with the United States), identity crisis, racial confusion, and testaments to the power of a mother’s love and/or ultimate betrayal. Even this listing reads like a description of a made-for-TV movie of the week. More specific literary conventions for adoptees place them “between worlds,” either as lost and confused characters with fractured identities or, conversely, as characters who act as bridges between two cultures, nations, races, and (most dramatically), mothers. This is also noted by David Eng, who strategically asks, “How might a transnational adoptee come to have psychic space for two mothers? And what, in turn, would such an expansion of the psychic mean for the sociopolitical domain of contemporary family and kinship relations and the politics of diaspora?”<sup>31</sup>

Both *First Person Plural* and *The Language of Blood* make use of the conventions of melodrama with emotional cliffhangers and releases. Certainly the use of these conventions makes both *First Person Plural* and *The Language of Blood* more marketable to popular audiences. However, these melodramatic expressions about Korean adoption also operate as conversational responses to the long history of Orientalist sentimentalism between the United States and Asia. Klein’s *Cold War Orientalism* details the power of American imperial domination through sentimental cultural production. In examples from film and literature, Klein describes how the United States pursued imperial expansion during the Cold War era through U.S.-Asia integration by engaging with popular American sentimental and emotional senses.<sup>32</sup> The integrationist objective required the embrace of a common humanity over racial difference and sentimental appeals made this possible. In making just two of four points about sentimental narratives of the early nineteenth century that she then applies to Cold War era Orientalism, Klein writes: “the sentimental text explores how [human] bonds are forged across a divide of difference—of race, class sex, nation, religion, and so on; the sentimental is thus a universalizing mode that imagines the possibility of transcending particularity by recognizing a common and shared humanity... emotions serve as the means by achieving and maintaining [these bonds]; the sentimental mode values the intensity of the individual’s felt experience, and holds up sympathy—the ability to feel what another person is feeling, especially his suffering—as the most prized. . . . the violation

30. William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996).

31. David L. Eng, “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas,” *Social Text* 21, no. 3 (2003): 3.

32. Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*.

of these affective bonds, through the loss of a member of the community or the rupture of communal ties, represents the greatest trauma within the sentimental universe.”<sup>33</sup>

While Trenka and Borshay work against the dominant narrative characterization of Korean adoption that suggests “bonds forged across a divide of difference,” they both use melodrama to make their case. In this way, both authors become active in the war of sentiment over Korean adoption. In Klein’s terms, this is a war fought over who owns the greatest trauma: childlessness on the part of adoptive parents, or familial, racial and cultural displacement on the part of adoptees.

## Racism and the Racial Melancholy of Transnational Adoption

The expression of racialized experiences is critically important in literary transracial adoptee interventions. That transracial adoptees, as people of color, are subject to racialization and experience racism might seem obvious, but these assertions of experiences with race and racism underline the differences between adoptees and their (usually White) families, and therefore have been suppressed.

Borshay’s and Trenka’s texts take on an almost confessional tone; familial duty to colorblindness as an antiracist moral imperative creates social and emotional settings where the acknowledgement of race—and by association, racism—represents a moral failure. This failure falls on the shoulders of the adoptee, and often on the shoulders of the White parents as well, as they are found guilty of the charge put forward by the National Association of Black Social Workers: that White parents are incapable of raising a Black (or by extension, non-White) child because they cannot adequately prepare that child to deal with racism in our racist society. In her film, Borshay states: “For a long time I couldn’t talk to my American parents about my Korean family. I felt I was somehow being disloyal to them. That here they had done all these wonderful things for me and provided opportunities for me and loved me a lot.” For Trenka, the denial of race, nationality and adoption in the family is more strongly mandated. “The a-word, adoption, was not mentioned in our house. Neither was the K-word, Korea,” she writes.<sup>34</sup> Borshay’s decision to take her parents to meet her Korean family, and Trenka’s decision to embrace her Korean mother, totally disrupts the colorblind ideals of their adoptive parents. By doing so, both demonstrate that they come from a family and a people that are biologically, culturally and racially related to them. In these conflicts, Borshay and Trenka show how the admission of racial, cultural and biological difference has the potential to hurt both the transracial adoptee and the adoptive parent. The implications of racial difference for parents are reabsorbed by adoptees, who seek to shield parents from race-related allegations in order to satisfy the colorblindness contract in force within many adoptive families.

In classical psychology, melancholy is a disorder better known as depression; in its Freudian use, melancholy is one possible response to loss in which the mourner is trapped in a cycle of depression. Literary scholar Anne Anlin Cheng outlines the concept of “racial melancholy” as a response to living in a racist society willing to apologize for racism, but unwilling to change. A melancholic cycle is endlessly re-enacted as race-based traumas are recognized as grievances and remedied but not prevented. For Cheng, the melancholic subject who becomes dependent on the remedy as the sole redress for recurring racial grievance is effectively unable to break the cycle of melancholia and is doomed to remain in a state of racial grief.<sup>35</sup> Cheng is specific in her assignment of racial melancholy not only to the identities of racialized “others,” but also to dominant White identities. She writes:

33. *Ibid.*, 14.

34. Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 35.

35. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).



Dominant white identity in America operates melancholically—as an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social consumption-and-denial.... Both racist and white liberal discourses participate in this dynamic, albeit out of different motivations. The racists need to develop elaborate ideologies in order to accommodate their actions with official American ideals, while white liberals need to keep burying the racial others in order to memorialize them. Those who do not see the racial problem or those who call themselves nonideological are the most melancholic of all, because in today’s political climate...it requires hard work *not* to see.<sup>36</sup>

I apply Cheng’s theory of racial melancholy to the case of transracial and transnational adoption, where White adoptive parents, non-White adoptees, and non-White birth parents are locked in a melancholic state created by the imperialist and racist foundations of transracial and transnational adoption. In this application, adoptees operate as subjects with race-in-hiding as they are called into action to embrace what Cheng has termed “White liberal discourse” by burying their own racial otherness. When transracial adoptees do make claims to racial grievances within family and social structures, apologies are made, but the foundational structures of racist society and the imperial structures of transnational and transracial adoption do not change.

### Competing Racial Realities: “Real” Memory and Family in *First Person Plural*

*First Person Plural* documents the personal journey of the film’s director, Deann Borshay, to South Korea to meet her birth family, including her mother. Adopted at the age of eight, Borshay gradually forgets her experiences in Korea and assimilates to life as an American living as part of a White family. As she grows older, she makes the choice to research her adoption and finds that, just before coming to the United States, her identity was switched with that of another Korean girl at the orphanage. She then learns that her actual birth family is alive and well and willing to meet her. Her adoptive family, including parents and siblings, are also included in the film. Her adoptive parents travel with Borshay to Korea and meet her birth mother and siblings. The film is critical of adoption processes that changed Borshay’s Korean identity to facilitate her adoption and focuses on the difficult navigation of adoptees with two families, two countries, and two identities.

Borshay opens her film by speaking the three names of her triple identity: Deann Borshay, her adopted American identity; the Cha Jung Hee, the switched-at-adoption Korean identity given to her by orphanage staff in order to provide a child to the Borshays when the one they had been originally assigned was reclaimed by her birth father; and Kang Ok Jin, her actual Korean birth identity. The highlighting of Borshay’s triple identity introduces the melodrama to come: a story that will attempt to resolve the identity crisis of subject/director Borshay. In her narrative, Borshay remarks: “I forgot everything. I forgot how to speak Korean. I forgot any memory of ever having had a family. And I forgot my real name...[t]here wasn’t room in my mind for two mothers” and “I felt like I was supposed to choose one family over the other.”<sup>37</sup> These statements underline the pressure on Borshay to resolve her identity crisis by choosing one of her identities over the other(s). Borshay addresses this crisis by asking her American parents to travel to Korea to meet her Korean family. In *First Person Plural*, the peak action is the emotionally charged meeting of Borshay’s two mothers; the film’s resolution hinges on Borshay’s ability to decide which is her “real” mother.

36. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 11.

37. Borshay, *First Person Plural*.

In the case of Deann Borshay, the sentimental appeal to “save starving children” is literally realized by her adoptive parents who participate in a program through which they sent \$15 each month to sponsor Cha Jung Hee for two and half years before making the decision to adopt their imagined ward. In *First Person Plural*, Borshay’s sister remembers her arrival, “From the moment you came here, you were my sister and we were your family and that was it. Even though maybe we looked different, and had a different nationality and whatever, we were your family,” and her mother reflects, “I realize now that you were terrified. But because we were so happy, you know, we just didn’t think about that.”<sup>38</sup> The early part of *First Person Plural* is loaded with sentimental stories from family on how they accepted Borshay unconditionally and see her as just like others in the family.

The conflict between adoptive parents’ and adoptees’ versions of the adoption experience is raised repeatedly throughout Borshay’s work, and highlights the question, “what is real?” when recounting these experiences. Borshay reveals that, when she was young, her parents’ version of her experience prevailed. She states, “I think as a child, I made a decision that I would never forget Korea. Every now and then I would stop whatever I was doing, close my eyes, and picture the road from the orphanage to the house.”<sup>39</sup> But eventually, she admits, “The only memories I have of my childhood are the images my father filmed while I was growing up. I relegated my real memories into the category of dreams.”<sup>40</sup> After she becomes an adult, she is able to take back control of the memories of her life in Korea, but the incompatibility of her perception of her identity with that held by her parents creates emotional rupture. “My parents have no idea... this entire period... that I would say I was depressed,”<sup>41</sup> she says, acknowledging the stress of having two realities: Korean, adoptee and Asian in contrast with her parents’ version, American, familial and White.

Even after Borshay discovers that her identity was switched before she left Korea, her adoptive family tries to dismiss the significance of this finding in an effort to reinforce their acceptance of her as American Deann, part of the Borshay family, without realizing that their remarks are insensitive to Borshay’s identity as also Korean. Her mother responds, “I didn’t care that they had switched children on us. You couldn’t be loved more... just because you weren’t Cha Jung Hee, you were Ok Jin Kang, Kong, whatever, it didn’t matter to me... you were Deann and you were mine.”<sup>42</sup> The supposed familial utopia of inclusive colorblindness fractures in this well-intentioned remark; while Mrs. Borshay surely intends to include her daughter in the family, in doing so, she minimizes the pain felt by Deann as a result of living with switched and missing identities, effectively erasing Borshay’s Korean identity. Near the end of her film, Borshay tearfully explains, “There’s a way then, which I see my parents as my parents, but sometimes I look at them, and I see two White American people that are so different from me that I can’t fathom how we are related to each other and how these two people are my parents... as a child I accepted them as my parents because I depended on them for survival... as an adult, I think that I haven’t accepted them as my parents and that is part of the distance I have been feeling from them for a lot of years.”<sup>43</sup>

Borshay’s focus on this difference in perception between herself and her parents works as dissent by augmenting and correcting the dominant perspectives of transracial adoption (that her parents also share) with the story of her own loss, trauma, and sadness.

When Borshay’s own stories counter family narratives with her memories of her Korean family and that her identity had been switched, her mother will not believe her. Only when

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

Borshay is an adult is she able to more fully consider her past: “I moved away from my American family and started living by myself. Dreams started coming to me...over the course of a year or so, I started realizing that these must be memories coming back from Korea. That they weren’t just dreams, that there had to be something about them that was real.”<sup>44</sup> In this exploration of her personal history, Borshay also makes political connections that question the very processes of adoption. In a section of the film that gives a history of Korean adoption, Borshay narrates: “[T]he more children orphanages had, the more money was sent from abroad...what Harry Holt started as a humanitarian gesture right after the war became big business in the decades to follow. South Korea became the largest supplier of children to developed countries in the world, causing some to argue that the country’s economic miracle was due in part to the export of its most precious natural resource, its children.”<sup>45</sup>

Borshay’s dissent in reaction to her adoptive family’s inability to see her outside the limited confines of their family is transformed into questioning and dissent towards the larger-scale processes of transnational adoption and becomes a key moment in *First Person Plural*. In backgrounding her own story by relating a short history of Korean adoption, Borshay uses the language of economy (i.e. “big business,” “supplier,” “export,” and “natural resource”) and chooses to underscore critiques of the practice of transnational adoption as an unethical trade of children for economic prosperity. This is certainly not a depiction of fulfillment of the family that currently dominates mainstream transnational adoption discourses.

The experience of racism, especially within adoptive families, often comes not in the form of direct race-based confrontations, but instead in the form of ignorance of subtler and more complex forms of racialization. This is how Borshay approaches these experiences in *First Person Plural*. The Borshays’ ignorance of the problematic Orientalization of Asian Americans is revealed when a photographic portrait of Borshay as a child in a sailor outfit with an oriental parasol is prominently featured in the beginning of the film. Though Borshay never discusses the significance of the portrait, I suspect that the Borshays’ White children were not photographed in similar settings. Later in the film, the Borshay’s American parents present a copy of the portrait to Borshay’s birth mother as a gift, presumably to give Borshay’s Korean mother a document of the lost middle childhood of her daughter, but perhaps also to prove their embrace of Borshay’s Asianness, albeit in an Orientalized configuration.

The inability of Borshay’s adoptive family to detect the switching of the child they adopted from Cha Jung Hee to Kang Ok Jin, despite a two-and-a-half-year correspondence that included letters and pictures, underlines the White stereotype that all Asians look alike. Borshay’s adopted sister remarks about the family’s inability to tell which child was destined for their family when they pick up Borshay at the airport. Her sister remarks, “I think mother went up to the wrong person. I think we didn’t know until we checked your nametag or somebody told us who you were. It didn’t matter...I mean, one of you was ours!”<sup>46</sup> This stands in stark contrast to Borshay’s Korean brother, who seemed to know right away, despite her switched identity, that she is his lost sister, Kang Ok Jin.

The emotional trauma Borshay experiences also demonstrates why there might be more general silence among transracial adoptees on the topic of racial and national difference. Borshay states, “I think being adopted into my family brought me a lot of happiness...but there was also a lot of sadness, and a lot of that sadness had to do with loss. I was never able to mourn what I had lost with my American parents.”<sup>47</sup>

Borshay describes the difficult decision of her Korean mother as she contemplated giving her daughter up for adoption. Ultimately, under pressure from her Christian church and the or-

44. Borshay, *First Person Plural*.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

phanage where Borshay and two of her sisters had been temporarily placed for financial reasons, Borshay's Korean mother decided to give her up for adoption. This is an example of the Korean birth parents in a state of racial melancholy as they believe that giving their Asian children up for adoption into White American families is better for them than keeping them in the birth family; this belief implies the superiority of White American societies, reinforced by local social welfare and religious structures.

*First Person Plural* has been thoroughly analyzed as a text of "psychic diaspora" by Asian American literary scholar David Eng. Eng's literary psychoanalysis of Borshay also focuses on the melancholy of transnational adoption, supported by examples of unresolved heartache between Borshay and her adoptive family, who refuse to see her pain, which he describes as "the strict management of the adoptee's affect."<sup>48</sup> He usefully connects the long threads of Asian immigration, and the racial grief held within them, to Borshay's adoptee grief. In addition, his work does well to examine transracial adoption as a White act, indeed an act of "Whitening" for gays and lesbians who seek to create normative families through adoption. Eng identifies the rejection of Borshay's Korean identity by her White adoptive family as problematic; he writes, "What is especially disturbing...is not just the fact that the family...cannot easily conceive of her adoption as involving loss [or]...imagine her arrival in the United States as anything but a gain...[e]qually distressing is the fact that Borshay[s]...sadness...is read by many involved as ingratitude."<sup>49</sup> Here, Eng suggests the injustice of the familial negation of Borshay's adoption-related trauma.

My analysis of *First Person Plural* and *The Language of Blood* expands on Eng's in an effort to explain the work of *dissent* done by transnational adoptee narratives in dialogue with an existing melodramatic popular discourse on transnational adoption. By publicly bearing witness to transnational adoptees' personal pain and trauma, these narratives correct the erasure of difference in the family and in society. While Eng explains the "communal nature of racial melancholia"<sup>50</sup> as a rejection by parents of the adoptees' racial awareness and experience, I instead understand birth and adoptive parents not only as causes of racial melancholy, but also necessarily as affected by it through societal demands for normative family formations that are, in turn, linked to capitalist interests between poor nations that supply send children for adoption and rich nations with demand for adoptable infants. In other words, both transracial adoptees and adoptive parents are enmeshed in the racial melancholy of transracial adoption, though the relative power of the two groups determines their different roles within this melancholic formation. White parents, called into action through sentimental discourses of "common humanity" and "colorblind love," enforce the social conditions of racelessness for their adopted children. In so doing, without acknowledging that the act of burying racial difference is a uniquely White privilege, adoptive parents also participate in subsuming the identity of transracial adoptees as racial others in order to create racial and cultural identities within the family that are consistent with dominant (and normative) images of the family as biologically, culturally, and racially homogeneous.

### Korean Adoptee Memoir as a Corrective Action in *The Language of Blood*

*The Language of Blood* is the life story of author Jane Jeong Trenka, who was adopted from Korea as an infant into a small rural community in Minnesota. She describes a childhood filled with emotional and cultural neglect at the hands of her adoptive parents before entering college in Minneapolis, where she encounters a violent stalker who threatens her life and brings her to the

48. Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," 16.

49. *Ibid.*, 21.

50. *Ibid.*, 20.

brink of emotional breakdown. Eventually, Trenka travels to South Korea to reunite with her birth mother and learns the story of her relinquishment forced by her birth father, an abusive alcoholic, who denies his paternity to his infant daughter. Trenka's reconnection with her birth mother and sisters effectively ends her relationship with her adoptive parents, which is only more completely severed when her birth mother dies of cancer. In contrast to Borshay, who spends her film reconnecting with her two mothers, the peak action in this story is the loss of both mothers, one to cancer, one through a bitter falling out.

Like Borshay, Trenka introduces herself more than once in her book. “My name is Jeong Kyong-Ah. My family register states the date of my birth, the lunar date January 24, 1972,” she writes, “My name is Jane Marie Brauer, created September 26, 1972, when I was carried off an airplane onto American soil.”<sup>51</sup> Also like Borshay, Trenka finds that the cohabitation of her two identities within her is all but impossible; she writes: “In Minnesota... Jane Brauer is missing. She is gone—only a memory in the minds of those who imagine her. Meanwhile, in the mountains of Korea, Jeong Kyong-Ah... blinks hard in the sunlight, as if awakened from a deep sleep, or perhaps a very long fugue.”<sup>52</sup> The absence of Kyong-Ah in the presence of Jane and vice-versa sets the stage in *The Language of Blood* for a melodramatic story of loss, neglect, violence, and abandonment to come. *The Language of Blood* opens with a letter from Trenka's Korean birth mother to her and her biological sister with whom she was adopted. The immediate focus on Trenka's Korean family represents a major shift from dominant adoptive-parent focused discourses of transracial adoption. Throughout the work, Trenka identifies and attempts to understand her Korean mother's life, further reappropriating the story of adoption to focus on birth parents, who are virtually non-existent in popular conceptions of transracial adoption. The publication of her memoir alone had the potential to bring adoptee voices of dissent to the White-dominated discourse of transnational adoption; that Trenka's memoir has strong overtones of loss and recounts memories of childhood discrimination in family and community makes the work of dissent in her book even more plain.

Trenka is much less subtle than Borshay in recounting experiences of racism, both in her hometown and within her family. In a satirical single-act play within the memoir, Trenka details a barrage of racist slurs from her youth focused into a single response from generalized community members: “Rice-picker! I don't my kids to play with those girls! Go back where you came from! Can they speak English? Roses are red, violets are bigger, you got the lips of an African nigger! [...] All you people are good at math. Frog-eyed chink! Boat person! How much did they cost? Where did you get them? [...] Where did you learn to speak English so well? I know someone who adopted Korean girls. Do you know them? Gook!”<sup>53</sup> Trenka also describes her father's racist response to her dating Asian men: “He mocked their faces, as if they were not human, but dark, stupid monkeys. He mutilated their long names, which he could not and did not want to pronounce correctly.”<sup>54</sup> Trenka internalizes her father's racist response to Asian men as racial shame and secrecy. In relation to this incident, Trenka writes, “It was during those years that I took down the bulletin board in my bedroom and scratched my Korean name (which I had cunningly memorized years before) into the paint on the wall and then replaced the bulletin board so I would not be found out.”<sup>55</sup> This is also a prime example of “burying racial otherness” which Anne Anlin Cheng suggests is a key element of racial melancholy. Though it begins as an act of shame, I suggest that it operates as an act of dissent towards her parents' silence, and is then powerfully transformed into dissent towards rosier depictions of transnational adoption as a published “true story” of pain and loss within the practice of Korean American

51. Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 14.

52. *Ibid.*, 15.

53. *Ibid.*, 31.

54. *Ibid.*, 59.

55. *Ibid.*

adoption. Later in the book, she reveals, "I had checked 'White' in the box of all my college forms.... I didn't want to be Korean. Korea was a place that couldn't be talked about at home; it made other children leer at me in school. Korea was the reason why my face was mutated, why my glasses wouldn't quite stay on my nose, why it was so hard to find clothes that fit. It was the reason why some children weren't allowed to play with me, some felt compelled to call me a chink or a rice-picker, and adults didn't feel compelled to defend me."<sup>56</sup> Here, Trenka's admission of her own internalized racism serves as its own correction; by the time she wrote the book, she is aware that checking "White" is not the right choice for her, but lists reasons why she would feel compelled to do so as a younger adult. Here, she also connects her internalized racism to external racism she faced as a child when she identifies the discrimination against her, and the tragedy of growing up in a racist society where the adults in her life failed to protect her.

*The Language of Blood* has also gained some notoriety as an "angry adoptee" publication in adoption circles; letters and emails to Trenka as well as posts on her book weblog attest to the work's controversial handling of the experience of adoption. Much of the controversy surrounding the book stems from its critical depiction of Trenka's adoptive family and its disparaging view of life and society in small-town America. Trenka's eventual break with her adoptive family is probably also anxiety-inducing for prospective parents of transracial adoptees who read the book. Because of her more overt opposition to the current practice of transnational adoption (embedded in her story of her adoption, which probably never should have taken place), the perception of the book as "angry" is unsurprising. While Trenka's political beliefs about the wrongs in transnational adoption as expressed in her book are certainly self-empowering and are potentially empowering to other adoptees who have had problems in their adoption experiences, they are controversial in the context of dominant discourses on transnational adoption. This is evidence that the use (or even the perception) of anger as a form of direct dissent (as opposed to the depiction of sadness as less direct dissent) can actually be less effective in the "war of sentiment"; as noted by Eng, anger can appear as ingratitude in light of dominant discourses of transnational adoption, where adoptees are reduced into lucky recipients of "a better life."

## Korean Adoptee Memoir as Community Voice

Although I have identified as a Korean adoptee since childhood, I began my research work on the Korean American adoptee experience as an adult: informally in 1999 and more formally in 2002. The project I have been working on for the last decade focuses on Korean American adoptee experiences, and how the sociopolitical narratives of belonging, rescue, race, and nation have been incorporated into their everyday lives. Likewise, I am also interested in what Korean adoptee experiences tell us about the current state of American race relations, migration and transmigration, family construction, and Asian American subjectivity. While I tried to consider as many facets as possible of current Korean adoptee experience, I worked mostly as an ethnographer, interviewing as many Korean American adopted adults as possible, and taking note of the sociocultural environments that adoptees created and inhabited. During the course of my ethnographic work, I met hundreds of Korean adoptees in the United States, Europe and Korea and became quite immersed in Korean adoptee communities, organizations, and networks.

It was early in my research that I first met Trenka, when she visited the local Minnesota Korean adoptee networking organization, AKConnection, for which I was a volunteer. This was shortly after her first memoir, *The Language of Blood*, was published in 2003. Though *The Language of Blood* was not the first Korean adoptee memoir, the leadership of AKConnection quickly realized that this new memoir was an event of major significance for our community, both because Jane grew up in Minnesota, where we all lived (and which, incidentally, which

56. Ibid., 113.

has the highest concentration of Korean adoptees of any place in the country), but also because this book so poetically addressed many difficult themes of isolation, racism, and family divide central to Korean adoptee experience.

The release of *The Language of Blood* roughly coincided with the emergence of new culture-based approaches to research on Korean adoptee communities and the beginnings of networking efforts among Korean adopted adults in the United States. I now wonder if the first decade of the twenty-first century will come to be regarded as a golden age for Korean adoptees, a result of the peak transnational adoption years from Korea, but before the demise of the practice, which has already been predicted by many. Demographically, the past ten years have witnessed a critical mass of Korean adoptees reaching adulthood and gaining visibility as artists, activists, authors, and researchers—not only to the general public, but just as significantly, to one another. In my ethnographic work on Korean adoptee communities, the theme of isolation seems ever-present, explained perhaps by the tendency of Korean adoptees to be the only (or one of the only) adoptees, Koreans, Asian Americans and/or people of color in their families, schools, and communities. The synergy among members of this burgeoning community should not be underestimated, as the voice of one adoptee inspires, encourages and otherwise amplifies another.

*The Language of Blood* was preceded by a handful of other memoirs by and about Korean American adoptees. Each has an important place in raising awareness about issues related to Korean adoption and building Korean adoptee community. However, it is *The Language of Blood* and *First Person Plural* that captured the imagination of both Korean adoptees and the general public most meaningfully. This is certainly because of the artistic and literary merits of each work, but I would argue that it is also because these works both endeavored to complicate the adoption story. Within the constant cycle of “what if?” questioning in which adoptees so often find themselves, Trenka points to her own displacement in her American family and in the United States, questioning at once the primacy of the United States over “poor” countries that send children to be adopted and the long-held American trope of adoption as an act of salvation. Her work is especially effective to this end because Trenka shares her most painful experiences of racial ostracism, family estrangement, and emotional isolation and trauma. Though her memoir is hers alone, the work resonates with many other Korean and other transnational adoptees around the world, and *The Language of Blood* remains seminal reading for initiates to the worlds of transracial and transnational adoptees.

In this way, Trenka has become a standard-bearer of sorts within Korean adoptee communities, a voice that incites both action and reaction. The response to *The Language of Blood*, both in academic circles, in which the memoir is probably more written about than any other Korean adoptee creative work, and in greater communities, adoption-related, or not, makes possible its influence as a sociopolitical document of note. Trenka’s works have become touchstones within adoptee communities as documents of dissent about what is wrong with current practices of transnational and transracial adoption.

As return migration to Korea has become more commonplace among Korean adoptees, Trenka has followed up *The Language of Blood* with another memoir, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee’s Return to Korea*,<sup>57</sup> about her own repatriation to Korea. Meanwhile, more academic attention is being paid to patterns and cultures of transmigration among Asian Americans, and new interest in adoptees in Korea is part of this shift. Trenka’s shift of focus from America to Korea opens the repatriate experience to Korean American adoptees, normalizing what has been largely uncharted terrain and refiguring Korea as a space in which a Korean adoptee subjectivity might expand.

Trenka’s reconnection with her Korean family positions *The Language of Blood* within the genre of search narrative. The adoptee search narrative, rife with conflicts of identity arising from

57. Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*.

the complications of searching for and finding another family, has become a memoir subgenre that entertains with melodrama as much as it connects to adoptee readers. Even though most adoptees do not search the possibility of search may well be the most interesting quality adoptees have to offer to the public eye. Thus, according to published memoirs, it would seem that we all search, and I have often wondered if an adoptee memoir without a search narrative would even be publishable. Within these constraints, Trenka has complicated the search narrative in *Fugitive Visions*; the object of her search shifts from the family to the self, particularly the lost Korean self that so many adoptees wonder about as we consider our possible alternate pasts, presents and futures. Trenka marks her legitimacy in Korean society by claiming Korea, whether it embraces or rejects her, just as she claimed her Korean mother in *The Language of Blood*. The possibility of claiming Korea, a nation so long lost to most Korean adoptees, is at once shocking and reassuring.

Though I am wary of the essentializing influence memoirs can exert upon a community (both in terms of external perceptions of the community and the community's internal discourse, as a scholar of Korean adoption, I am often struck by the parallels between adoptee memoir and adoptee culture; *Fugitive Visions* is no exception. The work is an exploration of Korean adoptee repatriate life, and of the difficult, often painful process of negotiating the Korean language and Korean society as an adoptee. Trenka describes her reaction as she encounters her "people": Korean nationals and a fractured international community of Korean adoptees, the so-called "KAD nation." In *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka gestures toward a future for Korean adoptees; a position that will be inhabited by relatively few adoptees in practice, but which may well become a model of the imagined transnational adoptee in the minds of academic researchers and the general public.

Key themes in *Fugitive Visions* have particular resonance in the transplanted repatriate community, and reach back to communities of Korean adoptees living in their adoptive countries. Trenka's poignant description of her struggles learning the Korean language is one of the first literary representations of that trial faced by Korean adoptees the world over. While many adoptees never elect to learn Korean, for many who do attempt it, difficulty with learning birth language underlines the many losses connected to birth culture that Korean adoptees suffer. Difficulties with learning or re-learning the Korean language poses a particular psychological obstacle for adoptees wishing to integrate into Korean society, both because it is a painful reminder that their life histories were disrupted by adoption, and also because there is such a high expectation in Korean society that anyone who *looks* Korean should *speak* Korean. Many adoptees have remarked to me, "I feel I can pass as Korean until I open my mouth." Lack of fluency in the Korean language is the primary barrier to reconnecting with Korean culture cited by adoptee return migrants, and could therefore be used as a strong argument against the practice of transnational/transcultural adoptions that are also translingual.

Trenka also paints a tragic picture of a Korean adoptee community of made up of transplants, self-seekers, and lost souls. Her depiction of the ramshackle KAD nation looking for their Korean identities in a Korea obsessed with American culture, is an example of a central paradox of globalization: transnationals who travel globally to seek nationalized identity and the cultural belonging that goes with it can never fit neatly into nations, because nations so often define themselves by rejecting foreignness. Though transnational adoptees might be held up as the ultimate global citizens, the ideal of a borderless global future is complicated by very real problems of immigration status, cultural competence, and mistaken identity.

As the Korean adoptee community matures, it experiences growing pains. Is there really such a thing as a "Korean adoptee community" in the sense that there are unifying qualities for all Korean adoptees? Is it possible to make a community from a group of persons who are distinguished only by their separation from one nation and family and an envelopment by another? If we are a community, and we find an identity, what do we do with it? In *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka makes a resolution for an adoptee activism by detailing how her own outrage was awakened. Her work



in *Fugitive Visions*, as well as in *The Language of Blood*, documents the many emotional, societal, political, and procedural pitfalls inherent in the current practice of transnational adoption. Because public perceptions of transnational adoption are overwhelmingly positive, Trenka's work brings to light some of the seldom-heard truths about the many problems adoptees face as they attempt to integrate their often-split identities in a “check-one-box-only” world.

## Conclusion

That transracial adoptees would be present in discussions about transracial adoption is seemingly self-evident. “After all,” they can argue, “this discussion is about us.” However, most public discussions about transracial adoption are still not framed this way. In a November, 2004, talk radio broadcast about transracial adoption in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota—the state with the highest per-capita population of Korean adoptees in the country and home to a variety of institutions that pioneered the facilitation of transracial adoption—White transracial adoptive parents/adoption service providers Joe Kroll, executive director of the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), and Gloria Hochman, director of communications and marketing at the National Adoption Center, were the featured guests. Most of the broadcast callers to the show were also White parents. The comments of only one transracial adoptee caller, Amalia, were aired in the hour-long program. Amalia stated that, “[M]y concern with the conversation today is that...it is largely bookended by those who have adopted and not by those who have been adopted. The perspective is very different.... Past the age of fourteen or fifteen, my parents did not have skills that they could share with me in terms of helping me develop my own racial and ethnic identity. Those are areas where I had to go out and develop my own skills and tools...if you are person of color in the United States, you need to develop the skills and tools to deal with White supremacy and racism. You can't get those from White parents.”<sup>58</sup>

Amalia also made objections to minimization of racist experiences for adoptees who are not African American and connected the imperial relationships between the U.S. and third world countries to the practice of transnational adoption. Her criticisms of adoption discourse as dismissive of adoptee voices was noted by host and guests before they moved quickly to continue discussion among adoptive parents. In reference to training sessions that NACAC provides to prospective transracial adoptive parents, Joe Kroll, in an effort to acknowledge the Amalia's concerns remarked, “we consciously have transracial adoptive parents and transracial adoptees doing the trainings together...to get their voices...parents hear almost better from the young people that have experienced it, than they do from their peers, other parents.”<sup>59</sup> However, Kroll's remarks ignore the reality that transracial adoptees are not necessarily youth or “young people”; all of the authors/directors referenced in this piece are of parenting age themselves, and could very easily be older than the prospective adoptive parents to whom Kroll refers. Complaints about infantilization among transracial adoptees are common;<sup>60</sup> an adult identity for an adoptee is all but erased by popular and scholarly parent-focused depictions of adoption.

In order to develop and express experiences of adoption apart from dominant parent-focused narratives and to be heard, the most effective choice transracial adoptees can make is to engage in sentimentalist conversations. In Amalia's case, the articulate and logical presentation of her grievances was virtually ignored in the face of the multitude of parents wishing make their own stories heard. I argue that instead, melodramatic stories that engage in the sentimental terms defined in dominant discourses of transracial and transnational adoption are far more effective in bringing transracial adoptee perspectives into public discussion. While these are not the only

58. Kerri Miller, *Race and Adoption*, Radio broadcast. Minnesota Public Radio. November 29, 2004.

59. *Ibid.*

60. This finding is present in my current oral history research with adult Korean adoptees; it is also documented by Eleana Kim.

stories about the transracial adoption experience, they are the ones that are currently most visible as the stories many adoptees have to tell. This intervention on the part of transracial adoptees is particularly crucial because their stories also do the important work of disrupting popular notions of transracial and transnational adoption as unproblematic, apolitical experiences of love, fulfillment and happiness. These disruptions often appear as ruptures in the happy American rhetoric of colorblind love for Korean adoptees who would choose to assert a racial identity, whether it be part of a Korean Adoptee or Asian American community, or a part of the White American community in which most were raised.

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