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Author
Sooja, John K.

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Language of the Heart: Korean Adoptee Identity and Disorientation

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

John Sooja

September 2017

Dissertation Committee:
   Dr. Traise Yamamoto, Chairperson
   Dr. Jennifer Doyle
   Dr. James Tobias
The Dissertation of John Sooja is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
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environment heavily populated with Korean adoptees, and I cannot fathom being here without all of my adoptee experiences, friendships, communities, and colleagues.

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For all my parents
and all my families
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Language of the Heart: Korean Adoptee Identity and Disorientation

by

John Sooja

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, September 2017
Dr. Traise Yamamoto, Chairperson

Language of the Heart explores Korean adoptee identity, adoptive family
dynamics, mythologies of blood, and the negotiations of kinship and racial difference
within transnational and transracial adoption criticism and popular texts. I argue for a
Korean adoptee identity that does not condemn the adoptee to victimhood and inauthentic
selfhood. The transnational and transracial adoption critical canon offers little agency or
futurity for the Korean adoptee—often generously designated as the “model transnational
and transracial adoptee.” Language of the Heart explores why this might be and suggests
that given how transracial adoptee literature is dominated by self-writing, autobiography,
memoir, and poetry, for many critics, identity, then, is simply treated as the summation of
the expressed self in the text. Further, given that the Korean adoptee’s expressed self is
most commonly articulated as lost, inauthentic, or, as Eleana Kim notes, inescapably
haunted, I argue that Korean adoptee identity actually provocatively catechizes and
indexes the limitations of founding identity in blood and kinship. My dissertation proffers
a theory of disorientation and disoriented identity that aims to dismantle genetic
essentialism, nativism, and the heteronormative nuclear national family that are inevitable within heteronormative kinship regimes. Ultimately, this project excavates kinship, as the binary of biogenetic or “blood” relations versus adoptive or “social” relations, and the consequences of not taking seriously the grounding of identity in kinship, blood, family, history, and the nation.
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Introduction

After a surge of transnational Korean adoptions in the 1980s, Minnesota quickly became home to the most Korean adoptees per capita in the U.S. and in the world, except for Sweden; an estimated 15,000 Korean children have been adopted by Minnesotans since the mid-1950s.\footnote{Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, p. 110. Also, according to Erika Lee, “it is estimated that 50 percent or more of the Korean population in Minnesota is adopted.” See Erika Lee, “Asian American Studies in the Midwest: New Questions, Approaches, and Communities.” *Journal of Asian American Studies*, October 2009, pp. 247-273. Further, Tobias Hubinette estimates that “contemporary international adoption … has seen at least half a million [Korean] children flown into [sic] Western countries during [the last] 50 years.” See Tobias Hubinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture*, vol. 32, Jimoondang, Seoul: Korean Studies Series, 2006, p. 17.} Given the presence of two long standing adoption agencies—Children’s Home Society and Lutheran Social Services (the former currently the only remaining agency to facilitate international adoptions from Korea)—it is no surprise that Minnesota has become one of the epicenters of Korean adoptees. Further, the Korean adoptee population in Minnesota represents an estimated 10% of the entire Korean American population in Minnesota. This large population has encouraged a number of community resources for Korean adoptees, which include Korean culture camps, Korean adoption-oriented newsletters and publications, art and music groups that teach traditional Korean music, drumming, and dance, youth groups, and nonprofits like Minnesota Adopted Koreans (now defunct) and AK Connection (founded in 2000).
Like most Korean adoptees, I was adopted by white parents. Unlike many of us, however, I was fortunate enough to be raised in a liberal environment and in a relatively large metropolitan area. My folks were politically conscious, academics, and quasi-religious. While they could have lived, like many of their peers, in any of the predominantly white suburbs surrounding the Twin Cities metro area and still easily commute to work, they chose to live in a middle-class neighborhood in Minneapolis, close to Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park and somewhat close to Lake Harriet, one of the over 10,000 lakes in the state, as advertised (one for each Korean adoptee, as some of us always joked). Living in the city allowed me to attend public schools, play on park recreation soccer teams, and find friends from many different walks of life.

Also like many Korean adoptees in Minnesota, many of my friends growing up did not have Korean faces. My best friend since the age of two grew up on the same block as me and his family was very white, blue collar, and conservative. His family was openly racist, joked about “the blacks,” and worried over immigrants; his nephews grew up calling me their uncle’s “black friend” and his brother’s family literally moved to a new home, twice, because “too many” minorities were moving into “their neighborhood.” But despite these differences, this best friend became a brother to me in life. We bonded, perhaps, not only because of proximity and circumstance but because we shared similar anxieties over our perceived lots in life. Early on, he realized that he was a good twelve years younger than his siblings and promptly proclaimed he “was an accident.” He thought that maybe he shouldn’t have been here at all. Similarly, I often thought about another life I could have had in Korea.
Of course, I often spent time with my best friend’s family, as he did with mine. Perhaps as a natural consequence, I tried—during meal times, car rides, cabin trips—to detect differences between our families that might reveal what I thought might be missing in my own. Because his family consisted of genetically related kin, unlike mine, I wondered if they maybe understood or knew each other better, more easily, or more truthfully. Maybe they laughed together more than my family because they all shared a similar “humor” gene. Maybe they could predict each other’s thoughts. Maybe they could feel their kinship more so than I felt mine? Where was, exactly, the source of this evidence? Was it in their blood, as everyone says? What about their visible behavior toward one another? Where were the traces of their connection that I did not have in mine? What (and where), exactly, is the stuff of this connection? If I didn’t have natural kinship as a connector in my family and if his family did, I should be able to identify the real thing because it would certainly appear foreign or different to me in some way, right?

There were times I thought I noticed something unspoken between them. Later, I asked my friend what he thought about my musings in this regard, but he only responded in mild confusion and humor, exclaiming that he always thought my family had a kind of connection that his family didn’t, “a solidarity, a connection, a love.” My best friend loves his family, but he has had to reconcile who he has become with who the rest of his family are and perhaps always will be. While his family continues to be conventionally conservative, he has become quite the opposite. It turns out there are many ways in which
he is different from the rest of his family. Yet, he will always physically resemble them more than I do my parents.

As a teenager I engaged in other means of inquiry into this difference between “normal” families and my own. In many ways, I both sought out and did not seek out other Korean adoptees. I eventually learned to compartmentalize my social spheres such that I had Korean adoptee friends on one side and white and black friends on the other. I thus eagerly participated—as camper, mentor, coordinator, and volunteer—in some of the aforementioned culture camps and youth groups for Korean adoptees. Further, wanting to engage with the adoptee community in Minnesota as an adult, from 2002-06, I served on the board of AK Connection, the primary adult Korean adoptee nonprofit in Minnesota, a resource, group, network, and global community based in the Twin Cities for adult Korean adoptees. Additionally, I jumped at the chance to return to Korea in 2006 as a representative of AK Connection in order to join other Korean adoptees—representing cities from around the world—so we could plan the following year’s 2007 IKAA (International Korean Adoptee Associations) Gathering, a global conference allowing adult Korean adoptees to congregate, explore, network, discuss, and learn about Korea, Korean culture, history, adoption politics, and ourselves. During the planning week,

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2 Their current mission objectives are: “1. Provide this website that displays current information and resources of interest to adult Korean Adoptees in Minnesota. 2. Host educational, cultural, and social events or activities to foster friendship, networking, and support for the various needs and interests in our community.” (www.akconnection.com/mission--objectives.html)

3 IKAA, now a nonprofit, consists of IKAA Europe—Adopted Koreans’ Association (Sweden), Arierang (The Netherlands, Korea Klubben (Denmark), Racines Coréennes (France), KOR.I.A.-Korean Italian Adoptees (Italy), B.A.K.-Belgian Adoptees from
adoptees representing organizations from the US, Italy, France, Holland, Sweden, Korea, and several other countries met with government officials and companies (for sponsorships), toured historic sites, and mobilized the Korean adoptee global network as much as possible. In addition to planning the following year’s conference, we visited the beautiful island of Jeju (often referred to as Korea’s Hawaii), attended fancy dinners, held news conferences, and reached out to the public. Our days were fully scheduled, and our nights were thoroughly celebratory. At the three-day conference the following year, over 600 Korean adoptees from all over the world came for discussion sessions, workshops, paper presentations, the first International Korean Adoptee Research Symposium, art, dance, and musical performances, the formal gala dinner sponsored by Samsung, and the first Adoptee World Cup Soccer Tournament.4

I begin with these early musings about my own history, adoption, identity, family, and community connections in order to augur my subsequent concern with difference. It is this supposedly natural difference I wanted to locate early on between my family and my best friend’s family. This dissertation argues that there was never a natural difference of any kind. I initially set out to fully mine Korean adoptee literature and art and poetic

Korea (Belgium)—and IKAA U.S.A.—AK Connection (MN), Also-Known-As, Inc. (NY/NJ/CT), AAAW-Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington (WA), KAHI-Korean Adoptees of Hawai’i (HI), Adoption Links, DC (DC/MD/VA), Association of Korean Adoptees of Southern California (CA), Katch-Korean Adoptees of Chicago (IL). All organization websites can be found at http://ikaa.org/en/page/68.

4 Workshop sessions were organized around such topics as: “Post-Birth Search/Post-Reunion Relationships,” “Getting Networked to Professional Jobs in Korea,” “Considering the Move to Korea,” “Korean Adoption in Literature,” “Generational Differences Between Korean Adoptees in America,” and “Bringing up Asian or Biracial Children in a Society Where White is the Norm” (IKAA 2007 Gathering Report).
self-expression for the ways they speak differently to issues of identity, family, kinship, and the nation. However, the more I read, the more I grew distant with much of the criticism that—even in the mien of progressivity and resistance—makes use of our literature (and ourselves as severely subordinated and marginalized subjects) as means to reify existing kinship structures and beliefs. This first wave of transnational adoption criticism largely benefits from an academic market that remains paranoid and thus more open to work that situates transnational adoptees as victims and unfairly and unjustly removed from their “natural” families and cultures and histories.

This kind of criticism, I argue, ends up engaging with Korean adoptee and other transnational and transracial adoptee texts as evidence of existing unjust histories and as evidence for the end of transnational adoption, the latter, often tacitly encouraged. I argue, instead, that while histories may be silenced or erased, the histories of Korean adoptees are not purely obviated by the processes and histories of transnational adoption. In other words, adoption merely adds further complexity to one’s history. We do not have a potential history, cut short, for a new and completely different kind of history to begin. Further, by critically accepting that adoptee histories begin with this erasure, only, contradictorily reaffirms the notion that adoption erases the naturalness of family and culture. I accept that for legal purposes the Korean citizenship of the adoptee must be first erased such that the United States may claim the child as a citizen, for instance and on which many critics eagerly focus, but I contest their one-to-one correlative expectation that, therefore, adoptees are unnatural having undergone such processes of
denaturalization (from Korean citizenship) and naturalization (into new citizenship). I argue that adoptees are naturally unnatural, then, if the above are the given parameters.

This dissertation argues that the above is necessary simply because there continues to be a negative critical popular consensus regarding the above and the liberation of the transnational and transracial adoptee based on reunification into the adoptee’s “natural” family and culture—in order to “reestablish” the natural bonds these presumably provide. However, I question, for instance, how exactly does the transnational Korean adoptee receive or feel (to the degree of adequacy or beyond) these bonds? By simply being physically present in Korea? By living there? By learning the language? By tracking down their “birth” mother and family? By having their “birth” family “accept” them? At what point can the Korean adoptee decide, here, now, this is where and when I fully feel authentic and real. In a sense, this desire is purely that, and only that which mirrors adoption: the adoptee’s attempt to re-erase a history, the history of their adoption, in order to, “become Korean again.”

Much of the first wave of transnational adoption criticism can be characterized by the ways it focuses on dispelling some adoption research claims that transnational and transracial adoption has been unproblematically successful and positive for adoptees and adoptive parents. In doing so, however, this kind of criticism happens to also configure the transnational adoptee as irrecoverably psychically traumatized, determined as both and between object—as commodity on the globalized baby market—and subject—as immigrant. While these determinations may be accurate, I argue against their assumed significances, which are the same and based on a general question: what happens to the
transnational, transracial adoptee’s psyche because of being a transnational, transracial adoptee? The assumption here of course is that the answer cannot be nothing. It is this assumption that this dissertation wishes to target and examine directly. This critical assumption also seems to lead to what I casually call a kind of representational criticism that, in this instance, claims that the Korean adoptee subject is psychically damaged, traumatized, and suffering from losses from which they can never recover simply because the text/adoptee says so.

Thus, there was a clear decision to not pile onto the existing work that explores more ways in which things are horrible. I intentionally here use an adjectival form (others being horrific, horrid, and horrendous) of horror to stress the ways the Korean adoptee figure is horrific, in principle, to normative, biogenetic kinship. I do this not to emphasize the content of this construction—that, perhaps, yes, the Korean adoptee is aesthetically or representationally or actually horrific—but instead to emphasize the significance of this construction: that, as such, as “adoptee,” as “adopted,” we are by definition monstrous and abnormal and horrific in relation to biogenetic kinship. Thus, I argue that instead of representational criticism, we might look to a kind of disoriented criticism the likes of which speak to how the Korean adoptee figure has been and is, multiply and complexly disoriented. A disoriented criticism might then focus on the ways transnational and transracial adoption criticism orients its subjects and texts as representational and the ways transnational and transracial adoptee texts and self-expressive production often seem to contradictorily reinforce genetic essentialism and cultural nativism.
This dissertation then aims to also be what it proposes, a disoriented and disorienting critique of identity, family, kinship, and the nation that is invested in not only the ways in which we determine difference from one another but also the ways in which those determinations may follow and highlight arbitrary structures. Identity and difference are halves of the same coin. To identify with something is to do so based on similarity. We say, *I am like that or I feel similar to those people because of our similarity, thus I will identify with them, and eventually, if not immediately, be one of them.* To claim identity with something is to also claim nondifference from it. For instance, in the context of family and the familiar, we determine difference as that which is different from all that which is deemed the same (or the familiar); thus the different is inextricably tied to the realm of the same, if only in negation (it is different because it is not this particular same). As Trinh Minh-ha suggests: “Difference undermines the very idea of identity.”

This dissertation is concerned with how the managements and determinations of difference control how it appears as such, and with how these processes often go unquestioned in transnational and transracial adoption criticism. Difference and differences always have a history and histories, historicities, and historicizations, and these may not be the same as the material histories of transnational adoption. Difference in the eternal first instance is often assumed to be outside history, but our critical and popular deploying, categorizing, citing, institutionalizing, monitoring, policing,

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navigating, and striation of difference must largely be taken as not mere revelations of power or structure or antistructure, but as coterminous and coeval with difference itself.

Further, I wish to keep at the forefront of my project Eve Sedgwick’s well recognized axiom—“People are different from each other”—and her list of ways in which people can be different from each other. Sedgwick points to “how few respectable conceptual tools we have” for recognizing and categorizing what counts as different. Sedgwick instead argues for a kind of “nonce taxonomy” or the “making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world.” For Sedgwick, only a “tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought.” Laureen Berlant eloquently adds that Sedgwick’s notion of nonce taxonomy, “tracks the inventiveness of desire in finding form and singularity not just in attachment … but anywhere it can.”

As I undertake my own research into differences between kinship systems of belonging, I acknowledge that considerable adoption research across various disciplines have been likewise interested in revealing the criterion or criteria that grounds or ground this categorical kinship difference. For instance, kinship research has been pioneered at

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7 Ibid., 23.

the University of Minnesota largely because of the Korean adoptee population in the state. As one of these Minnesotan Korean adoptees myself, I routinely participate in some of this research through the University of Minnesota Twin Family Study, a longitudinal tracking of twins and adoptees that explores possible significant differences between genetic and environmental influences on sociological and psychological behavior and development. The Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study, a related project, shares data and databases with other MTFS studies and looks for differences between adopted siblings and biological siblings in order to map out how family environment—here, families with siblings who are biogenetically related to the parents versus families with siblings who are adopted versus families with siblings both biogenetically related and adopted—influences the mental and behavioral health of children, adolescents, and eventually, as the study continues, adults. This research, which began in 1989, has tracked me and other adoptees since our youths, and every four years I respond to questions mostly regarding my behavioral health, sexual behavior, drug use/chemical dependency, and any legal or criminal issues I may have recently encountered.

As a transnational, transracial Korean adoptee my development concerns the study as I represent one end of this biogenetic relatedness spectrum (the negative end),

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9 Additionally, the first official Korean adoptee organization, Minnesota Adopted Koreans, was established in 1991 (later supplanted by AK Connection). Also, see Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016, pp. 101-103. Nelson also points to the irony of Minnesota having a largely racially homogenous history, like Sweden, which helped “support its racially progressive policies when it came to family matters … The state’s high degree of racial homogeneity also meant that racial politics in the state have tended to be assimilative” (102).
while identical twins—who share one hundred percent genetic similarity between one another—occupy the other end. While this study tracks differences along this “kinship scale,” the study fails to recognize or speak to any transracial aspect of the transnational adoptee’s experience, which is peculiar considering how significant racial difference and, importantly, the effects of its negation, can be for transracial adoptees adopted from foreign nations. Ann Anagnost suggests that racial difference within the family can produce “scenes of misrecognition” for the adoptive parent—whose “link to the child appears to be tenuous and needing support”—as not only do they struggle for recognition as parents generally (having to adopt in the first place) but also find themselves “repositioned in relation to a difference that is not readily assimilable[,] … the relation of the parent to the child becomes something that must continually be explained … almost as if the child’s uncertain citizenship color[s] that of the parent.”

Scenes of misrecognition beyond the “Are those your kids?” queries might also describe transracial adoptee experience, though, more robustly. Transracial adoptees may struggle to be recognized as children (which may or may not have something to do with the “perpetual child” myth associated with adoptees) and may struggle to be recognized as racially other within their families and often struggle to find self-recognition, if our burgeoning transnational and transracial adoptee literature is suggestive of anything.

Over the years, throughout my participation in the Minnesota Twin Family Study, I have never been asked questions regarding my opinions, thoughts, feelings, or beliefs.

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about race, my racial identification, the racial difference between myself and my adoptive parents, Asian Americanness or Korean Americanness or Korean Americanness within a white family. The suggestion here is that racial difference must not have any effect on other parameters (identical twin siblings, adoptive siblings) nor is racial difference deemed relevant as its own parameter (the study presupposes kinship difference as formative of subject constitution in order to study it while racial difference is presumed to be “surface level” and after the originality of family constitution. But clearly racial difference and the erasure of it—throughout various spheres of Korean adoptee life—may affect indicators of adversity or trouble, as racial difference and its consequences may likewise affect a Korean adoptee’s disposition to answer certain questions in certain ways. Evidently, even leading research like The Twin Family Study fails to acknowledge this crucial aspect of many transnational and transracial adoptive families. But again, and despite my willing participation, the MTFS is admittedly first and foremost interested in “twins,” while adoptees function as a kind of off-the-hinges “bottom” that answers the question, “What if there is no biogenetic relation at all?”

This dissertation explores how secreted narratives of transnational adoptees have become in the popular consciousness, and as such, consequentially, as the anti-default to normative kinship, the transnational, transracial adoptee subject threatens to explode normative biogenetic kinship. In other words, if “having children” is the default expectation for an adult couple, then adopting is the anti-default (people say, “If we can’t have children, we’ll just adopt”). For adoptive parents, what once was thought of as default (having children) is realized to not be the default as they must instead default to
adoption. This defaulting to adoption at first looks like a mere turning to it, but in fact this somewhat common scenario implies that adoption is the default all along. The “problem” is that adoption as default flies in the face of systems of control, based on genetics and bloodlines. The status quo of patriarchal containment originally holds that women should bear and mother children because their “place” is the home and with the children. If adoption, the adopted, and the adoptive were to become the new norms of kinship, seen as the fascia that holds all of kinship and family together, not the belief in blood or genetics, then this former alignment of women and children and the domestic could be unraveled. Alternative and queer family forms—for example, single father or two father or two mother families—may become less contained. Already, of course, we recognize that parenting and caregiving are not the sole province of birth mothers. Many people have parents and caregivers of any kind of relation, brought about by marriage, friendship, a promise, or genetic relation. A birth mother may or may not be involved in parenting.

While the concern here for most adoption critics seems to be the conditions that encourage and incentivize birth mothers in poor countries to relinquish their children, and in many instances of Korean adoption clear coercion and confusion occurred to the extent that some mothers did not know fully the degree to which they were sending their children away. Many mothers and families saw adoption (as it was advertised) as a means to provide their children with better lives. Nevertheless, rather than join the canon of work that uncovers these histories of transnational adoption, this project focuses more on family and kinship language, mythologies, and impossibilities.
Part of why I move away from victimization scholarship has to with how transnational and transracial adoptees, like Korean adoptees, are so often figured as gifts (as children generally are) rather than young human beings who need someone to decide to be their parent. Susan Coutin, Bill Maurer, and Barbara Yngvesson speak to the rhetoric of donation and the gift in adoption as a means to conceal the horrors of the globalized industry of transnational adoption that is most complicit in and generative of the often gendered and racialized commodification of foreign babies. They suggest that this rhetoric is one “of choice” that “is part of the morality tale that animates Western stories of self and nation.”¹¹ To view children as gifts also allows the continuance of determining women as naturally mothers, as gift givers, and as maternal providers, while men enjoy more freedom and possibility, if only insofar as deciding to be “fathers” or providers or not. Another issue with the gift metaphor is that for many adoptees, the facts of their adoptions are kept secret, ignored, or erased in the adoptive family. Adoptees may be told themselves to not advertise the fact of their adoption (to pass when possible, when the fact of racial difference is not readily perceived). Adopted children thus may become secret gifts and often times see themselves through this metaphor.

Jacques Derrida suggests that the notion of the secret is in fact about a duality that can be found in telling and not telling. For Derrida, the secret denies itself and thus: “There is a secret of denial and a denial of the secret. The secret as such, as secret, separates and already institutes a negativity; it is a negation that denies itself. It de-

negates itself.”¹² In plain words, there is a paradox at the heart of the secret, in that, initially, the secret is something that must not be told, which is the first negation. However, in order to possess, truly, the secret, one must at least tell it to oneself, in order to keep it. This process is one of what Derrida calls “auto-affection”—of which autobiography is a prime example (and for my transnational, transracial adoptee-as-secret purposes, nicely fitting)—or the telling to oneself of, in this case, the secret. Further, to speak the secret to oneself is inevitably a sharing of the secret, even if it is to oneself. But this principle of sharing suggests that the secret, from the beginning, is shareable. This is formed by the representation of the secret, if not the secret itself. Nevertheless, the secret then, at this juncture, needs to negate the first negation, that of not telling the secret. Therefore, in order to keep the secret of adoption, the abstract adoptee must not keep the secret. For Derrida, then, there is no secret as such.

Derrida similarly turns to the notion of the gift as consisting in a paradox of undecidability. For Derrida, the gift cannot present itself or be presented as such and therefore when it does appear, its appearance immediately invalidates the notion of the gift in the first instance. Even a simple “thank you” places the listener in the particular position of being encouraged or compelled to respond in some way, which only further indicates the need for acknowledgement of the gift—the need for acknowledgement that something had been indeed given—which suggests that the gift is as much about getting

something in return as it is giving. On the other hand, if a gift is given and is never legible as such (but still given), then this gift occurs but without the citation and indexing of it, thus, in effect, occurring outside the normative trajectory of the gift and thus is no longer, properly, a gift. Further, the giver cannot even acknowledge that they are giving, as to do so would be to still benefit from self-congratulatory possibility. Thus, ultimately, the genuine gift is impossible.

I suggest here that transnational, transracial adoptees, then, as determined by such rhetorical logics of undecidability and impossibility, well metaphoricized in Derrida’s observations of the gift and the secret, are similarly critically and popularly determined. I offer that this is a more productive interpretation of the Korean adoptee predicament and context and moment in history (if indeed it is to be only a moment) than the representational criticism of Eng and Kim. Further, for Derrida, the Freudian notion of Verneinung (denial and negation) as practiced method hides another impossibility. Because the Freudian interpretation of negation merely affirms that which the analyst sees in the patient, the initial locating of cited negations only function as affirmations for the analyst. In other words, for my purposes, we must find other, if representational, ways to interpret, frame, and radicalize adoption studies and theory and praxis and practices not directly associated or aligned with theory. This might also allow us the freedom to move on from what Hazel Carby bemoans as “theoretical paradigm[s] of difference” that are “obsessed with the construction of identities rather than relations of power and
domination and, [that,] in practice, concentrate on the effect of this difference on a
(white) norm.”13

As mentioned earlier, while I initially conceived of this project as a necessary
survey of transnational and transracial adoption literature, and especially Korean adoptee
literature, the more criticism I read the more I felt critical. Thus I endeavored to explore
what the field seemed so desirous of, part of which clearly was to capitalize on the
emergence of the transnational, transracial adoptee, exemplified in recent years by the
model Korean adoptee. I directed my attention to other knowledge regimes that do not
necessarily depict the transnational and transracial adoptee subject as contained by the
history of international adoption, by cultural and familial misrecognitions, and by
psychical plights. The remedies so often implied by transnational adoptee criticism are
also problematic in that they cannot avoid reeking of genetic essentialism, nativism, and a
“natural attitude” toward family and kinship. In other words, the tacit conceit is an
affirmation of a denial: yes, the transnational, transracial adoptee from Korea shouldn’t
have had to happen, these adoptees shouldn’t have had to been adopted, and they would
have been better off not being adopted, with their Korean mother and family and culture
and national identity. This ignores the fact that we were, in fact, adopted and now enjoy
(some of us at least) a felt and peculiar kind of positionality between many entities,
notions, and norms (and their others), and there is radical potentiality in the impossible.
What is clearly more interesting is the configuration and positioning of the Korean

13 Hazel Carby, “The Multicultural Wars.” Black Popular Culture, edited by Michele
adoptee, in this instance, as a “modern” family formulation that affirms extant post-Marxian and post-Freudian theories of difference, desire, and the psyche, despite, for example, Eng’s claim that bringing “transnational adoption together with psychoanalysis” is a “rather unorthodox but, I would contend, necessary theoretical combination.”

Thus, we might interpret these kinds of critical approaches as mirrors attempting to erase that which it claims to work to alleviate—and through the obviation of the fact of or any focus on adoption itself.

Chapter 1, “Korean Adoptees, Identity, and the Languages of Kinship, Blood, and Disorientation,” explores various notions of Korean adoptee identity that critics have theorized. I also engage with Korean adoptee identity on its own terms and encourage a view that sees it as a complete dismantling of much of the ground upon which previous nonadoptee identity or identities stand and further cannot fathom as such. I develop a critical and theoretical backdrop and framework of “Korean adoptee identity” in order to even further disorient it away from extant criteria of normative identity constitution. I argue that the language we use to describe kinship and family is greatly compromised by the very binary that contains adoptees, the adoptive, and the adopted as unnatural and other. I suggest ways of conceiving family and genealogy that do not rely on myths of family trees and other arboreal visions of social connection. Chapter 1 is a critical

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landscaping that ends with my notion of transnational and transracial adoptee identity as complexly disoriented. This dis-orienting and dis-orientation is multiply pronged and valenced and further speaks to the ways Korean adoptee identity has also dis-oriented itself from that which traditionally orients identity. Further, this plural disorientation is an impossibility, in that we are the secret gift.

In chapter 2, “What’s Queer about Korean Adoptees? Contradicting Ancestry, Family, and Identity,” I consider what Soojin Pate calls the “queer dimensions of Korean adoption.” In this chapter I highlight the fictions and myths of normative biogenetically related kinship and suggest that any hesitation towards rejecting these supposedly natural truths has to do with denials of the queer dimensions of Korean adoption. I position Korean adoption within these queer dimensions and within queer diaspora as a way to explore how the figure of the Korean adoptee does and does not signify as a queer subject whilst performing the “consumptive labor” of the modern adoptive family. I suggest that more firmly situating the Korean adoptee within a queer perspective and positionality allows the Korean adoptee subject more agential power by reorienting the ways by which identity is conventionally determined, in contradistinction to genetic essentialism and the heteronormative national nuclear family. I further engage with research on DNA and popular genealogy testing and the contributions of various critics who articulate the mythology of DNA and genetics as the metaphorical successor to “blood.” I do this to get at some of the possible reasons why the transnational and transracial adoption critical

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community has yet to fully acknowledge problems with the “natural attitude” toward kinship, despite our ready attention toward the ways in which “family” has been historically exclusive and problematic.

One of the problems with nature, of course, is that once someone or something claims nature for its own, claims it as origin, foundation, and raison d’être, everything outside this naturalness is necessarily figured as specifically not natural and/or beyond or outside of nature. While adoption and orphans and children raised by parents or caregivers other than their biogenetically related mothers and fathers have been around arguably forever, for the kinship binary to hold, adoption, adoptees, orphans, interracial families, queer families, and so on, must be naturally held up against biology and genetics as other and not the default. To suppose that something is natural and another thing as not natural, however, is to suggest that the unnatural entity or unnatural association is naturally unnatural or unnaturally natural. Accepting adoption and the adoptive as not natural is also to create, where there was no distinction before, the binary itself, as this implies that before the appearance of “adopted” and the “adoptive” and “adoptive” families, the binary had not existed in its current form. The supposed sudden appearance of adoption as a “modern” means of family making and kinship suggests that natural kinship simply existed alone—a full monopolization of kinship and its order—before needing to distinguish itself, as primary, original, and natural.

This naturalization of the family and of kinship is akin to David Eng’s anxiety over the term “queer” and queer theory, generally, in their tendency to leave out any of the actual queerness in determining things as “queer.” If queer theory’s “success” or
inclusion into the normative and political spheres have only occurred through a kind of castration, as Eng describes, by removing any of the actual queer sex and behaviors and bodies and acts of queer life, adoption might be looked at similarly, in that its success and inclusion into the normative and political mainstream consciousness and culture has occurred only through a likewise figurative castration of that which adoption does, which is cite, mark, and register the true abomination and monstrosity of itself, in that, adoption, is born from the opposite of nature, despite being its default. But if adoption and the adoptive function became legible as such through its relation to and difference from natural kinship, then adoption must be natural too, which is to further suggest a deeper monstrosity and abomination: that there is no nature, not even in “family,” not even in “where one comes from,” or if there is one, it is the nature of adoption that binds families together. Thus, the first association of adoption and abomination is revealed to be presented as such in order to distract from its counterpart’s (normative kinship) inevitable failures, of which primarily include the failure to claim nature for itself, only, and the failure to not contain adoption and the adoptive function as merely social manifestations and constructions.

In chapter 3, “Language of the Heart: Korean Adoptee Identity and Disorientation,” I argue for a language of the heart and a language of disorientation. To do so, I retake up Korean adoptee identity in Jane Jeong Trenka’s The Language of Blood: A Memoir and Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee’s Return to Korea. I read Trenka’s adoptee as wonderfully disoriented and disorienting, spatially, temporally, historically. I explore the ways Trenka’s autobiographical self and other performances of the self
implicate this disoriented identity and further implicate the disorientation of identity altogether. These disorientations of identity dismantle the stuff of origins, nature, and authenticity, all of which are always already also about what they are not (what is not original, what is not natural, and what is not authentic). I finally offer a disoriented reading of Trenka’s memoirs in order to highlight, not a language of blood, but a language of the heart. I find the metaphor of the heart a more apt, inclusive, and descriptive metaphor for what anchors all kinship. If the truth is that adoption or the adoptive function is the anchor, then as metaphor, the heart anchors adoption as a metaphor for love, that amorphous notion, varied in manifestation romantically and filially, flexible, adaptable, and accommodating. Indeed, love is the fascia that brings people together into and holds them in the vicinity of family.

Chapter 4, “The Korean Adoptee’s Eidetic Reduction of Family and the Familiar: The Criticism and Phenomenology of Deann Borshay Liem’s First Person Plural,” explores the ways various transnational and transracial adoption critics have reacted to Liem and her first documentary and why they largely treat her and First Person Plural as unmediated snapshots of severe racial melancholia. Critics like Jodi Kim and David Eng build their arguments around Deann’s proclamation in First Person Plural that she doesn’t “have room in [her] mind for two mothers.”16 The problem, however, is that Kim and Eng accept this claim immediately as truth: there isn’t room in her mind for two

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I contest, however, this logic of critically troping the transnational and transracial adoptee subject as evidence of extreme psychical lack. I argue that it is not having two mothers, alone, fundamentally, that causes such psychical turmoil. It is more the support for and the consistent reinstitution of normative kinship as genetically determined; it is more the “being told” of adoption as such, that contains us against any natural alignment with genetic kinship. I am concerned with the critical tendency to treat adoptee texts as more “truthful” (itself an odd dream) than something a character in any fictive genre might say.

Is there room in the minds of nonadoptee children for two mothers? Sure there is. In many families, children claim two (or more) mothers and have no reason to believe that there should be a problem with having more than one mother. Part of the problem lies in the trouble with the term, “birth mother.” Interestingly, however, the term only seems to appear outside normative kinship formations, e.g., adoptive family contexts and queer family formations wherein men may have chosen a female surrogate. One might assume this adjectival distinction is a natural consequence of having “two mothers,” a condition that results in psychic turmoil and unsurmountable mourning, as Kim and Eng invariably discuss via engagement with Borshay Liem and First Person Plural. Yet, what really is at stake is not “two mothers,” but adoption, as the logical representational mistake above largely has to do with the problem of taxonomy and simply not having

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17 Following this representational critical logic, what happens if Korean adoptee texts suddenly start proclaiming otherwise, that there is no feeling of inauthenticity, no sense of loss, of being robbed of true culture and family, but instead, say, a kind of freedom from normative structures of family, belonging, and kinship, and consequentially, identity, itself? Would Kim and Eng argue similarly?
adequate language to signify the vicissitudes between and nuances of kinship and family and belonging. Further, Kim’s and Eng’s readings of *First Person Plural* doom Deann’s transnational, transracial adoptee to an “unending mourning” or an unmournable loss (of mother, of nation, of culture, of identity and self) and precisely because Deann’s adoptive family couldn’t see or properly recognize her racial difference. Despite the fact that the opposite is unlikely, given who the Borshays are—common, white, Christian, well-to-do, well-wishing Americans—I would still personally hope that the possibility of “true mourning” (whatever that would be) would not depend so much on whether or not my adoptive parents attempt to deny, hide, or erase or ignore my racial difference, the fact of my adoption, and/or my earliest history—that includes my “birth” mother and family and my Koreanness and my adoption and my adoptive family and my Asian Americanness.

This dissertation takes adoption criticism as sites of emergence that feature certain biogenetically normative languages of family and kinship. I recognize extant critical foundations of adoption criticism as a wave whose rise and fall belies a dialectics that will not always be held in suspension by containing the adoptive and the adopted within the social and manufactured and outside the natural order of things. I argue for the disorientation of family, kinship, and identity, instead, as a way of critiquing not only family, kinship, and identity but also the notion of orientation—or position—itself insofar as it functions as a mechanic and explanatory principle for belonging and identity. Further, identity always involves difference; the citation of it appears with its identification. Thus, disorientation and orientation (which is always, first, a
disorientation, before the orientation succeeds) are precisely always about position and
positioning, positions and positionality.

Instead of arguing for destinations of self-annihilation, buttressing tropes of
adoptees as victimized, psychically tormented, lacking, empty, lost, only gendered labor,
grossly different, embodied byproducts of unfair power relations between rich nations
and poor ones, inheritors of the legacy of slavery, the legacy of mail order brides, the
legacy of the forced indoctrination and abuse of Native Indian children into Christianity
and Western culture, I articulate an adoptee theory of disorientation as the provocative
principle of transnational and transracial adoptee identity—particularly drawn from the
materiality and history of transnational adoption between Korea and the West. Other
perspectives, however descriptive or accurate, continue to psychically doom the
transracial adoptee simply because we seem to be expressing the sentiment.

Representational criticism agrees with biogenetic privileging and genetic
essentialism and argues that if the transnational and transracial adoptee were to have an
authentic or real identity, it would be clearly monstrous and built from the descriptive list
above. Fortunately, for representational criticism, the transnational and transracial
adoptive is bereft of identity and robbed of culture and family because some transnational
and transracial adoptees say so. A disoriented adoptee criticism might instead, however,
argue for a transnational and transracial adoptee whose identity complexly involves this
self-reflexive questioning of true identity, holds together multiple histories of family,
culture, nation, and of nonadoptive and adoptee lives, and cares for the transnational and
transracial adoptee, specifically, about our present and future, for one, rather than our
pasts. These verbs—*involves, holds,* and *cares*—articulate both the processes of *adoption* and *love,* but this association requires a much more dedicated inquiry in the future.
Chapter 1
Korean Adoptees, Identity, and the Languages of Kinship, Blood, and Disorientation

Insofar as how we cite kinship, albeit, often in negative form, Korean adoptees endure or enjoy a unique brand of difference that marks us both as excessive (too much family) and as lacking (no family) and along multiple axes and striations of race, ethnicity, nationality, citizenry, history, politics, power, and diasporic movements. Korean adoptees and other transnational and transracial adoptees, currently, most, arguably, implicate and signify kinship otherness and difference, such that beyond and within existing structures and histories of oppression, adoptees command or occupy an odd position of representing and embodying an other otherness, whose categorical difference over the last half century has concretized into a, or now, the, binary of normative and alternative kinships—one considered natural, default, and real, the other considered manufactured, substitutive, and inauthentic—not to mention a new foundational way of defining the self. Overtaking “orphan,” for instance (even though many adoptees were once orphans), “adopted” and “adoptee” have fast become central monikers of a different kind of kinship. There are also themes of loss and victimhood and tropes of “feeling” real versus “feeling” not real (which is often cited in childhood with the phrase, “you’re not my real parents”) that pervade transnational and transracial adoptee literatures and discourses.
Perhaps not shockingly, many adoption critics have turned to notions of identity when engaging with adoptees, adoptee politics, literature, history, criticism. Kimberly Leighton, for instance, argues for an “adopted identity” that is one of possibility … a way to make sense of the tensions produced by being both at once the product of one’s environment and someone whose meaning always exceeds that environment … [As] a paradigm (or metaphor) for identity, “being adopted” opens up a space of non-identity (or non-identicalness) between the self as a subject and the self as an object such that one cares about the processes (social, historical, cultural, political, and relational) through which one has come to be … [such that] one can undertake (the pleasures and pursuits of) self-knowing in a way that engenders a recognition of self-difference (i.e., that the self one is [and can be] is not identical to the knowledge of it).¹

Leighton speaks to the “possibility of claiming an identity based on the history of the production of one’s identity, that is, that one was (literally) adopted, and the idea that identities are neither born nor made but are adopted.” Leighton also recognizes that to “construct the fantasy of identity, it seems we want to believe that self-knowledge is possible.”² Leighton argues that any adopted identity framework must feature the “historicity” of its makeup, the details and margins of kinship. Her system “exploit[s] the double meaning of adopted as both to have been adopted (as someone else’s) and to


² Ibid., 148, 165. Leighton clarifies: “Hence, the logic of identity engenders the possibility of having a nature, a something which can be one’s essence. Such an essence, this logic contends, can then be transmitted to others, assuring that, like property itself, the property of identity will continue on. This construction of identity as a kind of natural essence that is transferred through practices of inheritance—both reproductive and legal—but is not constituted by them is not dissimilar to the kind of ‘as-if-the-same’ construction involved in a traditional, historically ‘closed’ adoption” (154).
adopt (as one’s own) … connoting two different sets of practices.” These practices together generate “a liminal space” where the subject is both subjected to social practices and able to construct and reconstruct practices. Leighton concludes: “Thus, as adopted, an identity is the position from which one attempts to understand one’s own history.”

Questions about the so-called nature of kinship beat at the heart of this project. The idea—the performance, application, appearance, deployment, citation, feeling—of normative kinship is generally or popularly accepted as natural and self-evident—even among some adoption critics. But there might not be anything natural about blood bonds at all. Yet, given that popular understandings and beliefs about what kinship means and is and confers continue to appear as self-evident and natural—that often times, in turn, provides great meaning, value, and significance for people interested in their family trees and genealogies, DNA and ancestral linkages, even if they be ultimately mathematically and technically arbitrary—we must take care in dismantling the existing unfair paradigm, or paradigmatic dichotomy, without rejecting outright the benefits that that system, however unfair, nevertheless did prompt, produce, or generate for many adoptees. And herein lies, ultimately, the rub: if there is no truth to blood bonds, no singular naturally special something between mother and (biogenetically related) child (over mother and adopted child, for instance), then what is a bond in any instance? Is it purely made up?

The idea that people who share geographical location over time—whose determination is also arbitrary and ultimately whim to any present technological capacity to “look at” history, decide on boundaries, borders, and lines on maps—naturally also share

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3 Ibid., 148.
differences significant enough to determine them defining and exclusionary particular to this or that group of people is unlikely. What does it mean to argue that we are more like this x group of people here—defined by whatever—over that y group of people over there? In what ways do we claim we are different and why for each way? Do these decided upon categories of difference shift or change over time? Do the “borders” and demarcations of territories change over time?

While some adoption scholars have acknowledged that much of our critical discourse threatens to reinforce genetic, biological, and cultural essentialisms, brief acknowledgment is often where the conversation stops, if I might be so bold. But indeed, I want to explore why our conversations often stop where they do, despite any (understandable) unwillingness to engage with—and integrate into our perspectives and positionalities—information that refutes the significance or veracity of blood bonds.

One way Korean adoptees embody the above tension between biogenetically related “certainty” and adoptive substitution is how we as a political entity, identity, and group of people speak to a kind of impossibility. In other words, we cite and embody lack and excess synchronously (adoptees have both no “real” family and too much of it, two mothers, for instance), function as “substitutes for real children” and as real children who feel their own selves are substitutes for lost Korean selves back in Korea, and as a political group largely see ourselves as part of a progressive community, family, even, and one that challenges existing norms and means to kinship and identity, while, however, at the same time argue for our own annihilation as a kind of group or identity—through the eventual discontinuance and obsolescence of South Korean transnational or
international adoption—which often finds our subjectivities represented and viewed as severely, grossly, fundamentally lacking, empty, inauthentic, false, lost, fictional, not whole, and unavoidably concerned with the “truth” of who we might have been, that phantom Korean self-other, who, in a parallel reality (one where adoption did not occur), grew and lived as a “normal” Korean citizen. Of course, the catch here is that this phantom would-be Korean self only exists because of its other, because of adoption, because of actual reality. In other words, if our phantom non-adopted Korean versions of ourselves did happen, they would have absolutely no wherewithal regarding or reason to even think about phantom adopted versions of themselves scattered around the world. Nevertheless, Korean adoptee texts often envision the source of these truths in the biogenetically related mother (or “birth mother”) and the “motherland,” itself, with heavy foci on the actual land itself, its geography and landmarks and what they mean for Korean people, national and cultural histories of Korea, and the metaphorical and literal powers of natural kinship.

I argue, though, that it is not possible to actually be lacking, empty, inauthentic, false, lost, fictive, or not whole; however, it is certainly possible to be a self who feels these ways. Additionally, this identity predicament itself is a unique and potentially profitable kind of identity, potentially radically unbound from traditions and regimes of nation, clan, or kin. We might view ourselves and our predicaments as more like what Elizabeth Freeman calls “queer belonging,” which names more than the longing to be, and be connected, as in being ‘at hand.’ It also names the longing to ‘be long,’ to endure in corporeal form over time, beyond procreation. Though I offer a false etymology here … To want to belong, let us say, is to long to be bigger not only spatially, but
also temporally, to ‘hold out’ a hand across time and touch the dead or those not born yet, to offer oneself beyond one’s own time.\footnote{Elizabeth Freeman, “Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory.” \textit{A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies}, edited by George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2007, pp. 295-314: 299. Freeman argues that “kinship” is an alibi for “biology” and instead notes Pierre Bourdieu’s “practical kinship” versus “official kinship,” in which the latter is inert while the former is ubiquitous and based on “habitus” and acts that dominate everyday life.}

Judith Roof might call the retrospective aspect of such longing “pretermortality,” the desire for “having always existed,” while the desire for existing in the future is commonly and simply “immortality.”\footnote{Judith Roof, \textit{The Poetics of DNA}. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 199.} Indeed, there are many different ways to articulate, argue for, prompt, and construct Korean adoptee identity, and I argue that transnational and/or transracial adoptee identities may not represent accidents or aberrations of nature but rather inevitable historical breaks from orienting identificatory attachments to the past, temporally and spatially, and to past means of identification, all of which, arguably, are fictive and mythological anyway.

I am excited about much recent work that repudiates the accuracy or validity to DNA and human population genetic technologies and/or for-profit companies that purport to reveal ancestral lineages (in order to “better know where you came from” and to “better know who you are”). Genetic genealogy, however, is never complete or whole; the “significance” of any relation becomes arbitrary very quickly because of exponential math, the fact that we are all related to one another, ultimately, pedigree collapse, facts of how DNA is tested and what it can actually reveal and cannot reveal, our current political
and categorical biases of what constitutes a “group” of people in the first place and where and how to demarcate them geographically and temporally, across history. On top of the contributions from social scientists and critics of science and technology, like Catherine Nash and Alondra Nelson, who both dispute the claims of popular DNA ancestry sites, adoptee critics must certainly not, I would hope, ignore these contributions nor those within our own fields, like Sara Ruddick’s now quarter-century-old observation that “all mothers are ‘adoptive’,” Marianne Novy’s assertion that “rather than distinguishing fictive from authentic kinship, we should say that all kinds of kinship are fictive, because all institutions are constructed by social agreement … all kinship can be considered constructed,” and Jacqueline Stevens’ expansive work that shows how overtly or implicitly all families are adoptive, as all families depend on the legal institutionalization of rules that put children in relation to parents that the children themselves do not choose … The resulting contrast between biological or natural families and adoptive ones is a legal distinction and therefore a construction, one with the same power and effects as other myths whose acceptance shape reality.\(^6\)

\[\text{Korean Adoptee Identities and Our Future Extinction}\]

Almost every South Korean administration since 1976 has tried to end South Korea’s participation in and model of transnational or international adoption. The

national Five Year Plan for Adoption and Foster Care (1976-1981) envisioned phasing out foreign adoption by 1981. Finding the incentives and amendments ineffective, the Chun Doo-hwan administration reversed its policy, and the 1980s produced South Korea’s highest transnational adoption numbers to date. In 1985, the peak year, almost 9,000 babies were adopted overseas. Later in the decade, however, the government was embarrassed during the 1988 Olympics, particularly because of NBC’s special “report” on “some aspects of [Korean] society they’d prefer we’d not examine so closely.” In 1989 the government established the Adoption Project Improvement Guideline, aimed at ending foreign adoption, this time, by 1996. (The Kim Young-Sam administration extended this deadline to 2015.) Additionally, because of the criticism following the Olympics, no more abandoned children would be put up for transnational adoption. In 2006, to further encourage domestic adoption, the Roh Moo-hyun government offered to give single mothers 400,000 won per month to support their children, and 100,000 won a month per child for South Korean adoptive parents. Many restrictions within the domestic adoption process were also loosened.

An obvious, though not often appreciated, probable outcome of these policies is an end to the Korean adoptee community. In *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* Kim Park Nelson observes: “For those who work to end transnational adoption, many of whom are adoptees, the disappearance of Korean adoptee communities is a necessary result of their activism … [A]nti-adoption activism works against the very existence of future Korean adoptees and of Korean adoptee communities.” Nelson only mentions that these “activists
... are also silent on this future they envision."

The implications of this ostensible objective, however, are problematic, this destination of eventual, hopeful self-erasure.

What does it suggest about our identity as a unique group of people who built and cultivated what Catherine Ceniza Choy refers to as the “global family” of Korean adoptees? To be literal, then, the goal of self-erasure, for lack of a better term at the moment, seeks to ensure that sometime in the future, there will be no more living transnational Korean adoptees, and thus our time as a specific kind of “identity” and status might represent a mere blip in the overall history of the homogeneity of kinship across national and cultural borders?

Would the following question differ if South Korea became larger as a global and economic power and player, commanding “first world” status easily? In Nelson’s view, “South Korea as a nation no longer wants to participate in a practice that is associated with poor and undeveloped nations,” particularly because, perhaps, the “current practice of transnational adoption depends on economic inequity between sending and receiving nations.” Among others, Choy also points to this perception of national shame as consequent to a history that directly connects South Korea’s participation in the present transnational adoption industry to the fallout of western imperialism, war, and U.S.

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9 Nelson, Invisible, 192.
military engagement. However, as South Korea continues to modernize and grow as a powerful economic global presence and establish itself as a first world nation decidedly not poor and undeveloped, economic inequity becomes less of a factor. This leads to the question: What might transnational adoption practices look like between nations without yawning economic disparities? Would equal situations or statuses between nation states “fix” anything or mitigate any of the injustices of transnational adoption?

That said, the principle, in principle—that all forms of kinship are ultimately adoptive—describes our adoptee critical and often personal dilemma. Our critical task is then bound by, at least initially, this position of resisting and rejecting the bifurcation between adoptive and genetic kinship. Is the truth-value and/or evidence of this principle *cum* maxim contingent upon whether or not we as adoptee critics and we of adoptee communities find productive and useful moves toward obviating the supposed difference that makes us, in the accepted schema, “adopted”? Does the *telos* of this politics, set up this way, point to a self-annihilation (as a kind of subject, group, community) whose coterminous critical value lies primarily in whether or not we are successful in that aim?

Simply, there are two overarching implications of the above principle, each pointing us in different yet similar directions. The first is to note the consequence: “If all forms of kinship are based in adoption and are adoptive in nature, then the statement, ‘everyone is adopted’ is both true and not true.” The second suggests, “If the first (‘forms’ not ‘statement’) is true then the statement, ‘adoptees aren’t really adopted’ is both true and not true.” And how much do the material histories and experiences of adoptees challenge this second direction? Many adoptees emphatically *feel*, abstractly,
organically, explicitly, implicitly, *adopted*. And yet what are the potential “solutions” before us? One possible solution is to argue that while we have been adopted, and while there is an extensive transnational adoption institution and global business, and while the terminology and language of kinship and adoption binds us to this schema and history, and while its material effects are real and often traumatizing, one possible purpose for our advent as a kind of subject, community, and people might be to *absolutely* disrupt entrenched ideas about identity, the nation, family, genetic determinism, and essentialism, and kinship. If so, how do we go about doing this? And how does this help adoptees who *feel extremely* adopted, *now*? Does the division between genetic kinship and adoptive kinship that so greatly founds our identity dilemma, as well as the conditions from which that dilemma arise, allow adoptees to “speak” identity at all? Even if we acknowledge that one of the reasons we feel “adopted” and experience our lives as adoptees might be based on limitations of language, errors of taxonomy, errors born from our current linguistic and epistemological circumscriptions of kinship, and even if we disagree with this structure, would the hypothetical “completion” of a new schema—that would better describe, categorize, cite, hail, and treat all people as univocal in kinship makeup or constitution—succeed in making adoptees no longer *adoptees* as such? Does this critical inquiry, at present, also, yet in a different manner, express a kind of desire for self-annihilation?

Many adoption critics acknowledge that Korean adoptees have forged our own communities, our own means to family and belonging, and our own senses of selfhood. Many adoption critics acknowledge that we subvert and resist normative forms of
identity, belonging, family, and kinship by simply existing within nonnormative family structures. We have formed adult Korean adoptee groups and nonprofits and resources for ourselves; we hold yearly “gatherings” in Seoul as well as around the world and have cultivated a well-connected and robust presence on the internet. In a word, we are unique, powerful agents of change, and have found, performed, and exacted our own ways of and means to belonging, community, family, and kinship. We have fostered powerful inquiries into the natures of identity, belonging, kinship, race, class, sexuality, motherhood, blood, history, national and cultural and ethnic affiliation, and parental rights. Yet, many adoption critics and transracial adoptees and Korean American communities fervently work toward a future where there will never be another transnational, transracial, Korean adoptee alive in the world and only further substantiated by recent critical positionings within transnational and transracial adoption research.

The remainder of this chapter will be loosely organized around the various pillars that hold up the current critical regime within adoption criticism; because of the limitations of what these pillars can reasonably bear, our structures of thinking might require renovations. These pillars and the beams they support are longstanding and load-bearing. Yet some of them are rotting and made of only wood (trees) and in need of replacements. What are the reasons for these pillars? What functions do they directly serve?

For instance, one of these pillars of transnational and transracial adoptee politics involves genetic and biological essentialisms and the generally accepted belief that
there’s just something to kin, or more directly, blood, or more accurately, genetic, kin, and—by extension and in its own right—more emphatically, really something to the natural bond between mother and biogenetically related child. While, certainly, motherhood has been a focus for feminist thinking and a source of great debate, Jacqueline Stevens, for example, proffers a system that reserves the term “mother” only for those who give birth and gets rid of the title and term “father” altogether, adds “parent” or “caretaker,” and provides a solid foundation upon which new kinds of thinking about kinship, family, identity, belonging, and transnational adoptee politics might build. Would changes like these effect significatory change in “adopted,” “adoptive,” and “adoption”? While Stevens’s system would force change in law and legal language, family law and beyond, but theoretically when would adoptees stop feeling so adopted?

Additionally, I turn to Catherine Nash, who soundly repudiates the myths and significances and meanings given to genes, blood, and DNA and what they “say about ourselves.” She analyzes scientific praxes of popular human genetics, ancestry sites and companies selling history and geography, and the belief in DNA and genetic genealogy. She argues that

Kinship involves ideas of incontrovertible bonds based on blood, biology[,] or genes; routine practices of choosing kin and doing kinship; and flexible senses of the significance and sometimes insignificance of shared biogenetic inheritance and connection. The everyday fluidity and flexibility of the significance attributed to inheritance and experience and nature and nurture in people’s sense of themselves is nevertheless encompassed within a dominant social understanding that ancestry matters
and that self-knowledge is incomplete without some understanding of the ancestral past.10

Nash argues against “the idea of the coincidence of bonds between a group of people through shared ancestry and their geographical propinquity” and the “conventional idea of the nation-state as an extended family and a shared community of descent, whose sense of collective identity and culture derived from a shared ancestry and biocultural inheritance” that are based on “an assumption about the spatial and social ordering of human difference in the geopolitical map: that geographical proximity is a measure of ancestral relatedness and that the political geography of national borders marks out a mosaic of national communities of shared descent.”11

Adopted, Practical Kinship

Eleana Kim has called Korean adoptees’ “cultural citizenship,” which describes the “affective dimensions of identification with ‘Koreanness’—in other words, to use it as an analytic framework for talking about how Korean adoptees might ‘feel Korean.’”12


As a Korean adoptee, my involvement with my local and global Korean adoptee community functions not only as a textual site upon which to work out an “unofficial history” and “narrative” of our cultural citizenship as Koreans, Korean Americans, and the in-between, but also as practices that speak to “stories of dislocation and displacement that create alternate ways of imagining and constructing adopted Korean identity.”\(^\text{13}\)

Additionally, nonprofits like AK Connection also work as a kind of textual site, the likes of which have proliferated all over the world over the last twenty years. Besides IKAA, there are GOA’L (Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link) and OKF (Overseas Koreans Foundation) at the international level, plus many affiliated and independent local organizations, like AK Connection.\(^\text{14}\) Most of these Korean adoptee groups also have websites—another kind of text that has profited from and been engendered by technological expansion. Indeed, Korean adoptee global networking has taken advantage of technologies that have helped Korean adoptees become more aware of each other, and our online community, networks, and collective acts of connection have become central resources and tools through which Korean adoptees can connect (as AK Connection, for instance, so explicitly conveys) with one another. “Thus,” as Kim describes, “a radically dispersed and deterritorialized group of people is articulating a new diasporic Korean


\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 128.

\(^\text{14}\) Kim’s “ethnographic representation of the adoptee counterpublic,” in Adopted Territory, features an abbreviation list of many of these nonprofits, NGOs, and foundations on pp. xvii-xviii.
identity, through *re*territorializations of transnational space,” much of which, I might add, now occurs online.\(^{15}\) Additionally, thousands of individual adoptees and their family members—including writers, poets, artists, and critics—have contributed to the ever-growing discourse and literature of Korean adoptee (and transnational and transracial adoptee) thinking and expression. Korean adoptee organizations, art, work, activism, scholarship, gatherings, conferences, events, outreach, and socializing, constitute an at once local and global kaleidoscopic network and community that has undoubtedly helped thousands of Korean adoptees find senses of belonging. Understandably, as Korean adoptees, our desire to “belong” *somewhere* and to *somebody* is one of the most immediate reasons for building and growing a “connected” global Korean adoptee community for ourselves.

Kim suggests, “It is through these practices taking place in a range of locations—in cyberspace, at conferences, through artistic production, and on trips to South Korea—that Korean adoptees are constructing their own ‘roots’…”\(^{16}\) The conceit here of course is that Korean adoptees do not have access to or knowledge of our “roots” and therefore find ourselves needing to construct our own. Of course, many non-adoptees don’t have easy access to their “roots” and they may or may not actively seek them out; many people in general do not care about or have little interest in their distant relatives or lineages or genealogies. Many people without knowledge of their pasts, where they come from, and so on, do not feel such urgency to have that knowledge, but Korean adoptees and

\(^{15}\) E. Kim, “Remembering Loss,” 120.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 128.
adoptees in general often do. We adoptees are so acutely aware of our lack of access to and knowledge of our genetic relatives, lineages, and genealogies—our ostensible roots—it seems we are uniquely primed to want that which we know we lack. After all, we do have roots, we just often do not have access to or knowledge of them. So it isn’t as if we are presumably “lost” because of our lack of roots, technically, but rather because we are so viscerally removed from our genetic families, nations, cultures, and histories. Are there any differences between this configuration and that of immigrants, other diasporic peoples, or orphans in general? What is it exactly about Korean adoptee narratives and experiences that lend themselves so vitally to notions of loss and feelings of inauthenticity? Whatever it is exactly is not simply because we like many others do not have access to “roots,” and it is not simply because we have been removed from our places of birth (as many others have been without affecting their notions of identity).

Heteronormative languages of consanguinity, kinship, and family (“kin/ken/know,” “blood/DNA/genes,” “roots,” “real,” “adoptive,” and so on), construct a labyrinthine system of meanings—many of which only lead back to one another or fold in on themselves—and largely serve to keep the current heteronormative hegemony of genetic kinship and genetic essentialism secure in its primary functional position, which is the natural, given, and default. As Ruddick, Novy, Stevens, and others suggest, all forms of kinship are technically adopted (any potential parent, whether genetically related to a child or not, decides to parent the child in question). The problematics of Korean adoption arise when we figure them within the above explanatory rubric: What if we are not “lost,” our roots not as distant as we believe, and what if we are searching for
something that never existed in the first place? While not precisely the first of our kind, what if, because of our transnational and most often transracial adoptions, we possess a unique agency, flexibility, and fluidity, in addition to the bereavement so ubiquitously tended to in adoptee discourse? Our distinctiveness may be the key to challenging the prevailing kinship language, which continues to fail and limit adoptees (and everyone else, for that matter).

**Consanguinity and Surrogacy**

While many Korean adoptees feel like they are replacement children or surrogate children, there are many ways that Korean adoptees have made proactive and agentive use of this surrogacy. As a broadly networked textual site, the AK global community and its various localities, constituencies, and affiliates do function in various ways as surrogates for normative kinship. Our AK community might also be viewed as a surrogate for the “Korean-Korean” community many of us feel has been robbed from us. While our community may form an approximation of the “blood bond” that we have been primed to desire, as we represent and embody non-normative kinship family making, I argue that our community goes beyond working as a simple surrogate means to selfhood. Articulating what it means to “go beyond” surrogacy will take some time, but for now it is clear that many of us are in the business of creating novel spaces and places of belonging. In the process of trying to locate “authentic” selves, subjectivities, and identities, which often seems to call for a rejection of our literal and metaphysical
representations as surrogate children for typically white parents, we have however nonetheless forged new structures and configurations of identity of our own making.

As Korean adoptees, our shared bond clearly challenges the primacy of simple “blood” bonds. Still, some adoptee critics risk or unwittingly reinforce genetic essentialism by privileging a “natural” link and connection between Korean adoptees and their genetic mothers (typically genetic fathers receive little attention). Korean adoptees often articulate in our literature an imperative to “know” their genetic or “birth” parents, often just birth mothers.\(^{17}\) The fault here does not lie with genetic fathers receiving short shrift but with the assumption that “women and children” naturally belong together more than fathers, grandparents, or anyone else who might desire to parent any particular child. Korean adoptees are often intrigued by the prospect of “the search” or “reunification” or simply “returning” to the “motherland,” the latter yet another proxy for a real connection, bond, or relationship with their genetic mothers.

Kinship remains a largely uncontested as if incontrovertible marker of identity, with consanguinity the norm, even though adoption and adoptees have existed in various forms in the shadows, forever, arguably. Yet identity continues to be conventionally seen as originating in and substantiated by genetic genealogies that produce any number of categories of affiliation (nationality, ethnicity, race, class, creed, clan, etc.) and, further, having knowledge of (and often pride in) such genetic histories and genealogies seems to reify identity such that a search for family history is also a search for identity insofar as to

\(^{17}\) The etymological proximity of “know” and “kin” renders the two concepts unique in that they purport to reference the same impulse and source, while yet being, for the Korean adoptee context, completely divorced from each other.
discover what family histories are present in me is to discover something absolute or certain about me—as in, what do my “blood” relatives embody or share with me such that I, naturally, “relate,” to them, naturally, despite rationale.

In a straight family, this quest, however dubious, is relatively straightforward as the tracing proceeds via genetic parents and their genetic relatives, helped along by physical similarities between relations (“she has your ears!”) and like beliefs about personality traits (“she reminds me of your grandmother!”). In alternative, queer, and “adoptive” families, however, the tracing is not straightforward as we do not have access to such easy and culturally reinforced performances of identity that are reified by these kinds of presences (of traits, physical appearance). Therefore, on one hand, the Korean adoptee subject often signifies the absence to the normatively kinship related presence of biogenetic close-close relation. Despite the Korean adoptee subject often being treated as lacking a legible identity as such because she lacks a known history and all that might include and serve to substantiate, our “lost identities” form around the absence of knowledge about our histories and origins and this ontological uncertainty (of origins), one could argue, which indicates a particular kind of identity (and a means to it) rather than a “false” one or none at all. For the Korean adoptee subject, the desire to have present knowledge of the self is incredibly mercurial as this knowledge must include not only figuring out specifically where one came from and from whom but also consider why one would accept the premise that knowledge of the self begins with where one comes from in the first place. Our questions should be: why exactly are we prone to base our senses of selfhood on such a mythological ground of kinship? What might the
situation look like if we were to discover what lies underneath are not “roots” at all but layers upon layers of proxies, substitutions, surrogates, and metaphors for what “it means” to feel connected to others?

*Roots and Rhizomes*

It might be worth excavating how the term “roots” has become concretized idiomatically, covering up its initial deployment as a metaphor. The more we look at the language we use when we talk about kinship, the more we find nebulous origins and unstable anchors and reference points whose meanings have effortlessly shifted over time to accommodate cultural mythologies and legal precedents.

For Korean adoptees, our roots ostensibly lie within (our ties to) Korean culture and history and through genetic parents, most often the mother—the sign naturally conjoining with the notion of Korea as “motherland,” as if they often speak or indicate the same thing. Simply “knowing” where we come from isn’t enough; we need access, connection, and the *feeling of belonging*, which is also often described as a *feeling of kinship*. These components that make up our roots signify *the something/s* that would *constitute* us, situate us within the world, within a nation, history, and specific family or clan. Many Korean adoptees feel they are not complete or authentic without searching for and presumably later finding their roots. The sheer number of books and writing about adoption that perfunctorily deploy “roots” in their titles or in their content, along with the commonplace understanding of “roots” testifies to how sonorous “roots” has become.
Clearly, the original metaphorical power of “roots” has given it considerable identificatory power ever since its early figuratively polysemous proliferation.

A quick glance at the definitions and etymology of “roots” in the *OED* reveals how useful “roots” became in describing other things, notions, ideas, and concepts. The 1st branch (pun unintended) of definitions begins with plant denotations: “The underground part of a plant” (OE and c1200), “The part of a plant or tree, normally underground, which attaches it to the ground (or other supporting medium) and conveys water and nutrients from the ground to the body of the plant or tree; an individual branch of a system of such parts … an adventitious structure developed by a tree, esp. a mangrove, which serves to support and anchor the tree” (c1175), and “The permanent underground stock of a perennial plant from which the stems or leaves are periodically produced; (formerly also by extension) a plant, a herb” (a1225). We also find other literal applications, such as: “The embedded or basal portion of the tongue, a hair, tooth, finger, nail, or other member or structure of the body” (c1225), “More generally: that part of a thing by or at which it is joined to something else (typically a larger part or thing)” (1632), and “The lowest part or bottom of something; esp. the foot of a hill or mountain; (Geol.) the part of a mountain, volcano, or mountain range below the level of the land surface at its foot” (a1382).

The 2nd branch of “roots” shows how, from early on, “roots” had many other “abstract and figurative uses,” including but not limited to: “The source, origin, or cause of a quality, condition, tendency, etc.” (c1175), “That from which something grows or is derived; a source, origin, or cause” (c1200), “The bottom or depths of the heart; the most
profound emotions” (a1225), “The basic, fundamental, or innermost part of something; the essence; the core” (a1325), “A person or family considered as the source of a lineage; an ancestor” (c1330), “A scion, a descendant” (c1300), “That upon or by which a person or thing is established or supported; the means of continuance or growth of something” (1340), “That on which a quality (esp. a virtue or vice) is founded or established, freq. with reference to its hold upon a person” (1340), “In collocation with branch, in phrases with the meaning ‘the entirety of something, the source or body of something together with all that proceeds from it’; esp. in reference to complete destruction or eradication” (1552), “A strong link or attachment” (1632), “A hold upon a person’s affections, confidence, or favour” (1715), “Established ties with a place; a person’s social, cultural, or ethnic origins” (1840). Additionally, the term’s 3rd branch of meanings details technical uses of “roots” in mathematics, linguistics, music, and computing. The salient point here though is that nearly all of the meanings in the 2nd branch pertain to how “roots” circulates and signifies in our kinship contexts. When Korean adoptees talk of their “roots,” we are referring to all those definitions in the 2nd branch, at once and at the same time, as well as nodding toward its originary metaphorical plasticity. Further, the etymology of “roots” outlined in the OED suggests that the word “roots” has roots from many different places: Indo-European, early Scandinavian, Old Icelandic, Norwegian, Old Norse, Old Swedish, Old Danish, Latin, Ancient Greek, Proto-Germanic, Old and Middle English, and Old and Middle French, which suggests that even “roots,” despite its polysemy (or in support of it), does not have a singular place of origin.
In spite of and in conjunction with all its history, “roots” as a sign has become loaded—perhaps especially in the Korean adoptee world or adoptee world in general—yet brimming with longing, loss, and emptiness. As a sign that has fully incorporated an original metaphoricity into its definitions, it is meant to encapsulate not only technical information but also connotative and abstract values. We often speak of roots to indicate *where we come from* (nation, culture) and *from whom we come* (clan, family), and we often further assume that these roots inherently and incontrovertibly *matter*. When we speak of *our roots*, we cite not only “our history,” but the history of “roots” itself, in all its polysemy. According to many of the early and current figurative definitions of “roots,” we speak of them as that which can point to, describe, define, and determine *who we are*, as if reifying *being within* history (of language, of knowing the world) *instantiates* our existence within the abstract world (history), but also that the *where* (we come from) directly causes or instantiates the *who* (we are). This move from *where* to *who* is not only significant because it points to the assumed self-evidence of its construction, without the need for critical inquiry into its presumed aprioricity, but also because it points to how effortlessly we tend to ground our identity in roots, origins, and history via a polysemous metaphorical foundation whose means to self-evidence can only ever be wordplay.

Simply, we imagine ourselves, our being, makeup, means of constitution, and mechanics as *like* or *similar* to trees, as if we were botanical, which only serves to buttress the naturality of how “roots” establishes the senses of its figurative uses as organic and intrinsic. There are of course many other ways—for example, mechanistic or
computational—to conceive of human “nature” and connection. Interestingly, “roots” signifies similarity on multiple levels, via its base definition, its means of constitution, and its semiotic parasitical iterability or its “undecidable contamination.” It is no coincidence that “roots” does point us toward a notion of kinship and has become such a central facet or quality of “kinship”; it does so because of its original dependency on similarity and analogy for its own definitions. “Roots” orients us toward a similarity or likeness and familiarity to explain why connection is present or a bond is felt. Secondly, “roots” can only buttress its instantiations of its figurative senses through the basic metaphor of how organic roots similarly might represent how we feel about ourselves, which, in turn, may merely point to the vulnerability of language only being able to point to differences, deferments, and differentiations. Within our Korean adoptee context, our positionality and presence brings forth—via emblematizing and parodizing the noted presupposed absence (of the referent) within every sign, when we speak of roots and kinship—the consequence of being disoriented (away) from normative kinship systems and identificatory schemas, which is to also say, history and culture. This resonates with Derrida’s conception of language as only contexts without true loci of meaning or stability, which, for Korean adoptees and their feelings regarding “family” and “kinship,” ring quite frustratingly true.18

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Here we might also bring to mind, in the sense of the diegesis of this writing and in the sense of evocation by identity—Michel Foucault’s insistence that the modern human is founded upon systems of modernity that elude her. Systems, like language, for instance, lodge her “thought in the folds of a language so much older than [her]self that [s]he cannot master its significations, even though they have been called back to life by the insistence of [her] words.”¹⁹ Further, Foucault asks,

How can [the modern human] be the subject of a language that for thousands of years has been formed without [her], a language whose organization escapes [her], whose meaning sleeps an almost invincible sleep in the words [s]he momentarily activates by means of discourse, and within which [s]he is obliged, from the very outset, to lodge h[er] speech and thought, as though they were doing no more than animate, for a brief period, one segment of that web of innumerable possibilities?”²⁰

Within our Korean adoptee, transnational, and transracial adoptee contexts, “roots” inevitably fails to function in the ways it “should” or does for non-adoptees, because when we speak “roots,” we have already changed the context and the situation, grandly, and thus already altered its legibility and signification. Our exploration, apprehension, recognition, anti-recognition, deployment, citation, and general (attempts at the) locutions of “roots” also reveal the limitations of all kinship language insofar as it speaks “identity.”

If we were to imagine an original moment of moving beyond the 1st branch of meanings for “roots” and to the meanings outlined in the 2nd branch, and if we were to


²⁰ Ibid., 323.
then imagine a tracing of why and how, there is nowhere for our imaginations to go except for referring to the similarities, analogies, and metaphors themselves, which is to say that we must imagine the extension from the 1st branch to the 2nd branch occurring not because of something intractably “natural” or given, but because of the metaphorical or analogical capacity of “roots.” The formations and deployments of the figurative senses of “roots” are based on the self-evidence of how organic roots function, but there is nothing inherent in the figurative senses of “roots” themselves. For example, take “roots” defined as the “source, origin, or cause of a quality, condition, tendency, etc.” This usage functions purely because organic roots in plants and trees suggest such qualities in their own biology. Of course, we might argue that roots are the “source” of a thing, but that immediately gets us into other semantic issues, let alone the issue of agreeing on what criteria matter for counting what a “source” can be.

Further, “roots” defined as the “basic, fundamental, or innermost part of something; the essence; the core,” functions likewise purely because the roots of tree are believed to be the most basic, fundamental, and innermost part of a tree and also that which holds a tree’s core or essence. But again, these statements do not report truth or self-evidence, and whether “roots” truly are the most fundamental part of a tree is arguable. Also, “roots” defined as, “That upon or by which a person or thing is established or supported; the means of continuance or growth of something,” again, only works because of how we know organic roots establish and support the continuance and growth of a plant. Other definitions of “roots,” like, “A person or family considered as the source of a lineage; an ancestor,” “A scion, a descendant,” “The bottom or depths of
the heart; the most profound emotions,” “A strong link or attachment,” “A hold upon a person’s affections, confidence, or favour,” and “Established ties with a place; a person’s social, cultural, or ethnic origins,” all similarly stem from the original connection or similarity to the organic roots of plants, which is seen as “natural” and from the naturally given world. Thus, in a sleight of hand, a metaphoric similarity becomes “natural.” We have only imagined ourselves as arboreal, as the roots of “roots” suggests, fashioning our senses of connection, kinship, family, identity, genealogy, and being, within a “tree-root” model of understanding and belief.

There are other, anti-genealogical ways, to conceive of human history, kinship, and the world. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, for example, are “tired of trees.” They argue that the tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree … The book imitates the world, as art imitates nature: by procedures specific to it that accomplish what nature cannot or can no longer do. The law of the book is the law of reflection, the One that becomes two. How could the law of the book reside in nature, when it is what presides over the very division between world and book, nature and art? … [Yet] nature doesn’t work that way: in nature, roots are taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one … Binary logic is the spiritual reality of the root-tree.21

Deleuze and Guattari attempt a wholesale attack on Western metaphysics, Hegelianism, psychoanalysis, and linguistics, but for our purposes, their critique of binary “tree logic” that grounds so much epistemological inquiry as well as ontological inquiry based in representation, at least offers a method and way of thinking about identity and kinship

that is decidedly anti-genealogical and anti-tree. Their contributions also offer a way into the linguistic convolution of kinship language, let alone identity language.

Proposing the figure of the rhizome as metaphor instead of the tree-root, Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome as that which ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages. There is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogeneous linguistic community … There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. Language stabilizes around a parish, a bishopric, a capital. It forms a bulb. It evolves by subterranean stems and flows, along river valleys or train tracks; it spreads like a patch of oil … There is always something genealogical about a tree. It is not a method for the people. A method of the rhizome type, on the contrary, can analyze language only by decentering it onto other dimensions and other registers.22

The “rhizome is an anti-genealogy,” not “amenable to any structural or generative model,” a multiplicity, an assemblage, and a becoming, which is useful here for the ways this kind of language reorients identity away from linguistic models that stabilize identity via a system that only permits signification of an idea based on the difference (with) in its relationship to another idea, which often makes one term more real or dominant and another more fanciful. The rhizome also argues against a static model of identity wherein the subject is located (a problem of orientation) or not, is either or, and is or is not (to be

22 Ibid, 7-8.
or not to be), and instead replaces being with becoming. Becomings grant intersubjectivity, trans-subjectivity, and subjectivity via the group and the individual within entities, communities, and spheres of living, which all form assemblages in the becomings-with. Identity as becoming seems to describe adopted Korean identity quite well.

As a Korean adoptee, I imagine my identity as rhizomatic, not tied to mimesis of the Father, a lineage, and necessary cultural history. As an adoptee, I feel unlike the tree and outside of tree systems, as I have been removed from them—literally in the genealogical sense of family trees and figuratively in the sense of the logic of family trees always already being figurative and in the sense of the logicality of binary orders—disoriented from the normative grounding of identity in kinship and kinship in identity, which are themselves lures toward an assumed necessary orientation to life and the world. Deleuze and Guattari say, “The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance,” and that while “the tree imposes the verb ‘to be’ … the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and . . . and . . . and . . . ’ [which] carries enough force to shake and uproot

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23 See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 268. Deleuze argues for an epistemology founded on difference and repetition over identity and representation. Not to mention how the latter inevitably leads to political dead-ends, Deleuze shows how identitarian epistemology forms reductive binaries that in turn establish ontological hierarchies that determine and ensure dominant terms and subordinate terms, wherein difference then becomes solely the negation of one term, always already citing that which it differs from. In such a tree-like hierarchical system, any difference that exceeds or is outside the structure cannot be legible. This system of course does not allow for difference in itself, or pure difference, then, as the only difference allowed is contained within the system and only there to further establish the stability of identity as being. This kind of theoretical mechanic extends to the dialectical problematic in Hegelianism wherein revolution is only always a “fête” because negation can only ever function via citing the term wishing to be negated.
the verb ‘to be.’” I do not feel within the tree’s “arborescent systems [that] are hierarchical systems with centers of significance and subjectification” and thus feel more like “the rhizome … not the object of reproduction,” thereby bringing “into play very different regimes of signs.” I do not feel defined by a state of being but “solely by a circulation of states,” a nomad, who no longer “imitates[s] anything,” and who “only assemble[s].” My disorientation away from the foundations upon which kinship and identity have been understood, my disorientation as a matter of existential fact and as a matter of present day life and as a matter of identity, and my disorientation as a state of being or becoming, all figure me rhizomatically with “no beginning or end … always in the middle, between things, [an] interbeing, intermezzo.”

Disorientation

It seems the grounding of identity in roots, origins, and history—where we come from—is necessary to orient us, in the world and in a history. Where we come from (and presumably “access” to where we come from) grants us the capacity to calibrate our sense of being, aligns us in appropriate spatial and temporal and relational ways, and ultimately allows us to have direction. We orient ourselves by looking backward and

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25 Ibid., 16, 21.

26 Ibid., 21, 24.

27 Ibid., 25.
forward, not unlike Janus, “a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other way,” facing not in any particular direction per se but giving the quality of direction initially, such that we can be oriented.\(^{28}\) In other words, orientation is what genetic kinship ostensibly provides (which includes explicitly not having been adopted) and vice versa, given that roots and origins act as gateway and gatekeeper to what genetic kinship attachments and knowledge allegedly bestows.

The etymology of “orient” and “orientation” further exposes my theoretical usage of disorientation, in that its “roots” lie in many places, one of which is in the 14\(^{th}\) century when Chaucer first wrote of the “Orient” as a region to the East (Jerusalem), from the Latin orientation (nominative orientum), meaning, “the rising sun, the east, part of the sky where the sun rises,” originally from the present participle of oriri “to rise.” Many ancient temples and religious buildings, like the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem were built with main entrances facing East and thus were said to have proper “orientation.” But this occurred after the verb form of “orient” began to circulate around the 18\(^{th}\) century as “to arrange facing east” and “to turn or face towards a specified direction, spec. to turn to the east,” as well as meaning, from the French s’orienter “to take one’s bearings” (c1727), with the term “disoriented” eventually meaning “loss of direction.” Here, “orient” incorporated the sense of propriety, as in things, buildings, and people having the proper orientation and later the sense of having the right bearing or direction.” Clearly, to be oriented was to face the East, which implies that to do so one must be in the West, or at least not the East, which establishes a default of location, place, and space. Ideally,

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\(^{28}\) Ibid.
something or someone with proper orientation stood in the West while facing the East. Before the invention of the magnetic compass, ancient and medieval European maps were dominated by religious perspectives; thus, “paradise” was presumed to be eastward, and later, Jerusalem, was depicted at the center, with “the East” oriented at the top of the map (rather than the North). Of course, the earth’s magnetic field aligns a magnetized needle either north or south (which is why many Chinese maps during the time, even with the introduction of the compass, had the south at the top of their maps). Notwithstanding, we can see how the “West” and modernity eventually figured the East against the centrality of the Occident, with “the Orient” quickly serving as the other and that against which one could “be (properly) oriented.”

Within this tradition and history of “orientation” we can see a deeper confusion at the heart of Korean adoptee disorientation. Having originated in the “East,” we have had to reorient ourselves ontologically, “gather our bearings” from different perspectives in our histories, and have had to figuratively and often literally look to both the East and the West, despite the arbitrariness of these determined directions and locations on the globe, in order for us to have bearing and “be located.” Our disorientation speaks to these physical and affective histories of displacement and replacement, to shifting orientations, and to how we cannot so easily determine our identities. Instead, when we assume the traditional positionality of a Westerner, the orienting East that provides bearing for the Westerner does not hold the same substantiative power for adoptees, as we know we actually came from the East. We always already must acknowledge a traversing of place and location within our supposed origins. From within the West, one can look to the East
to substantiate one’s identity, physically and spatially. By virtue of our transnational
adoptions, we resist that narrative and simple referencing of the Eastern other that
grounds the West as West, and as such, we are caught in, embody, and represent a
disorientation at the beginning of our identities. So we orient ourselves against both the
East and the West, and when “knowing where you come from” is given such
identificatory power, we find ourselves disoriented.

Altogether, we are disoriented in multiple ways. We disorient the standardized
historical path to “knowledge of self” via one’s genetic kinship history. We embody
disorientation in the colloquial sense of simply feeling lost and without direction. We are
disoriented in the sense of being physically and spatially relocated away from the
“Orient” to the “West,” resulting in a technical dis-orient-ing. We are disoriented in the
sense, also, of disrupting the history of the word that originally meant to instantiate the
self against the East, being able “to look to the east” to “gather one’s bearings.” While we
do this, we also look to the East not to only further establish the centrality of our homes
in the West but to establish a connection with a lost home in the East. We also represent
disorientation insofar as how we are outside the normative orienting of oneself by
grounding identity in history, time, and place. All of the above are processes and
elements of disorientation and as transnational adoptees, this kind of positionality within
disorientation is unique and radical in all that it reveals and affects. I argue that by
disorienting the foundations of identity and kinship and their relationship to one another
we might better be able to see how Korean adoptee subjectivity disrupts the centrality of
kinship as epistemology. We may also reorient ourselves away from an “adoptive
identity” that situates the Korean adoptee subject as structurally or poststructurally eternally othered and susceptible to a dialectic whose revolution (a) may only ever operate via part citation, even in negation, of that which it demands to negate, and (b) may never come.

Thus, rather than treating Korean adoptees as only unfortunate in that we have been disoriented in any or all of the above ways, I am more invested in the ways we are fortunate in our disorientation. By virtue of our having been disoriented, so often early in life, we can now bring to bear insight into the many ways the mythologies of genetic kinship substantiate an ungrounded and untenable linguistic and identificatory principality. Having been so violently disoriented, removed from the speciously original and natural order of kinship, Korean adoptees reorient kinship away from its tether to identity by suggesting that our disorientation from (normative, genetic) kinship reveals and cultivates new formations of identity that do not begin so incontrovertibly with genetic kinship. Perhaps the dominant kinship shall never be free from contaminating and infecting alternative or other forms of kinship, and vice versa. But adoptees’ rejection of and being outsider to normative ontological substantiations of identity and kinship position us uniquely as subjects whose voices complicate and trouble these normative orders of being. For one, our disorientation radicalizes kinship and its assumed causal and recursive relationship to identity and therefore inherently and demonstrably critiques not only genetic essentialism but also the notion that genetics can substantiate identity.

Of course, like many pillars of (hetero)normativity, kinship (and the ways it grounds itself in identity and vice versa) is and was always in need of disorientation, new
reference points and criteria that would seek to substantiate the relationship between kinship and new kinds of identities and means to identity. The instability and specularity of the figurative tree of kinship was always going to be inevitably shaken, if not cut down altogether—and the Korean adoptee subject, as I argue throughout the following chapters, makes radical and at times revolutionary use of our disorientation. I organize my argument around disorientation precisely because the advent of Korean adoptee culture, practices, subjects, and production—as well as transnational adoption culture, practices, subjects, and production, more broadly—have prompted and inspired new ways of understanding kinship and identity. Also, Korean adoptees may have yet to fully champion ourselves for the ways in which we destabilize extant beliefs about identity and normative kinship and kinship rules, mythologies, and beliefs. Our experiences, positionalities, and consequent contributions force more critical examinations of our own beliefs about ourselves. For one, this reorients us slightly away from victimization and histrionics but does not silence them.

Secondly, it reminds us that by investing more critical energy toward the benefits, advantages, utility, and propitiousness of the disorientation of and from kinship, from itself and from identity, the Korean adoptee subject reorients the problematics away from recuperation and restoration only through the same system that positions the adoptee as immutably subordinated, in terminology, semiotically, and structurally. I situate, locate, and present our disorientation as a theoretical concept that might be able to implode or at least subvert the terminology of normative kinship, the citational power of genetic kinship, genes, blood, and DNA, the semiotics of kinship, family, and identity. As a
theoretical tool, disorientation can prompt further nuanced and less bifurcated ways of understanding kinship and identity. I suggest viewing Korean adoptee subjectivity as uniquely powerful because of our disorientation. I make use of disorientation and the ways Korean adoptee literature, textual production, and practices articulate potentially Foucauldian disclosive spaces amidst the psychically heterotopic liminalities of Korean adoptee identity in order to overhaul our critical approach toward Korean adoptee contexts, positionalities, and critical production that often initially situates the Korean adoptee subject and Korean adoptee identity in terms of being and being without rather than in terms of becoming, being within and without and in-between.

Connections

A more nuanced understanding of kinship may help many adopted Koreans more effectively reconcile their relationships to identity, which may in turn help redefine let alone rebuild connections that might bond us to one another in ways similar to or substitutive for that which we have only been able to imagine or catch glimpses of—namely, the connection that many believe naturally attends biogenetic relations or biogenetically related families. However, because of our distance from such biogenetic relatedness, we also know that our mimetic approximation of the supposedly “natural” connection that “blood bonds” ostensibly produce may not adequately replace what many of us feel we have lost or never been privy to. We may also realize that claiming a connection to a group or individuals based simply on any particular aspect of a person, like one’s race, gender, heritage, sexuality, class, or spiritual system can be a precarious
pursuit. Yet we have built and continue to build a unique and ever-growing Korean adoptee community based primarily on the fact that we all share a like beginning that differs from “normal” peoples’ beginnings—being born into families and kept there. As adoptees and orphans, this normative grounding of identity can be considered taken for granted, given that without such a “natural” ontological orientation, we find ourselves bereft of access to many of the parameters that substantiate “who we are.” Instead, we must acknowledge that we are at once orphans removed from our birth nation and culture as well as once-orphans who have an overabundance of family, with multiple parents and multiple national and cultural allegiances. We are also those who have “been given up” only to be “chosen” by desiring parents from countries all over the world. We are at once citizens, immigrants, perpetual foreigners, Asian, not-Asian, “lost,” “found,” with family, without family, mostly transracial, and further find ourselves part of a long history of Western entitlement, often unsure of our responsibility or role, if any, in the various ways transnational and transracial adoption practices have essentialized children as cultural commodities.29

Do we embody capitulation or complicity in the above by our sheer status of “Korean adoptee” and therefore should we combat current practices of transnational and

transracial adoption? Do we condemn those who do not care about these issues? Should we be political? Should we feel allegiance to Korea and Korean culture? Are we (still) Korean at all? How much does our “cultural citizenship” count? Do we have to reject our Americanness in order for our Koreanness to register as authentic? Do we have to return to Korea? Should we live in Korea? Should we seek out our genetic parents? How should we think of our adoptive parents? How much should we hold our adoptive parents, adoption facilitators, and adoption advocates, accountable, if at all, for taking part in a history and elite system of “baby buying,” whose “dynamics of whites selecting particular nonwhites to satisfy their own desires or to assuage certain fears, however well-intentioned,” according to Kristi Brian, “ought to appear jarringly comparable to other forms of exploitation of peoples of the world through slavery, colonialism, concubinage, and the like”?30 Further, many critics, like Drucilla Cornell, argue that “the language of adoption is the language of war,” and that “the politics of imperialist domination and the struggle of postcolonial nations to constitute themselves as independent nations are inevitably implicated in international adoptions,” which, however tenuously, marks Korean adoptees as living byproducts of this legacy.31 How should we feel about that?

Questions like these lead us into inexhaustible Carrollian rabbit holes of belonging, race, ethnicity, family and kinship, nationhood and nationality, class,

30 Ibid., 71-2.

citizenship, and culture, to name a few. Yet these questions prompted by our predicament, by Korean adoption, and transnational adoption more broadly, also advocate the virtue inherent in our particularly instable, technically insecure, precarious, and unsettled but not ambiguous condition, as our inconstancy is unambiguously clear and palpably inescapable. As transnational and transracial adoptees, Korean adoptees represent a uniquely associative ontology, signification, and state of being, in that, in terms of kinship, for instance, we signify a lack and absence (of genetic children that would normally “make” a family) as well as an excess and presence (as the overdetermination of that which would “make” a family), not to mention that by our very presence we signify the absence of that which we are supposedly meant to satisfy, if, only as proxy or substitute. Perhaps this is why Korean adoptee memoirist Jane Jeong Trenka feels that we are “indefinable,” and that we need to thusly “make” ourselves.32

Nonetheless, given this, our *sui generis* position, as both child and not-child, as both sign of fulfilling a lack and sign of the lack itself, as both without family and with too much family, our imperceptibility portends our isochronal vagrancy of position. We represent the contamination itself between kinship and not-kinship. We signify as an identity that is both positive and negative at once, in form. The mistake so far has been to assume that we only represent, model, and register as lacking and without, and not both and the in between. We possess a kind of kinship radicality that not only queers genetic

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32 Trenka writes: “But no matter what our past, our differences, our failures or achievements, we will all arrive alone and together at the end … the mothers, the children, the indefinable … We are fearfully and wonderfully made … fashioned by our own words, by our own hands” (194). See Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee’s Return to Korea*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2009.
essentialism and genetic norms of family making, but also proffers a different way of being, grounded not in secure origins but in a liminality of being that constitutes us as between borders, between boundaries and categories, and between constitution itself, which often elicits feelings of imperceptibility, ghostliness, and indefinability. We inhabit psychic and literal spaces and places of connection and disconnection, often at the same time, that evoke both an absence of belonging (to no one, in certainty) and a presence of belonging (to many, uncertainly).

Our bond and our commonality with one another as Korean adoptees, however, are proving to both ensure our survival as a community and the reason for it. While we continue to gather around our identity predicament as eternal cause célèbre, we continue to present ourselves, nevertheless, as distinctive phenomena of human spirit in that we have forged both localized families and a global one amidst such ostensibly impenetrable senses of loss and difference. It is precisely this shared bond, of course, that drives many Korean adoptees around the world toward each other. Why should we, as a community, endeavor so greatly to assemble around the common fact of our transnational and most often transracial adoptions? Certainly, we share a unique bond because of that fact, and many of us desire to be around “people like us.” What I highlight here, however, is the causa sine qua non nature of Korean adoptee status, meaning that our cause is indispensable for producing the effects in question. We find ourselves in a predicament not of our choosing and thusly desire to rectify our sense of loss by forging our own senses of worth and being.
Given the content and nature of our “connection” and the reason for it, however, our community-making suggests something more vital to our survival as a group and for many as individuals. We are a group that at the outset registers as lacking “genuine family,” such that the community-building we undertake reads immediately as an alternate or new kind of kinship making. Eleana Kim articulates a notion of “adoptee kinship” arising from the “solidarity based upon radical contingency rather than biologically rooted certitudes” that Korean adoptees “mediate and perform.” Kim describes the ontological predicament of Korean adoptees, and presumably other transnational, transracial adoptees, as a kind of “contingent essentialism”—which I argue results from the disorientation of the Korean adoptee subject—because Korean adoptee identity “is at once essentialized as something natural and also construed as something cultural or socially constructed … thus tak[ing] on biological associations despite the inherently nonbiogenetic basis of adoption.” She further argues that contingent essentialism is distinct from … biologism or genetic essentialism … [in that] the often powerful bonds of relatedness that adoptees claim to share are not based on a common desire for pure “origins” as presumptions of genetic essentialism would suggest but rather on a shared acknowledgment of the instability and uncertainty of origins and the involuntary forfeiture of historical and cultural connections, whether one thinks of oneself as an alien, a foundling, an orphan, or a kidnapped child.

33 E. Kim, Adopted Territory, 13.

34 Ibid., 86.

35 Ibid., 97.
Presented as a “counterpublic” and as a process of “disidentification”—what I would also call a kind of disorientation—“adoptee kinship” describes Korean adoptees’ “discursive process of identity construction … [that] define[s] themselves as a group that is distinct from others that might share demographic or biographical similarities.”

We do, though, share demographic and biographical similarities, but the point is that we do so laterally, with each other, rather than vertically, with genetic family members. Also the point is that our connections are alliance based and not filiation based. Nevertheless, Kim’s “adoptee kinship” does at least articulate a “mobilization of new social and political identities” that “extends relatedness beyond ‘biological’ and ‘adoptive family.’”

One of the exciting facets of Korean adoptee identity is how indefatigably our presence challenges, provokes, and perverts normative rules and understandings of kinship and family. The bond Korean adoptees share is crucial to figuring out “who we are,” beyond working as simply an impetus that drives us to forge new kinds of families and communities. If it were that simple, we have already succeeded, but clearly, there is more work, writing, art, theorizing, thinking, understanding, exploring, interrogating, challenging, provoking, perverting, and radicalizing to do. People find all kinds of

36 Ibid. 86. See also: Lisa Lowe, Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996. Lowe articulates disidentification as a “space in which alienations, in the cultural, political and economic sense, can be rearticulated in oppositional forms … It allows for the exploration of alternative political and cultural subjectivities that emerge within the continuing effects of displacement” (103-4).

37 Cited in Kim, 87-8; Also see Rayna Rapp, “Gender, Body, Biomedicine: How Some Feminist Concerns Dragged Reproduction to the Center of Social Theory.” Medical Anthropology Quarterly, vol. 15, no. 4: 466-77: 469.
reasons to connect and relate to one another, but particular to Korean adoptees are the ways in which we have reconfigured and continue to reconfigure family and kinship, what it means to belong—to whom and to what—and what this itinerant reconfiguring might suggest about prevailing core beliefs about identity, subjectivity, kinship, and family themselves.
Chapter 2

What’s Queer about Korean Adoptees? Contradicting Ancestries, Families, and Identities

The implication … is that we have all become world orphans, detached, lost, divorced from a continuity and history we all long for. Reconnecting with our ancestors will provide definitive identities.

—Judith Roof¹

Deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated.

—Judith Butler²

In the 1990s, Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant, and Eve Sedgwick developed ideas centering on heteronormativity, and they built on previous concepts, like normativity, Gayle Rubin’s sex/gender system critique, Adrienne Rich’s notion of compulsory heterosexuality, and Michel Foucault’s history of sexuality. Many took up Simone de Beauvoir’s suggestion that “one is not born, but becomes a woman,” and Monique Wittig’s calling for the abolition of “woman” as a category, other than for


strategic feminist purposes. Heteronormativity describes normative roles for women and men, in that the normal and expected designations for the sexual choice of each should be their respective “opposite” others. Heterosexuality is assumed to be the default sexuality, and further cannot arguably exist as such without homosexuality to define what heterosexuality is not (which Sedgwick later argues may denote heterosexuality as not a sexuality at all). Nevertheless, heteronormativity has since overtaken the potency of “patriarchy,” as the former can arguably more readily account for, among many benefits,


4 See Wittig, “The Straight Mind.” The Straight Mind; Rich, Compulsory Heterosexuality; Sedgwick, Epistemology, especially, 9-10.
multiple subjects of difference under oppressive regimes dominated by men, maleness, masculinity, whiteness, heterosexuality, and wealth.

Later, Lisa Duggan offered the term homonormativity to point to the ways in which culture has been shifting (or always has been shifting) to include queer identities that don’t challenge the stability of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. Duggan defines homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”5 Initially, then, homonormativity offers only some queer subjects seats at the citizenry table and therefore should not necessarily be taken as a sign of social or political progress. Some queer identities and subjects remain off of the shifting “acceptance” gauge, subjugated against the “good” queer subjects who have only recently gained entry into the social-political national body. This distinction between acceptable and unacceptable queer subjects is similar to how the power of whiteness—or white power—has historically pitted minority groups against one another, e.g., how the model minority myth pits other racial minority groups against an abstract Asian American who is docile, submissive, nonviolent, and hardworking.6


6 This kind of shifting of acceptance has historical precedents, of course. Patricia Hill Collins notes her worry over the relatively recent inclusion of black women into the socio-political sphere as likewise not a sign of progress but a sign of how black women are more easily monitored, policed, observed, calculated, kept under surveillance, and controlled. Collins’ work is particularly valuable for critiquing the juridical and legal histories involved with national/domestic race policies, and finds great faults in our legal
Whether or not queer theory has “sexualized everything,” as Mandy Merck notes in *In Your Face: 9 Sexual Studies*, works providing the foundations of radically rethinking the self, identity, and sexuality have become canonical themselves. Many queer theorists and critics have turned to Foucault’s tracing the emerging maintenance, institutionalization, disciplinarization, regulation, and policing of sexuality and its discourse and discursive effects, one of which was creating sexuality as such. Foucault’s ideas remind that certain categories and means to identity—in Foucault’s case, sexual identity or sexuality—can be problematized, clarified, and contested. Foucault notes that as scientific inquiry and study of sex practices and sexuality increased, “perversions” and “deviants” proliferated in the name of developing codes of family around a normativized sexuality, one that was now concretized as an object of knowledge for the “West.” This *scientia sexualis* was further necessarily politicized and often used by the state to regulate certain “sexual” bodies and other deviants. With the tradition of confession, the system, many based on its “only from precedent to precedent” formula for rulings and new judgments. She also notes how some contexts and histories indicate the need for changes to allow for the vast inequities that are and have been in place that render many subjects unequal and without fair access to our judicial system, both of which often only encourages nonchange. Collins points to the limitations and harmful effects of how we classify “hate speech,” which “consist[s] of insults of such dimension that they either urge people to violence or inflict harm. Although the First Amendment to the Constitution is designed to protect political speech of all types, bomb threats, incitements to riot, obscene phone calls, ‘fighting words,’ and all that speech that infringes on public order [sic] can be prohibited in the interests of the common good. Reclassifying hate speech as ‘fighting words’ would remove its constitutional protection and thus expose it to regulation” (84). See Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

“confession of sexuality” came to be constituted in scientific terms; all aspects of the psyche and “identity,” and their exploration and study were incorporated into this recently scientifically baptized “sexuality.”

I cite Foucault’s recognition of the discursive power of scientific discourse and its role in the historicization of sexuality, heterosexuality, homosexuality, and queerness here to foreshadow the latter half of this chapter that argues against the validity of the technoscience behind DNA testing and genetic genealogy services. (This is not to suggest, however, that Foucault was arguing against the validity or truth value of scientia sexualis.) I argue that transnational adoption critical engagement with queer theory and queer history (and the queering of history) has been insufficient, and that transnational adoption theorizing remains impoverished because of this deficit. I suggest that transnational adoption critique might wish to move away from problematics that reinforce genetic essentialism, normative kinship, and compulsory heterosexuality. The current landscape of transnational adoption criticism is too often not situated within the queerness of its own context, makeup, and positionality. The transnational adoptee is arguably an embodiment of queer reproduction, queer family, and queer positionality amidst the compulsive heteronormativity of the national nuclear family. Yet primary themes of transnational adoptee discourse and literary production continue to be identity loss, lack, and disingenuousness, whose remedy lies in the supposedly natural blood bond between biogenetically related mother and child. Further, this belief in blood—genetic essentialism—bleeds into other problematic ideas of identity and belonging.

8 Foucault, The History.
In order to better engage with queer theory and develop future ideas around queer
kinship (and queering kinship), adoption critics might first establish the identificatory
stakes of ignoring deconstructive analyses of dichotomies of identity, many of which
have been generated by queer ideas. At the least, a clearer queer contextualization,
clarification, and determination suggests that if sexuality qua identity, as a concept
central to identity, has been productively open to queer critique, so then might other
concepts, constructs, and categories of identity.

I. Queer Roots

Queer theorists have noted many ways in which heteronormative ideals of
sexuality have impacted notions of identity as well as notions of what constitutes
sexuality itself. For instance, the critical reaction to the Lawrence v. Texas (2003) case
that reversed the anti-sodomy laws of Bowers v. Hardwick (1986) highlights how the
ruling adapted its regulatory power over sexuality to include sodomitical acts, at least
within the confines of the private sphere or home. Some critics argued that signified
progress while others argued that Lawrence v. Texas simply authorized new legalized
control and regulation of homosexuality. Teemu Ruskola, for instance, in “Gay Rights
versus Queer Theory: What is Left of Sodomy After Lawrence v. Texas?” argues that the
Lawrence v. Texas reversal of Bowers v. Hardwick gets the question right, but the answer
wrong. Lawrence v. Texas only further interpellates proper “homosexuals” into the
national sphere of personal/private intimacy. Lawrence v. Texas requires persons to have first an acceptable “intimate relationship” that can be expressed safely within the confines of the home, thus still leaving out sexual practices and acts and behaviors and lives outside this intimate sphere. Berlant and Warner react against the heteronormative institutionalization of sex and sexuality as private and argue that there is “nothing more public than privacy.” Warner further argues in “Zones of Privacy”: “If your zone of privacy requires the support of an elaborate network of state regulations, judicial rulings, and police powers … then your privacy is another name for an armed national sex public to which you so luckily belong.” Queer sex lives, then, must be respectable, and by turning the terms of the debate away from “sodomy” and toward “intimacy,” the regulation of queer sex in a positive guise further differentiates and establishes proper sex from deviant sex.


11 The overturning of Bowers v. Hardwick allows the state to regulate intimacy whereas before the state regulated “homosexual acts,” and the ruling indicates the ambivalence of homosexuality in the eyes of the courts and the state, as between identity and act, and Ruskola suggests that queer politics might do well to return to queer acts as a means to form new alliances. Lawrence v. Texas also buttresses Foucault’s contention in “Friendship as a Way of Life,” that what disturbs heteronormative culture about homosexuality is not so much homosexual acts but that homosexuals indeed love one another, form new modes of alliance and relationality, friendship and sites of pleasure that do not correspond directly with or against heteronormatively supported laws. See Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life.” Translated by Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston. Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984, edited by Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotext[e], 1996, pp. 308-12.
Other critics find further deficiencies in what David Eng calls “queer liberalism.” Eng worries about narratives of liberal “freedom” and political enfranchisement that ignore race and racial difference. Eng argues that queer liberalism “does not resist, but abets, the forgetting of race and the denial of racial difference.”\textsuperscript{12} Eng further relates queer liberalism to Lisa Lowe’s notion of disavowed histories—the histories that have been silenced and made complicit in the “Western” narratives of progress, expansion, and development of freedom and the liberal human subject.\textsuperscript{13} The history of liberal humanism is replete with violences against subjugated peoples and the forgettings of these violences, and Eng suggests that the move towards queer inclusion into the national body politic has relied upon the exclusion, denial, and forgetting of race and racial difference. Eng argues that this forgetting of race and difference is particularly exacerbated within transnational/transracial adoptee contexts, families, and politics. Transnational adoption, in his view, is the current primary and privileged means of entry for queer subjects and citizens into the national family public sphere. Because most transnational adoptive parents are white, Eng mirrors what many transnational and transracial adoptees express themselves, which is that they represent surrogate white children.

While operating under mechanisms of forgetting and denial, queer liberalism often gets subsumed under rhetorics and narratives of multiculturalism and progress toward the “new global family.” Rey Chow suggests that “the particular formation of the


contemporary, politically correct white subject, who imagines that he has already successfully disaffiliated from his culture’s previous, more brutal forms of racism,” amounts to an abstract (and often literalized) “white liberalist alibi.” Combined with the emerging capital power of queer consumer spending, white liberalist alibis grant sanctuary for national queer inclusion and inclusion into life, the latter a salient if ironic avowal of a new queer family form that allows queers to marry and have kids. Facing historical adversity that aligned homosexuality with death, queers also literally had no state sanctioned or often culturally sanctioned access to life, making families, (re)producing new citizens, and the living of life generally. Indeed, as Jasbir Puar notes, “the capitalist reproductive economy (in conjunction with technology: in vitro, sperm banks, cloning, sex selection, genetic testing) no longer exclusively demands heteronormativity as an absolute; its simulation may do.”

Aligned with Eng’s queer liberalism critique is Puar’s notion of homonationalism in Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times, which speaks to the ways U.S. nationalism configures queer subjects and bodies against “terrorist” subjects and bodies. After 9/11, national attention towards and awareness of “the terrorist” increased, and Puar suggests that part of this redirection toward the “terrorist (body)” allowed for new inclusions (again, at the expense of the exclusion of others) for queer subjects into

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16 Ibid., 2.
the national body politic. This rise of nonnormative national subjects, then, demands very specific production, care, regulation, and prompting of terrorist bodies against the newly proper queer subject. Working off familiar biopolitical terrain—the management of life through surveillance, calculation, delineation, and study—Puar marks the biopolitical reordering of the “negative register of death” into a “positivity of life” for queer subjects who can now signify as “futural” over “the past,” which is to say, over “death.” In other words, because of the AIDS crisis and the nation’s unfair associating of the (male) queer body and queer practices with death, queer subjects, and arguably especially gay men, were aligned and associated with sickness, illness, and death. These associations are dissipating as more queer subjects are now hailed as citizens, can legally get married, have children, visit their spouses on their death beds, and enjoy the innumerable benefits and luxuries of being recognized American citizens. Much of this progress, however, hides unchanged inequities in U.S. institutions. For one, not only has homonormativity relegated “terrorist” bodies to the inhuman category, the acceptance of certain kinds of queerness into the national public sphere and dominant culture also expects queer subjects to be able to produce future American citizens just like their nonqueer (normative) counterparts.

Additionally, Puar points to a “U.S. sexual exceptionalism,” in which “a narrative claiming the successful management of life in regard to a people … is now joined by an exceptional form of national homonormativity, in other words, homonationalism.”

Homonationalism brands a kind of homosexuality and queerness as nationally representative yet relies on the denigration of other queer and racialized subjects.\textsuperscript{18} Puar’s phrase incorporates Chow’s observation of the “ascendancy of whiteness” that “links the violence of liberal deployments of diversity and multiculturalism to the ‘valorization of life’ alibi that then allows for rampant exploitation of the very subjects included in discourses of diversity in the first instance.” Giorgio Agamben also analyzes the “state of exception”—referring both to the exceptional mindset and administration that the state deploys during times of state crises—that also sanctions and naturalizes disregard of standard state limitations—and the notion that the state itself is exceptional.\textsuperscript{19} Finally, Puar notes a “queer as regulatory” third manifestation (the ascendancy of whiteness and state of exception the first two) of new national queer inclusion that encourages demarcations between terrorist and citizen bodies and the further regulatory power of the state over queerness and queer subjects.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} Puar, \textit{Terrorist}. 2.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 3. Chow also notes how “Foucault’s discussion of biopower can be seen as his approach, albeit oblique, to the question of whiteness in the modern world” (3). The “ascendancy of whiteness,” also describes the ways of and means by which the proliferation of ethnic and raced bodies are made to be complicit with whiteness and its ascendancy through careful management of difference, including the rhetorical flattening out of difference into sameness (25). See Chow, \textit{The Protestant Ethnic}.

\textsuperscript{20} Queer as regulatory also marks Puar’s anxiety about how liberal underpinnings of queerness promote it as “singularly transgressive of identity norms. This focus on transgression, however, is precisely the term by which queerness narrates its own sexual exceptionalism … Queerness here is the modality through which ‘freedom from norms’ becomes a regulatory queer ideal” (22). This predicament often renders available only assimilation or transgression as choices. See Puar, \textit{Terrorist}. 
II. Queer Diasporic Presents

One reaction to these kinds of movements and vicissitudes within the abstract national inclusion sphere might be to suggest that striving for inclusion into unfair and unjust systems largely built upon principles of exclusion is not what marginalized subjects should be fighting for. After all, the above culture critiques are not only descriptions but also warnings. Not only do we have the “category” problem but also an always moving target of inclusion. For instance, championing identities based around sexual orientation, identification, practices, and desire and launching a politics of resistance and liberation may generate positive, politically efficacious effects. At the same time, these effects may only mask continued inequities (and produce new ones) and may only reinforce the conditions of possibility that dictate potential realities for queer and nonnormative subjects.

Other, perhaps more responsible, strategies theorize diaspora, immigrant narratives, and the queer underpinnings of notions of home, family, nation, and belonging. Reformulating antiquated notions of diaspora that, as defined by Stefan Helmreich, refers “to a system of kinship reckoned through men,” many queer critics have theorized diaspora through queerness, in order to, as Gayatri Gopinath argues, “work against the tendency toward patrilineality, biology, and blood-based affiliation that lies embedded within the term ‘diaspora.’” Further, Eng’s promotion of “queer

diaspora,” for instance, combats queer liberalism and proffers a methodology of “reconceptualiz[ing] diaspora not in conservative terms of ethnic dispersion, racial descent, filiation, and biological traceability,” but “rather through the lenses of queerness, affiliation, and poststructuralist accounts of kinship.”

Given that transnational adoption is one of the most privileged forms of diaspora and immigration, as an adoption critic, adoptee, and queer subject, I find it imperative to recognize Eng’s rejection of “configuring diaspora as displacement from a lost homeland or exile from an exalted origin [that] underwrite[s] regnant ideologies of nationalism, while upholding virulent notions of racial purity and its structuring heteronormative logics of gender and sexuality.”

Brian Keith Axel, in “The Diasporic Imaginary,” suggests that “rather than conceiving of the homeland as something that creates the diaspora, it may be more productive to consider the diaspora as something that creates the homeland.” Axel’s reversal of hierarchy and of sequencing suggests particularly accented connotations and political implications for transnational adoptees and our configurations and imaginaries of what constitutes home and homeland. Of course, the benefit here is a paradigm that “retools the notion of diaspora to account for connectivity beyond or different from sharing a common ancestral homeland.”

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23 Ibid.

about diaspora can work as an inquiry into social formations of belonging that privilege the "ontologization of place." For Gilroy, diaspora "disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple series of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness."25

Eng claims that queer diaspora "emerges as a concept [that] provid[es] new methods of contesting traditional family and kinship structures—of reorganizing national and transnational communities based not on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments." Yet transnational adoptees may argue that our experiences suggest otherwise. While our means to kinship—self-crafted, affiliative, and structurally antithetical to normative kinship—may indicate transgression or liberation, the predominant themes and tropes in our community intimate that we, as the championed queerly diasporic subject, actually wish to retreat to the presumed genetic certainty of normative kinship, that is, to reclaim an original biological heritage.26 There simply are not many narratives antithetical to this perspective, narratives that challenge the lure of genetic essentialism. Indeed, we seem to: descriptively not appreciate or enjoy our position (which is not to say we should), prescriptively fight for the end of our own kind (the end of transnational adoption), and conscriptively adopt the opposite of what queer diaspora articulates.


While transnational adoptee politics may be resistant to notions of queer diaspora, our literature may nevertheless be part of a “queer diasporic archive,” as defined by Gopinath, that runs against the grain of conventional diasporic or nationalist archives, in that it documents how diasporic and nationalist subjectivities are produced through the deliberate forgetting and violent expulsion, subordination, and criminalization of particular bodies, practices, and identities. This archive is the storing house for those ‘clandestine countermemories,’ to once again use Joseph Roach’s phrase, through which sexually and racially marginalized communities reimagine their relation to the past and the present. By narrating a different history of South Asian [for instance] diasporic formation, a queer diasporic archive allows us to memorialize the violences of the past while also imagining ‘other ways of being in the world,’ as Dipesh Chakravarty phrases it, that extend beyond the horizon of dominant nationalisms.27

Arguably our transnational adoption experiences qualify as clandestine countermemories; our experiences may both memorialize past violences and evolve distinctive ways of being in this world.

Our literature and literary production most certainly belong in the queer diasporic archive as they upend notions of home (defined by the past, origins, and roots). We must ask ourselves if our texts, as Gopinath describes, “evoke ‘home’ spaces that are permanently and already ruptured, rent by colliding discourses around class, sexuality, and ethnic identity” and if we as “queer diasporic subjects transform the meanings of ‘home’ from within its very confines.”28 Our texts also disrupt normative means to identity and identity itself (as in and defined by the past, origins, ancestral history and

27 Gopinath, Impossible Desires, 21.

28 Ibid., 15, 91.
coopted by the spatialization of the past and its concealment, forgetting, and eschewal) and kinship (as in and defined by the past, ancestral genealogy, and heteronormative blood ties stretching across human history).

In other words, we cannot have our cake and eat it too. We cannot accept our inclusion into a queer diasporic archive if our political stances regarding transnational adoption principally suggest otherwise. To do so is to suggest that while we celebrate our potential subversive agency and challenge to normative regimes of identity (notions of home, nation, kinship, belonging), we also believe that because we have been exiled from these normative regimes, our paths to personal peace (which is predicated on the idea that adoptees search and need this personal peace more than others) can nevertheless only lead inevitably back to antiquated notions of roots, family and kinship, biology, and genetic essentialism. This contradiction does not mean that we or our texts are disingenuous, but rather that these kinds of contradictions constitute, also, the general articulation of exactly how we do work against normative means of identification while also subjectively desiring, often, to not have existed at all, not exist as such (as adoptee), and not encourage a future where other transnational adoptees might have to suffer the same ontological plight, existential and psychical traumas, and difficulties in crafting new, however agential, means to identity, kinship, and belonging.

The title of this chapter highlights these kinds of contradictions that so shape transnational adoptee discourse, politics, literary production, and activism. Not only might the transnational adoptee subject qua queer diasporic subject exist in self-contradiction (political stance/self-annihilation versus championing of adopteeness or
adopted identity, kinship), the theme of contradiction is not only ever negating and resistant but also indicative of possibility for transnational adoptee subjects. Exploring the structures of “contradicting family,” then, is not simply a means of rejecting the heteronormative national nuclear family but a means to its contradictory makeup. This is relevant to transnational adoptees because we both mobilize around our adopteeness and lament it. We endure, as transnational adoptees often describe, as “outsiders”—of normative kinship, family, and identity—which, for positional sake, situates us in countercultures and countercommunities. Despite this, we navigate within and through dominant culture, resistant to it here, complicit with it there, often rejecting our adopteeness in favor of truer identities only accessible in our “birth countries” and “birth mothers” (birth fathers are rarely figured in these equations) or handily, the “motherland.” Thus any descriptive analysis would have to note both valences of transnational adoptee subjectivity, if not also a third, which denotes the orientation toward contradiction in the first place.

What may be unique about our transnational adoptee context is that while we politically debate the merits and demerits of the transnational adoption complex, even rejecting in theory genetic essentialism on grounds of its risks, antitransnational adoption proponents remain unclear how ensuring no more transnational adoptees does not reinforce genetic essentialisms. In other words, if we reject dominant normative kinship and champion our own kinship crafting, we do just that, we “resist” a dominant form of categorization that marginalizes us against normal people who have easy access to blood-based affiliations. But by also working toward our own end, we are in principle
supporting normative kinship, just not in our adoptive nations. But again, this is a contradiction and is par for the course. How we situate our predicament, let alone the predicament itself, is crucial for any future adoptee politics that confidently avoids genetic essentialism.

To this end, we may find value in José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of “disidentification” (of which builds on Lisa Lowe’s “immigrant act” framework) is a “third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”

Muñoz further articulates how disidentification “recycles and rethinks” encoded meaning, “scrambles and reconstructs” encoded messages of cultural texts that “expose universalizing and exclusionary machinations,” and “recircuits” them, proceeding to “use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”

How does transnational adoptee subjectivity disidentify with dominant culture? Is it our ontology, constitution, and representation as adoptees as such that “recircuits” and reinscripts encoded meanings unthinkable by dominant culture or is it our (immigrant) acts as such subjects that count as disidentification?

Here, I suggest a clearer situating of transnational adoptee identity within Lisa Lowe’s “immigrant act” framework. “By insisting on ‘immigrant acts’ as contradictions,”

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30 Ibid., 31.
her double use of “immigrant acts” refers to both the literal history of immigration exclusion acts—“the legal and political restriction of Asians as the ‘other’ in America”—and the “agency of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans: the acts of labor, resistance, memory, and survival, as well as the politicized cultural work that emerges dislocation and disidentification.”

31 Immigrant acts are critical acts that negate universals. What the transnational adoptee subject does, then, as immigrant and diasporic subject, is turn immigrant acts into an immigrant ontology. This confusion around ontology and activism, around who we “are” (we are immigrants and immigrant actors) versus what we do (we do cultural work), remains in transnational adoption politics, as we often tend to opt for one or the other given different rhetorical contexts and purposes, or simply conflate the two and use them interchangeably. However, I argue that a lot of the confusion around ontology versus activity has to do with fortified beliefs in the natures of blood, kinship, history, geography, and nature, itself. These entrenched beliefs also lead to implications of difference, itself, in that means of categorization and of differentiation from one another are never prepolitical, prehistorical, or free from the paradigms of the present. Thus, the remainder of this chapter explores why these kinds of contradictions might be and why our immigrant acts may sometimes contradict—and contradict harmoniously—our theoretical positions.

III. The Lure of Blood

The stakes of not emphatically situating transnational adoption politics within queer history and queer theory—and as emblem of queer liberalism, homonationalism, and queer diaspora—suggests the need for more transparent dialogue regarding the specific reasons for adoptees’ political and critical positions. For instance, if we are to find that Korean adoptees—as descriptively transnational, diasporic, immigrant, forever alien, orphan, and outside normative kinship and other normative models of belonging—are not or should not be considered as such then we will need to be specific regarding the foundations of our positions. Do we admit the illogical and mythological constitutions of such foundations and then reject them on other political grounds? Do we deny overwhelming evidence so we do not have to engage, integrate, or converse with ideas because they are incommensurate with our current beliefs?32

Some of these foundations highlight how, over the last few decades, adoption studies has contended with a resurgence in U.S. cultural interest in biogenetic genealogies, genetics, and origins. This revitalization of popular belief in “blood” and bloodlines suggests that genealogical inquiry is a crucial explanatory function of “who we are,” where we come from, and to whom we belong. The myths of blood and heredity,

32 Some adoption critics who generally claim that transnational adoptee discourse, identity, and politics resist genetic essentialism, but many fail to articulate further, and exactly, how, and by what mode or flow of power or discursive effectuation? It seems as if the ontological constitution of the Korean adoptee as subjective embodiment of anti-genetic essentialist traditions is sufficient for critics as evidence of how we and our discourses and theorizations and politics and counternarratives resist, challenge, and transgress genetic essentialism and (hetero)normative kinship. As I argue, here, one potential reason for this truncation involves my notion of disorientation.
however, not only make substantiative claims about our “true” selves, but also circumscribe broader social anxieties about the growing emergence of different family formations, as Janet Beizer suggests. More broadly, U.S. cultural interest in origins, heredity, genealogies and genetic belonging may be consequence or reaction to postmodern subjective splittings, dualities, fragmentations, and identity crises as if, as Judith Roof suggests, “we have all become world orphans, detached, lost, divorced from a continuity and history we all long for.” Donna Haraway has also called this recent interest in family trees and genetic ancestry, “epistemophilia, the lusty search for knowledge of origins.” DNA testing services and websites that purport to provide a kind of historical continuity that would reify identity have successfully commodified this desire for identity—via kinship—by employing something “objective” and traceable: the powers of mitochondrial DNA, a modernized metaphor for “blood,” whose metaphorical power has historically been strong, versatile, and lively, enjoying a near synonymical relation to “kinship” and “biogenetic relation.” Catherine Nash further suggests:

33 Janet Beizer suggests that this return to biology and genetics is a reaction to the increase of transnational adoption and other forms of nontraditional family making or “modern families,” queer, transracial, technologically assisted, and so on. See Janet Beizer, Thinking through the Mothers: Reimagining Women’s Biographies. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. Also see Novy, 6; Jerng, 209.

34 Roof, The Poetics of DNA, 200.


36 Roof suggests that “blood … rarely stayed blood, but also became something else: food, life, soul” (167). Roof, The Poetics.
Discourses of genetic kinship and genetic connection become socially significant both through the model of the family, which is so heavily deployed in human population genetics, and through the authority of science, especially when presented as a science that can discern true relatedness—who is really related to whom—among mistaken versions in the messiness of real social relation.\(^{37}\)

The danger here is not only accepting mythical ideas about one’s family, but also reinforcing the notion that one group is distinctive and essentially different than other groups. Nash offers a concise description of the problem:

The idea that ancestry matters as a source of personal and collective self-knowledge underpins … [this idea] … that patterns of genetic variation are sources of knowledge of ancestry … In contrast to the significance of inherited biological differences in the racial science that emerged in the late nineteenth century, ‘genetic differences’ in this [modern configuration] seem neutralized, just a means to something else, to knowledge of ancestry, something positive, rewarding, meaningful but politically neutral. This is a science of difference purposefully distanced from the science of race, which justified eugenics and the Holocaust. ‘Genetic difference’ is a vital sign of something more benign; it is revelatory but in service to a more significant level of collective self-knowledge. ‘Our ancestry’ remains semantically open; it might mean a collective of individual ancestries (mine, yours, and so on) or ‘our’ universal human ancestry. However, it also evokes, if only implicitly, ideas of other human groups historically figured as communities of shared descent—racial, ethnic, and national. It is the potency of these collectives that underlies public interest in these accounts of difference and curiosity about how they confirm, challenge, or complicate claims about the origins, arrival, and distinctiveness of traditionally defined groups.\(^{38}\)

The successor to blood—DNA—continues the legacy of an individualist culture’s need for a satisfactory substitute that explains away that which cannot be easily, fully, or rationally understood. Heredity, kinship, origins, history, and identity and the ways in

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\(^{38}\) Ibid., 7.
which these concepts often speak with a singular voice are all wrapped up in the metaphorical power of “blood.” The problem with the popularization of DNA, however, is that it parades less as metaphor and more literally as scientific truth, such that this new “molecularization of identity” has inaugurated technoscientific claims to the “truth of a person.” Roof, in her revelatory The Poetics of DNA, adds that DNA has become the “figurative heir to blood.” 39 She historicizes the various metaphorical, metonymical, and synecdochical functions of both “blood” and DNA. According to Roof,

[i]f blood is a substitute—a metaphor—then genes and DNA are imagined as contiguous to or metonymic: a literal, physical part of the larger processes they govern … [t]he DNA gene seems to offer the possibility of a complete account of how living organisms get from molecules to intelligent life. The possibility of linking the minute evidence of connection to larger phenomena—another version of the origin-identity story … enables imaginations of genetic bases for all behaviors, instincts, and even desires … [which] transforms the DNA gene itself into a metaphor for almost the very same processes blood stood for: life, animation, identity, kinship. Just as blood became a metaphor for the metaphysical, so the DNA gene threatens to become a metaphor for the same vague, phantasmic properties. 40

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39 Roof discusses the “heredity narratives and reproduction narratives” that have have shifted during the last hundred years or so because of DNA: “Blood, although still a favorite metaphor for kinship and heredity today, soon began to relinquish some of its metaphorical functions to the idea of the gene. Not only does blood transfer its figuration of family relations to the image of genetic connection, but genetic connections become a synecdoche of the larger set of social relations previously identified as ‘blood’ relations … [W]e are at the point where we usually understand that the properties of blood are somehow the effects of genetic determination … [a]s DNA takes over the figurative functions of blood, DNA genes, already metaphorized, become even more so. Just as blood substitutes for a series of unknown or misunderstood processes, so genes (and DNA) supposedly make such relations as identity and filiation certain. DNA spells it out, so to speak” (169). Roof, Poetics.

40 Ibid., 170-1.
The “magical thinking and pseudoscience” that blood and DNA have enjoyed in popular culture and the cultural imaginary largely relies on language and its capacity for impurity and metaphor. That these metaphors of affiliation can only substantiate claims of kinship via iteration underscores the idea of kinship as deceptively unanchored, always pointing to something vague, spectral, and constructed, substantiated and sustained not only by metaphor, substitution, myth, narrative, and fiction, but now also by “pseudoscience.”

Jonathan Marks reminds us: “There’s DNA and there are probabilities of sharing some, but no tangible genetic stuff divisible among kin and distinguishing or bounding them from non-kin. There is no genetic test for kinship. Kinship is not a genetic property.”

Plus, the math cannot support the assumed explanatory powers of biogenetic relatedness; indeed, the exponential mathematics of relatedness, according to Steven Pinker,

makes an individual's pedigree collapse onto itself [and] also makes everyone's pedigree collapse into everyone else's. We are all related—not just in the obvious sense that we are all descended from the same population of the first humans, but also because everyone's ancestors mated with everyone else's at many points since that dawn of humanity. There aren't enough ancestors to go around for everyone to have a family tree of his or her own. So it is a mathematical necessity, not a surprise, that genealogy will turn up strange bedfellows.

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42 See Stephen Pinker, “Strangled by Roots: The Genealogy Craze in America.” *The New Republic*, 6 August 2007, pp. 32-35: 34. He continues: “And before you brag about the talent or courage you share with some illustrious kinsman, remember that the exponential mathematics of relatedness successively halves the number of genes shared by relatives with every link separating them. You share only 3 percent of your genes with your second cousin, and the same proportion with your great-great-great-grandmother” (34). He adds: “If you assume twenty-five years per generation, you can calculate that you had around three billion ancestors at the time of the signing of the Magna Carta, one hundred
Ultimately, the payoff—the excitement of discovering ancestral links to famous historical figures, stock, and/or tribes, finding “strange bedfellows”—is a myopic fantasy that ensures one’s individualistic significance against literally millions of other ancestral linkages to which one also “relates.” In other words, the fact that someone is “related” to Genghis Kahn is statistically irrelevant when that someone is also “related” to millions of other more “insignificant” people and when millions of others are also related to Genghis Kahn. Also, any someone “related” to Genghis Kahn is also related to millions of others, including “bad” or undesirable people, murderers, rapists, slave owners, and idiots. If the math cannot logically explain the identificatory values we place on genetic relations, Pinker suggests that, instead, it is the perception of relatedness that “creates an opening through which manipulators can flood people's kinship sense with cues that mimic the signals of biological relatedness.”

The point is that the perception of kinship is based on “signals”—or signifiers—buttressed over millions of years that “naturalize” attachments for evolutionary survival, but these “myths and ideologies” and “kinship metaphors [of] brethren, brotherhood, fraternity, sisterhood, sorority, the fatherland, the mother country, the family of man,” endorse the “natural” parent-child relation, national ideologies of the family, and other

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billion during the Norman invasion, two quintillion at the fall of the Roman Empire, and around 1,200,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 at the birth of Jesus” (33).

43 Ibid., 34.
myths of identification that normativize personhood via the “truth system” of biogenetic kinship.\textsuperscript{44} Further, Nash reminds us that despite the promise of discovering something profoundly meaningful and definitive … The opening chapter of the main textbook for human population genetics in the United Kingdom cautions against seeking answers to ‘meaningless questions.’ They include, ‘What was the ancestral biological homeland of population X?’ and ‘Where did my ancestors live a thousand years ago?’ The first is a meaningless question … since it is impossible that ‘all genetic diversity in a population could be traced to a single time and place.’ Unless ancestry is defined through matriline or patriline alone, the answer to the second question is, they argue, ‘everywhere.’\textsuperscript{45}

\textit{IV. Geography is Never Neutral}

One consequence of not acknowledging the disingenuousness of the pseudoscience supporting popular interest in ancestry might be that this interest may continue to operate as unmediated pre-political truth, or that which is merely nature and natural, whose telos ends in what Nash calls, “geographies of relatedness.” Nash argues that there are no “self-evident spatialities of ‘genetic history’” and suggests:

The idea of the coincidence of bonds between a group of people through shared ancestry and their geographical propinquity is fundamental to the deeply embedded imagination of a world of nation-states. The conventional idea of the nation-state as an extended family and a shared community of descent, whose sense of collective identity and culture derive from a shared ancestry and biocultural inheritance is … a collective sharing of a geographical portion of the world as a natural homeland … underpinned by an assumption about the spatial and social ordering of human difference in the geopolitical map: that geographical proximity is a measure of ancestral relatedness and that the political geography of national borders marks out a mosaic of national communities of shared

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 35.

\textsuperscript{45} Nash, 59.
descent … Ideal indigeneity—of unbroken presence … as rooted in a single original place of native purity … shape[s] interest in knowledge of origins and indeed get[s] cultivated and serviced through genetic genealogy … The idea of ancestral origin itself get[s] attached to an imagined place of previous ancestral indigeneity … In the U.S. context, the appeal of being indigenous—of not being from elsewhere—and the significance of ethnic distinctiveness—of being from elsewhere—are entangled.46

Nash questions the concept of geography itself, that there are or have been definitive bordered, either physically or conceptually, territories, non-arbitrarily determined “places” that serve as the “origins” of particular groups, ethnicities, clans, or family names. From what exact point in time and place is the decided origin claimed to be? What group and grouping is one claiming? Can this group, determined and categorized as such, presently, have any claim to similarity or kinship with the same kind of group in the past, also determined in the present? Hans-Jürgen Bandelt, Yong-Gang Yao, Martin B. Richards, and Antonio Salas point out that standard genetic genealogy tests can produce “at best, a very approximate sub-continental origin at a point of time with very large uncertainty, typically somewhere between 5,000 and 40,000 years ago,”47 which suggests that we cannot know that any particularly determined group in the present specifically hails from a specific area or place in the past better than within this range.

46 Ibid., 4, 23-24, 26, 28.

Roof suggests that the current popular beliefs in blood and DNA that intend to provide people with ancestral histories conflate identity and history, which is problematic because

history becomes the answer to any question of origins—in fact, tends to be reduced to the answer of any question about origins … [and] at the same time, history also becomes a tabula rasa for the inscription of contemporary imaginations. The idea, finally, that we represent the culmination of a long line of others whose genetic material we bear in our bodies [ultimately] projects a version of immortality backward.  

The intertwining of the narratives of heredity, origins, and kinship means the enduring question of identity ends up, as Roof notes, “producing the illusion that the question is already answered by either parentage or geographic and ethnic locations [because] DNA functions as the protagonist or figurative parent in the reproductive narrative and because we understand ourselves to be the end products of that narrative.” Because of DNA people have adopted a new idea of history that, when aligned with DNA (as in, my genetic makeup shares likeness to my ancestors, etc.), merges biology into the realms of not only history but, eventually and most emphatically, identity. However, by concretizing the association between and conflation of identity and history, these signs of belonging—blood, DNA, genetic genealogy, ancestry, and our “genetic codes” and “biological blueprints”—in effect, excludes adoptees, since one must presumably have access to that kind of information, in order to have identity.

48 Roof, 201-2.

49 Ibid., 166.
Nevertheless, despite the illogical foundations of popular belief in ancestry, DNA, blood, and normative kinship, genetic ancestry services like ancestry.com and geogene.com offering DNA testing for people who wish to “trace roots,” “become a part of history,” and “know where they come from,” merely sell “identity cast as history.”

Further, these sites and services promote a “genetic ignorance” that customers—and particularly targeted African American customers—may absolve by purchasing tests that will reveal definitively their genealogical histories. However, Nash confirms genetic genealogy testing as a “deeply selective and reductive model of ancestry that only addresses a tiny fraction of an individual’s ancestors,” which may often only feature one of two haplogroup ancestries [maternal and paternal] that are themselves not spatially fixed … [and promote] the odd fiction of haplogroups as human groups … This is an imaginative fiction, since human groups are never homogenous genetically; migration is not a matter of the unilineal movement of genetically homogenous groups … [and] where along the way from [one’s ostensible origin place] to the place identified with a present-day predominance of a haplogroup might an individual’s origin

50 Ibid., 199.

51 Nash writes: “While Europeans are selectively being figured as indigenous, discourses of diasporic mobility and displacement are being applied in both universal and differentiated ways. The narrative of humanity’s African origins suggests a diasporic condition for all except Africans and thus for all those whose ancestors were migrants from Africa but who became indigenous in the settled geography of premodern homelands. But those with ‘nonnative’ ancestry in the New World are figured as diasporic—ultimately, from somewhere else … [and] a specific African American sense of loss and lack is amplified and extended to suggest a generalized sense of the troubling absence of knowledge for anyone who is ‘nonnative.’ The appeal of being indigenous (of not being from somewhere else) and the appeal of ethnic distinctiveness (of being from somewhere else) are both harnessed to produce a market for genetic ancestry tests” (178-9).
lie? Where on the pathway is the origin place? When is the foundational time?52

The problem with these sites is that not only are their practices and what they advertise extremely dubious, they prey upon current popular belief in the *connection* between the above two claims—that knowing where you come from causes you to know yourself (more, enough, at all, completely)—and subsequently reinforce this myth, a myth that remains largely accepted, and specifically so, perhaps, within transnational and transracial adoption and adoptee politics, discourse, and popular opinion.

V. *The Adoptive Geneses of Trees and the Adoptees Excluded from Them*

Further, as Nash shows, many companies take advantage of “tree symbolism” and entangle logos of double helixes with trees, despite the incongruent gesture of combining these two signs, one, the family tree, genealogy, and lineage, the other, DNA, genes, and genetics. These two “incommensurate models” consist of different temporalities of ancestry. Nash notes:

Lineage tests, which predominate, focus only on direct maternal and direct paternal descent in contrast to the potentially endlessly ramifying thicket of the conventional family tree … Family history or genealogy works on the time scale of generations—unusually, only back to the point of the emergence of written sources, usually three or four hundred years at the very most for nonnobles (i.e., most people). Genetic genealogy, unless applied to specific historical cases, offers results that describe ancestry in terms of tens of thousands of years … The value of genetic genealogy is widely claimed to be its usefulness in overcoming the limits of documentary sources. But in most cases of individual tests, there is a considerable temporal gap between conventional and genetic genealogy.53

52 Nash., 54-55.

53 Ibid., 58.
Normative kinship currently enjoys the sign of the family tree as the primary image of its makeup, which includes its corresponding images of arboreal or arterial systems, whose connotations of “nature” and “biology” are designed to support this a priori association. But of course adoptees encounter irrelevancy rather than revelation when confronted with the prospect of our own family trees or lack thereof. In a way, we enter other people’s family trees through being adopted by them, a mode not dissimilar to how many people enter into other people’s family trees throughout the generations through marriage. Nevertheless, the exclusivity of family trees finds adoptees outside normative kinship spatially, in various ways, as adoption literally re-places adoptees and disrupts the continuity of the heteronormative family tree, an adoptive family tree, and the notion of the family tree itself, as we must enter into it, if we are to at all, seemingly from out of nowhere.

The notion of the family tree also finds adoptees outside normative kinship temporally, in that the family tree has an axis of time central to its construction and significance. I mention “significance” here to note the role of time in the family tree; family trees mean something because over time one can see how one is “related” to ancestors. Without time, the family tree is not significant in that it doesn’t function or reveal what it is supposed to. For adoptees, being outside time also means being insignificant to the system in the first place (meanwhile many people within it are only mildly interested in their own family trees if at all). The significance of one’s family tree greatly varies per person, which is on one hand obvious but on the other hand curious because then why place so much importance on family trees and genealogies generally,
when for many it is their prerogative to *not find* identificatory or general significance in their family trees?

For adoptees, it is ironic that our desire for the genetic histories that we have been “removed” from has also fated us to care about a system that may have not been so great—or accurate or functional or productive—in the first place. To complicate matters further, while adoptees are certainly excluded in the figure of kinship as a tree, without (access to) origins—a lineage, a clan, a people, a culture—which is to say lacking, we are also excessive, *overly full* of family, and both this emptiness and this excessiveness makes us adoptees walking contradictions and further confuses where we might figure into this notion of the family tree. These complications also highlight how despite adoptees’ exclusion from the family tree construct—we either register only momentarily in an adoptive family tree or not at all and are conceptually and by all intents and purposes “removed” from our genetic or “birth” family tree—we also have not precisely lost, absolutely, altogether, our “place” in our “old” family trees. Which is to say that just because adoption occurred doesn’t mean the technicality or materiality of the genetic relatedness to others goes away. After all, if “blood” qua “blood relation” truly was all that is needed for connection and bonding, why work so hard to perform, experience, seek out, and ultimately *adopt* its ostensible byproducts of feeling, sense of belonging, and identity? I am suggesting an initial deconstructive gesture that marks the irony and contradiction of privileging blood, genes, and ancestry so heavily in determining one’s place within the normative and *possible* economies of belonging. In addition, the dichotomy of normative kinship and adoptive kinship is insufficiently oppositional in that
the “opposite” of “adoption” would be more likely, “rejection,” “subtraction,”
“disconnection,” “exclusion,” or “opposition,” itself, and not “biology,” “normative
kinship,” “kinship,” “blood relation,” or “genetic relation.”

VI. Fictive and Adoptive Kinships

Of course, similar accessible deconstructive gestures already exist. Maryanne
Novy, in Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama, argues that
“rather than distinguishing fictive from authentic kinship, we should say that all kinds of
kinship are fictive, because all institutions are constructed by social agreement” and that
“all kinship can be considered constructed.54 Jacqueline Stevens also argues:

The reason it is imperative to question the dichotomy between adoptive
and genetic families is not simply to correct poor taxonomic work in the
past, but because the division marginalizes and stigmatizes those families,
relations, and relatives called ‘adoptive’ … The thinking—rarely
articulated—leading to such a double standard is confused and unfair.
Overtly or implicitly all families are adoptive, as all families depend on
the legal institutionalization of rules that put children in relation to parent
that the children themselves do not choose … Nonetheless, strictly
speaking, the only genetics influencing the necessity to be in a family are
the ones we all share: we are mammals who as children have a long stage
of dependency on adults. That any particular adult performs these tasks is
not, however, a consequence of a genome particular to that person but,
legally or informally, occurs when one or more adults take care of, or, we
could say, adopt, a helpless creature who has no say in the matter. From
the point of view of the dependent infant, the existence of a few mutations
in DNA that she may or may not share with her caregiver is completely
irrelevant. To survive, she needs at least nutrition, shelter, and emotional

54 Maryanne Novy, Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama.
intimacy, none of which lead to requirements for a narrative distinguishing genetic parents from any others.\textsuperscript{55}

Sara Ruddick, in \textit{Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace}, similarly argues for concepts of mother, motherhood, and mothering not based in biology, suggesting that “all mothers are ‘adoptive’”:

To adopt is to commit oneself to protecting, nurturing, and training particular children. Even the most passionately loving birthgiver engages in a social, adoptive act when she commits herself to sustain an infant in the world. It is not possible to limit a priori the forms of respectful relations between birthgivers and adoptive mothers … A particular birthing woman articulates that hope by arranging the conditions of adoption that suit her. The work of a birthgiver is not compromised if she carefully transfers to others the responsibility for the infant she has birthed.\textsuperscript{56}

But of course the idea that “the work of a birthgiver is not compromised,” pricks a transnational adoptee critical nerve. Do we contest that there is something essential to birthgivers over other (adoptive) mothers? Stevens offers a follow-up deconstructive cum taxonomic solution, starting with clarifying some confusion and slippage between biology and genetics: “Custodial relations for children based on anything except pregnancy are all rooted in legal and social conventions, not biology … Birth is an activity yielding a bond to the fetus not present in a purely genetic tie, and hence it is necessary to consider a claim to parental status on birth separately from claims based on


genetics.” Stevens argues for viewing maternity, motherhood, and the term, “mother,” as a “sui generis condition without a copy,” as “while the status of ‘mother’ is held by only the person giving birth, the effect of this in the context of laws denying the status of ‘father’ is to put all non-maternal parents on equal footing.” One central rationale for these changes in signification is due to the intransigency of how current marriage law exists to bring men into relation with children, even if these are not their genetic offspring. That pregnant women must be secured by men in matrimony (from the Latin matrix, meaning womb) institutionalizes the paranoia of a masculinity anxious about men’s inability to give birth, and therefore intent to influence reproduction by those who do give birth. Forcing men to earn the status of parent outside the realm of sexual access—managing to ejaculate during intercourse—promotes a new incentive system for becoming a parent.

Indeed, all forms of kinship are ultimately adoptive because the child is parented by someone he or she does not choose, and while the genetic mother is deemed to “naturally” choose to parent her genetically related child, this action or event is nonetheless adoptive. Ethically, genetic mothers should usually always get first dibs on choosing whether or not to raise the child in question; the vital point remains, however, in that, for one, heterosexual procreation and the subsequent decision to parent that child is always an act of adoption. Therefore, “adoption,” then, say, in-between the 1st and 2nd ostensible phases of deconstructive methodology, more accurately articulates and describes this elision itself—the nonrecognition of and lack of connotative and denotative

57 Stevens, “Methods of Adoption,” 68, 70.

58 Ibid., 93, 90.

59 Ibid., 92.
possibilities for “adoption.” Following Derridean scripture, I would in theory then need to reinscribe the (formerly) inferior terms—adoptee, adoptive, adoption—as the origin or source of the opposition and hierarchy itself, which, for “adoption,” would suggest that blood is not the immutable truth and descriptor and arbiter of kinship and family; instead, “adoption” emerges as that which grounds all kinship. But how might we orthographically alter the previously inferior terms to signify their change in status and signification?

Real kinship—supported by the “science” of blood and DNA and human population genetics, the “natural” laws of heterosexual reproduction, and popular cultural, ethnic, and nationalistic beliefs of belonging—opposes fictive and adoptive kinship. Literarily made manifest in so many adoptee memoirs, this inauthentic, false, fictive, and adoptive kind of kinship is automatically assumed to be less than or not equal to its normative dominant counterpart. But of course if blood and ancestry and history and lineage were all so immutable and incontrovertible, then there shouldn’t be an issue as these connections always already exist. So, in fact, blood, et. al., do not “prove” themselves by themselves, they require belief in and acknowledgement of “adoption,” as a notion, as possible, and as that which functions as the capacity for kinship in the first place. In other words, Korean adoptees who believe that their true identities lie in Korea, in Korean culture, and with their Korean biogenetically related parents, must first believe in adoption before they can believe that it is possible to return to all the above, to adopt their Korean selves and identities. While some might argue that Korean adoptees are merely recovering their lost identities, this still nevertheless assumes that identity can be
lost in the first place. This initial belief is ignored because it reveals how normative kinship relies on adoptive notions of kinship first, at its origin, so to speak. Losing identity is the opposite of adopting identity, and believing in the former must take place prior to believing in the latter, even if the latter is rarely depicted as an adoptive gesture and more usually depicted as a simple return to and revelation of one’s true self.

VII. Origin Matters and Contradicting Identity

For Korean adoptees, the materiality of our blood connection to our genetic families will always remain, and in fact, what is elided and yet most significant is how the notion of adoption becomes subservient to normative kinship or kinship making (or the doing of kinship). Blood, then, is paradoxically not enough, as despite this literal relation, the Korean adoptee subject still needs all the nurture in the world to feel adequate senses of belonging and identity. Nevertheless, and perhaps especially for adoptees, blood does matter even if it really shouldn’t. For many adoptees, these notions must be reconciled for them to “find their identity” or “feel whole.” Here is where certain beliefs and conflations appear that involve ideas of identity, history, origins, nation, family and belonging.

One of these beliefs has to do with connecting identity with history. It seems adoptees really want to believe that where we come from matters. But I, for one, ask, why, exactly? Why does it matter where you come from? Is it primarily because of “being adopted” and the act of adoption occurring in the past? Surely, it is many things. But as Sedgwick posthumously might remind us, we differ from each other in many ways. How
many reasons can we list for why it matters where we come from? How many reasons can we list that are not based in myth, bad science, or antiquated epistemologies? For instance, one common reason to believe in where we come from mattering is that it “tells me who I am.” But of course, what does it tell you, exactly? Does it tell you things beyond the limitations of your present perspectives, realities, materialities, configurations, manifestations, and paradigms of identity? Does believing in an arbitrarily originary place and point in time and history on the planet generate a sense of worth, pride, and belonging? Can we still derive worth, pride, growth, and belonging from a system of knowledge that purports “truth” within accessible personal origins? Part of the issue, perhaps, seems to lie within the uncritical use of the possessive pronoun, “your,” in that the claim, “your history,” assumes precisely that, that this vague, indeterminate, and arbitrary history, is already yours, which is nonsensical in that if this history is already “yours” then what is the difference between having it and having knowledge of it?

The consolidation of social norms that govern kinship has returned our popular imaginary to the “primacy” of genetics, blood, and biology and has thus thrust adoptee narratives into the spotlight as they often express a more complicated and fraught relationship to blood and family when they do not seem to represent the same thing. Some adoption critics seek to flesh out and decenter the valorization of ancestral origins.

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60 Over ten years ago, genealogy was the second most searched for subject on the web and around the same time transnational adoptions into the U.S. numbered around 20,000 a year, peaking at 23,000 in 2004. Since then, this number has been reduced by over half, with less than 10,000 adoptions in 2011.
and biological modes of relatedness because adoptee subjectivities, stories, and politics seem so tangled by and within these parameters. In many ways, the tropes of blood, belonging, and the search for identity in Korean adoptee texts speak to the significance of kinship language that belies a desire to be located, in a place and time, and amidst others, of similar stock, ilk, creed, kind, or fashion, to feel connected to not only ancestors but to history, to time itself, and to being inside history and inside time or more properly, to be of time. What I am trying to articulate is the speciousness of pursuing this quest for and through genetic connections. Clearly these ad hoc adoption desires for “historical continuity” suggest that we don’t genuinely matter until we can satisfactorily locate, situate, and orient ourselves on spatiotemporal maps whose topographies ostensibly reveal family trees across great spans of time.

While many critics recognize to some degree the “risks” of genetic essentialism, this chapter is a more direct attempt at rejecting genetic essentialism outright, a theoretical positioning whose consequences might suggest that transnational adoption criticism would do well to move beyond its inaugural phase that has focused primarily on transnational and transracial adoptees as tragic victims—lost, multiply marginalized, robbed of natural parents, family, identity, and culture—whose only recourse is to form simulacra of kinship, amongst ourselves, other adoptees, and adoptive families. While championing our “adoptive communities” that we have made for ourselves as progressive and evidence of agency and resistance, I argue that this championing is not sufficient. Nor should we view the emergence of our unique alternative communities as a satisfying goal. Interestingly, this promotion of adoptive kinship contradicts the often presumed
political stance of anti-transnational adoption (or at least anti-Korean participation in the international adoption industry/complex). This stance involves critiquing the history of international adoption, related politics, juridical management and legal agreements between nations, the monetary and affective capital flowing between particularly rich nations and particularly poor nations, and the traumas and violences it inflicts on women, mothers, and children. Ultimately and ironically, the anti-Korean adoption stance requires in principle a *telos* of self-annihilation, in that if it succeeds it would put an end to adoptive Korean identity and community.

Kim Park Nelson clarifies, “For those who work to end transnational adoption, many of whom are adoptees, the disappearance of Korean adoptee communities is a necessary result of their activism … [A]nti-adoption activism works against the very existence of future Korean adoptees and of Korean adoptee communities.” Further, this contradiction in stances remains oddly harmonious, at least in the sense that this contradiction doesn’t seem to bother too many adoptees. This contradiction can be expressed in a nutshell: “While we are here, we will celebrate our uniqueness and our subversion of normative kinship and the heteronormative nuclear family, and if we shall succeed in our aim of ending transnational adoption, thereby sentencing our kind to immanent extinction, we will celebrate that too.” Lastly, promotion of adoptive kinship also reinforces it as a kind of kinship (making) sufficient enough to approximate “real” kinship, which of course merely structurally confirms a paradigm wherein we must

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always cite the default against which our novel forms of and approaches to kinship must be compared. The problem is that this “adoptive kinship” position does not critique kinship itself—how it has \textit{always been} adoptive and queer in “nature”—despite traditions of genetic essentialism, or popular belief in ancestry and blood and DNA. The default status of normative, biogenetically related kinship consists of at least these two claims: that “knowing where you are from” is knowable and accurate, and that this information \textit{means something} and is relevant and natural to identity.

What it “means to be Korean” is at stake but also what it means to identify with and believe in particularly essentialist ideas about belonging, family, blood, and kinship. Processes and factors of power certainly impact this calculus as well; nevertheless, we are talking about Korean adoptees who feel they have been unfairly and improperly displaced and often misplaced, tragically removed from their native land, country, nation (and with these, from traditions and histories), and culture, and psychically damaged in various ways because of being adopted. With the ubiquity and continued troping of “loss of identity” narratives, the notions that Korean adoptees \textit{should have been} Koreans, are \textit{actually Korean underneath}, and Koreans, plain and simple, reinforce dangerous nationalist and ethnic essentialisms.

When Korean adoptees accept the myth of genetic identity, or what Nash calls \textit{genealogical identity}, they may experience an initial rejection or \textit{denial of identity}, which I suggest critics of Korean adoptee and transnational adoptee texts have hardly noted. This denial of identity (of Asian Americanness, of Americanness, of being adopted) is usually supported by a strong sense of nationalism and/or (belief in) national and/or
ethnic essentialisms. While identity itself and the notion of “lost/false/empty/inaccurate identity” are very common tropes in adopted Korean discourse, literature, and for many, daily life, I argue that the notions of “lost selves” and “lost identity” (or false, empty, fake, “not correct,” fictive, unreal, or untrue selves/identity) do not and cannot point to actual references or signifieds but rather merely the belief in and feeling of what is assumed to be the consequence of lacking (access to) kinship. The belief in and feeling of these notions are very real, but philosophically, technically, false identity is impossible: One can only ever be a self who feels as untrue or inaccurate or inauthentic. Therefore, I do not reject or deny the existence of this trope. I only argue that this belief does nothing to help Korean adoptees toward the arguably, potentially more progressive goal of not simply working to return and/or join the normative filial ranks that so emphatically form “authentic” identity via belief in coming from somewhere, belonging to an older family or bloodline, and/or in one’s native nation, history, culture, and traditions. In fact, I argue that these tropes of identity actually set up our potential for progressive futures, beyond our current trauma-, suffering-, victimizing-ridden discourse. Indeed, I find highly valuable, for instance, the belief in the accuracy of the claim that I, as a Korean

Odd, here, that so many of us argue for a return to a culture and society, with its national histories, traditions, and beliefs, that is arguably more patriarchal, traditionalist, conservative, homophobic, and politically problematic than other so-called first world nations, let alone South Korea’s history with and present in believing in the importance and significance of blood, bloodlines, and family names. While my position may at first suggest an anti-anti-transnational adoption position, I hope for a more nuanced and complicated view, if not convoluted. I argue not for transnational adoption nor for its immediate or eventual cessation. I am far more interested in the ways we as Korean adoptees expose limitations within the ways in which we approach identity, belonging, family, and kinship.
adoptive, actually have no real/true identity. As Korean adoptees, we are the ones who have been un/fortunate to enjoy such novel identity predicaments, and I now argue for our unique opportunity to show how we as a community can challenge and change entrenched beliefs in normative kinship. Simply, I argue that our political position should not necessarily primarily consist of these two prominent goals: 1. Stopping Korean involvement in international and transnational adoption, and 2. Returning to Korea to become our “real” selves.

I stand against the values and bases of the notion of “knowing your history,” both its claim to accuracy and its claim that it makes “you know who you are.” This idea of “knowing who you are,” a claim that etymologically relies upon active verb forms of “to know” that are intimately mixed up with “ken,” “kind,” “kith,” and “kin,” implies some sort of origin of “to know”—or “knowledge”—itself. The only certainty here is the circularity within this etymological logic: to know something or someone based on the notion of kin, itself a connection based in consanguinity and shifting ideas of blood, is to be familiar with it or kin to it. While popular belief in ancestry, blood, and the conflation of personal history with identity may all provide some individuals with valuable meaning, the dangers are too often hidden or not mentioned at all: privileging ancestry and genetics suggests that single father families, single mother families, two father families, two mother families, and adoptive families are simply not as natural or effective (in terms of parenting) a form of family as the default. Therefore, as we Korean adoptees and adoptee critics cannot support a position that encourages division, exclusion, heteronormativity, and so forth, we must look to other justifications for why transnational
adoption is so undesirable, evil, unjust, and unfair. In other words, if it cannot be because of not being raised in an ideal nuclear family, then our justifications must to turn the “unjust and tragic” separation of mother and biogenetically related child or to the specific practices of international or transnational, transracial, and domestic adoption.

VIII. Queer Kinship and the Disorientation of Orientation

That said, I argue that our Korean adoptee positionalities and identities, rather than embodying a series of lacks, losses, and inauthenticities, instead embody an overabundance, an excess of identity—the presence of, or current identity of, an “identity lost,” the felt “ghost” of identity assumed to have been lost, and the presumed identity that one has the capacity to achieve once one finds “true” family, history, culture, kinship, and belonging—as well as any lack of it (identity). It seems the pathos and pain of “being adopted” and “losing your family” and “abandonment” and “losing identity” often divert attention from the conditions of possibility that precede such effects. Sure, many of our stories as Korean adoptees are sad ones, but many are not; regardless, if we continue to privilege and prioritize “returns to Korea” and recoveries of lost selves, identities, and senses of belonging, we threaten to only reinforce normative kinship as such, genetic essentialism, and general popular belief in ancestry, blood, and genetic genealogy. In other words, in isolation, the stereotypical Korean adoptee journey for identity and authentic kinship seems justifiably, ethically, positive. There is trauma, violence, and psychical pain, injustice, and a corrupt history of transnational adoption practices from the beginning. This disease of identity must be remedied. However, I
argue that we are not in isolation, and our beliefs, actions, attitudes, philosophies, behaviors, and words do affect the world around us.

I highlight these problematics precisely because transnational adoption criticism and Korean adoptee politics, specifically, have not yet quite articulated our own predicament within these prior problematics, much of which may affect the all too common rhetorical and critical trajectories of Korean adoptee texts, art, theory, and criticism that argue for the primacy of a series of rejections, denials, and essentialisms. These include the rejection or denial of Asian Americanness (or Asian American identity) as opposed to the “truth” or “realness” of Koreanness (or Korean identity) (native/national essentialism), the rejection or denial of adoptive family attachments and connections in favor of a more “real” and “natural” attachment and connection to biogenetically related family (genetic essentialism), and the rejection or denial of queerness, of queer family makeup or constitution, and of any sort of queer identity, of not representing the standard heteronormative and nuclear family in its makeup, in that our adoptive parents did not have normative sexual intercourse that led to our births by our adoptive mothers. While this last point begs for a much more thorough exploration and discussion, my initial point should at least remain, for now, in that I argue that privileging biology, “nature,” genetics, and blood ties, not only rejects the queerness of adoption and adoptee problematics, but also goes against what we as a community could be championing, which is progress, progressivity, equality, justice, and how best to treat one another going forward. Another way to argue this third point is to argue for a queering of kinship altogether that would reveal how kinship (even heterosexual
normative kinship, which is at this point redundant) has always been queer, especially considering the lengths and depths to which heteronormativity, arguably, must go to keep itself as the dominant form or hegemony.

This chapter aimed to articulate imbricated manifestations of contradiction, what I call, *disorientation*, or the queering of orientation itself (the disorientation of orientation) and the primacy of it in the establishment of the modern human liberal subject—white, liberal, American/Western, and heterosexual—which, amongst many consequences, reveals paradigms and parameters of disorientation for the transnational adoptee subject. My theorization of disorientation is meant to put pressure on notions and norms of naturalization, ancestry, family, the nation, kinship, identity, and citizenship, as well as on itself, as it is also a disavowal of orientation—its originary power and primacy in the shaping and defining identity—and a repudiation of the spatio-temporal constitutive power that personal history demands, much of which includes obfuscations of accuracy and empiricism. Belief in the notion that “it matters where you come from” points to the arbitrary calculation and conflation of space and time—as the saying and sentiment is not, “it matters *when* you come from”—yet this dimension is equally if not more central to the realities of tracing humans and human relations over time. Here, we have what Nash calls, “biohistories” with “their orientation to the past.”63 The privileging of place, nation, clan, and ethnicity in being centrally constitutive of identity and meaning operates uncritically as natural and self-evident, and my theorizing around *disorientation* works to reorient ourselves away from this originary claim of orientation that certifies itself

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63 Nash, 180.
through mythological structures of “place,” “geography,” and “ancestry” itself. The idea of the constancy of nation-states and the boundaries and borders surrounding them over history must also be relied upon, for belief in ancestry and genealogical history to remain discernable, as well as the general belief in the idea that the closer people live to others, the more likely they are the same or similar. *Disorientation* also marks not only our psychical positionalities and material realities that can be described as colloquially disorienting, but also specifically rejects the claims generated by a new technoscientific *scientia genesis* that concretizes popular belief in blood, ancestry, genetics, and personal genetic genealogy, which is genetic essentialism in short. This point in particular is crucial as it is this concomitancy with technoscientific modernity through which genetic essentialism defines itself.

*Disorientation* cites Foucault’s dichotomy between Occidental *scientia sexualis* and Oriental *ars erotica*, but remains distinct from it as the term can indicate a literal *dis-orienting* or *dis-orientation* particularly involved in transnational adoption history, i.e., from Asian nations; thus *disorientation* also marks this historical materiality as well as the psychical complications and predicaments transnational adoptees often articulate. *Disorientation* describes, indexes, and comments on all of the above, and more, and culminates, potentially, in a critique of queerness itself, in that *disorientation* not only critiques the centrality of *orientation* in the historicization and development of the modern human liberal heteronormative white subject—as outlined by Foucault and improved by critics like, Chow (ascendancy of whiteness), Eng (racialization of intimacy and queer liberalism), and Puar (homonationalisms)—but also implies a *dis-orienting*
That being said, I articulate Korean adoptee identity as *disoriented* (introduced in chapter one), first wrestling with notions of blood, genetic essentialism, and belonging, only to then wrestle with the failures of kinship language in describing the Korean adoptee predicament, identity included. I center my argument around *disorientation* as it captures and conveys both the literal *disorientation* Korean adoptees experience being *dis- oriented*, removed from the Orient, which recognizes and does not obfuscate the fact of our adoptions and the material histories of the transnational adoption industry, *and* the primary colloquial definitions of disorientation: 1. The condition of having lost one’s sense of direction, and 2. A state of mental confusion.  

64 Through the lens of *disoriented identity*, the transgressive queer diasporic Korean adoptee subject resists genetic, native, and cultural essentialisms.


66 I fixate on *disorientation* as a theoretical, methodological, critical, descriptive, and functional concept that is particularly applicable here because so much of our notions of identity and “who you are” is based on antiquated beliefs in “nature” and “where you come from.” Disorientation is a move away from the notion of orientation as significant in the first place. We already describe ourselves as being outside time, outside history, which is to imply that we do not exist in human ancestral timelines. It matters not, then, that we may desire our own annihilation, or at least not mind it, as our belief in
If I claim to know myself much more (or enough) now that I know that I come from the tribe of x in the sub-Saharan desert circa 1200, what exactly, in words, do I know? If so much of identity requires a belief in the centrality of place, geography, nation-states, and indigeneity, and most importantly, one’s relation to it, meaning, one’s orientation, then disorientation also critiques the centrality of place, geography, nation-states, and indigeneity insofar as they have to do with identity. It is no accident that the language so often used to describe Korean adoptee identities and subjectivities revolves around notions of being lost and in need of finding truth, identity, family, history, authenticity, and so on. Both make sense only within the context of orientation and being disoriented and embodying this process of identity called disorientation, which, outside the Korean adoptee context, may not be required at all. When one is already oriented, or when there is no question of the need for orientation, then the need for itself, for disorientation, is absent. But the notion of adoption, its theoretical justifications and its praxes, creates the need for itself as such, much like how some proponents of “prosthesis theory” articulate the prosthetic as that which creates the need for itself, ostensibly making whole something that was never originally whole to begin with.

orientation—and in the significance of its own positionality as that which must be decided before identity can happen—already subjectively claims “death.”

66 It is no accident that to know shares an intimately, etymologically affiliative, if you will, relation to to ken, which itself shares an intimately, etymologically affiliative, if you will, relation, to kin.

Disorientation also references the move away from heteronormative constitutions of the self, spatially and temporally, as cited in such parlance and semiotic slippage between one’s “sexual orientation” and one’s “sexual identity.” Notice, here, how “orientation” and “identity” are used almost synonymously. This exploration might continue with querying what “sexual dis-orientation” might be versus what “sexual dis-identity” might be. In this valence and in its others, to disidentify with the identificatory processes that govern identity is to also disorient oneself away from the same and from that which caused the division originally. As Stuart Hall suggests, cultural identity is “not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin.’” Hall’s definition of “cultural identity” could be changed to, simply, “identity,” which he could be indicating anyway, in that part of the point here is that identity is never pre-cultural. Gopinath also mentions that the queer diasporic subject “reorients” diaspora away from its traditional, “backward-looking glance.” In a way, queer disorientation asks whether the transnational adoptee and the category “adoptee,” generally, are not born as such. What would it mean to suggest that we are born adoptees? For the adoptee, what is more desirable or progressive? Is it more advantageous to view our constitutions, our adopteeness, as made, hailed, interpellated, assimilated, and constructed? As Nash effectively demonstrates, there are no such things as natural difference, natural affinities,

and natural homelands. It is time for adoptees to decide whether we should resist or integrate the kinds of contributions Nash, Roof, and Stevens have argued for.69

69 Nash’s full conclusion has been highly instructive for my project: “This celebration of ancestral relatedness … [suggests that] human genetic difference [is] ‘geographically structured’ with genetic similarity decreasing with geographical distance … If this ‘geographical structure’ of human genetic variation is combined with the idea of natural genetic relatedness, it produces a world in which patterns of affinity and antipathy are also understood as naturally ‘geographically structured.’ Proximity and distance would be imagined as correlating with natural senses of affinity and difference. It suggests that people living near each other are more similar genetically and thus more bound to each other than they are to people far away … Given that humans vary genetically—but not by much and not in bounded ways—and given that the genetic variation is both broadly geographical and profoundly complicated by migration in the past and present, it is better not to look to shared ancestry and genetic interconnectedness—that is, to ancestry at all—for progressive models of how humans might think about and treat each other. Ideas of relatedness and ancestry are always ready tools for differentiation, and ide[s] of genetic and geographical propinquity—natural symmetries of place, ancestry, people, and culture—can easily be put to work to support exclusive models of belonging … that [are] easily compatible with—and indeed can reinforce—old, persistent, and problematic imaginative geographies of natural difference, natural affinities, and natural homelands” (175, 183).
Chapter 3

Language of the Heart: Korean Adoptee Identity and Disorientation

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, [identities] are subject to the continuous play of history, culture[,] and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways in which we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, narratives of the past.

—Stuart Hall¹

There is no nature, only the effects of nature: denaturalization or naturalization.

—Jacques Derrida²

Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible … The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated.

—Judith Butler³


For many transnational and transracial Korean adoptees, access to identity and processes of identification proves to be particularly difficult and fraught. Acknowledging these themes, Eleana Kim observes that a “concern with identity and loss emerges in much adoptee artwork” and that “desires for ‘authentic’ personhood frequently surface in adoptee activities of self-narration.” For Kim, as well as for popular opinion, these concerns and desires are self-explanatory and naturally consequential to being transnationally and transracially adopted. Korean adoptee “expressive practice,” then, “enacts a recuperative (re)production or (re)creation of a memory of Korea that has been severed or forgotten.” It may be no surprise, given these foundations, that many Korean adoptees seek (and are encouraged) to recover or “restore” connections that would presumably allow easier access to authentic identity. Ann Anagnost, for instance, advocates for “restoring history to the process of constructing the [adopted] child’s subjectivity.” But is this possible? And if so, how? What exactly should we transnational and transracial adoptees do, then, to restore history to its identificatory purpose beyond expressive practice? Is expressive practice enough? What does “enough,” here, mean?


5 Ibid.


7 If we assume “enough” determines “recuperation,” “recovery,” “restoration,” or “that which we assume expressive practice supplements for” then are we not accepting a logic
What if our concerns of identity and loss and desires of authentic personhood underscore contradictions within processes of identification?

In this chapter, I engage with ways Korean adoptee identity (or, the ways Korean adoptees have complicated identity) challenges normative means to identification by revealing arbitrary and contradictory constructions of identity. Identity is supposed to be assembled from the originary stuff of the self, its inalterable aspects whose radiance precedes and originates essences. The figure of the Korean adoptee troubles this sequence, however, by allowing for and even promoting notions of the adoptive—over natural categories of belonging—as potent identificatory means. Perhaps adoptee identity reveals a more accurate picture of identity formation than does nonadoptee identity. It may be that nonadoptee identity is quite limited and reductive, at least when compared to the adoptive and adoption as primary means of forming kinship. Nonadoptee identity—as formed and built and maintained, as such, currently, wholly oriented around ideas of shared origins, bloodlines, DNA, and national and ethnic heritage—then, it follows, may only align itself against, derive itself from, and orients itself via static and increasingly antiquated categories of belonging, like shared origins, bloodlines, DNA, and national and ethnic heritage. Adoptee identity, however, suggests we can “do” something about what we lack: identity, origins, family, culture, history, etc. This is one of the contradictions crucial to Korean adoptee politics: the belief in identity adoption as a

that pins us to inevitable and retroactive emptiness, forever destined to be in need, or more directly, in need of something?
means to restore lost, inauthentic, or ruptured ties and bonds, such that, one would be found, authentic, and made whole.

In other words, believing in the power of adoption as a means to recover something authentic or original. Yet, if this something is both so integral to the self but also lose-able, lose-able but also recoverable, how did we so definitively “lose” it? Or, what happened that made us so starkly switch from one to another, one, the once genuine, to the present, the one that has lost that which was genuine. If identity can be false, lost, and altogether nebulous, inaccessible, and incomplete, as Korean adoptees often express, then how do we make our identities whole again? What happens—or doesn’t happen—if identity has no origin, no ground from which it naturally grows, no static history to which it naturally belongs? Further, adoptee identity, as often depicted in our expressive works, assumes that it is possible to amend, change, add to, subtract, alter, edit, and adopt new or different or “lost” senses of the self to better establish our identities and familial connections. But of course this constructivist duality is kinship treason: “true/authentic/real” kinship presents itself as impenetrably rooted (pun intended) in popular belief in the matters of kinship: blood, DNA, and biology—or, that which cannot possibly be simply adopted. The assumed “naturality” of genetic factors and blood, for instance, strains to convince that they generate necessarily aligned bonds, connections, degrees of closeness, and identities. Nonadoptee identity is assumed to arise naturally but adoptee identity implies a belonging and a family making that occurs in multiply varied ways as well as implicates identity as hardly natural. Nature is to nonadoptee identity as culture is to
adoptee identity. Adoptee criteria of belonging are social and adaptive and thus oppose the “natural” nonadoptee criteria of belonging. 

A lot of Korean adoptee artwork, expressive practices, and activities of self-narration prompt questions about identity and how satisfied we can ever be with such a notion. More intriguingly, though, are the ways Korean adoptees have pushed beyond these promptings and questions by launching critical attacks on the naturalness of identity. As this article partly explores, the versatility of identity language alone reveals the adoptive function at the heart of identity. Identity is not merely the sum of natural and inevitable categories and taxonomies of origin and belonging (a summing and/or summation of nouns and objects). Rather, identity is substitutive and additive, adjectival and supplementary. Another way to articulate this change (highlighted in Korean adoptee inquiry) is to note the replacing of identity as descriptively either this or that with the infinitely additive and supplemental seriality of identity as descriptively this and that and then and now and in the future and here and there, and so on. This view questions the facile use of terms like “history,” “biology,” “ethnicity,” “culture,” and “heritage,” and often synonymously with “identity” itself.

Too often adoption critics accept these terms as prepolitical and presocial, however, when they are no such thing and not exempt from the productions of their own appearance, the particularities of their own histories, etymological, taxonomical, cultural. 

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8 I wish here to contrast the normative (nonadoptee) kinship/adoptive (adoptee) kinship binary with Butler’s treatment of the sex/gender binary that, as discursive formations, act “as a naturalized foundation for the nature/culture distinction and the strategies of domination that the distinction supports” (37). See Butler, Gender Trouble.
For instance, Kim writes, “Transnational Korean adoptees have historical, biological, and ethnic connections to their country of birth, yet for many of them those connections are abstracted from their everyday lives …” But of course, the abstraction has already happened, here, since “historical,” “biological,” and “ethnic,” cannot be justified by their denotation alone.9 In this essay, I interrogate some thematic grounds (and language) from which this transnational and transracial adoptee terrain of identity has been constructed. I also argue for a more radical approach to articulating Korean adoptee identity that resists outright genetic and biological essentialisms, conflations of history, origins, narration, and identity, and well-accepted premises of all that which defines and orients identity. This approach refutes the view that transnational and transracial and Korean adoptee identity are forever psychically troubled or, in a sense, diseased, and in such a formidable ontological fashion that the only cure can be found in cultural origins, biological attachments or bonds, and other popular and dominant norms of kinship.

9 I do not contest these connections; I am not saying we do not have historical, biological, and ethnic connections to Korea and other places. I do, however, wish to question the appearance—and often, absence—of these connections we automatically “have” as primordial. I also ask, what, precisely, are these connections that for Korean adoptees are not already abstracted and primarily felt in their absence? It is my contention that normative notions of kinship and belonging and identity are not only intimately wrapped up with one another in one incestuous intertwining of signs but also that, through citations of that which it is not (adoptive or other kinds of kinship), normative kinship language therefore cites, circulates, transmits, contaminates, and indexes via the absence of that which is cited (Korean adoptees’ relationship to “history,” for example, appears in the negative, as in, “we do not have history or access to it” and as in, we do not, then, “know where we come from”).
Disorienting Identity

I.

I will examine language from Jane Jeong Trenka’s two memoirs, *The Language of Blood* and *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee’s return to Korea*, to show how Trenka’s adoptee identity is caught within disorienting and contradictory narratives of kinship and self.\(^\text{10}\) I argue that Trenka’s self-proclaimed “angry adoptee narrative” functions more than a direct expression of loss, lack, and alienation. Trenka’s adoptee figure articulates an adoptee identity that oscillates between that which is supposed to, or normally would, provide the sense of filial, national, cultural, and *historical* belonging and that which she has been forced to make, fashion, and *adopt*, as an adoptee.\(^\text{11}\) Trenka’s memoirs reveal an adoptee identity laden with ethical potentiality rather than inevitable otherness. Further, it is our otherness that has given rise to potential radicalization, a de-tethering of the guywires and anchors of bloodlines, reproducing citizens, heteronormativity, heteronationalism, and patriarchy that have heretofore defined, stabilized, and governed heteronormative identity.

I suggest that by engaging in reparative reading, a notion Eve Sedgwick develops around Melanie Klein’s concept of “positions” (namely, the *nonnormative positions* of the ego, the schizoid or paranoid position and the depressive position) one finds in


Trenka a more nuanced Korean adoptee identity. This identity is born from and in contradiction, or, disorientation, and yet, still, also, in love, which Klein suggests, is another name for the reparative process. Sedgwick appreciates Klein’s positions for the “flexible to-and-fro movement implicit” in them as well as their capacity for a kind of reading (in this case, of Korean adoptee identity) that moves away from a “hermeneutics of suspicion” and instead towards asking “how … is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?”

How might kinship be performative or a “performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be”? How might Korean adoptees perform kinship differently than nonadoptees? Do nonadoptees need to perform kinship in the ways adoptees need to? Are we all on the same, equal playing field? Does adoptee performance parodize the notion of a natural kinship, like drag performance parodizes the notion of a natural gender? In this sense, does adoptee performance betray the imitative nature of all kinship? According to Butler: “[I]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.”

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13 Butler writes, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Butler, *Gender*.

14 Butler, *Gender (Ann.)*, 137-8. Butler warns, however, that “parody by itself is not subversive … [t]he task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that
kinship performativity fail the Korean adoptee political context? Do Trenka’s memoirs perform and parodize that which ostensibly “speaks” kinship? Does Trenka poke and provoke the potentiality of reading adoptee texts through notions of the performative and the citational? For one, Trenka negotiates between contradictive and opposing elements of belonging—criteria, conditions and preconditions, possibilities, elements themselves—as she navigates languages of kinship that ultimately collapse under nonnormative citational contexts. How are ontological norms of identity and kinship deployed discursively? How are they, if at all, subverted, transgressed, or resisted by adoptee narratives like Trenka’s, whose encountering of normative languages of kinship (and identity) from places (and temporalities) of psychic, figurative, and literal disorientation complicate mimetic, ghostly, or appropriated destinies? How might we more reparatively read such exemplary transnational and transracial adoptee texts as those in Trenka’s formidable canon? Do Trenka’s texts succeed in restoring her narrative sense of self? Whether they should be determined to do so is not, however, the point; instead, as technologies of the self and of identity construction, how does self-love happen?

II.

The notion of lacking a “narrative sense of self” emanates within Korean adoptee literary genres more ubiquitously than for nonadoptees. While it may be easy to assume


natural causes for this, I contend that texts like Trenka’s work to discredit notions of history and origin and identity altogether, or at least disorient them from their moors and tethers, shackles even (recall, bonds can also be imprisoning), and further disorient us from them (history, origin, identity). Like lacking history or origins, lacking a narrative sense of self for adoptees suggests that the narration lacking is doubly difficult to recover because that which usually substantiates and grounds and orients terms of identity for nonadoptees may not do so for adoptees. Trenka’s narrative sense of self develops out of the notion that she has been displaced from her origins, her “history,” and therefore robbed of “real” kinship, but also out of the notion that there can be something done, or things done, things made, to manufacture, adopt, and craft, anew, an identity formed from vastly variable and unnatural paths. These crafted identities circularly mime and parodize the idea that kinship history and origins point to anything natural. Further, it is the elision and concealment of this contradiction that lies at the heart of Korean adoptee identity. Certainly, without the idea that we are grossly “other,” blood kinship wouldn’t be legible as such.

Nonadoptees are also vulnerable to lack and absence: nonadoptees lack the Korean adoptee set of lacks and absences (genetic ties, history, culture, origins, etc). Nonadoptees lack the lacks adoptees have and therefore are “missing” what could be crucial elements of their identities, namely, those elements that give rise to alternative means of identity and kinship. Without these, nonadoptee identity seems incredibly limited and basic compared to adoptee identity, the latter so free and unattached to legacies of patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, capitalism, neoliberalism, imperialism,
empire and nation building, and so on. Nevertheless, adoptees often forget this freedom. If this were not the case, then we wouldn’t have cause for so much “searching.”

III.

Forms of Korean adoptee autobiographical writing can seem multiply devoted to the “search narrative” in that “search” refers to searching for identity, but also for “culture,” “history,” the biogenetically related mother, father, and family, and for a narrative sense of self. Further, the search narrative can indicate a searching for narratives as well as a narrative that features searching. While the search narrative risks privileging blood, biology, genetic essentialism, nationalisms, and origins as premier tenets of identity, more significant are the adoptive ways this project of reclamation goes about its business. This point emphasizes the contradiction within the adoptee “search narrative” and “desire for reunion.” While the adoptee seeks to reclaim a “real” kinship that is viewed in contradistinction to an “adoptive” kinship, the adoptee must also forget or ignore the fact that it is the technicity or the functionality of adoption, the need for it, that allows for and indeed generates and cements bonds and connections between subjects and groups and communities and families and means of belonging generally.

Technologies of adoption, then, are the means by which kinship, both normative/genetic and adoptive, circulate, cite, cathect, codify, and index what it means to kinship. Secretly, adoption is the “blood” everyone believes in: that which might bind, connect, and unite one another prior to the social, to language, to citation, to politics; indeed, the capacity for adoption as a means to identity, its technology, its use, may yet
be another sign for “love,” which would serve as a more potent common denominator of kinship than blood or biology or genealogy. Thus, my readings of Trenka’s memoirs loosely articulate the following roadmap: adoption, despite its position as other to normative kinship, is foundational to it and justifies its primacy through elisions of this fact; adoption is also another word for love, or, the capacity to take on, to integrate, and to incorporate into one’s own life and responsibility and care, another being, entity, or life; adoption is the absolute common denominator, the background, the technical kinship function par excellence able to bestow the capacity for incorporation, identification, and recognition; yet, adoption, in this sense, historically, is also, then, it must be noted, initiated and constituted in contradictions of belonging. Beyond the victim who speaks traumatic truth, the transnational and transracial adoptee particularly incites and marks a provocative disorientation via our being dis-oriented, or, in this instance, removed from “the orient.” We implicate the violent histories of nation building and practices of containment while not being wholly defined by them; disorientations and their manifestation then embed themselves lovingly against all forms of potential criteria for connection, bonds, and belonging, both filial and affiliative. Love is also Klein’s word for the possibility of reparation; love, it seems, may actually be the fascia of kinship, not blood.

IV.

Meanwhile, Sara K. Dorow points to other contradictions within the kinship binary of original kinship versus adoptive/substitutive kinship. Dorow argues that
practices of transnational adoption and particularly those involving Asian countries (primarily Korea and China) “pose impossible contradictions of belonging” that demand “a reckoning with liminality, especially at the busy intersections where internal relations of race and capital meet trans-Pacific practices of exchange.”

Troped as first lacking identity and second needing to locate it in order to know it, Trenka’s Korean adoptee figure is inaugurated in liminality, in the in-between, exiled but extant, othered in current popular normative kinship regimes but also is suggesting radical implications for identity, at large. Mirroring this theme, Korean adoptee memoir as a genre also seems hard to categorize, hard to place. To what genre (traditional autobiography, testimony, trauma) does it properly belong? Through which critical frame (kinship studies, minority discourse, queer studies, diaspora studies, legal studies) should it be viewed?

Debates about this literature cross psychotherapeutic, sociological, literary, historical, academic, theoretical, and popular discourses. In other words, the resistance of Korean adoptee literature to categorization mimics the prominent tropes of ambiguity of belonging and liminality in the genre.


17 To pose this point in parallel by inquiring into how the transnational adoptee subject eludes similarly easy categorization, David Eng asks “Is the transnational adoptee subject an immigrant? Is she… an Asian American? Even more, is her adoptive family Asian American? How is the ‘otherness’ of the transnational adoptee absorbed into the intimate space of the familial? And how are international and group histories of gender, race, poverty, and nation managed or erased within the ‘privatized’ sphere of the domestic?” See David Eng, The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010, p. 94.
While *Fugitive Visions* and *The Language of Blood* continue to serve adoptee communities as popular self-representative narrative models of the transnational adoptee predicament, they may both mimic and complicate problematics of the doubly alienated self as well as discourses of trauma, victimization, and silencing. As Wendy Brown notes, sometimes the stories with the greatest amount of suffering get too easily canonized (and are much more likely to get published), which risks a “norm-making process in traditions of breaking silence” that disadvantage others whose stories may be similar but not the same or “the very persons these traditions mean to empower.”

Korean adoptee autobiographical writing may also, however, while colluding with the traditional mode of autobiography as self-discovery and path to the truth of the self, be read similarly to how Doris Sommer reads Latin American women’s testimonios that challenge the traditional autobiographical subject as singular, historically privileged, and usually white, male, straight, and classed, by adopting an “autobiographical pose” in order to speak a plural subject. Such writing can be a “medium of resistance and counterdiscourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography.”

Drawing on Butler’s notion of gender performativity, Smith argues that the autobiographical subject is primed for strategic potential as she finds herself “on multiple

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stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity … [however,] these multiple calls never align perfectly[;] [r]ather they create spaces or gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits and their transgressions.”

It might follow, then, that some texts accomplish both “a reiteration of a norm or set of norms” and an embedded critique of the myriad social forces and discourses that inform the citational quality of language that in various ways recognizes, hails, and constructs subjects. For Smith,

The history of an autobiographical subject is the history of recitations of the self. But if the self does not exist prior to its recitations then autobiographical storytelling is a recitation of a recitation. Ultimately … the life as lived experientially is itself performative. The living of a life becomes the effect of the life as narrated.

Identity (or, for this context, bodies who write) and language (or, here, written citations that materialize bodies) seem entangled sites in which to explore the relationship between bodies and language that both reiterate and critique social norms that serve to naturalize personhood.

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20 Ibid., 110. See also Butler, Gender: “The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment” (145).

21 Butler, Bodies, xxi.


23 Butler asks in Bodies, xii, “What are the constraints by which bodies are materialized as ‘sexed,’ and how are we to understand the ‘matter’ of sex, and of bodies more generally, as the repeated and violent circumscription of cultural intelligibility?”
Ultimately, Trenka’s adoptee identity reveals a kind (or kinds) of disorientation, naturally consequent to what Dorow calls “impossible contradictions of belonging” manifest in transnational and transracial adoption and adoptee identity. Specifically, Dorow articulates three kinds of impossible contradictions of belonging: the “uneasy relationship between commodification and care,” the “demands of dislocation and relocation,” and “fixed and flexible racialized imaginaries,” and all three highlight “excruciating ruptures” that render null easy access to senses of belonging and identity.

What I call transnational and transracial adoptee disorientation is as much about ontology as psychical materialities of trauma and loss. I focus particularly on the kinds of disorientation that articulate states of being under identificatory contradiction and failure. Yet, disorientation is not negative; it names a radical potential for adoptee identity, not only because it must first reject the norms of identity from which it has formed. Adoptee identity is a failure of normative identity for the better.

Disorientation, further, represents the desire for a departure from that which currently orients identity: blood, genetic essentialism and privilege, origins, historical certainty. Prompted and notarized by the emergence of the Korean transnational adoptee,  

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25 Dorow, 17, 19, 21.
this emergent, different-in-kind critique of identity is emblematized both by the themes of Trenka’s memoirs, the literal, physical, emotional, psychical, figurative and linguistic disorientations of Korean adoptee identity, as well as its tacit commentary on and parodizing of normative kinship bonds. Transnational and transracial adoption identities, as in the case of Trenka, can reveal the failure of all orientation: there is no presocial orientation; this (hetero)normative orientation only poses as nature and as biology. To be clear, this ontological prepositioning postures as the stuff of origins, of “personal truth,” and of identity. Jacqueline Stevens’s Reproducing the State robustly explores reasons for this kinship binary and the kinship laws and language that make her seriously question why, “[a]lthough kinship forms vary across time and place, many people still believe that there is something natural about kinship.”

V.

The language Trenka uses to articulate Korean adoptee identity and the always already self-critique of “making oneself” (which is ubiquitous in Korean adoptee memoir) mark, in various ways, what Derrida calls “the essential iterability of [a] sign.” As Sara Salih describes, “all signs may be placed between quotation marks (‘sex,’ ‘race’), cited, grafted, and reiterated in ways that do not conform to their speaker’s or writer’s


original intentions … the possibility of failure is intrinsic and necessary to the sign, indeed it is *constitutive* of the sign.” While to some degree this gives Butler hope for “contentious practices of ‘queerness,’” what is exciting for me as a Korean adoptee are also contentious practices of adopteeness and adoptiveness that at once embody failure, simulacra, recitation, and reterritorialization. Trenka’s adoptee identity grafts kinship performatives onto new contexts and thus plays with the citationality and originary failure of all kinship performatives, those with blood coursing through their veins! Adoptee identity may be at once a critique of identity; it questions how to arrive at one, claim one, and know the one claimed is authentic and true, and how to know whether what one refers to in order to define itself is “right.” Adoptee identity may question the notion of identity as static, singular, univocal, or temporally consistent, even while, at the same time, many of us work toward a future wherein Korean adoptees are a relic of the past. Lastly, even though Korean adoptees may feel lost and robbed of identity, it is philosophically impossible to justify that claim (even if adoptees claim no identity or false identities, it still can be said that we have identities that feel like none or the wrong ones).

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29 This is similar to the “lucid dreaming” problem: one may have the complete feeling and sensation of control and volition in a dream, but there is also the possibility that the dream itself is creating, pre-awareness of it, the illusion of lucidity.
The difficulty here is that prevailing tropes risk taking over the reality of individuals’ multiplicity. Not all Korean adoptees are critics, artists, theorists, writers, activists, involved in the adoptee community, identify as Korean adoptee or adoptee, at all. If anything, and perhaps contradictorily, our community at times does seem to speak as one voice, from one perspective, with the contradiction coming from “our” one voice versus the many varied, nuanced, undecided and undecidable, complicated, confusing positions, beliefs, stances, approaches, feelings, and beliefs about ourselves as adoptees, as not adoptees, as different, as similar, as victimized, as saved, as assimilated, as resistant, as aware and engaged, as neither.

Perhaps most significantly adoptee identity disrupts any notion of a priori identity. In other words, if we are to take anything from “our perspectives” as adoptees, then we can generally agree that our cultural productions and artistic expressions of being Asian American transnational and transracial adoptees are, as Jodi Kim puts it, not only “heretofore [a] largely untapped source of knowledge,” but also particularly keen on disrupting extant paradigms of belonging, like family, kinship, ethnicity, nationality, and so on, which is to say, in a word, identity. The means to identity—identification—is a process that Stuart Hall suggests, “entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of ‘frontier-effects.’ It requires what is left outside,

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its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process.’”31 Adoptee identity also seems particularly positioned as collective, or what Anthony Appiah calls scripts of identity and personhood: “Collective identities provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories … [Collective identities] structure possible narratives of the individual self.”32 Collective identities, however, may also risk ill effects. Mark C. Jerng suggests:

> These works, and more generally this project to hear transracial adoptees tell their stories, raise several issues regarding the relationship between narrativity and what it means to be recognized. For in structuring ‘possible narratives of the individual self,’ these scripts may preclude other possible narratives and thus limit the forms by which the transracial adoptee becomes recognizable. The idea that we use collective scripts in order to fit into wider stories presumes that ‘narrative gives us the life, or that life takes place in narrative form’ [from Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself.] … But this model acts as if telling our story is a simple self-revelatory act, as in the formulation above ‘to tell their stories in their own words.’”33

VI.

Yet, for adoptee identity, amidst this ubiquitous trope of contradiction, there is a kind of doubling, a kind of excess, that appears, here and elsewhere that does special work. While the notion of collective identities applies generally to identity formation,

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adoptee identity explicitly and openly complicates normative frameworks and paradigms and parameters of identity and charges them as being contradictive and inaccessible to adoptee identity and adoptees. Adoptee identity then not only describes and highlights contradictions within these schemas and regimes, but also necessarily and critically represents the contradiction of identity itself. Trenka, for instance, registers a plurality of subjects but also the notion of the subject as plural in itself; after all, Trenka is always at least two identities, one American and one “halfway around the world … someone else.”

Trenka’s identities (“Jeong, Kyong-Ah. Or Kyong-Ah Jeong? Jane Marie Brauer. Jane Marie Trenka. Jane Brauer Trenka. Jane Kyong-Ah Jeong Brauer-Trenka”) can also sometimes merge into one (“I finally choose Jane Jeong Trenka: one name from each family”). Trenka emphasizes the plurality of identity and its concomitant contradictions by suggesting that her many names, which in this instance function as substitutes for her many identities, reveal not only different identities within one identity but also this plural identity as variably signifying in different contexts, like geographical place (“halfway around the world”).

Like the butterflies, to which Trenka compares herself and other adoptees “not informed of their own impossibility or frailty,” her voice, which is “the voice of millions of butterflies,” articulates a plural subject designed for metamorphosis. Trenka

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34 Trenka, The Language, 14.

35 Ibid., 208.

36 Ibid., 220-1.
appreciates butterflies for the fact that they migrate: “Species that migrate travel back and forth between two different places. They have two homes,” also noting that “[n]o one knows how they find their way,” which implies that they do, at least, find their way.\textsuperscript{37} Noticeably, in addition, is Trenka’s figuring of adoptees as \textit{already} butterflies and not caterpillars, the latter presumed to be that which is \textit{destined for change}. This suggests that Korean adoptees have already metamorphosed, perhaps via adoption, and it is our returns or migrations to Korea that will complete our life cycle. However, Trenka reminds us that butterflies travel back \textit{and forth} and further stresses the figurative “opening and closing of wings” as this back and forth, as if to imply that her Korean adoptee is always flying or “floating.” Further, our wings do not simply represent tools whose primary purpose is to “get us home” or some other destination. Our wings, rather, are \textit{our} wings, part of our construction, having evolved this way to survive and not to make it simply from one place to another, full stop.\textsuperscript{38}

Butterflies are also often masters of camouflage and mimicry, both of which many Korean adoptees like Trenka are well versed in, and aposematism, which refers to a family of antipredator adaptations in which warning and advertising signals increase survivability. Of these, primarily “warning coloration” and sound warnings may register particularly for Korean adoptees and transnational and transracial adoptees in that these aposematic signals reflect their poly identities in various material ways. For many Korean

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 34. Additionally, while at a market in Korea with her biogenetic mother and sister, Trenka tries on \textit{hanboks}, to which her family likens to butterflies (115).

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 221.
adoptees who grew up with white parents in white families and communities, their racial difference serves as a constant “warning coloration” for potential threats. Likewise, for many Korean adoptees visiting Korea for the first time, their difference is marked by not knowing the Korean language (or if they do, they feel the threat of being seen through, or heard through). The warnings embodied by adoptees function as another inevitable and unavoidable, which is to suggest, natural, prerequisite for Korean adoptee lived experience. I choose to read Trenka’s invoking of butterflies as not a simple antiquated citation of the ongoing eroticization of Asian American and Asian women as delicate butterflies but rather as a citation that ventures into new semiotic territories. Trenka’s “butterflies,” then, claim and incite a stronger description and definition of identity as plural not only through stratifying it but also through the gesture itself of associating Korean adoptees metaphorically with an insect that is particularly polymorphic (all polymorphism in zoology and biology has a genetic basis), that at once presents a different paradigm of organic being, biological (singular) but also that which is poly in nature (having different morphs or forms).

Korean adoptee identity—our collective identity as Korean adoptees or transnational and transracial adoptees—can instigate a radical rejection of normative means to identity. Within this space (and time), within what Teresa de Lauretis calls the space of disidentification, the Korean adoptee autobiographical subject, “[t]hrough tactical dis/identifications … adjusts, redeploy, resists, [and] transforms discourses of
autobiographical identity.”³⁹ Smith explicates this space as one of feminist consciousness, whose unconscious might be understood as the repository of all the experiences and desires that cannot be identified with the symbolic realm and its laws of citationality, those calls to take up normative subject positions … The unconscious thus becomes the repository of surplus, of excess, of unbidden and forbidden performativity … not speakable, not intelligible, not credible, the unconscious is an interiority of disidentifications nested inside the interiority of the identifying subject, an effect of an effect.⁴⁰

I suggest here that the Korean adoptee identity of disorientation, or identity in disorientation, has necessarily formed from within disidentifications. My critique focuses less on what adoptee identity is and more on what adoptee identity does and the preconditions that precede the emergence of transnational/transracial adoptee identity and its futural trajectories of potential. I also explore how adoptee identity articulates an identity of no identity, an anti-identity, or at least, at first, adopts an anti-identity stance to inaugurate its self-narration. This perhaps marks the first phase of contradiction, the outside of the symbolic realm.

Disoriented Korean adoptee identity marks the effects and affects of identity built from disidentificatory spaces and contradictions of belonging. Indeed, implicit in the general notion of identity is a contradiction, in that in order to define the self—or allow the emergence of a self to be defined and claimed—one looks to scripts of personhood and belonging, collective identities, communities, and groups for recognition. This is the

³⁹ Smith, 111.

contradiction in a nutshell: contradicting the inherently contradictive notion of identity but not ending up in mere affirmation or a double negative. While this contradiction presents no immediate or practical problem, adoptee identity begins the audit. Any characterization of adoptee identity must include this very present and open challenge to identity itself, the possibility of its truth, speakability, stability, and reality.

**Origins**

As Korean adoptees, we are extremely certain of this “uncertainty of origins.” Adoptees cannot easily claim, or I might suggest, here, *adopt*, a history of our own, so it seems; we *have no histories* or have lost them and/or have been violently removed from them and our families, or what *should have been* our families. Adoptees then embody notions of dispossession, but according to Butler, everyone does when giving an account of oneself. Certainly, these kinds of “dispossession[s] in language” strike added valences for adoptees and notions of adoptee identity, though. For instance, arguing against the idea that she can easily possess her own origin, Butler suggests that the notion of one’s origin, or of presumably a *nonadoptive’s origin*, is already irrecoverable:

> When the ‘I’ seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the ‘I’ seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist. The reason for this is that the ‘I’ has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or a set of relations—to a set of norms … The ‘I’ is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence.⁴¹

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These problematics of possession, ownership, and having personal history highlight another contradiction prompted by adoptee identity in that “adoptee identity” also implies the ability or capacity to adopt an identity, which is antithetical to how identity is treated as something inherent, organic, natural, and true, or in other words, not adoptable.

Butler further writes: “I can tell the story of my origin and I can even tell it again and again, in several ways. But the story of my origin I tell is not one for which I am accountable, and it cannot establish my accountability.” Of course for adoptees, the stories of our origins or lack thereof indeed feature prominently insofar as they pose as a kind of originary reason for being, or in other words, the reason for the account, the narrative, in the first place. We already inquire about the ways in which our narratives of lost histories actually and excessively speak the impossibility of adoptee identity. Even the phrase “adoptee identity” hides a contradiction: “adoptee” modifies “identity,” which, in any final account, can include the category of “adoptee,” but nevertheless signifies not only a different kind of identity by degree, but a difference in kind, meaning a different kind of identity altogether. In other words, “adoptee identity” or “adopted identity” is a contradiction in terms: if identity is so essential, adoption would not be possible nor legible as a concept. And yet, it is, evidently. Amidst the rolling seas of difference, the more one identifies, the more one moves away from being different and toward being like others, a move that morphs being like something or someone into being that something or someone (“I am like this or that” into “I am this or that”). Yet this metaphysical paradigm might be seen as largely reductive; yet, further, there may simply be no escaping the

42 Ibid., 37.
metaphysical trap of Heidegger’s Dasein or Derrida’s trace. In many ways, “adoption” is more closely related to these two notions under erasure (sous rature) than “kinship.” Indeed, as Derrida argued, signs or language are the infinite play of identity and difference, whose presence is always already “not there” and whose definition is always “not that.” “Adoptee identity” then is a self-critique of identity. Because “adoptive” implies adopting or a taking on of identity or identity that has been adopted, the stability of identity is seriously provoked. “Adoptee identity” works as an inquest into the nature of identity itself, which, according to adoptee identity, is built from instable referents and contradictory logics. To sum, adoptee identity marks the contradictive uncertain foundations of identity—in that identity itself is a contradiction—as well as marks the contradictive elements seemingly inherent in adoptee identity itself, which is to mark a contradiction within a contradiction.

Butler’s words about (presumably) nonadoptive origins and the “constitutive incommensurability” of self-narration take on extra or excessive meaning for transnational and transracial adoptees. Speaking about the possibility of her giving an account of her own narrative, Butler writes “my narrative begins in media res, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story possible in language. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know.”43 She further rejects the notion that this annihilates the subject and offers instead that certain practices of recognition and certain breakdowns in the practice of

43 Ibid., 39.
recognition mark “site[s] of rupture within the horizon of normativity and implicitly call
for the institution of new norms, putting into question the givenness of the prevailing
normative horizon. The normative horizon within which I see the other or, indeed, within
which the other sees and listens and knows and recognizes is also subject to a critical
opening.” 44 My point here is that adoptee identity, or adoptee identity inquiry, seems
uniquely situated within Butler’s critique, as the themes of “our” literature specifically
stress the lack of a self or a true self, the trauma caused by being adopted, the inability to
access our “origins,” “history,” or “heritage”—all at times metonymically figured in our
lack of access to our birth records and information about our biogenetic kin—and the idea
that our identity and identities have been hijacked and rendered ultimately distant from
and unattainable to us.

Vincent Cheng argues that there is a consensus in adoption policies (and I would
add adoption criticism and general popular opinion as well) that the “adopted baby’s
cultural roots and heritage … are a vital and functional key to the child’s innate identity
and need to be cultivated at great pains. [Adoptive] parents, no less than adoptees who
expect to find their identity from their birth records, share in and participate in the need to
believe in an essential and authentic identity handed down by one’s cultural, racial,
ethnic, or national ‘heritage.’” But Jerng points out that this incorporation of the child’s
cultural heritage, however, “reifies] cultural origin as a fetish object that supposedly

44 Ibid., 24.
holds the key to one’s life meaning or arc.” He disagrees with Erica Haimes’s assertion (in “Now I know who I really am”) that the “importance of having a biography cannot be overstated … issues of identity in adoption have more to do with constructing a narratable self than with crisis.” Jerng argues that Haimes ends up reproducing the norms of genetic or biological essentialism. For Jerng, Korean adoptee texts that do not reinforce norms of personhood would be texts that instead “outline different modes of personhood built on dependence on the world … [and] depict the forms and logics of individuality when nation and race as forms of territorialization cease to provide representations of the self.”

I would go further however, and suggest that I, while claiming an identity of Korean adoptee, transnationally and transracially adopted at six months old, might find, that I see absolutely no need for a narrative sense of self at all, and yet I know “who I am” and “where I come from” despite lacking knowledge of my birth parents or birth culture. A “necessary account of my origins, life, birth, adoption, etc.” is, for me, entirely superfluous for my sense of self and identity. I feel no need whatsoever to return to that which is assumed to be mine from before I could fully speak. Nor do I feel that I have no identity or history or origin or that I am lacking them or authentic versions of them. On the contrary, I fully recognize my origins and history and adoption and biogenetically related parents and adoptive parents and my Asianness and my Americanness and my


46 Jerng, 149.
Koreanness, and at the same time I also resist the description of being anti-adoption or pro-adoption as the situation is clearly much more complicated than this bifurcation suggests. My identity is that which recognizes the tensions between and amidst all of the above. My identity is that which at times feels like not one or a wrong one, but this does not mean I genuinely have no identity or sense of self nor does it mean that I must find these in or from or via Korea, my birth mother, or self-narration. Indeed, I resist altogether the current algorithms of transnational and transracial adoptee politics that reduce this kind of complexity to being either simply assimilated and conformed or properly resistant and “for the cause.”

I argue that all of the above, all our inquiry, activism, criticism, theorizing, art, communities, families and communities—filial, affiliative, associative—our stories, histories, and narratives—abstract, embodied, constructed, metaphorized, literalized—all of it, constitute or at least must be constitutive of any notion of Korean adoptee identity. Any attempt to isolate (and speak) true sources of knowledge of the self is necessarily partly constitutive of the emergence of it and that in turn has a recursive impact on culture and history. In these ways, Korean adoptee identity threatens to destabilize norms of identity, kinship, and belonging. Our emergence accents contradictions within current postmodern notions of identity, kinship, and belonging. Our emergence accents possession/dispossession, innate identity/adoptive or adopted identity, substitution and surrogacy/originality, origins and history/incommensurability of (speaking) the past—reveal a particular landscape for critical analysis. Our predicaments prompt the idea (incite it,
critique it, both reify and reject it) that the triangulated logic of identity merges pasts (history, abstract referent) and selves (bodies, material referent) in order to produce identity. The trauma and victimization featured in many Korean adoptee texts like Trenka’s may falsely provide incontrovertible defense and justification for the essentializing of cultural origins, and I might add, also for the essentializing, dissemination, and ongoing upkeep of blood or DNA. Essentializing cultural and biological origins inevitably supports the uncritical establishment of the beliefs that “biological” or “birth” or biogenetically related parents are both naturally better suited to be a child’s parents and that a child should be raised by genetically related kin over any other potential parent or caregiver precisely because of the nature of their relation (genetic). Charlotte Witt strikes at this kind of problem via demystifying “family resemblances” as metonymical stand-ins for biological familial homogeneity, a unity that confers its own solidarity, or in a word, an identity:

Family resemblances are part of a family’s mythology, and they serve various purposes: bonding family members, explaining behavior, assigning blame. Family resemblances attribute relational properties to individual family members … Family resemblances are relational properties which are biological/social hybrids; they exist only as part of a family mythology and hence are social, but the myth tells a story of genetic inheritance, and hence they are biological.47

Stevens also puts pressure on a pre-politicized, pre-social “family resemblance” that has served as the grounding referent and explanation for why metonymical discursive proximities function and work as they do, buoyed by the weight of their own associative

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milieu. Further, Stevens evokes what Michael Warner calls “repro culture”—the “set of institutions and narratives through which your life is understood to gain meaning by its insertion in generational transmission”—suggesting that it “offers an individual a past and future via intergenerational families” and enmeshes various signs, “birth,” “family,” “nation,” for instance, in semiotic association with each other: “Territorial and descent criteria for citizenship both depend on invocations of birth [and] [t]he birth rule for membership in a political society also holds for affiliations of nation, ethnicity, and race.”

Stevens’s full analysis is incredibly instructive for my purposes in that it is from this premise, and not that of genetic essentialism—that any future adoptee politics, including transnational, transracial, and Korean adoptee discourses, or any “politics of the family,” including queer disruptions, interrogations, and disturbances of heteronormativity, might begin. In this sense, any project invested in queering “the


49 Stevens, Reproducing. “Wittgenstein is suggesting that there is something like an essential basis to the associations we notice, a grounding similar to that which allows us to recognize the commonalities of traits within families. At the same time that Wittgenstein challenges the possibility of any definitional certainty in the use of words for things—‘Can you give the boundary? No.’—he reaffirms an ontological certainty about the family, a clarity without which his exercise is impossible. Wittgenstein’s point about the indeterminacy depends on a metaphor that invokes at least plausible certainty. We have to have some notion that ‘family’ means those who are naturally and visibly related in the ways Wittgenstein lists in order for the metaphor to work, in order to imagine that there is an underlying ‘belonging’ or ‘togetherness’ among some things. Of course Wittgenstein does not say we need to pick out exactly where the family ends. It may include third cousins or it may not, or some children may be difficult to recognize as such, since they may not resemble their parents. Still, the familial resemblance metaphor
family”—or the nation, history, and origins—might begin with Stevens’s attack on the “nature” of, or natural, family and on the certainty of any pre-political or pre-social constitution of it. To do so, one declares from the outset that debunking the natures of family and origins works to undermine heteronormative and homonormative configurations and determinations of identity and selfhood that have largely heretofore relied heavily on categories of identification and belonging that are yet still myths. Primarily among these myths are blood and its ancillary synechdoche, family resemblance, which might include ideas of nation, race, ethnicity, and history. Myths of blood and resemblance dominate popular belief about family and identity. Stevens reminds us also that the “virtue of the semiotics of things and practices associated with the state form,” suggests that

Like the various things that may or may not be associated with the same word, words themselves can be represented by relative discursive proximities … each word simultaneously stringing together a certain set

depends on the idea that families betray the kinds of ‘overlap and criss-cross’ among relatives that appear among ‘related things’ … if what counts as the possibility of family does not emerge from some pre-existing array of genetically related individuals whose obvious phenotypical differences correspond with innate genotypical ones, then the source of the concept of the family must lie elsewhere, must depend on a particular diachronic discourse about ‘intergenerationality,’ for instance, and on ideas about beginnings and endings” (19-20). See also Wittgenstein, remark 68. Stevens further suggests that “Metonymic associations among certain affiliations such as family, nation, and race invite generalization about the human psyche. Each of the forms of association are often presented as merely exemplary of some primordial dark side of the human condition … [yet] what amounts to semilogies of abstract group membership … do not help us to understand the particular semiotics of ‘nation,’ as opposed to ‘family’ or ‘race.’ Insofar as each of these is taken as exemplary of underlying psychological or other structural (dis)orders, sometimes lost in such analyses of discourse is the particularity of each manifestation of difference.” Stevens, Reproducing, 16-7.
of meanings that gain their particularities through their associations in this interweaving.”50

We might also imagine refuting the notion of family resemblance and blood as a way to move away from rooted psychoanalytic paradigms that render the adoptee as forever destined to live in fantasy. For Jerng, Florence Clothier’s 1943 essay, “The Psychology of the Adopted Child,” efficiently sums up this psychoanalytic paradigm:

Every adopted child, at some point in his development, has been deprived of this primitive relationship with his mother. This trauma and the severing of the individual from this racial antecedents lie at the core of what is peculiar to the psychology of the adopted child. The adopted child presents all the complications in social and emotional development seen in the own child. But the ego of the adopted child, in addition to all the normal demands made upon it, is called upon to compensate for the wound left by the loss of the biological mother. Later on this appears as an unknown void, separating the adopted child from his fellows whose blood ties bind them to the past as well as to the future.51

Jerng suggests that “the priority of one’s biological and national origin in adoption depend on psychoanalytic pathologizations of the adoptee as living in fantasy,” and when this coalesces with what he calls the “right to identity,” a prerogative that developed around adoptee rights discourse in the 1970s, the result is problematic. Jerng argues that while the psychoanalytic paradigm and right to identity are “powerful forms for gaining visibility for the psychic realities and social status of adoptees, they have played equally

50 Stevens, Reproducing, 44, 18.

strong roles in normalizing and naturalizing the transnational adoptee within racial, national, and familial logics.\textsuperscript{52}

Trenka’s \textit{The Language of Blood}, however, disrupts, disorients, and deterritorializes logics of belonging. While Trenka’s is a story of alienation replete with accounts of difficulty growing up Asian American in a small white town in Minnesota, hers is also a story of the journey toward self-care and love. Most significantly, Trenka’s positioning, which is to say repositioning, “floats” constantly amidst scripts of identification that for nonadoptees bestow general ontological senses of being situated, oriented, and of and from somewhere and someone (or some group), and therefore, it is assumed, ergo, identities, as they ground themselves in these criteria. In other words, “the language of blood” points to the criterion of groundedness (whose opposition to Trenka’s “floating” renders her identity unmoored, exiled) via genetic ties, but for Korean adoptees like Trenka, genetic ties are “absent” (which is also not to suggest that “genetic ties” actually means anything). The Korean adoptee autobiographical genres that have proliferated since the 1980s prominently feature themes focused on various consequences of not “having” genetic ties, literature Trenka potently helped build. The position of the adoptee, here, demands that “the language of blood” signifies differently, additionally, substitutionally. Yet from this nonadoptee position, this “language of blood” is largely inconsequential unless explicitly prompted by an ad hoc and random interest in heritage, genealogy, and “family trees.” For nonadoptees, it is either inconsequential or a temporary interest in “where one comes from.” Trenka’s memoirs capture a tendency

\textsuperscript{52} Jerng, 130.
among adoptees to give blood the power of “nature” and declare it the organic stuff of connection, presociopolitical status, the essence of essence(s). The language of blood becomes (as it was always) a performance and citation of an idea made true via naturalization. Ironic, here for adoptee contexts, is the promotion of the exploring of the language of blood, the making of it as a thing, a need, whereas, without adoption it would not have such circulation, meaning, and gravity.

Without Trenka’s initial ontological difference in positioning, or orientation, the legibility of the language of blood would appear less conflicted. The orientation of identity has been built upon biological foundations, which is to say built upon notions of the biological, but identity has never had true origins. Disorientation as a theory is meant to relieve identity and kinship from their biological orientations and beliefs: from their orientation toward orientation, from all that which justifies separating ourselves from one another, a disorientation, completely. I suggest here that one kind of orienting criterion for identity is precisely kinship as biology. According to Elizabeth Freeman, “kinship is, in a sense, the alibi for biology itself … [K]inship makes bodies not only (or not even primarily) through procreation, but also through the process of gendering them male or female. It is a regulated system for making people look like they were born into anatomical sex that is actually an effect of particular modes of production and their attendant social relations.”

“longing to ‘be long,’ to endure in corporeal form over time, beyond procreation.”54 In order to do this, she suggests turning to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of practical kinship and the habitus as they articulate kinship as “the utilization of connections” as either a realization or substitution for “those uses of kinship which may be called genealogical.”55

For Bourdieu, “habitus” is a “plastic art … a mimesis, a sort of symbolic gymnastics,” the stuff of his kinship, the “shared substance” between bodies, or a “learned bodily disposition, stance, or schema.”56

Kinship Language

Before exploring further notions of disorientation, like practical kinship, I wish to highlight the various ways Trenka’s metonymic inquiries into the language of blood engender “discursive proximities” that end up working as a critique of language that has grounded and oriented identity for nonadoptees. For adoptees, the language of blood questions the virtue of (searching for) a language that adoptees have never been privy to. Attempting to capture (or locate any true or originary referent) of such kinship language ultimately reveals the mythic and metaphorical temperaments of the language of blood in


the first place. Certainly, any language of blood can only be an approximation, as all language can only be; ergo the “language of blood” actually signifies the very mythic and constructed nature of any “truths” ascribed to “blood.” In fact, as other critics have pointed out, the colloquial usage of “blood” traces back to an antiquated meaning of “blood” as “refined semen,” which underscores “blood” as a fictive construction that props up the primacy of biogenetic relatedness and heredity. The “language of blood” might read, “the language of a language,” in that, “blood” (as it is also the case with “roots,” “kinship,” “genes,” and “biology”) can only refer to the cultural language and narratives and mythologies that support it. While The Language of Blood to an extent recognizes “lost origins” that are to be located in likewise lost biogenetic relations, the text also highlights some of the ways Korean adoptee discourse denaturalizes myths of normative kinship from within an always already denaturalized position, or in other words within a position of disorientation, that also disidentifies with normative constructs of personhood and cultural belonging.

Additionally, Trenka begins The Language of Blood with a quotation from Joyce Carol Oates’s I Lock My Door Upon Myself—“… Because we are linked by blood, and blood is memory without language.” Clearly serving as an initial guiding maxim for

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58 Trenka, The Language, before title page.
Trenka, this notion of the significance of blood—that it carries with it not only memory but therefore a kind of language that precedes, exceeds, and/or can only, perhaps, be transmitted through genetic kinship—anchors much of that which structures normative kinship against adoptive or other forms of kinship. In this schema, these three now entangled notions—blood, memory, and language—imply a presumed certainty about the “powers” and properties of blood and DNA. For example, if memory can only be constituted in language outside of an experience of it, is Trenka suggesting that blood, as memory *sans* language is perhaps, less susceptible to semantic uncertainty? Further, the context for which this quotation is appropriated is an adoptee one, which certainly affects the quotation’s signification; thus, what is implied and largely accepted in the Korean adoptee community (and in the general population for that matter) is that adoption primarily or most often involves wounding, traumatic, and psychically violent processes.

I argue, however, that these are our narratives largely due to believing incontrovertibly in the powers of blood as much as due to the fact of our adoptions. But Trenka has to first believe in this notion of blood and what it produces and provides, and before she can then feel alienated from it. Thus I argue, before the equation, that there is simply no truth, empirically or philosophically, to the claim “blood is memory without language.” Similarly, I argue that the phrase, “because we are linked by blood” that precedes and justifies “blood is memory without language,” also highlights the precariousness of the supposed natural order of kinship because of adoptees’ crucial difference in positioning and orientation toward identity. Perhaps adoptees are condemned to a “relentless pursuit of the facts of their origin,” but also, more
importantly, it may be the pursuit, its constructions and languages—its discursivity, dissemination, contamination, and contagious properties—itself that makes the idea of an attainable origin becomes legible in the first place.⁵⁹ Again, this link by blood is only reified in its constitution, which is also through language, thus Bourdieu’s insistence that kinship is more a “field of relationships constantly reused and thus reactivated for future use.”⁶⁰ While people may be linked by blood, it is the means by which the linking has already occurred that is to be questioned.

Trenka’s search for this (language of) blood, then, is co-figured through her desire to reunite with her biogenetic mother, explore the extent to which she can assimilate into Korean culture—which is primarily metaphorized in the land, physicality, and geography of Korea insofar as they pertain to Korean history, traditionality, and the collective Korean identity—and essentially “become Korean again.”⁶¹ Trenka addresses her biogenetic mother: “I will carry you with me, in the language of blood.” Of course, the verb “carry” here implies adoption, but the conditional clause preceding “I will carry you with me” is also suggestive: “Even if I fail to create you again with words,” suggests that not only is it possible to create someone again with words but also that to pose the very question is to rely on that which, contradictorily, led to the need to create not only


⁶⁰ Bourdieu, 52.

⁶¹ Trenka, *The Language*, 40.
Trenka’s mother in words but also the bond and connection between her and her
daughter: the notion of blood as the intractable stuff of kinship.⁶²

What Trenka’s identity search narrative and the project of becoming Korean again
implies is that in order to be in a position capable of taking on (or adopting) distant, not
immediately felt, elements of identity (Korean culture, land, history), in order for the
legibility of the project to remain, Trenka must first accept the possibility of adoption as a
viable method of incorporating identifications, even while, secondly, forgetting this first
condition, upon which any recuperation of old dormant connections might happen. In
short, the desire to become Korean again is a desire for a kind of identity presumed lost
or hidden; yet, if blood bonds were actually as intractable and secure—indeed, the “real”
to the “inauthentic” of adoption—then the need to recover them would not exist.
Undoubtedly, this deconstructive observation supports the notion that kinship is always
already adoptive, and significantly, it is perhaps the emergence of transnational and
transracial adoptee discourses that has prompted such demonstrative deconstructive
analyses. A simpler explanation is that this adoptee identity exists in contradiction, in and
from this contradiction: believing in the power or efficacy of adoption as a means to
identify and have family, even while searching for lost origins, associations and feelings
of belonging to cultural and biological roots, and absolutely believing in the primacy of
blood bonds over adoptive ones. Thus, rather than read Trenka’s narratives through her
desire for authenticity, I read them through the promptings of identity in contradiction.

⁶² Ibid., 140.
Trenka’s second memoir, *Fugitive Visions*, finds Trenka searching the Korean “(home)land” for potential means of accessible identification. Reverently describing geographic locations, monuments, and traditional landmarks, she mentions “Sajik Park, where kings offered sacrifices to the gods of the land and grain,” “mountains where shamans bribe[d] the dead,” and “Gyeongbok Palace, where the last queen of Korea was assassinated,” and declares that “we walk through history every day.” The next paragraph begins with a friend concluding that “‘Your history is your identity, it’s what you are.’” In this sequence, *Fugitive Visions* deploys metalepsis, from the Greek *metonymia*, which means “substitution” or (which is to say, and) “sharing,” to first refer to history by evoking landmarks and locations and to second equate this history with identificatory potentiality. For the Korean adoptee, then, “knowing your history,” the same as “knowing your identity,” requires *knowing* locations, geographies, and their histories, specific and collective, as this knowledge places the subject within the Korean history from which she or he feels removed. But this process involves some semantic slippage between “history” and “identity” such that the metaleptical contaminations keep history and identity from completely collapsing into one another, as they are equated and yet not the same. In other words, the presentation of the conflation of history and identity through forms of metalepsis (from the Greek, for “sharing, substitution”) in order to cathect “history” into the notion of identity specifically relies upon *substitutive* functions of meaning.

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63 Trenka, *Fugitive*, 10-1.

64 Ibid., 11.
Moreover, what counts as “knowing” is elusive. By simply returning to Korea and placing oneself within historical sites (and often these locations are only accessible via the tourist industry), the Korean adoptee does not immediately, as if by osmosis, know one’s history. In The Language of Blood, for example, Trenka articulates how “mountains, temples, [and] ancient dolmens” affect her sense of identity: “I am afloat in the beauty of a culture deeply mysterious to me and, yet, my birthright. This is the heart of my ancestry, with its dark odor of incense; its rhythmic tok, tok, tok of tiny drums; its eighty-four thousand woodblocks containing the Korean Tripitaka, over seven hundred fifty years old and without error, each character carved following one bow to the Buddha.” Trenka’s metaleptical deployment of “heart” in “heart of my ancestry,” accentuates Trenka’s attempt through language to merge that which she must know and that which is without the need for external affirmation and reification—her own body, as it “shares the same blood” as her “ancestors.” “Heart” also injects the connotations of love into “ancestry,” which gives it a personal attachment (or connection); “heart” also bestows “life” to “ancestry,” as to create another bond to relate to, which is to say, Trenka’s ancestry, even if lost, remains open to reattachment, which is to yet again also implicate adoption as a fundamental process of identity formation or identification. Further, “heart” can also denote the human organ, which pumps and circulates blood, thus bonding biology with these other associations of “heart.” This is slightly ironic because Trenka needs to cite the power of blood (and its source in the heart) in order to unite these semiotic, connotative, discursive, and citational threads, in order to play with

65 Trenka, The Language, 14.
potential metaleptical and metonymic proximities and constellations of meaning that make up kinship language. Indeed, in this configuration, “heart” momentarily rises above its previously legible signification to newly proclaim the status “blood” once enjoyed, the status of origin, signified, and telos of the self. This circularity is further metaphorically manifest in how the “heart”—as the center of biological circulatory systems—circulates blood. I might also add that hearts beat, which provides the metalepsis with additional connotations of conferring something rhythmic or temporal to “ancestry,” which itself already denotes the past. “Heart,” then, gives time to ancestry and provides it with an ever present beat, in the present.

Here, “ancestry” also merges Trenka’s singular identity with the collective unity of her whole ancestry through intimating that one’s ancestry has a heart—as in a common denominator—or heart—as in “belief,” “spirit,” or “moxie.” Trenka can be “afloat” in this history, but not grounded, not directly inside or within it. Indeed, she desires to “take something from [Korea], something more meaningful than the plastic tapes of chants, the cheap postcards, the wooden bead bracelets,” which suggests that simply “being there” isn’t enough.66 The commodified accoutrements that disingenuously represent history (do they do likewise for Koreans?) only remind her, perhaps, of the identity she desires to leave behind, the remnants of a commodified Korean baby who bears the (racial) significations of a Korean culture and history but who has no real access to them. She does not take those souvenirs but rather a “small white stone … jagged and dusty,”

66 Ibid.
something that more “naturally” signifies Korea, its age (“dusty”) and sharpness (“jagged”), as if she cannot truly touch what souvenirs are supposed to represent.

Trenka’s positionality as a Korean adoptee in Korea, in this moment, is parodied by the “whiteness” of the stone that implicates “foreigner,” an American, or in Trenka’s words, because of her positionality, an “honorary white.”67 Knowing one’s identity then involves not only trying to locate the self within the Korean historical landscape but also incorporate it into one’s sense of identity, which is to suggest, then, that these moments of cathexis depend upon both a positioning and an orienting as well as an adoption, or, adoption qua substitution: the substantiation, validations, and verifications of “real” kinship actually involve a discursive series of sophisticated and repeated adoptions, of citations, metaphors, associations, and of the effacement of the betrayal of identity in the first instance.

Thus, adoption, or the substitutive, reveals the anxiety over the ultimate lack of all kinship: there is no nature. Further, lacking is to ultimately be in need, in this case, but precisely in need of the tool of the adoptive, its functionality, use, and capacity for adaptation in conflict and contradiction. Adoption is that which allows identifications to occur in real time; adoption is what grants belief in the connections or bonds of a category of belonging; it is what endows all kinship; all forms of kinship are adoptive. Even though Korean adoptees may appear to lack in identity, family, and origins, they at the same time have an overabundance of them, a fact that others have suggested has caused psychical complications and pathologies because of the contradictive and

67 Ibid.; Also, Trenka, Fugitive, 30.
disorienting positions that fact must effectuate. The problem here though has to do with mistaking the themes of our discourse—lost identity, family, history, origins—as immediate truths without first exacting more robust critiques that explore why these themes present themselves and why they are not only effects of violent histories of silencing and nation building and heteropatriarchy (as they are) but also prompts for new ways of thinking about identity. I am suggesting here that reading adoption as the clandestine mechanism through which all kinship bonds reify and materialize encourages a fuller, more complicated, and healthier description (and thus recognition of) of the Korean adoptee predicament and future.

Trenka’s lost identity reveals the hidden underbelly of normative identity, in that one has to adopt and find substitutes for that which might satisfy its own constitution. Within the confines of au courant vernacular, which is to say present language, The Language of Blood often describes this kind of identity as an “exile” or, as Trenka suggests, “the word that fits me best.” Trenka is exiled from both her “birth” country (representation of “origin”) and “adoptive” one (representation of loss of “origin”) but also from history and (thus) identity. By adopting the term “exile,” Trenka eulogizes a past not visible and locates her lost self between “psyche, body, and place … because the essence of that which is most present is not visible.” Thus, Trenka, having never “really


69 Trenka, Language, 199.

70 Ibid., 65.
been born at all—but ... still here,” adopts the substitute and makeshift identity of exile and absence in place of an identity more “present.” Further, Trenka’s phrasing in “the essence of that which is most present is not visible” is ambiguous: is “that which is most present” Korea, Korean culture, Korean identity, or her exiled, present, lacking, yet excessive, identity? Both? Neither? Is this referent “blood” or “true kinship”? Either way, or in all ways, whatever “the essence” is, it “is not visible,” which suggests that Trenka is questioning the very nature of essence in itself. For it to matter, to be valuable, useful for identity, does it need be visible? What if through these examinations Trenka finds essence mythological? What does that say then about identity? Clearly, the paradoxicality of this kind of ontological predicament prompts ambiguities like the above. What identity, in a sea of normative requirements for authenticity, can arise from questioning if not rejecting outright those requirements? What might an identity—that reconciles lacks of family, origins, culture, and history through autobiographical practice that contests its own form and representation with an equal appreciation of absence over presence—do to normative prescriptions of identity?

Another way to pose this ontological dilemma prompted by Korean adoption is by reading work like Trenka’s as indicative of articulating identity in terms of the future rather than the past. Certainly, superficially, Trenka’s initial foci on the past and origins suggest otherwise, but I argue that Trenka’s memoirs confess the futural. Trenka’s adoptee identity metaphorizes the “origin of the notion of origin,” because an identity without origins, removed from them, necessarily points to an original fault of the origin.

71 Ibid., 38.
of the notion of the origin, in that there was never a transcendental signified; the notion of the origin is constitutive of itself. Adoption then mechanizes dual and supplemental functions of identity, maintaining and eliminating necessary scripts and senses of belonging accordingly. Adoption, therefore, doubles as both substitution and its raison d’être. Korean adoptee literary tropes of the loss of origins and of substitution are not merely indicative of the psychical and phenomenological consequences of adoption per se but more indicative of the ways these tropes metaphorize this supplementarity. Trenka describes her search for origins as like “having never been born.” As the supplement to kinship, adoption renders kinship as always already about the loss and retrieval of origins. Adoption, actually, relieves kinship of the presence of this irretrievable loss, its origin. Derrida suggests, “There is no present before, it is not preceded by anything but itself, that is to say by another supplement … One wishes to go back from the supplement to the source: one must recognize that there is a supplement at the source.”

Belonging

Because the “making whole” process that biological identity ostensibly provides is often located in the birth mother, she becomes, ultimately, key to the adoptee’s racial,

72 Ibid., 38, 27.

73 See Derrida, Of Grammatology, Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 303-4. Further, if writing itself is the supplement par excellence as it is “the supplement of the supplement, sign of a sign, taking the place of a speech already significant” (281), then does Korean adoptee memoir metaphorize the metaphoricality of a writing that can only ostensibly merge identity with materiality?
cultural, and national identificatory success. Not even considering that for many adoptees reuniting with any birth parent is an incredibly fraught and unlikely process, the mechanisms by which the birth mother becomes this symbolic key can’t be separated from the political linkages of motherhood and nation. Stevens reminds that mothers are expected to fulfill their duty to “reproduce the nation.”74 Her explorations of how “the state reproduces itself” underscores the “highly elaborated practices of familial reproduction,” in which “the state appropriates the script of matrilineality, attempting to match the certainty of identity that follows from maternal knowledge (by the mother of her child).”75 The normative, nuclear, national family serves the state. Notwithstanding some feminist arguments that celebrate or privilege biological maternity, Novy, for instance, worries that “it is important to demystify biological maternity, lest women be confined to it.”76

The partnered regimes of heteronormativity and heteronationalism that define women around “reproductive capacity (read duty)” troubles adoptee kinship as a threat to the “sanctity” and maintenance of the national body politic. But if women were not so automatically presumed to be the natural immediate guardians of children, perhaps this equation wouldn’t so normatively figure. Shulamith Firestone in The Dialectic of Sex:

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74 Additionally, Stevens suggests: “The nation entails specific political conventions that produce affective, familial-like attachments. Every political society does this, which is to say that every political society exists in tandem with a familial nation” (107). See Stevens, Reproducing.

75 Ibid., 44, 45.

76 Novy, 31.
The Case for Feminist Revolution argues: “Women and children are always mentioned in the same breath … however … the nature of this bond is no more than shared oppression.”⁷⁷ She discusses the “myth of children” and highlights how the figure of the child is a relatively recent historical invention whose construction and perpetuation largely depends upon the supposed natural relationship between child and woman. Institutions arose to protect the development and maintenance of the “childcentered nuclear family … that would keep children under the jurisdiction of parents as long as possible.”⁷⁸ Firestone criticizes the pairing of women and children and argues that state institutions such as schools and academic disciplines such as psychoanalysis function as disciplinary mechanisms to keep women and children in the merged jurisdiction of each other.⁷⁹

One cannot be surprised, then, by the lengths that the U.S. nation-state takes in order to institutionalize transnational adoption. The biopolitical management, surveillance, and policing of women’s bodies and the linking of woman to child all engender a systematized set of institutions that “reproduce the state,” reproduce the heternormative telos, and reproduce masculinist ideology. Kathleen Jones describes


⁷⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁷⁹ Lauren Berlant has also argued that “a nation made for adult citizens has been replaced by one imagined for fetuses and children” (1). See Lauren Berlant, The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship, Series Q. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.
“Th[is] history of the Western cooptation of feminine powers of generativity in representations of the ‘birth of the state’ as an essentially masculine act of political natality [that] both suppresses and ironically preserves the connections between charismatic rule and female symbology.”

The abstract national woman, then, and her normative female body whose value is recognized only by its procreative capacity puts a lot of pressure on women whose bodies are discovered to be “excessive.” Prospective adoptive mothers, then, are encouraged to “not give up hope” and continue to do all they can to become mothers. To be sure, the state cares little about the way in which it reproduces itself as long as it reproduces itself. For instance, Stevens, by way of articulating that all forms of kinship are legal constructions and ultimately adoptive, clarifies that the legal means by which the state articulates itself, through its “rules” and definitions of parentage, does not ultimately distinguish between biological reproduction and adoption:

Overtly or implicitly all families are adoptive, as all families depend on the legal institutionalization of rules that put children in relation to parents that the children themselves do not choose … The resulting contrast between biological or natural families and adoptive ones is a legal distinction and therefore a construction, one with the same power and effects as other myths whose acceptance shapes reality.

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81 Stevens, “Methods,” 71-2, 69. Also see Stevens, Reproducing.
Almost by way of reverse engineering might the naturalized mother be wrested from state responsibility. Other critics proffer nonbiological views of mothers, like Sara Ruddick, for instance, who suggests that “all mothers are ‘adoptive.’”

I highlight the ways Trenka’s Korean adoptee subject disrupts notions of identity, family, kinship, origins, history, nation, and culture. Many of these notions grow from belief in the natural significance derived from genetic ties to a parent, most often, the mother. Further, while even though *The Language of Blood* and *Fugitive Visions* often express a great void and irreconcilability between the supposed fictional/adoptive family and the real/genetic family, I find more interesting the margins of the text that speak to the impossibility of corroborating a more real family over a less real one. Trenka, in her summative reflections after having lived in Korea for “a thousand days” and hoping for “a thousand more,” concedes that her return to Korea, to “become Korean again,” has not happened in ways she had initially desired. She writes:

If I were writing fiction, I’d write that I have been on a long journey back to where I came from … that thirteen years and six trips to Korea later, I’m fully integrated into Korean society. I came back to my roots … I have no conflict in my family because I have turned completely Korean, as if I never left … But that is a fiction.

Instead, she compares her time to Korea similarly to the moment she “arrived an alien and daughter into the home of my American parents.” Her “Korea dreams and … America dreams begin to meld into one unending dream, placeless, detached from reality,

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83 Trenka, *Fugitive,* 182-3.
superimposed upon each other,” and she no longer “wake[s] up sweating and screaming.”

These dreams of hers speak to when she sleeps but also to the desires and hopes of her American self and her Korean self. In her figuration, the once irreconcilable separation of the two has now become one.

Trenka’s Fugitive Visions, the title taken from a selection of “twenty loosely related piano pieces” by composer, Sergei Prokofiev, highlights aloneness and loneliness as that which provides “an endless, deep, and abiding intimacy” that “has grown like the morning glories of my mother’s summer garden, each year … reviving … climbing farther, taller, and blooming wilder,” this loneliness “honed at the piano.”

Precisely because she is an “observer, [which] has been [her] deep and shining aloneness” who “watch[ed] … an all-American family[,] … a traditional Korean family, [her] own,” she can recognize that “even loneliness can be worth something.”

Trenka’s imperative, “In my loneliness, let me be whole,” further articulates a Korean adoptee identity in both schizoid and depressive positions as well as in the “flexible to-and-fro movement” between them. It is the ego’s potential to engage with “hatred, envy, and anxiety” and not be monopolized by it. Trenka ponders, “Who knows what is the genealogy of this familiar aloneness, the austere restlessness, the floating despair,” as if to categorize anew

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84 Ibid., 186.
85 Ibid., 192, 187.
86 Ibid., 187, 192.
not only aloneness but aloneness as familiar and thus partly that which might serve as criteria for belonging.  

Near the end of *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka writes of loving Korea for all the ways it has “taught [her] how to be quiet and alone.” She loves “Korean village life,” “countryside people,” “soju,” “the tiny, bridgeless island of Jebu-do,” and the Korea that allows her to eat “macaroni and cheese and American breakfast cereals” in her “small room alone.” She loves Korea best when she embarks “on a great American road trip” and when she hears the “American How are yas … that so many adoptees bring with them.” Trenka piles on citation upon citation of Korean and American living, mixing the two to produce an identity born out of “loneliness” and “observation,” out of “belonging in this land [Korea]” and the land being “completely indifferent” to her. By focusing on love and the reasons why she loves Korea, Trenka performs kinship in contradictory yet loving ways: “I love Korea because Korea has taught me how to be quiet and alone. I love Korea in the way that only someone who has fought to reclaim something can. I love Korea even though she didn’t love me … I love Korea because here is my uncomfortable home. I love Korea despite my abiding grief.” Further, Trenka loves Korea to the point of circularity: “I love Korea because I am Korean.” And so it is that Trenka stumbles upon perhaps a more accurate description of the stuff of kinship, as it is not based solely blood or culture or ascription into lineage or national

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87 Ibid., 187.

88 Ibid., 189-90.

89 Ibid.
recognition but *in love*, perhaps the actual fascia of kinship: identity is self-reparation
which is love which is the adoption function, which is all family.
Chapter 4

The Korean Adoptee’s Eidetic Reduction of Family and the Familiar: The Criticism and Phenomenology of Deann Borshay Liem’s *First Person Plural*

In the U.S., the transnational, transracial adoptee from South Korea is by definition an Asian American immigrant but clearly significantly different from most other Asian American immigrants. For David Eng, this kind of adoptee represents a “privileged” form of Asian immigration to the U.S. Yet, if, as Eng suggests, this “transnational adoptee is, in fact, an Asian American immigrant, what kind of labor is she performing for the family, and for the nation?”¹ While Eng examines the ideological labor the transnational adoptee performs for the national heteronormative nuclear family, Jodi Kim examines “the ways in which [the transnational, transracial adoptee] also reveals the problematic fictions, repressions, and denials through which such a family gathers its seeming coherence from Cold War logics[,] within which such labors—ideological, (re)productive, and consumptive—are undertaken.”² Privileged immigrant, variously commodified capital, and fullfiller of white national and international baby market demand, the transnational, transracial adoptee must nevertheless also be examined as potentially agential lest the above configurations further our containment, otherness, and psychic discontent.


To begin, I resituate the transnational adoptee figure clearly against the backdrop of what Lisa Lowe calls “immigrant acts.” In *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lisa Lowe highlights ways—juridically, culturally, legislatively—that Asian Americans have been and continue to be figured as “the symbolic ‘alien,’ the *metonym* for Asia who by definition cannot be imagined as sharing in America.”³ Lowe argues that “the material contradictions of the national economy and the political state are expressed in the legal exclusion, disenfranchisement, and restricted enfranchisement of Asian immigrants, and that culture is the material site of struggle in which active links are made between signifying practices and social structure.”⁴ Exclusion Acts like the 1882 Chinese Act that prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers depicted the Asian immigrant to be the “Yellow Peril”; more recently, the “model minority” myth has taken hold.⁵ These configurations and resulting policies continue to reify the denial of nation-state requirements for Asian immigrants and Asian Americans generally. Lowe further

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⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵ See Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003, p. 68. Mohanty also summarizes other Asian exclusion acts: “The first law explicitly based on nationality was the 1882 Chinese Act. Following this act were the 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement, which curtailed Japanese and Korean immigration; a 1917 act that restricted Asian Indian immigration; the 1924 Oriental Exclusion Act, which terminated all labor immigration from mainland Asia; and the 1934 Tydings-McDuffe Act, which restricted Filipino immigration to the United States. Citizenship through naturalization was denied to all Asians from 1924 to 1943. Beginning in 1943 [with the Magnuson Act] and until the mid-1960’s, when immigration laws were liberated, the state instituted a quota system for Asian immigrants. Quotas were available only for professionals with postsecondary education, technical training, and specialized experience” (68–9).
suggests that while Asian immigrants have been subjected to exclusion policies and stereotypical expectations, these cultural formations develop in contradistinction to the abstract citizen of the state. Asian immigrants have been defined mainly as laborers and noncitizens. Their labor has been denigrated and at the same time valued, while their citizenship is always contested. Asian Americans and Asian immigrants have been situated and figured in contradiction to both spheres, economic and political; Lowe, however, highlights the agency of Asian American immigrants. Lowe’s notion of “immigrant acts” names “the agency of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans: the acts of labor, resistance, memory, and survival,” and notes the ways that Asian Americans have countered dominant racial and gender formations throughout U.S. legislative history.6

Lowe is intent on extending Asian American history in a way that emphasizes “every narrative articulation of freedom is haunted by its burial, by the violence of forgetting.”7 These forgotten histories reveal and constitute privileged modern European humanism; they have been necessary for the propagation of the universality of the free humanist subject. Naoki Sakai goes further to argue that Asians are excluded from the world of subjects altogether. Sakai warns that “we must not forget that the Orient thus

6 Lowe, Immigrant, 9.

7 Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents.” Haunted by Empire: Race and North American History, edited by Ann Laura Stoler. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 191-212: 206. I further ask, perhaps naively, in what additional ways (additional to its current valences) might featuring so prominently these violences affect negatively the ways we see our potential? In what ways might the focus on these histories of violence re-capture and re-contain our subject as inextricably attached to these histories?
known cannot be represented to itself; it can be represented only to the West … it necessarily appears that, even in its resistance, the Orient is subjugated to the mode of representation dominated by the West. [The Orient’s] attempt to resist the West is doomed to fail; the Orient cannot occupy the position of a subject.” Sakai adds: “Is it possible, then, to define the Orient as that which can never be a subject?” Lowe, though, insists on the agency of Asian Americans in offering counter-hegemonies, counter-memories, counter-histories, counter-narratives, and counter-publics that necessarily contest dominant political and cultural hegemonies.

Lowe questions the political emancipation that legal naturalization—sanctioned by the state—supposedly grants Asian immigrants. Yet access to naturalization is tainted by the anti-Asian immigration legal history of the United States. Nativist and white power policies have governed U.S. treatment, depiction, management, and containment of the first, “yellow peril,” and second, “model minority.” Additionally, it seems, there is nothing natural about naturalization. If a subject was not born into citizenship, natively, then naturalization reconciles the difference between this state of alienness or alienality and natural citizenship. Therefore a lot is riding on this naturalization. Being born into American citizenship seems to confer, by extension, nativity (birth), which only convolutes the semantic slippages between “naturalization” and “native” and “nature.” “Naturalization” of course derives from “nature” or the Latin natura—literally, “birth”—

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again once removed from the Latin *natus*, past participle of *nasci* (“to be born”), hence the etymological proximity between these signs.

In addition, deployments of “native” and its appropriation for “native” in “Native American,” throughout U.S. history continue to operate as a multifarious means to erase and murder Native peoples, institute Christian doctrine (and “save” children), and establish innumeros other containment policies that are all justified by a “natural” order of things that has substantiated the neoliberal subject with the erasure of these very histories. Sandy Grande suggests that

The United States is a notion defined by its original sin: the genocide of American Indians … American Indian tribes are viewed as an inherent threat to the nation, poised to expose the great lies of U.S. democracy: that we are a nation of laws and not random power; that we are guided by reason and not faith; that we are governed by representation and not executive order; and finally, that we stand as a self-determined citizenry and not a kingdom of blood and aristocracy … From the perspective of American Indians, “democracy” has been wielded with impunity as the first and most virulent weapon of mass destruction.9

U.S. democracy, naturalization, and citizenship evoke, for “Native peoples” and immigrants, a history that is grossly different from the dominant U.S. narrative. It is a history of slavery, genocide, exclusion, and outright denials of futurity, belying the smooth trajectory of neoliberal and humanist progress. In plain terms, one of the many ways, or technologies of systematic silencing and containment, that U.S. policy has enacted is the high-jacking of jurisdiction over “native,” claiming authority over it, and determining American Indians as “native,” which, in effect, is more about determining

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and restricting who gets to make “native” significant, who gets to make it into something. This also has produced the kind of distortion and illegitimacy that Audre Lorde describes when she says that “it is not the differences between us that tear us apart, destroying the commonalities we share. Rather, it is our refusal to examine the distortions which arise from their misnaming, and from the illegitimate usage of those differences which can be made when we do not claim them for ourselves.”

One consequence of the wielded or weaponized power of deciding who gets to be “native” is U.S. national identity itself. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues, for instance, that the American national identity actually derives from surrogacy of the Native American. This is “a form of colonization as exploitative as the seizure of Native American lands. Identifying with the other, internalizing the other, personifying the other, the surrogate incorporates the other, drains the other of its most desired characteristics.” With and through popular mythology, U.S. citizens identify with the vanquished or colonized other. Joseph Roach suggests that the “process of surrogation [involves] the enactment of cultural memory by substitution … As actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitute the social fabric, survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternatives.” Smith-Rosenberg further suggests that this


new national identity … [its] idealization and introjection of the Native American as a marker of the white man’s Americanness; their distancing themselves from that idealization through parodic performances … depended on Native Americans’ absence. That, after all, is what surrogacy is all about—the replacement or displacement of one figure by another, the dead or absent one by the surrogate … [t]he other to be introjected, repeatedly incorporated, and internalized … [this] desire to displace and [sic] desire to possess.13

How have transnational and transracial adoption configured its adoptee as similarly and differently surrogative? In addition to focusing on the similarities, what happens when we focus on the differences? Indeed, the modern transracial adoptee is a surrogate American—we are often surrogates for once desired biogenetically related children (does that desire go away?)—and many of us grow up hearing (or specifically not hearing) the phrase “replacement children.” This configuration encourages a belief, strongly held by many Korean adoptees: they aren’t who they should be. As surrogates, however, transnational and transracial adoptees pose a threat to what they are surrogating. How can adoptees inherit legacies built on blood? After all, adoptive families are surrogates for “real” families, right? One consequence, however, is what these surrogations have produced an “adoptee identity” that profoundly if not limitedly presents itself as surrogated as well. Is this kind of surrogate identity similar to the dual consciousness of W.E.B. Du Bois or the masking strategies used by Japanese American women writers post-World War II?14 What lessons or prescriptions, if any, might we learn from


historical precedents, if we claim to call them that, especially considering how much more complicated the global market for children has become?

This chapter explores a few instances of transnational and transracial adoption criticism that have framed the transnational and transracial Korean adoptee as existentially fraught and contradictory, psychically incomplete and adrift, and ontologically uncertain and different. I seek to clarify possible underlying reasons for this dis-position toward these themes, a dis-position that, effectively, creates a sense of removal, as if from the situation itself, this being a position of no position, of ostensible objectivity—or the belief in or acceptance of it. This critical dis-position assumes distance from the particular phenomena involving adoption, as if beyond the reach of the phenomena themselves, and prior to their constitution and reason for being. I argue that the dis-positional logic applied to transnational and transracial adoptee subjects mirrors not only the dis-positionalities of our constitutions and psyches—or the disorientations subject to adopted families and adoptee identities—but also the popular phenomenology of kinship and family. However, if adoptee critics actually proceed to do thorough phenomenological work, we may reveal that what is perceived as kinship and family is actually founded on adoption or the “unnatural.” The elision or omission of internal criticism of the phenomenology of family further implies that family is always a staged presentation, against which manifests normative and negative forms and bases much of its operation on notions of habit, habitus, association, having, and finally, familiarity itself—as it has claim to truth only through the citation of family, which seems to be already (pre)defined. In other words, this dis-positioning that is required of
phenomenological procedure (despite its shortcomings) is indicative of the phenomenological attitude itself, indeed, crucial to it. This dis-positioning cites and indexes, additionally, the downfall, the internal kernel of the infinitely negative, the reversal, and the inevitable, arguably, dialectical turn, lest we remain trapped in purely phenomenological or psychoanalytic or postmodern wombs.

These critical and popular dis-positionings also mirror and double what I call the disorientation/s of the Korean adoptee subject, who, one, has been literally removed from “the Orient” and replaced (re-positioned) into, most often, “the Occident;” two, in a more colloquial usage, has been characterized as generally disoriented; and three, is indicative of how adoptees ourselves—via our literature, art, politics, theorizing, and global community-building—force a new kind of orientation toward family, kinship, and belonging. I suggest adoption critics recalibrate our terms, put pressure on suspect ones, and reveal falsity within consistencies rather than focus on obvious disjunctures. I suggest adoption critics allow for radical readings of adoptee narratives that question identity, family, and futurity, in addition to our necessary dismantling of the heteronormative nuclear national family. I lastly argue that by turning phenomenology in on itself through the eidetic reduction and imaginary variation of “family” and the “familiar” demonstrates a kind of primordial adoption at the proverbial heart of family and familiarity instead of blood, genes, or some substance of truth.

I briefly review a few critical readings of Deann Borshay Liem’s First Person Plural, as I find in them not only promise but also a kind of critical containment—that seems meant to liberate but only determines adoptees as byproducts of commodity
fetishization and psychical traumas—fails to offer any real avenues for liberation, outside of adoptees’ eventual annihilation via ending all international adoption from South Korea. While some critics, like Eleana Kim, promote “adopted kinship” forms as radically transgressive, including specifically the emergent and emerging Korean adoptee global family and for the ways in which it and other nonnormative forms of family and kinship disrupt extant hierarchies of unfair and unequal power arrangements as well as the Westernized neoliberal nuclear family, other critics, while not in disagreement with Kim, promote what Jodi Kim argues are: “the conditions of possibility for transnational and transracial adoption as a project that attempts to socially reproduce the white heteronormative bourgeois nuclear family ideal … [which are full of] tragic ironies … imperialist violence … lingering displacements, irrecoverable losses, and unhealed wounds … cognitive dissonance … [and] ‘social death.’”

Given these conditions, Kim asks: “How is [Deann] to feel and know who or what she ‘really’ is, and who or what her ‘real’ family is?” But how does one hold the radical potentiality of disrupting normative alongside the desire for self-annihilation? How do we as a critical community hold active

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16 Ibid., 174. Unconventionally, I refer to Deann Borshay Liem throughout this chapter as “Deann” rather than her last name, as the former underscores Deann as a textual subject who speaks within the text of First Person Plural and as different from the Deann Borshay Liem as author, writer, featured actor (or representor of the profiled subject), and director. In fact, the lack of this kind of clarity within existing criticism of First Person Plural greatly highlights some of the genre’s internalized questions, like, who am I? and, does authoring autobiography work as a kind of identity itself?
both beliefs despite their incongruence? Is it possible to do both? For those of us Korean adoptees who fight for this end, pun intended, does it suffice that we “represent” these challenges to norms and histories of erasure for a while, for however long it takes, until we achieve our primary goal? Is this a case of not being able to speak so we die?\textsuperscript{17}

Is this the best we can do with the opposing ideas of disrupting family and working for the annihilation of our created families? Do we simply hold the two in suspended opposition, a kind of anti-dialectical maintenance of the incongruity or binary? Perhaps it is our belief in the naturalness of family and what makes things familiar that holds this kind of disjunction in suspension.

Because most Korean adoptee artistic production is autobiographical or self-authoring, critics are less likely, it seems, to question the question of accuracy of these accounts. Again, I do not suggest that Deann Borshay Liem, for example, \textit{is wrong or inaccurate} in her explication of her psychic torment and suffering in \textit{First Person Plural}; rather, I suggest that some critical readings of this text fail to examine their own processes in the inquiry and ignore the possibility of error or of oscillation between right and wrong or of something \textit{in the middle}.\textsuperscript{18} Where I see critical myopia is in a reliance on


\textsuperscript{18} Do we ask ourselves if Antonin Artaud was \textit{accurate} in his descriptions of, say, a “body without organs”: “When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom”? For how Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari appropriated this concept for their radicalization of psychoanalytic re-orientations of desire and objects see: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, \textit{Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia}. Translated by Robert Hurley. London: Penguin Classics, 2009, and Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{A Thousand}
and a belief in the function of similarity qua the familiar as understood through phenomenological notions like habit and habitus, association, and, redundantly, the familiar. Of course, this mistake occurs everywhere—which is to clarify it is in no fault of critics themselves, adopted or not, Asian American or not, etc. Still, I argue, for transnational and transracial adoptees to not be involved in putting pressure on a priori ideas of family or on ideas of the a priori family is not coincidental. For instance, transnational and transracial adoption and adoptees could be seen as the necessary killing of family. Yet, adoption itself, as a notion, sign, material reality, and evolving fantasy becomes integrated into the habitus of the personal and social and collective milieu of the present. It prompts the notion of similarity (as in, it is similar so it must be it or like it in determined ways). This is merely a tautology at the core: the familiar is familiar because it is like family and family is familiar because familiarity comes from family. But I wonder, openly, while other adoptees may not, what could be some consequences of the death of family. What if adoptee literature prompts phenomenological excavation of family within phenomenology? We may puncture the grand illusion that family (as referent, absolute) is primordial and in no need of explanation or inquiry into its appearance or function.

The Analysis

Deann Borhsay Liem’s *First Person Plural* documents her 1966 adoption by Alveen and Donald Borshay after they became aware of international adoption through NBC television’s sponsorship of the Foster Parents Plan that encouraged good Christian Americans to help children in need overseas.\(^{19}\) For $15 a month, the Borshays sponsored Cha Jung Hee, a Korean orphan at the Sun Duk Orphanage. What the orphanage neglected to tell the Borshays, however, was that after two and a half years of correspondence, and after the Borshays completed the formal adoption process facilitated by the ISS-USA (International Social Service), Cha Jung Hee’s papers were given to Kang Ok Jin, another, different Korean orphan, after Cha Jung’s father removed her from orphanage a month prior to her scheduled adoption by the Borshays. At eight years old, prior to leaving, Ok Jin was told to keep secret the fact that she was not Cha Jung Hee at least until adulthood. Still, she recounted the secret to her adoptive parents, who labeled her memories “just bad dreams.” Only later would Deann dig into the story of her adoption, eventually finding two photographs, both of herself before her adoption. Upon realizing that the “problem was only one of [the pictures] looked like me,” Deann writes a letter to the Sun Duk Orphanage in 1981. In return, she receives a letter from her biogenetically related Korean brother, Ho Jin, confirming her suspicions: “My dear sister,

Ok Jin, you don’t know how happy I am to be writing a letter to you now … I’m certain you are Kang Ok Jin, not Cha Jung Hee.”

These three identities, Kang Ok Jin, Cha Jung Hee, and Deann Borshay Liem, speak to some of the consequences of the gendered, racial, and material politics that dominate early transnational and transracial adoption criticism. For Jodi Kim, adoptees like Deann represent the continued forced migrations engineered by American and Western capitalist modernity, American Cold War Imperialism in Asia, the gendered racial logics subtending America’s white heteronormative bourgeois nuclear family ideal, and the enduring imperialist sentimental desire to save the world … [and further] index the displacements precipitated by the Korean War and the protracted presence of the U.S. military in Korea … [and] as a particularly vexed gendered racial Cold War subject, the transracial Asian (American) adoptee produces her own knowledge project, an attempt to get to know and negotiate her own complex subjectivity.

Eleana Kim likewise suggests that the “production of the legal orphan” creates a “disembedding of the child from a normative kinship structure and its legal reinscription as a peculiar and exceptional state subject.” Thus, with “the barest of social identities, and in the context of Korean cultural norms, she lacks the basic requirements of social personhood—namely, family lineage and genealogical history.”

Eleana Kim and Jodi Kim articulate transnational and transracial adoptees as the tragic byproducts of unjust histories. While not incorrect, this depiction still leaves Korean adoptees, like Deann, bereft of agency, which can also be said to amount to valuing and using the figure of the

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20 J. Kim, Ends, 169, 172, 173.

transnational, transracial adoptee as critical capital. Kim writes: “The denial and repression of her true family history and identity produce an unmourned, indeed an unmournable, loss for [Deann]. It is a loss that cannot be mourned precisely because her adoptive family … refuses to acknowledge or even simply investigate her true family history and identity.”

This passage raises a few issues, however. Does it not presuppose “true family history and identity,” and is it not this very problematic itself what transnational and transracial Korean adoptees like Deann radically challenge? Presupposing what is true (biogenetic kinship), especially in this context, only maintains the distinction between nonadoptees and adoptees. Also, the idea of “unmournable loss” is taken at face value and justified by, seems to depend on, the authority of the adoptive, white, U.S. adoptive parents “acknowledgement” (or not) that governs whether Deann’s “loss” can be sufficiently mourned. Another way to describe Deann’s situation is that the truths of her histories lie in Korea, the U.S., in and between both histories and the joint history thus created by transnational adoption as a global industry. Yes, mourning and loss are involved—as transracial adoptees from Korea like Deann painfully attempt to articulate—but it is the very predicament and subsequent inquest into the supposed natures of identity and family and kinship that engenders a crucial question: What are the sources of why we feel irrecoverable loss? Is it forced migration? Forced culture, parents, etc., alone? Not precisely, because all children are forced to migrate if their parent/s decide to, all children are born to a parent/s whom they do not choose or to none at all,

22 J. Kim, Ends, 182.
and all children undergo, some degree of unmournable loss, through the ideological separation of the self and the mother, according to psychoanalytic articulations of the child’s psychosexual development.

Part of the problem here has to do with the ways kinship language fails to fully account for its limitations. But it is precisely this language that also highlights how entrenched the dichotomy between adoptive and genetic kinship is. Jacqueline Stevens suggests, for instance, that prescriptions for resisting genetic essentialism argue that a child born is not immediately *owned* and does not have immediately given parents. The child has a “mother” but for Stevens, only one, as “maternity is recognized as a sui generis condition without a copy”:

Analytically and legally distinguishing the custodial relations that follow from conception—none—from those attendant on birth—mothers may adopt—recognizes the uniqueness of maternity as a condition that should legitimately engender the choice of whether to pursue custody. This, again, is a mother’s choice and does not entail an essentialist biological collapse of maternity with long-term child custody.23

Stevens means to “put all non-maternal parents on equal footing,” defining a “parent” as “the legal term for those contracting to raise a child.”24 Her reconfiguring of kinship rules

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24 Ibid., 90, 92. Stevens prefers “genetic parents” and “not the more idiomatic ‘birth parents,’ ‘natural parents,’ or ‘biological parents,’ as these latter categories are over-inclusive with respect to the practices they seek to name. ‘Genetic parents’ is more accurate than the other labels because men never give birth, but they are often parents, and sometimes even claim that parental status, informally and legally, on the strict basis of genetics and no other more general biological or natural attribute. Excluding fathers from the category of a ‘birth parent’ may appear pedantic, but it is necessary for the purpose of clarifying prevailing intuitions underlying longstanding patterns in adoption
is not solely based on the politics of motherhood or the maternal; she argues that “current
marriage law exists to bring men into relation with children, even if these are not their
genetic offspring.” Yet the requirement that “pregnant women must be secured by men in
matrimony (from the Latin matrix, meaning womb) institutionalizes the paranoia of a
masculinity anxious about men’s inability to give birth, and therefore intent to influence
reproduction by those who do give birth.”

Certainly, mothers have a privileged position in deciding whether or not to parent the child and whether any other persons will be contracted to parent and raise the child. Stevens writes: “Birth is an activity yielding a
bond to the fetus not present in a purely genetic tie, and hence it is necessary to consider
a claim to parental status based on birth separately from claims based on genetics”

Yet to imagine that mothers are not automatically parents points to the limitations of not only
legal language that circumscribes kinship (as Stevens brilliantly shows) but also the
limitations of a common language of possession: my child, my mother, mothers and their
children.

law. Birth is an activity yielding a bond to the fetus not present in a purely genetic tie,
and hence it is necessary to consider a claim to parental status based on birth separately
from claims based on genetics” (70).

25 Ibid., 92.

26 Ibid., 70.

27 Stevens argues that the “family” is pre-political by analyzing the laws that demarcate
kinship: “when it comes to adoption law, the state favors the genetic family, treating it as
a norm, while the adoptive one is the deviant one demanding of special government
regulation and scrutiny” (73) and “[h]ence by distinguishing between adoptive and
 genetic families, the laws … falsely instantiate the view that the family is pre-political.
That is, these differences imply that a legal order only formally ratifies a natural family
that has long predated it, when the truth of the matter is that families have never existed
Kim’s uncritical and heavy usage of essentialist kinship language of \textit{a priori} ownership and belonging undercuts her suggestion that she argues for an “expanded conceptualization of transnational reproductive justice … [that] would recognize the right of birth mothers to parent \textit{their} children [emphasis added]” that “does not necessarily privilege the biological.”\textsuperscript{28} Despite Kim’s attempt “not to reify and naturalize motherhood by presuming that mothers should always mother, or want to mother, \textit{their} children, [emphasis added]” her liberal usage of “\textit{their} children” throughout her argumentation belies an assumed natural and pre-given link between mother and child, that indeed the child is the mother’s prior to her decision, or not, to raise the child.\textsuperscript{29} The point here is not that mothers should not get to parent their children or that mothers cannot say “\textit{my} child” but rather that the moment of “ownership” or custodial responsibility does not happen before the fact and is not \textit{naturally} given. In other words, Kim’s critical position toward transnational adoption as an industry that limits certain women from being able to raise \textit{their} children is misguided. Indeed, if a mother decides to raise the child she will give birth to, then she should certainly be able to. But Kim’s

\begin{quote}
without a political society providing the rules for what counts as a family, with patterns of endogamy and exogamy that vary across societies and within the same society over time … Once we review the various ways that the state constructs the ostensibly natural family, we shall see how it is immanently reasonable to consider radically different alternative family rules that do not take myths about the genetic family as their starting point” (77).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28} J. Kim, \textit{Ends}, 170.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., my emphases: “significant forces that would compel a birth mother to give up \textit{her} child,” “the right to of birth mothers to parent \textit{their} children,” “seek to recognize the right of birth mothers to parent \textit{their} children,” “birth mothers to keep or parent \textit{their} children.”
construction suggests paradoxically that this decisive moment occurs naturally and before the child, the birth, and after.

This construction also, perhaps most importantly, erases the fact of adoption at the heart of all family and parenting, that even if someone is the birth mother of a child, that someone still needs to make the decision, at some point, whether particularly instanced or over time, to raise that child or not. This point, however, comes with provocation, when applied to the Korean American adoptee context. Stevens’s analysis would suggest that adoptees technically never first had a parent to lose because the mother simply, in these cases, chose not to contract to raise the child. All the potential reasons why—coercive, tragic, unjust, corrupt, traumatic—as is covered extensively in Kim’s work and elsewhere, may still be true. But also not all these reasons will be true for every transnational, transracial adoptee. Stevens’s proposed radicalization of kinship rules and legal language argues for a deconstruction of kinship and adoption that might also, for one, eliminate the term “father” as a legal designation and subject position and legible and functional descriptor of relation, “a consequence that radically reconfigures not only particular families, but, at least as significantly, refashions the gendered psychic life ordered by kinship rules and the law of the father.”

Unfortunately, Kim’s construction here risks privileging genetic essentialism by not speaking to the father’s role in adoptee family configurations, both on the biogenetically related side and the adoptive side. In other words, by assuming that the biogenetically related father is unlike the birth mother in that he does not have as natural

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30 Stevens, “Methods of Adoption,” 92.
a connection excludes two father families with no mothers present, two mother families where one mother is adoptive, and adoptive families generally. Kim’s (and David Eng’s and Catherine Ceniza Choy’s) absence of discussion regarding the fathers in First Person Plural, for instance, reinforces the idea that children are naturally the property of the birth mother, as the separation from the biogenetic (or “birth” mother or “natal” mother) is unquestionably considered a severe turning away from natural existence and natural law.

The transracial and transnational adoptee is firmly tied to this othered “adoptive” pole or realm of kinship, still thoroughly lacking and horrifyingly excessive: without mothers and with too many mothers, without “native” culture and of and between two cultures, without “true” identity and with many identities, without a home and with many notions of home, “socially dead” and virtually alive in at least two mental places. Kim argues that “social orphans,” like Deann, complicate an “already fraught transnational geography of kinship, instantiating a cognitive and affective economy that is at once one of excess and one of lack.”31 Further, Kim notes, “Once [Deann] travels back to Korea and meets her Korean birth mother, she finds it difficult to have room in her mind for two mothers. Yet this excess of mothers also signals a lack. [Deann] has two mothers, yet she is differently estranged from both of them, precisely because there are two of them.”32

31 J. Kim, Ends, 180.
32 Ibid. Further, I ask, why is having two mothers so traumatizing? Why cannot both mothers be real, be true, just in different ways? Other people, nonadoptees and adoptees, have two mothers. Thus, what is the real trauma? Is it not having a choice in being removed or re-placed into another’s care? To clarify, I do not deny the trauma, I only wish to clarify to what we may actually be reacting.
Yet, these conclusions only make sense if one already accepts the idea of mother as from the beginning naturally and only ever singular.\(^{33}\)

Kim’s critical perspective represents this critical tendency toward a *kind of look*, but a look that is not one, or attempts to appear as not one, in that it must adopt a position of distance and authority lest any lens through which the studied phenomena is revealed. Catherine Ceniza Choy likewise suggests that “[Deann’s] story speaks to the strength of the emotional attachment between the birth parent and child, an intimacy rarely revealed in organizational records and news media reports.”\(^{34}\) This kind of critical engagement is not marginal or deconstructive or critical but merely *representational*. In *First Person Plural* Deann explains: “There was a lot of sadness that I think that we couldn’t deal with as a family. 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.” Kim’s critical approach treats *First Person Plural* as purely representational, and at the same time, as unmediated phenomena, as if the critical process here was simply: she said she couldn’t mourn her loss, so that must *be true*, now let’s envision ways in which it *is* true, justified by this adoption.

Taking Stevens’s analysis seriously, the title of Kim’s *An Orphan with Two Mothers* would have to change. The title would have to read: “An Orphan? with a Mother and Multiple Parents.” So again, what we have here, for one, is a problem of taxonomy.

\(^{33}\) I would also disagree with Kim’s casual use of “birth mother,” I would Stevens. As an adoptee, I hesitate to use the term as it falls foul of the many errors I note in kinship language, but this is also largely a personal decision.

Adopting Stevens’s perspective implies that “adoption” and “adoptee” become meaningless because all forms of kinship are always already adoptive and adopted, ergo, all forms of kinship are also “real,” as now formerly adoptive forms of kinship are no longer different. In other words, if Stevens’s kinship system was normatively practiced and reified by law and language, “adoptees” would no longer be categorized as such, as there would be no “natural” norm against which adoption becomes and is subordinated, thereby rendering the term “adoptee” in its current form nonsensical outside of its former valence in the historical or etymological record. This new kinship landscape would rely on a less restrictive lowest common denominator to configure kinship that is not blood or genes: the fact that people are born rather than the fact that people are born into lands, nations, lineages, and families.

How do we get away from transnational and transracial adoptees as inextricably contained and determined by psychic “fantasies of return, projections of loss, and desires for reunion”? The transnational and transracial adoptee is figured as attached, connected, and tethered to histories that have been silenced to narratives and themes of loss and psychic confusion and contradiction. Further, Kim’s positioning of the transnational and transracial adoptee within the U.S. liberal multicultural history of securing racial hierarchies through expansionism, settlement, and assimilation echoes, for Kim, Pauline Turner Strong’s writing of Native American children removed from their homes and forced into white America. Strong writes: “Adoption across political and cultural borders may simultaneously be an act of violence and an act of love, an excruciating rupture and

35 J. Kim, *Ends*, 169-70. Also see: footnote 56 on page 281.
a generous incorporation, an appropriation of valued resources and a constitution of personal ties.” Kim also borrows (adopts) the term “social death” from Orlando Patterson—who argued that slaves are socially dead because of their “loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations [which Kim calls ‘natal alienation’].” Kim’s adoption of Strong’s and Patterson’s terms and their analyses because of similarity highlights how familiarity anchors likeness and similarity in the first instance because in the final analysis the two contexts—slavery and transracial adoption brought about by transnational adoption—are as different as they are similar. This natal alienation, while maybe true, is also not true in the same way for transnational and transracial adoptees. However, to argue that transnational and transracial adoptees are inheritor to the slaves of slavery because the contexts are similar suggests not only that the former are modern slaves but also that there is no way out beyond ostensibly either complete reintegration into, for Deann Borshay Liem’s case, Korean society or death, and not a social death but a real one. Even though Kim may be correct to point out how the “gendered racial governmentalities outside the space of formal slavery persist in creating a variety of ‘social deaths’ for subjugated groups,” I argue for an interrogation of what we mean by “natal” and “native” and “natural” in the first instance.


38 J. Kim, Ends, 281; also see: 185-6.
Similarly, Choy views Deann’s testimonial documentary and other transnational and transracial work that features “adoptees speaking back” as “important works for Asian American history … that presents the point of view of a Korean international and transracial adoptee.”\(^39\) This valorization for the sheer act of representation belies this difference in reception to this kind of work versus, say, *Hamlet* or *The Dubliners*, and further indicates this kind of criticism as representational criticism that focuses on the ways in which texts represent already extant and believed-in epistemological systems. Even using psychoanalytic concepts to complicate psychoanalysis itself, which Eng does, only reestablishes psychoanalysis, if negatively, by continuing to see its relevance at all. Psychoanalysis then becomes the background schema against which the adoptee must be configured or anti-configured. But by not also resisting the conditions of possibility and structures and givens that lead to us having to “speak back,” it may be difficult to see how *First Person Plural* does more than call “attention to the existing hierarchies in international adoption between sending and receiving nations and between birth and adoptive families” and actually help “viewers reimagine what an international adoptive

\(^39\) Choy, *Global*, 132, 134. For Choy, *First Person Plural* “challenge[s] the celebratory portrayal of international and transracial adoption as a privileged form of re-birth in a progressive and prosperous United States … makes visible the racial hierarchies and social costs associated with U.S. assimilation … examines the loss of adoptees’ histories and memories in the context of the transformation of Korean international adoption into a global industry … convey[s] a powerful message about loss … illuminate[s] that loss goes beyond the specific spatial and temporal experience of the death, disappearance, or relocation of persons … [and] also signifies the *loss of knowledge* of this collective experience” (132-3).
family looks like beyond a simplistic binary.”

40 Lowe, in “The Power of Culture,” argues that, generally,

Asian American culture ‘re-members’ the ‘past’ in and through the fragmentation, loss, violences and dispersal that constitutes the ‘past.’ Asian American culture is the site of more than critical negation of the nation—it is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state.41

Are Asian American adoptees part of this culture? Are we excessive to this culture? Do we or can we do the same thing, re-member the past? Can the transnational and transracial adoptee identity predicament of loss and lack and excess and insurmountable mourning give rise to “new forms of subjectivity” and “new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state”? If transnational and transracial adoptees like Deann can and do, then, as an transnational Korean adoptee myself, why do I not feel excited about this prospect from reading this criticism? Yet, regarding Deann’s inability to fully mourn what she had lost Choy suggests that First Person Plural “reclaims that inability.”43

40 Ibid., 140.


42 What if they grew up in all white families and communities and grew old and died without ever moving away or engaging with adult adoptee communities nor saw themselves as “Asian” or “adopted” at all?

43 Choy, Global, 143.
David Eng stresses additionally that “transnational adoption must be linked to the increased outsourcing of not just domestic, but reproductive labor to the global South. The practice must also be indexed to the concomitant expansion of new forms of labor and value under the shadows of global capitalism.”  

Eng also argues, through “a theory of racial melancholia [and] Freud’s essays on femininity and the negative Oedipus complex,” that “First Person Plural challenges us to imagine other pathways of affiliation, as well as other objects of desire, beyond the sanctioned parameters of the Oedipus complex.” Here, Eng uses transnational adoption as that which can reorder psychoanalysis such that it may “accommodate the possibility of two mothers.” But why must we accommodate psychoanalysis? In other words, the central question does not have to be the “problem” of two mothers; taking Deann’s two mother comment as natural evidence frames certain parameters over others and decides that that is what is at stake. But it could also just be a false problem. Does this focus engender “other pathways of affiliation” or does this focus only reinforce the “psychic costs and burdens of these significant contradictions”?  

To wit, by asking, “How might we begin to analyze [Deann’s] affective losses?” Eng suggests we proceed with Freud’s notion of melancholia to describe Asian immigrant experience. Eng writes: “As described by Freud, melancholia … is a


45 Ibid., 96.

46 Ibid., 111.
pathological mourning without end … delineat[ing] a psychic condition whereby certain losses cannot be avowed and, hence, cannot be properly mourned.”\textsuperscript{47} Thus, racial melancholia, which can also be “an everyday group experience for Asian Americans,” creates “failure[s] of recognition” that not only place the transnational, now transracialized, adoptee under “an affective embargo, making it particularly difficult to negotiate her melancholia and transform it ever gradually into mourning,” but also “haunts” her and reduces “agency to fantasy.”\textsuperscript{48} Racial melancholia, through its consequence of affectively embargoing the adoptee, makes it difficult for the \textit{melancholia} to turn into healthy mourning?

Eng describes how the transnational adoptee performs “a type of crucial ideological labor: that of shoring up of [\textit{sic}] an idealized notion of family and kinship” and offers that the transnational adoptee also embodies a kind of “consumptive labor” that works differently than the productive labor of traditional Marxian applications.\textsuperscript{49} For Eng, “The transnational adoptee is a form of embodied value, a special type of property uneasily straddling both subjection and objecthood.”\textsuperscript{50} Toby Alice Volkman also suggests that: “adoption discourse … is fraught to the degree that it implicates the

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 115.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., in order, 121, 122, 123, 122, 123.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{50} Eng, “Transnational,” 8.
possibility of the child as commodity.” Yet, Arissa Oh laments this focus, while still acknowledging its truths:

Competing narratives characterize international adoption as either profit-driven baby trade or highly sentimental love story. Some of the current criticism reduces the practice wholly to market terms, describing children as property, forms of ‘embodied value’ or subjects or objects entangled in transnational flows of capital and labor, whereas adoptive parents are depicted as consumers, selecting goods from ‘from an internationalized market in children.’ Others compare international adoption to child laundering, or slavery … [However, w]e should not equate or conflate what happened at the ground level with the structures and ideologies that emerged at a larger level. Market metaphors may fit, but to reduce international adoption simply to a series of cold transactions is unfair. Instead of post-Marxian or psychoanalytic articulations of transnational adoption and its consequences, perhaps we might explore a phenomenological inquiry into how it might better get at what transnational and transracial adoption and adoptee critiques also fundamentally suggest about “family” and “the familiar.” This is not necessarily empiricism nor the rejection of it but rather the aftereffect of adoption, the having of it, the tethered consequence, as ever yet not manifest until actualization. At this juncture, that which has been adopted becomes habit—whether conceived of as a corporeal or social incorporation or through, say, Hume’s definition as beyond the subject and


involved in the generation of the world as meaningful or through William James, who articulated habit as an “enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent” or through what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus* or the “systems of durable transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures … principles that organize and generate practices and representation.”

There are various etymological precedents for *habit*, among others, *habitus* (in everyday German, “manner” or “mannerism”) and the Greek *hexis* (“a state or habit of mind or body”), from its root *segh* (“to have”), and *habe* (“having”), as in “of a skill, routine, or decision, incorporated and embedded as a trait in one’s character.” But significant in Bourdieu’s deployment of *habitus*, is its character of bringing a passive, outside the subject, social dimension to *habit*, as a kind of social habituality or tradition. For Bourdieu, *habit* is “internalized as second nature,” “a state of the body,” and gets “forgotten in history.” Dermot Moran suggests further that Bourdieu’s *habitus* is a kind of “‘incorporation,’ a bodily instantiation of a routine, but also a kind of social production

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and reproduction.”\footnote{Moran, “Edmund,” 66.} According to Moran, Husserl’s various deployments of \textit{habit} anchor his phenomenology, as it does likewise, albeit more directly, in Bourdieu. Moran writes: “Bourdieu’s way of describing \textit{[habitus]} as a structuring principle aptly captures … the constitution of our personal, social, and cultural worlds, but also … the very manner in which \textit{nature} appears.”\footnote{Ibid., 68.} Further, Moran clarifies how Husserl, before Bourdieu, conceived of a \textit{habitus} based on notions of \textit{familiarity}, which itself, in turn (moving backwards), was based on “shared physical similarities,” “family resemblances,” “physical traits,” and “social typicalities”; further, “Habit is responsible for the organization of experience into horizons of \textit{familiarity} and \textit{unfamiliarity} and indeed for the whole process of the sedimentation of culture as tradition into something like a history. [my emphasis]”\footnote{Ibid., 66, 68.}

I turn to notions of \textit{habitus} not in order to merely view transnational and transracial adoption and adoptees through phenomenology but in order to use transnational and transracial adoptees’ potentiality and radical subjectivity—our \textit{disorientation/s} away from \textit{habitus} altogether, along with other beliefs, myths, narratives, and histories (genealogical, cultural, political, national) about what gives meaning to life, family, belonging, and authenticity—perhaps, as a means to view phenomenology and its own traditions or \textit{habitus} as also heading toward an internal critique involving the conditions of possibility for the phenomenology of family and perhaps Husserlian
phenomenology generally. Indeed, imagining our *orientation/s* kept untainted (not dis-oriented) is to imagine away altogether the fact, material and abstract, of our adoptions and our personal histories of obfuscation, denial, erasure, and difference. Because adoptees, if in negative form, so implicate family and kinship, it seems fitting that we, as theoretical tool, in this moment, might challenge Husserl’s and Bourdieu’s similar treatments of *habitus* for the ways they rely on an (il)logical circularity: that things are like other things and that people are like one another because of the original or natural referent of family resemblances and physical similarities. Thus, things are “familiar” to us because they are like “family.”

But what is involved, phenomenologically speaking, in our auto-belief in “family” as purely referential, the original creator, source, arbiter, and essence of similarity? In other words, it is if we see *habitus* as definitional of *what counts* as similarity, which leads in turn to identification, incorporation, and its final disappearance (all together, *adoption*, in a word) into the variously abstract, personal, collective, social, and counter-social realities of *habitus*. Thus, “identity” can be formed, variously, as without this *telos* of identification these decided similarities would have no purpose. Ultimately, however, it is never alone familial similarity that leads to the comfort and safety implied in “familiarity.” It is not familial similarity that is revealed through the phenomenological eidetic reduction of the “familiar” but adoption, habit, association, in order of ostensible primordiality. What I am getting at is the supposed fabric of family and familiarity and how it is *made of adoption*. This is what *First Person Plural* does so explicitly: test and stage what family and familiarity are fundamentally about. *First Person Plural* climaxes
with Deann bringing her adoptive parents to Korea to meet her Korean family, which acts as the stage, however literalized, for this examination of the phenomenology of family.

However we take *habitus*, its completion, so to speak, its pivot, its turn toward change, incorporation, infection, and then normalcy, such that it becomes invisible, *requires adoption*, or more directly, *is* adoption or the functional value of adoption as theoretical tool. In other words, for *habitus* to actualize, adoption as incorporation must occur. Indeed the current *well-adopted* attitude toward family renders, paradoxically, adoptees and adoptive families as grotesquely other. Additionally, the notion of the familial, of family, of the knowable and have-able, of the habitual, seems to escape Husserl’s inquiry into pure perception and the phenomenological disposition, as if various kinds of peoples across time and place all thought and saw and felt the same primal way about family and the familiar. What matters are the consequent possible structural and simple conceptual reasons for why adoption criticism, so likewise caught in the themes of identity, loss, and trauma, has yet to find its full way out of the dead (unsignifying or no longer signifying) womb of family and a family that resists, understandably, any rise of the abominable, and in principle, any potential threat to its primacy and to its union with nature. This family has a limit case, a constant living threat of implosion: the over-familiarity of family has led to its instability and obsolescence, which was inevitable, in that, at some point, a critical mass of transnational and transracial adoptees would come of age and not only “represent” positive challenges to existing normative structures of kinship and ways of being in the world, but actually change, in critical discourse, in language, in concept and definition, the very ideas and
words that limit us in the first place, like “adoptee,” “adopted,” and “adoption.” I suggest that the very notion of “family” requires revision and revision through the very phenomenology through which it sees itself, which is, it turns out, also a reorientation of family prompted by the disorientations of the Korean adoptee subject.

Helpfully, we only have to turn to one of Husserl’s own many methods of doing phenomenology to come to this conclusion. Phenomenology mistakes the familiar and what accounts for it as not part of or previous to how our familiarity with perception and all our subjectively perceived phenomena (the world) shades and/or prevents that world from truly being recognized. While Heidegger will famously replace Husserl’s pure ego with dasein, that stuff of being-there, that kind of preconditionality of the world and being, together, and further, as being-world, as one, and while the significances and consequences of this continue to be explored in numerous disciplines and spheres of life, Husserl’s eventual pure consciousness of absolute being remains valuable for how it came to be and for how it aimed to disrobe the Western philosophical tradition’s then presuppositional view of nature and naturality. Yet, it is the move toward habitus and its subsequent need for definition and defense, and in all its various uses, applications, modes, and functions, and how Husserl explains habit as functionally a primordial association—in principle, and in the principle of association in the traditions of Hume and Berkeley and empiricism—that is “a fundamental concept belonging to the
transcendental phenomenology” and half of an “entire realm of associations and
habits.” For Husserl, “the similar motivates the similar under similar circumstances.”

But of course on what criteria are we basing the similar or similarity? On family?
On how the default abstract human has family and that is enough justification for the
general notion and application of similarity? Husserl writes: “Higher psychic occurrences
[as opposed to, say, the mechanical], diverse as they are and familiar as they have
become, have furthermore [sic] their style of synthetic interconnexion [sic] and take their
course in forms of their own, which I understand associatively on the basis of my
familiarity. [emphasis added]” It seems the notion of the familiar sneaks by as a natural
function of its sign prior to perception. Thus, and perhaps it was because Husserl was not
an adoptee, I, as an adoptee, question this definition of familiarity as the mechanism
through which his critique functions: we have become too familiar with perception, with
defaults, and therefore can no longer see accurately what we are perceiving. What
Husserl was not positioned to do, again, as he was not an adoptee, was to further explore
how we have become too familiar with familiarity itself. Clearly adoption and adoptees
and the adoptive were not in Husserl’s direct view or within his gaze, as the global
transnational adoption industry and network had yet to be coalesced and codified as such.

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59 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology.*
to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book.*

60 Husserl, *Ideas,* 236.

61 Husserl, *Cartesian,* 120.
In order to see this better, I turn to Husserl’s method of eidetic reduction that attempts to get at the essences of things. But instead of Descartes’s wax or a candle, the adoptee subject may be more compelled to reduce “family” through imaginary variation. This examination might take two different trajectories. One trajectory might lead to an implosion of the phenomenological reliance on “family” and “familiarity” as an unmarked signs. Another trajectory, however, might accept without question the exemption of family from an inquiry into essences because of the nonadoptee assumption and belief in a naturalized habitus of the social, i.e., human realm, whose essential stuff of connection, bonding, association, affiliation, assembling, attaching and detaching, sociality, and so on, can be found in the natural family. This assumption would be seemingly evident and self-explanatory. Further, this perception engenders personal identity in a seemingly natural way. This alliance with nature is also, consider, a kind of positioning, recall, a kind of dispositioning, and a kind of disposition, also a dis-position, as it claims to be of and produce no position, as without it (this dis-position), how can the subject claim to know nature at all? Significantly this was Husserl’s phenomenology, depending on this exemption of family because family is already nature.

In short, I suggest that nonadoptee habitus (as opposed to the also variously composed and formed adoptee habitus— that includes the nonadoptee habitus) has no

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Because of this and for many other reasons likewise, I would encourage all adoptees and nonadoptees to think of nonadoptees as such; throughout this work, I try to use the descriptor as much as possible because one of the defining factors of nonadoptees is not seeing them necessarily as such (as their primacy is insured by their opposition to the adoptive). This in effect produces the presumption that adoptees are not non-nonadoptees but adoptees.
need to eidetically reduce “family,” as such. It is only the nonadoptee subject who may see more investment in and curiosity for doing so, nonetheless. The nonadoptee may not notice the ease with which “familiarity” and “the familiar” rolls off the tongue and floats ready in the mind, but the adoptee may note anxiety toward these terms—as we have been dis-oriented from their signification—and in all the ways they cite challenges to multiple established orders, national, political, categorical, taxonomical, societal, traditional, historical, structural, poststructural, natural. The nonadoptee may not be curious about the logic of familiarity and family, about its presupposed exemption from the phenomenological attitude, as it, I argue, greatly depends on this exemption and its necessary forgetting in order to make sense of anything phenomenological or of any phenomena in the first place. Thus, what does the eidetic reduction of family look like?

I suggest two trajectories. The popularly modern nonadoptee calculation (despite its lack of the need for it) might begin with the idea that family must at least have the essential components of mother and child, or parent and child, and in terms of number, in terms of smallest number that could make up a family, it may be two. Would we call a family that started out as three, which then became two, or even one, still a family? Or we would say this was once a family? Nevertheless the integrity of the question of number holds, as it was deemed a family in the first place. The nonadoptee may further point out that what prevents any persons from simply claiming to be (whether or not if in actuality it is the case) a family, if the ages match up enough, if the behavior matches up enough, if these are, indeed, similar enough. In response, then, the nonadoptee may suggest then that the persons claiming to be a family must at least have some kind of original and
provable reason for or evidence of their connection, for their presentation as a family. The nonadoptee posits that clearly this reason and evidence merely can be found at the source of their connection in the first instance, which is by birth. The nonadoptee then posits that the existence or not of “blood ties” adequately constitutes the essence of family.

The adoptee may interject here, however, and ask what if by various machinations over time certain nations and political economies and Cold War politics and nationalist expansionist imperialism and Christian ethics and savior mentalities and technologies of conscription and other numerous cultural, political, economic, juridical and established maintenances of the Other in all its various valences codified the figure of the adoptee and adoption and adoptive families as such (not that there was not always adoptive families and adoptees and adoption), and such that, however problematically, paradoxically, or mimetically, new forms of family are now more visible and possible, for better and for worse? And would we say these formations and people within them are not family? Do we give lip service to adoption and adoptees and adoptive families and allow them to mimic family and simulate it, content in knowing, that none of these simulations are the real thing? How does the introduction of the historical modern adoptee, which has taken over the previous period’s focus on the orphan, change the eidetic reduction of family?

Additionally, of course, the critical capital afforded by “weighing-in” to these politics encourages a kind of paranoia, perhaps, in that, while necessary and productive and inexhaustibly contributive, some critical (and artistic) contributions do not feature
open or liberatory or positive futures, particularly for adoptees themselves. The presupposed definitions of kinship, family, identity and their subsequent alignment with nature and essence have not been adequately acknowledged or sufficiently analyzed (the latter follows from the former), however. How do we craft a discourse and a criticism and an activism and a positionality and a future for the transnational and transracial adoptee that not only describes but challenges what Husserl called “the natural attitude”\textsuperscript{63}?

Variously aligning adoption and adoptees with forced migration, slavery, death, and psychic impossibilities and torment, loss, “being lost,” we as critics risk missing an opportunity in that we might miss fully, while it is happening, what we are becoming. It may be scary to take on our monstrosity: indeed, adoption is an abomination, it does not follow the natural order of things. It is my general intention to argue for a future wherein the adoptee is one of the markers of change in the historical record of how people view each other and categorize one another. This argument suggests that the political if not literal goal here is not self-annihilation (discussed elsewhere in this volume), but an agent and bringer of change. Our presence now shows, perhaps, how there was never a natural order to begin with, that the supposedly \textit{a priori} “fundamentals” of family and kinship are not blood, “sacred bonds,” or genes but adoption, or what I might call the function of adoption or the adoptive function, the functional theoretical use value of “adoption.” But in order to accomplish this, our frameworks will have to move beyond reiterating the

\textsuperscript{63} For Husserl, “It is not easy for us to overcome the primeval habit (die urwuchsige Gewohnheit) of living and thinking in the naturalistic attitude and thus of naturalistically falsifying the psychical” (271). See Husserl, \textit{Philosophy as a Rigorous Science}. Translated by M. Brainard. \textit{New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy} II, 2002, pp. 249-95.
\textit{realness} of our biogenetically related kin in Korea against the \textit{falseness} or \textit{tragedy of our lives}. This would mean not to end with psychic unrest and wandering, racial melancholia, or commodity fetishism, even though all these are arguably accurate. \textit{This}, is my position, as a Korean adoptee transnational and transracial adoption critic. But even if transnational adoption ends, I would hope we would have stood for more than the mere catalyst for our own end, our own end of a future.

Another way to look at this desire for self-annihilation is to excavate \textit{why} it exists, what its causes might be, and what remains vague about it? The transracial adoptee’s existential calculus of belonging does not necessarily have to end in insurmountable loss and melancholia: \textit{I am not who I should be, and I feel robbed of true identity and therefore also lost; we are legacy to a history of unfair power relations, economic, cultural, and political, between rich nations and poor ones, we have two mothers when we shouldn’t have had to have two mothers, and our destiny is self-annihilation.} This common starting place unfortunately reinforces what genetic essentialism demands, which includes maintaining non-biogenetically related kinship as inauthentic, as not the default, as not natural, which also includes keeping the adoptee and adoption as an aberration to this norm. Thus, we are aberrations of kin and kinship, and we must be destroyed. It seems much of our own discourse, many critics, and many adoptees personally feel this way.

Further, it seems as if, whether by accident or by presumed empiricism or this or that rhetorical purpose, one issue is how to properly \textit{locate} adoption studies and criticism within history, theory, Asian America, postcolonialism, diaspora studies, queer theories,
Marxist critiques, feminist theories, theories of the self, identity, kinship, etc. The themes of our context only buttress criticism’s approach in like fashions, and this relationship dangerously reinforces this tendency toward *location* and *locating*, as if to contain, as if identity and agency are not productions. Stuart Hall, for instance, suggests that “instead of thinking identity as an already accomplished fact … we should think [sic] of identity as a ‘production’ [that] is never complete, always in process … always ‘in context,’” *positioned*.  

A lot of the critical reception to Borshay Liem’s *First Person Plural* views it as evidence of that which it explores the existence of. Kim, Choy, and Eng treat this text as a signifier of the psychic impossibilities of transnational and transracial adoptees instead of explicit interrogations of that which dooms the adoptee to be viewed and determined as psychically lost and inauthentic. One way to get at this—and surely there are many—I have suggested, is to look at texts like *First Person Plural* as phenomenological texts, texts that explore the phenomenology of particular subject positions and identities. After all, that is what phenomenology is all about, the identification of things, properly (even if the ground will collapse later). As I subsequently suggest, Borshay Liem’s confrontation and provocation of family, what constitutes it, fundamentally, is, likewise, fundamentally, a phenomenological inquiry into the foundations of our notions of family and familiarity. For instance, when Deann’s sister proudly suggests that “Even though we look different, and different nationality or whatever, we’re your family,” or when Deann’s brother

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likewise points out that even though Deann “didn’t have the family eyes … You got the family smile,” representational criticism will point to the quotation as evidence of how multiculturalism and neoliberalism encouraged such beliefs—that also unfortunately erases racial difference—and how this causes psychic trauma and confusion in the transracial adoptee. A nonrepresentational criticism, however, might not take this position, and instead highlight how transracial adoption forces, consistently, encounters of difference that, sure, white power and white individuals will erase away or hide, but nevertheless also still prompt that which might not have been so visible (or visible in its invisibility) before: the flexibility of family, the instability of the heteronormative national nuclear family, and the rise of adoptive and “modern” family formations that do actually challenge normative kinship. In a way, representational criticism only sustains the normative kinship versus adoptive kinship binary by not treating adoptee texts as texts.

Additionally, when Deann says that “I belonged only to my American parents … I didn’t have a Korean history or a Korean identity,” representational critics suggest that this is evidence of itself: see, she says she doesn’t have a Korean history or identity. This must be true because of all the injustice and trauma inflicted upon her as a tragic orphan of transnational adoption, robbed of her natural culture and origin. Again, however, a nonrepresentational criticism might offer that what Deann suggests is actually impossible. Hers is a history that includes the legal obviation of her old Korean citizenship and biogenetically related parents and an identity that includes the idea that a once extant Korean identity was erased. In a similar move, critically, many critics like
Kim, Choy, and Eng also presuppose the belongingness of the adoptee child to an original parent or parents who, still, relinquished the child (even if coerced, confused, or under false pretenses), which is merely to point out that there is erasure that occurs on the critical end as well, in that it better serves the critical market to publish critiques that highlight the subjugation and subordination, history and cooptation, and psychical and ontological plight of the transnational and transracial adoptee against the naturalized norm of genetic family.

When Deann suggests that “When [my parents] adopted me they really accepted me as their child and I really became a part of their family,” and that, “Even though I wasn’t related to them by blood it was as if I had been born to them somehow,” representational critics focus on the “as if” as indicative of the limitations of an only available mimicry brought about by legal erasures of the subject. However, it is this treatment of the “as if” that reveals how all notions of familiarity work: as if like family. What the adoptee does is challenge that natural calculation by suggesting an implosion of the as if or as like or the familiar, or the folding in on itself, in that things can only be as like something via virtue of various criteria of familiarity. If family is that which anchors familiarity, and if family is from the beginning disrupted as anchor for all familiarity, then the implosion consists of an inversion or deconstruction: adoption is at the heart of all family and familiarity. Adoption is at the heart of all family because parents both nonadoptive and adoptive have to choose to raise the child in question or not, and adoption is at the heart of familiarity because to accept that something is familiar is to
first believe in family, and still, even though family now can be shown to be based on adoption.

I further note, in the representational criticism of First Person Plural, a certain hesitation to directly speak to some of the ensuing questions advertised by following these critical trajectories of representation. In other words, the ostensible flightpath of representational criticism heads toward the following, at least, essential questions, as in, questions regarding essences, the nature of essences, the appearance of essences: if racial difference and its erasure within the adoptive family cause and is evidence of such dramatically tortured psychical states of conflict and unresolved mourning, and if, correspondingly, the transnational adoption industry has created a booming market of baby-buying, then clearly the suggestion is that transnational and transracial adoption is bad or unethical, and therefore the latter should be banned (which already doesn’t speak to what this means or would mean for the adoptees, already extant, themselves)? This conceit is explicit, though; it is already there this conclusion of anti-adoption. But further, what supports this conceit? What does this critical version of anti-adoption indirectly suggest? Clearly, it asks, without asking, whether all families should ideally be of one singular racial makeup and whether all families should ideally be of one clear nationality. What if everyone was biracial? Would transracial adoption be more acceptable? These are indirect questions of essences and of the phenomenology of family and kinship. While I am not sure if these are the questions we want to be asking, exactly, I am glad that, at least, the eidetic reduction of familiarity does not end up reducing familiarity to how family is familiar, as there are many other ways to imagine familiarity
through experience: familiarity through shape, duration, context, specific social condition, etc. I am also glad that the eidetic reduction of family does not end up reducing family to blood or genetic relation, as the concept of family still holds in instances of openly adoptive modern families and in instances of the historical family with secretive (or open, for that matter) adopted children and in instances of the modern openness of “family” and the flexibility with which it is used. And therefore, as such, “family” is only ever a technology of the social, of the human, broadly speaking, and not the social itself. Because ultimately, nothing can ever actually be like family if family is only, ever, purely, blood based or genetically defined or justified.

To conclude, I suggest that First Person Plural prompts a possible “fundamental” of the phenomenological family by turning to a metaphor of love and belonging that also speaks to the adoption at the heart of all family. But unconventionally, I find this prompting happening to happen in Arnold, Deann’s adoptive father. On his expectations regarding meeting Deann’s Korean mother, he eagerly extolls, however, naively, their meeting: “We share something, there’s a bond, although we’ve never met; I know we communicate in a heartbeat.” Adoption consists of a decision and the subsequent incorporation of it and its integration into one’s life, responsibility, care, and love, which is ultimately the essence of any phenomenology of family.
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