

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Dissertations, Theses, and Student Research:  
Department of English

English, Department of

---

Spring 5-2016

# Birth Family Search, Trauma, and Mel-*han*-cholia in Korean Adoptee Memoirs

Katelyn J. Hemmeke

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishdiss>



Part of the [Asian American Studies Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#)

---

Hemmeke, Katelyn J., "Birth Family Search, Trauma, and Mel-*han*-cholia in Korean Adoptee Memoirs" (2016). *Dissertations, Theses, and Student Research: Department of English*. 107.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishdiss/107>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Student Research: Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BIRTH FAMILY SEARCH, TRAUMA, AND MEL-*HAN*-CHOLIA IN KOREAN  
ADOPTEE MEMOIRS

by

Katelyn J. Hemmeke

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Amelia María de la Luz Montes

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2016

BIRTH FAMILY SEARCH, TRAUMA, AND MEL-*HAN*-CHOLIA IN KOREAN  
ADOPTEE MEMOIRS

Katelyn Joy Hemmeke, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Amelia María de la Luz Montes

“Birth Family Search, Trauma, and Mel-*han*-cholia in Korean Adoptee Memoirs” analyzes the connections between adoption trauma and birth family search by examining three Korean-American adoptee memoirs: *The Language of Blood* and *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee’s Return to Korea*, both by Jane Jeong Trenka; and *Ghost of Sangju* by Soojung Jo. I draw links between their work and studies on trauma by critical scholars Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, Margaret Homans, and Jennifer Cho. According to Caruth, the pathology of a traumatic experience lies in the victim’s inability to fully experience the traumatic event as it happens; only belatedly does the traumatic event haunt the victim. Laub calls this a “collapse of witnessing.” In the case of transnationally and transracially adopted Koreans, who are almost always adopted at very young ages, trauma stems from the separation of the adoptee from her birth mother—an event that most adoptees cannot “fully experience” as it happens and thus they cannot recall it later. I claim that by searching for their birth families, transnationally and transracially adopted Koreans like Trenka and Jo search for a figure who can provide witness to the trauma of their adoption. Returning to Korea, searching for birth family, and recording their personal narratives also work to create what Homans calls “authentic origins.” Finally, adoptee memoirs can be viewed as works of political practice via Cho’s concept of mel-*han*-

cholia, which synthesizes the Freudian idea of melancholy with the Korean notion of communal grief known as *han*. Acknowledging the trauma of adoption and testifying to it via memoir, adoptees like Trenka and Jo work to disrupt the dominant discourse on adoption that typically erases the adoptee's pre-adoption history and insists upon total assimilation into the adoptive family and nation.

저 강들이 모여드는 곳  
 성난 파도 아래 깊이  
 한 번만이라도  
 이를 수 있다면  
 나 언젠가  
 심장이 터질 때까지  
 흐느껴 울고 웃으며  
 긴 여행을 끝내리 미련 없이

아무도 내게  
 말해 주지 않는  
 정말로 내가  
 누군지 알기 위해

*Where the river meets  
 Deep down under the angry waves  
 If only I could get there at least once  
 Someday  
 I'll sob and laugh  
 Until my heart bursts  
 And I'll put an end to a long journey  
 Without any regret*

*To find out  
 Who I really am  
 That no one  
 Will tell me about*

신해철, “민물장어의 꿈”—“Dream of the Freshwater Eel” by Shin Hae Chul

## CHAPTER 1: A BOWL OF WHITE RICE

My father, the oldest of five sons, born and raised in the Michigan countryside, grew up under the stern eyes of a thrifty farmer father and a stay-at-home mother. On Sundays, after the evening church service, my grandmother would dish up a simple meal for the six hungry men at her table: blue-box macaroni and cheese with chunks of Spam or hot dogs; casserole made with cream of mushroom soup and meat from the rabbits my grandfather raised; white rice topped with butter and a few good spoonfuls of brown sugar.

When I was a little kid, my father would sometimes heap a plate with that same buttery rice-and-sugar concoction and set it in front of me. I'd nibble at the sugariest bits and then turn up my nose.

"Finish your rice," my dad would say.

I'd shake my pigtails and pout. "I don't wanna."

"If you were still in Korea, all you would have to eat is a tiny bowl of rice like this," my dad would say, cupping his work-worn hand as if cradling a small orange.

"Plain white rice, with no butter or sugar on it."

The thought always horrified me. It was bad enough having rice that just didn't have any more sugary parts left. Imagine eating rice that never had any sugar to begin with.

For more than two decades, that small, imagined bowl of plain white rice was one of the only ways that anyone ever acknowledged the first few months of my life, spent in a foreign land, or the adoption that brought me to America. In the farming town of

roughly 8,000 where I grew up, no one ever called me a chink or a gook. No one ever accused me of being a Twinkie; more likely than not, no one could have told me what a Twinkie is other than a Hostess snack. No one ever told me to go back where I had come from; few even asked me where I had come from, even though I did not resemble my parents, did not resemble anyone in my school, did not resemble anyone except my own brother, also adopted (separately) from Korea.

But this also meant that no one knew anything about Korea. No one called me *unni* or *noona* or *chingu*<sup>1</sup>. No one had ever eaten kimchi; more likely than not, no one could have told me what kimchi is. No one encouraged me to visit the country of my birth or to learn about the culture in which I could have grown up. To my white adoptive family and friends, “Asian culture” meant orange chicken at Panda Express, kimonos tried on at Disney’s Epcot, and white faces painted orangeish-brown for a community production of *The King and I*. In their minds, aside from occasional puzzlement over whether South Korea is “the ‘good’ side or the ‘bad’ side,” Korea did not exist. I, as a Korean, did not exist. The poor Korean girl and her small bowl of plain white rice did not exist, and this was supposed to be a good thing, a blessing from God for which I should be grateful.

I was adopted at the age of three months. I know little else; to this day, my parents rarely speak about my adoption. They sometimes coo over washed-out disposable-camera pictures taken at the Detroit airport where they picked me up—I, my chubby cheeks and dark eyes peeking out from a soft swath of pink blankets, held by my mother, young and

---

<sup>1</sup> Korean words for “sister” and “friend”

blonde and beaming with delight—but they have never shown me any records or files, never indicated any knowledge of my birth family except that “my mother requested that I be placed in a good Christian home.” I did not even know that I had a Korean name until my early teens, and even then, I did not learn my Korean name from my parents.

I discovered my Korean name in the junk drawer.

I don’t know what I had been searching for—perhaps a roll of Lifesavers, double-A batteries for my Game Boy, a Band-Aid to patch up a paper cut. Instead, I found a small pink hospital bracelet, the kind that babies wear after they are born, and printed on it was the name “Min Ji Oh.”

I had never seen the bracelet before. I did not know where the bracelet had come from or why it had been buried in the junk drawer beneath stray buttons and rolls of yellowed tape and markers that had long run dry. I did not know that “Min Ji Oh” was technically written out of order, since Korean names list the family name first and the bracelet therefore should have read “Oh Min Ji.” I did not know why the bracelet was printed in English instead of Korean—not that I would have even recognized *hangeul*<sup>2</sup>, let alone been able to read it. The bracelet had no story, and neither did Oh Min Ji.

I let the bracelet fall back into the junk drawer. I have not seen it since.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Korean alphabet



## CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As the previous section indicates, I grew up entirely disconnected from Korean culture and lacked any knowledge about my birth family's history, adoption history, or anything relating to Korea. In this section, I reconnect with the historical events that are a backdrop to my own history.

In the aftermath of the Korean War, images of dirt-covered, emaciated children wandering through empty streets sparked a flood of American humanitarian aid to the thousands of Korean “waifs” who were left orphaned by the war. Newspaper stories of American soldiers handing out candy to Korean children and spending their off-hours at orphanages, accompanied by appeals to the American public to send their old clothes and toys to Korea, quickly evolved into advertisements for child sponsorship and adoption. In her ethnography *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*, scholar Eleana J. Kim includes images of clip-out advertisements, often printed by Christian organizations such as World Vision<sup>3</sup>, that caught the attention of Americans with headlines such as “A Korean Orphan for You—Yours for the Asking!” and pictures of tiny Korean children staring wistfully into the camera (Kim, 54).

Historian Arissa Oh describes other articles that pulled at the heartstrings of Americans by insisting that “for these children there is only the hope that kindly Americans will send aid to them” (Oh, 43). Before long, American donations came accompanied by adoption inquiries from hopeful couples, sometimes even circling pictures of particular children in newspaper or magazine articles and requesting to adopt those children specifically. Many

---

<sup>3</sup> World Vision, an evangelical Christian organization founded in 1950, provides humanitarian aid in nearly 100 countries. It focuses particularly on child sponsorship programs.

inquiries were sent directly to the Consul General or even straight to Syngman Rhee, the president of Korea<sup>4</sup>.

President Rhee “had significant interest in promoting Korean adoption abroad” (Kim, 62), but in its shaky years immediately following the war, the Korean government lacked the infrastructure and resources to facilitate international adoptions. Adoption inquiries were pouring in by the hundreds. A 1953 article in the *Los Angeles Times* reporting on a missionary hospital in Seoul that housed fifty orphans prompted over six hundred adoption requests (60), yet the Korean government had neither an adoption system in place nor the funds to create one. Rhee and his staff were all too aware of this, noting that they were in need of “some help from some source—an authority who will be recognized by the American authorities here—to receive the [adoption] requests and deal with them expeditiously on the spot,” as well as “the personal interest of an American person who has some godliness in his heart to get these children to the parents who want them so much” (Oh, 75). With so much adoption demand coming from America and so few resources of its own, the Korean government needed Americans to lead the way in creating an international adoption system.

The Rhee administration soon got their wish: in 1955, inspired by a World Vision meeting, a man named Harry Holt arrived in Korea. One can hardly discuss the history of Korean transnational adoption without mentioning Harry and Bertha Holt, a humble farming couple from Oregon who have been “much mythologized as the founder[s] of

---

<sup>4</sup> Known for being a staunch anti-communist, as well as a Christian who was educated in the U.S., Syngman Rhee was first elected president in 1948. He was also re-elected in 1952, 1956, and 1960, although his fourth term ended in his resignation and exile.

Korean and international adoption” (8). Contrary to popular belief, the Holts did not actually create the entire practice of Korean adoption. The Holt Adoption Program was not created until 1956, and the first reported adoption of a Korean “war baby” by an American civilian was finalized in 1953 (Oh, 46; Kim, 60). Not long thereafter, Korea’s first government-approved adoption agency, Child Placement Services (CPS), was created thanks to foreign funding (Kim, 61). However, Harry Holt, who was described as the “Good Samaritan of Korea” and the head of a “model American family” (Oh, 94-95), was undeniably “the public face of Korean adoption” (89). On his 1955 trip to Korea, Holt took twelve children into his care—eight children for the Holt family to adopt and four children for three other families—nursed them to health, and brought them back to the United States. Thanks to the help of several senators, Congress passed a special bill that allowed the Holts to adopt eight children instead of the normal limit of two allowed by the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 (92).

The eight children adopted by the Holts, like many of the children among the first wave of Korean adoptees, were “GI babies”—mixed-race children born to American GI fathers and Korean mothers. The “GI baby problem” was one of the primary forces driving the Rhee administration’s efforts to accommodate the American demand for international adoption: not only did post-war Korea lack financial and social resources in general, the traditional Confucian society was reluctant to accept mixed-race children. Most Koreans assumed that GI babies were born to prostitute mothers, fathered by American soldiers who vanished back to the States, although this was not always the case. Regardless of the circumstances of their birth, GI babies were treated with brutal

discrimination in a country that prized racial purity<sup>5</sup>. President Rhee fully acknowledged that these children “[would] never have any real place in Korean society” (51) because they were “not truly Korean” (64); therefore, it would be better to send as many GI babies to the U.S. as possible.

However, as Korea rapidly developed from a war-torn country into the world’s thirteenth largest economy, Korean transnational adoption transformed from a war relief effort to “give [GI babies] a chance elsewhere” (54) into the “Cadillac” of adoption programs, sending thousands of children abroad well into the 2000s. Long after the end of the Korean War, Korean transnational adoption appealed to American couples for several reasons. First, Korea’s adoption system was the oldest and “the most transparent and easiest to navigate.” Second, it became one of the fastest-working systems with short waiting periods. Perhaps most importantly, the vast majority of children available for adoption were young and healthy infants. Finally, adoptive parents could pick up their Korean child at an American airport, whereas other countries required adopters to travel to the sending country (166). By the 1980s, most Korean children being sent abroad for adoption were not orphans without parents. Instead, they were the children of single mothers who had relinquished them—sometimes by choice, often by coercion or force—due to the lack of social, economic, and legal support for single mothers trying to raise their children alone. In 1989, 77% of Korean adoptees had been born to single mothers (197). The number only continues to rise. For example, in 2006, 1,890 out of 1,899 overseas adopted Koreans—or 99.5%—were born to single mothers (Kim, 25). In total,

---

<sup>5</sup> Driven by traditional Confucian emphasis upon bloodlines, Koreans considered mixed-race children “completely alien” (Oh 51).

roughly 200,000 Korean children have been adopted overseas since the 1950s, with as many as 150,000 or more of them sent to the United States.

Although the majority of Korean adoptees are not actually orphans, very little research has been produced regarding birth family searches and reunions. In her 2014 study of Korean adoptees' initial reunions with their birth families, Sara Docan-Morgan notes that "generous estimates suggest that only 22% of Korean adoptees have actively searched for their birth parents" (354). However, the 22% estimate comes from a study conducted in 2000 (Freundlich and Lieberthal). The ever-extending reach of the internet and social media, along with growing mainstream attention to Korean adoptees' birth family searches, has undoubtedly increased that percentage in the past several years. Docan-Morgan also refers to a 2013 study by Kim Park Nelson, estimating that "less than 8% of Korean adoptees who search for their families are able to reunite" (354). This, too, is an optimistic figure; other sources such as the Overseas Koreans Foundation estimate the success rate for birth family searches to be as low as 2%.

As more and more adoptees return to Korea, attempt to search for their birth families, and run into the same frustrating obstacles hindering their searches, adoptees have begun to find ways to give voice to their stories. Adoptees have formed networks of organizations all over the world, dedicated to connecting adoptees with each other, providing post-adoption services such as counseling and birth family search assistance, raising awareness of adoption issues, and promoting the rights of adoptees and single mothers. In addition, adoptees have created works of scholarship, art, and literature. After decades of adoption agencies and adoptive parents dominating the discourse on adoption,

adoptees have started to make their voices heard. Adoptees who grew up as the only adoptee and/or the only person of color in their communities can now watch films or read books written by other adoptees and realize that they are not alone in their experiences. In this way, literature serves not only as the bridge between present adoptee narratives and the history of adoption, but also as a means of connecting adoptees to each other.

### CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Now that the majority of Korean transnational adoptees are adults, the small but growing pool of academic and artistic work by adoptees continues to expand. Perhaps the genre with the largest concentration of adoptee work is the personal narrative. There are a number of memoirs, as well as documentary films, telling the personal stories of adoptees. Many of these narratives revolve around the adoptee's first trip back to Korea and/or birth family search.

I have chosen to focus on three Korean-American adoptee memoirs: *The Language of Blood* by Jane Jeong Trenka; *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea*, also by Trenka; and *Ghost of Sangju* by Soojung Jo. Trenka's memoirs, published in 2003 and 2009, are perhaps the most well-known. *The Language of Blood* traces Trenka's childhood and young adulthood, focusing particularly on her reunion with her birth family, while *Fugitive Visions* narrates Trenka's life after she moves permanently to Korea. Jo's memoir, published in 2015, is one of the most recent additions to the adoptee canon. The book follows Jo from her childhood in Kentucky to her recent reunion with her birth family.

There are several similarities between the stories of Trenka and Jo. Both women were born and adopted in the 1970s. They were both raised in rural, predominantly white areas of the U.S.: Trenka grew up in Minnesota, and Jo grew up in Kentucky. Additionally, both women have reunited with their birth families and traveled to Korea. Of course, Trenka and Jo also have their share of differences. Trenka was adopted as an infant, while Jo was three years old when she arrived in the U.S. At the time in which she

wrote her memoirs, Trenka had not had any children, while Jo's role as a mother to three biological children and one daughter adopted from China plays a large role in her birth family search.

To examine these memoirs, I draw from three theoretical concepts. First, I examine adoption trauma and the birth family search in adoptee memoirs. By combining the work of Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, and Margaret Homans, I argue that for transnational and transracial Korean adoptees, the birth family search and the "return" trip to Korea that usually accompanies it represent not only a quest for what Homans calls "authentic origins," but also a search for a witness to the trauma of their adoption. I then bridge these ideas to Jennifer Cho's concept of *mel-han-cholia*, arguing that adoptee memoirs, similar to Korean-American author Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, are works of political practice that push back against the dominant discourse perpetuated by the U.S.

This dominant discourse is what makes it crucial to examine the links between adoption and trauma. As I outlined in the previous section, Korean transnational adoption found its roots in the aftermath of the Korean War. Post-war humanitarian efforts resulted in an adoption system based upon the concept of "rescuing" children, a concept that stuck long after war orphans ceased to comprise the majority of children being sent for adoption. In turn, adoption discourse became permeated with the concept of gratitude: adoptees should be grateful that they were given the chance to have a better life in America. By focusing solely on the bright future adoptees are assumed to receive in America, adoption discourse (dominated by adoption agencies and adoptive parents)



erases the adoptee's birth history, deemed as the bleak alternative to a life blessed by adoption, and thus erases the possibility of adoptee trauma. In this discourse, adoption can only be considered a gift, a blessing of good fortune. There is no room to speak of trauma in a framework where adoptees are deemed "lucky" to have been adopted, or "saved," from an allegedly grim fate in a country viewed as inferior to the U.S.

However, as the narratives of adoptees like Trenka and Jo demonstrate, adoption is indeed a traumatic experience. By sharing their stories, Trenka and Jo confront the trauma of adoption and work to break down the discourse that attempts to erase it.

#### CHAPTER 4: ADOPTEE TRAUMA AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BIRTH FAMILY REUNIONS

From the first psychoanalytic works of Sigmund Freud to more recent theories on trauma and melancholy by scholars such as Cathy Caruth and David Eng, trauma has long been a subject of interest in a variety of academic fields. Although trauma itself evades a precise definition, Cathy Caruth writes that the pathology of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder lies “solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (4). In other words, an event is traumatic in the way that it haunts its victim rather than in the occurrence of the event itself.

Caruth’s description easily fits the context of adoption trauma. An adoptee who is adopted at a very young age may not be able to “fully experience” the trauma that occurs upon separation from her birth mother—a trauma that adoption writer Nancy Verrier calls “the primal wound<sup>6</sup>.” A young adoptee also may not “fully experience” the trauma that takes place as she must quickly adapt to the changes of being brought into a new family, usually of a different race, and (for transnational adoptees) the culture of a new country. But the losses of adoption are many: the loss of the birth family, loss of language, loss of culture and homeland. The power of these losses to haunt has proven itself over and over in the personal narratives of adoptees.

In applying trauma theory to the personal narratives of adoptees, I am particularly interested in drawing from the work of Caruth and Dori Laub. Laub, a child survivor of

---

<sup>6</sup> See *The Primal Wound* by Nancy Verrier

the Holocaust, is now a clinical professor of psychiatry who has written extensively on trauma and founded the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University<sup>7</sup>. In an essay titled “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle,” Laub writes about the “ceaseless struggle” of testifying and witnessing trauma (61). Through his work with Holocaust survivors, not to mention his personal experience, Laub came to believe in the importance of testimony:

The survivors did not only need to survive [the Holocaust] so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life. (63)

Without wishing to generalize qualities of the Holocaust, Caruth connects Laub’s essay to trauma in a broader context, noting that all traumatic experience entails a “collapse of witnessing,” or “the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs,” resulting in “a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory” (7). This gap or lack of witness is what fuels “the imperative to tell and to be heard” of which Laub writes.

Like Caruth, I do not mean to compare or equate transnational adoption with the Holocaust; however, much of Laub’s writing on trauma, witness, and testimony rings true to the experience of adoptees. The circumstances behind their adoption, the identities of

---

<sup>7</sup> See <http://web.library.yale.edu/testimonies>

their birth families, even knowledge of Korean language and culture in general all constitute “buried truth” for transnationally adopted Koreans. Because adoptees face a gap in knowledge and memory regarding whatever short time they may have spent in Korea with their birth families (and/or foster families, etc.), adoptees lack a witness to the trauma of their adoption.

Who, then, can fill the role of witness to adoption trauma? I argue that for transnationally and transracially adopted Koreans, the birth family search—and the “return” trip to Korea that usually accompanies it—represents not only a quest for their “roots,” but also a search for a witness to the trauma of their adoption. Applying Caruth’s theory to adoption, the adoptee herself cannot be the witness because she cannot fully experience the trauma of being separated from her birth mother, of being thrust suddenly into the arms of a new, adoptive mother who is almost always of a different race and culture, in those exact moments. Furthermore, adoptive parents are not usually present at the moment in which the adoptee is separated from her birth family, and for other reasons I will elaborate, the adoptive parents cannot acknowledge many of the traumatizing aspects of adoption and thus cannot serve as witnesses to adoptees’ trauma.

As a result, the role of witness can only be fulfilled by the adoptee’s birth mother. While no two adoptee stories are the same, the search for and reunion with the birth mother is a central aspect of both Trenka’s and Jo’s memoirs; both women write about the transformative experience of meeting their birth mothers. Both the reunion itself and the act of writing about it are ways for the adoptee to testify not only their own trauma, but the trauma of their birth mothers—for they, too, experience trauma in the separation

from their children. Because both the adoptee and the birth mother suffer from trauma in their separation, the reunion between them is all the more crucial for their healing.

\*A note on language: When directly quoting Trenka and Jo, I maintain whatever style in which the author chooses to romanize Korean words. **엄마**, the Korean word for “mother,” is often romanized in different ways. Trenka uses the English spelling “Umma,” while Jo chooses to romanize it as “Omma.” In keeping with each author’s preference, I refer to Trenka’s birth mother as “Umma” and Jo’s birth mother as “Omma.”

**“We wove a gag over our mouths as thick and impenetrable as love”<sup>8</sup>**

Jane Jeong Trenka and her older sister Carol were adopted from Korea in the early 1970s; Jane was an infant and her sister was four-and-a-half years old. They were raised by white adoptive parents in a rural Minnesotan town. Trenka describes the predominantly white, conservative Lutheran community as “the last bastion of all that is good, right, fundamental, and homogenous” (*The Language of Blood*, 21). Because religious organizations facilitate such a large number of international adoptions, many Korean adoptees have grown up in similar environments: small, rural towns with strong Christian roots and few, if any, people of color.

As the obvious minorities in their town, Trenka and her sister faced explicit racism. However, their parents did nothing to acknowledge the racism or prepare them

---

<sup>8</sup> Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, p. 30

for it, leaving silence as the only option for Jane and Carol. In *The Language of Blood*, Trenka portrays this racism via a scene written in the style of a musical script. In this scene, Trenka and her family go out to eat at a local diner, where the other patrons point and stare at Trenka and her sister. The strangers initially coo over the girls—“What cute little girls you have! Do they speak Chinese? How big will they get? What pretty almond eyes!”—but the patrons quickly turn hostile, shoving the girls roughly in their chairs and shouting racist insults: “Rice picker! . . . Go back to where you came from . . . Frog-eyed chink! Boat person! How much did they cost?” (34). All the while, Trenka’s parents hold their menus over their faces, “oblivious to the crowd” of strangers and leaving Trenka and her sister to suffer in silence, “bit[ing] down hard on their lower lips” (34). Even as children, Trenka and her sister learn to swallow their pain and refrain from giving voice to their trauma, already knowing that their adoptive parents will ignore them.

Not only do Trenka’s adoptive parents turn a blind eye to their daughters’ struggles, sometimes they are the ones who instigate racism. When Trenka dates Asian men in high school, her adoptive father does not approve: “He mocked their faces, as if they were not human, but dark, stupid monkeys. He mutilated their long names, which he could not and did not want to pronounce correctly” (66). Angry and humiliated, Trenka realizes that the butterflies she gets in her stomach do not flutter out of love: “it was self-loathing, the kind you get when you discover that you must be one of two things to your dad, either invisible or ridiculous” (66-67). Internalizing her father’s racist remarks, Trenka wishes she were not Asian. She never dates other Asian men again, perms and bleaches her hair, and even “check[s] ‘white’ in the box on all [her] college forms” (129).

Her parents do not realize the harm in their attitudes and are even pleased by Trenka's attempts to change her appearance. But the trauma of Trenka's adoption, and her adoptive parents' refusal to acknowledge it, begins long before Trenka faces racism in her Minnesotan town. Trenka equates her adoption to the death of her Korean self, describing herself and her sister as "Kyong-Ah, who lived to the age of six months, and Mi-Ja, who died at four years of age when she became Carol" (29). It is fairly common for transnational adoptees to describe themselves as having been "born" upon being brought off of the airplane into the arms of their adoptive families, but Trenka takes this idea a step further by intertwining her American "birth" with her Korean "death." This combination birth/death makes Trenka's American self, Jane, a survivor of a serious trauma: the death of Kyong-Ah, her Korean self.

However, for Trenka's adoptive parents, her Korean self never existed in the first place. Years later, when Trenka tries to tell her adoptive mother about "how it was growing up in that town, how profoundly painful and lonely it was in all that whiteness," her adoptive mother brushes off her concerns: "*So what, all kids are mean, everyone gets teased, if they didn't tease you for being Korean they would have teased you for something else, like being fat, so why do you expect special treatment?*" With these remarks, Trenka realizes that her adoptive mother "doesn't see [her] . . . doesn't see how other people see [her] . . . chooses to see me without [her] body . . . because she can make that choice . . . she can choose to live in her imagination where I am white too" (*Fugitive Visions*, 29). Unable to acknowledge that Kyong-Ah ever existed, Trenka's adoptive

mother is also unable to acknowledge the trauma that Trenka experiences in the forced split of her identity.

With no one to turn to, no one to witness her trauma, Trenka attempts to contact her birth mother. After finding an old airmail envelope in her mother's desk, Trenka copies the return address and begins sending letters to Korea: "These letters were my private way of grieving, of crying to my mythical mother, because my parents here would not listen, would not see. So I wrote and wrote, in childish print on Garfield stationery, and sent the messages out into the world with a wish that, somewhere, the letters would find eyes to read them, a heart to hear" (*The Language of Blood*, 39). Even at a young age, Trenka realizes that no one in her American family or community can understand her pain, so she reaches out to the only person she can think of who might: her Korean mother.

Trenka's letters to her birth mother are reminiscent of an anecdote that Dori Laub uses to emphasize the importance of witness and testimony. During World War II, a four-year-old Jewish boy living in the Krakow ghetto was smuggled out by his parents. They had heard that all children in the ghetto were going to be gathered and killed by the Nazis. The boy's mother gave him a passport photograph of herself, telling him to "turn to the picture whenever he felt the need to do so" (Laub 79). As the boy wandered the streets and drifted from shelter to shelter, he prayed to his mother's photograph: "Mother, let this war be over and come and take me back as you promised" (80). Laub interprets the boy's prayers as the creation of his first witness. Trenka's letters to her birth mother comprise a similar ritual. When her letters go unanswered, young Trenka grinds up rocks



into “magic dust” and wishes with all her might, “*Mother, mother, mother. Where are you? Please come for me*” (*The Language of Blood*, 43), echoing the Jewish boy’s prayers for his mother to return. Trenka is not even sure if her “mythical mother” truly exists, but the isolation of her white hometown leaves her with no other options for a witness to her testimony of trauma.

**“I am ashamed of being Korean and a little guilty about being American”<sup>9</sup>**

Like Trenka, Soojung Jo grew up with her adoptive family in a predominantly white community. Jo was three years old when she arrived in Kentucky; her family also adopted another daughter from Korea four years before Jo. In her rural hometown, which she describes as a “rotten heartland of hoedowns and square dancing” (Jo, 26), Jo faces her own set of challenges as she grows up in the obvious minority.

Early in her memoir, Jo writes about one of her first memories of racial awareness, which took place when she was about eight years old. Her family is watching the news as they eat pot roast for dinner. When a report about Japanese business executives touring American factories comes on the TV, Jo’s father mutters, “They should all go back where they came from” (15). In her child’s mind, Jo struggles to process this comment: “Those businessmen fascinate me because, unlike most people I know in real life, their physical appearance somehow validates mine. . . . If I’m one of them, does [Dad] want me to go back too?” (15). Similar to Trenka’s father as he mocks her Asian boyfriends, Jo’s father never thinks that Jo might direct his anti-Asian remarks

---

<sup>9</sup> Jo, *Ghost of Sangju*, p.35

toward herself. What's more, Jo's mother humiliates Jo by retelling this story over and over, and Jo can only wonder if her mother is any less oblivious: "Maybe she just thinks it's a funny anecdote—*Your father said they should go back where they came from! He didn't even realize he was talking about you!*" (15). To her adoptive parents, these are merely offhand comments. To Jo, they are a lesson in "being *other*—foreign, outside, separate" (14), and the lesson is all the more painful because her own family are the people who administer it.

Knowing that she is *other*, Jo yearns to be affirmed as a beautiful woman, but she lacks any role models other than the white models she sees in fashion magazines. Like Trenka, Jo attempts to perm her hair and apply makeup to imitate the white girls around her, but these efforts are never quite successful: "No matter how many spiral perms I go for, my hair is always the wrong texture; regardless of how much I tan, my skin is always the wrong shade of brown" (28-29). In addition, Jo's adoptive mother enters both Jo and her sister Kim in local beauty pageants. Jo can only speculate why her mother decides to do this: "Maybe she is motivated by a consuming adoration for her daughters that borders on envy, or maybe she can't resist showing off her real-life China dolls" (32). Tellingly, Jo compares the beauty pageant contestants who strut down a catwalk in over-the-top sequined gowns to the livestock being shown for prizes in nearby pens, "also on display, also vying for blue ribbons, trophies, and validation" (33). The almost comical image Jo paints of herself, "a charming, curly-haired Asian child straight off the plantation in purple ruffled pantaloons with a matching parasol" (32), represents yet another way that her own family subjects her to racial objectification. However, like Jo's failed attempts at

cosmetic alterations to her appearance, not even an “authentic Southern belle” costume can cover her racial difference.

Jo’s sense of alienation only grows when she becomes friends with the only other Asian student in her high school, a Laotian-American girl named Vo. Jo is fascinated by everything in Vo’s home: the Laotian food cooked by Vo’s mother, the household trinkets brought over from Laos, the way Vo can instantly switch between speaking English with Jo and speaking Lao with her family. Jo cannot help but envy Vo: “Where her identity is a natural adaptation within both her cultures, mine is an adaptation excluded from both of mine” (35). By declaring herself as “a fraud—a first-generation immigrant hiding behind [her] middle-class white family” (35), Jo reveals another significant factor in adoption trauma: severed from their birth culture while simultaneously Othered in their adoptive culture, adoptees face a double strike of alienation. Unable to express these feelings of cultural rejection to anyone—not her adoptive family, not even Vo—Jo can only remain “sullen and secluded” (36). With no one to witness her trauma, Jo has no choice but to remain silent.

**“I know you now, Mama”<sup>10</sup>: Birth mothers as witnesses to adoptee trauma**

When Trenka is a junior in high school, her letters to Korea are finally answered. A letter from Seoul arrives with a phone number listed at the bottom. It’s a life-changing event for Trenka, but her adoptive parents still hold the reins: Trenka must receive permission from them to make the long-distance phone call to Korea. Her parents allow

---

<sup>10</sup> Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, p. 103

her to make the call, but their power to grant or withhold permission speaks to the degree of control that adoptive parents can wield over the lives of adoptees, regardless of their interest in the adoptee's birth family. In addition, neither Trenka's close friends nor her family (even her sister is not mentioned as having any reaction or interest in the letter or phone call) show any excitement or empathy for Trenka: "No one else made an event out of this momentous occasion. My parents did not gather around me to hear the conversation; instead, they went about their own business—watching TV, organizing grocery lists" (*The Language of Blood*, 70). Trenka's adoptive parents regard anything having to do with Korea or Trenka's birth family as none of their business. By totally ignoring Trenka as she reconnects with her birth mother for the first time, her adoptive parents deny the significance of the reunion and even the existence of Trenka's birth mother.

After six years of exchanging letters, Trenka finally travels to Korea to meet her birth mother in person. However, her adoptive parents continue to deny the importance of her birth family. As Trenka travels to Korea several times over the years, she repeatedly asks her adoptive parents to travel with her: "I knew how much my Korean mother wanted to thank them herself, to show them how grateful she was to have her children cared for" (110). But Trenka's adoptive parents always refuse, citing the inability to take time off from work. Trenka knows it is useless to argue: "It didn't matter that they would take time off work to sit on the deck in front of their house. They weren't going anywhere" (110). By refusing to travel to Korea, Trenka's adoptive parents deny

acknowledgement of both Trenka's ties to her birth family and her birth mother's desire to thank them.

In contrast, her birth family affirms Trenka and her identity in all the ways that her adoptive parents do not. Trenka and her birth family marvel at the similarities in their physical appearance and personalities, although Trenka notes that these connections should *not* be striking: "Physical similarities, as well as similarities in personality, are normal in most families, where people tend to look and act more or less like each other. But for us, it was a point of amusement and pride" (128). After a lifetime of alienation in her hometown and even in her own adoptive family, Trenka delights in being surrounded by a family that not only looks like her, but loves her freely and fully. She is amazed that despite her lack of Korean language proficiency and cultural competency, her birth family does something that her adoptive family never did: they immediately come to her defense when shopkeepers and strangers stare at her. Her birth family's love greatly moves her: "I love them for speaking for me, for defending me so that people will not assume that I am either Japanese or retarded. They do not shame me for who I am and how I cannot speak and understand . . . They take care of me and love me unconditionally, because I belong to them" (131). Trenka has only just met her birth family, but they care for her and support her in ways that her adoptive family did not.

Even when Trenka's birth mother is delirious with cancer years later, her affirmation of Trenka as her daughter provides Trenka with the witness she seeks. As they lie on the floor, Umma strokes Trenka's hair and calls her "*ippun egg'i*"—"pretty baby"—probably hallucinating that Trenka is an infant again and that they had never

been separated. Despite Umma's delirium, these simple words have a great effect on Trenka:

I wish I could join Umma in her mind, so I could give voice to that tiny baby, tell her how much I love her. I want to enter the sad story that she remembered for so long and change its ending to something happy, change it into the fairy-tale life she dreamed of when she was only a girl herself, when she still had a mother. Most of all, I want to tell her that with her two words—*ippun egg*i—she has changed the rest of my story: I have never felt so wanted or loved, and this will be my deep well of strength, beginning at this moment—here, now, with her. (172-173)

When Umma claims Trenka as her *ippun egg*i, she transforms Trenka's story. Instead of a lonely girl who can only imagine her mother as a mythical figure locked in a faraway tower, Trenka becomes the girl she has always longed to be: her mother's daughter, together in the present reality, no longer just a fairy tale or a dream. Thanks to the affirmation of her mother's love, Trenka can move forward with the rest of her story and begin to heal from the traumas of her past.

Soojung Jo's reunion with her birth mother, which took place only recently in 2013, is made possible through more modern means than Trenka's handwritten letters. Jo contacts Korean Adoption Services, an organization run by the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, and posts her photo and personal information on their website. One year after posting her photo, Jo receives an email from a Korean woman named Jeesoo,

who explains that her aunt is searching for her daughter. A DNA test soon confirms that Jeessoo's aunt is indeed Jo's birth mother.

After spending her childhood wondering if she is a "real" person and if she has a "real" mother, the evidence of her birth family's existence finally allows Jo to believe that both she and her birth mother are real people: "*I have a mother I have a mother I have a mother I come from somewhere I am real I am a person I am loved*" (Jo 8). Like Trenka, Jo is overwhelmed by the love of her birth family. Because Jo was a toddler when she was adopted, some of her extended family members still have memories from when Jo lived with them. When she visits Korea and meets them for the first time, Jo's extended family gathers for an overnight trip to their ancestors' burial site in the countryside. Jo is surprised to see her elderly uncle openly weeping, and her cousin Hyunjung explains that the family has not gathered for over a decade. Jo is struck by this revelation: "I realize now that this is a family reunion, and I am the reason for it. I'm awestruck by this circumstance, by how important every person in the world is, and by how many people even a baby can touch. How could I have ever thought that I was unimportant? That nobody missed me?" (152). After spending her whole life feeling insignificant, even non-existent in America, this love and acceptance from her birth family affirms Jo's identity in ways she had not known were possible.

In addition, through extensive letters and conversations with her birth family, Jo learns that her adoption records had been falsified. As she reads her adoption file and compares it with her birth mother's stories, Jo sifts through "the myth of [herself], composed of mostly lies" (115). Her adoption file states that she was "abandoned in the

street with her name and birthday pinned to her shirt” (115), a story that aligns with the typical Hollywood narrative of “the beloved infant gently swaddled . . . The longing backward glance, and a dream of a better life” (84). However, Jo’s birth mother explains that she was homeless and jobless after Jo’s birth father, an alcoholic, died suddenly in the street. Jo’s uncle—the man who weeps upon meeting Jo at the family reunion—wanted to help raise Jo, but lost everything when a friend betrayed him on a loan. With no other choice, Omma brought Jo to an orphanage, thinking that Jo could temporarily stay there until Omma found a job, but the orphanage sent Jo away for adoption (144-145).

Omma’s story is not easy for Jo to digest, but Omma’s testimony is an important piece in the puzzle of her identity, for Jo believes that “only the truth can resolve [her] dissonance” (9). The truth of Omma’s story, combined with the powerful love of her entire birth family, finally brings Jo a sense of healing. Leaving Korea after meeting her birth family is not easy for Jo, but unlike the trip that first removed her from Korea for her adoption, this departure contains a sense of hope: “Just as I was splintered in half thirty-three years ago, I feel it happening again. But this breaking is different—it is like the cracking and setting of a bone that healed badly the first time. It will get better now” (158). Meeting her birth family and learning the truth of her adoption do not form an automatic cure for Jo’s trauma, but they are significant first steps in her healing process. For both Trenka and Jo, reuniting with their birth mothers and learning the history of their Korean families provides not only a witness to the trauma of their adoption, but an origin story grounded in the truth and testimony of their birth mothers.



### **Adoptees, birth families, and “authentic origins”**

In her 2006 article “Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origin,” literary scholar Margaret Homans examines adoption through the lenses of narrative theory and trauma theory, arguing that “adoptive origins and origin stories are not discovered in the past so much as they are created in the present and for the present” (Homans, 5). She focuses on “roots trips” and birth family searches, noting that despite western cultures’ emphasis on biological origins as crucial to identity, “roots trips and searches are freighted with the demand that they provide what nothing can provide: certain knowledge of who you are” (5). According to Homans, the purpose of an adoptee’s efforts to “find her roots” is to *invent* her own “authentic” self rather than discovering it. Uncovering the “real” truth of one’s origins is impossible; therefore, “authentic origins” can only be *constructed* in the present.

Despite the late 20th century boom of international adoption and Korean adoption in particular, none of the narratives in Homans’s study are written by or about Korean adoptees; instead, Homans chooses to focus on literature that narrates domestic American adoptions. However, Korean transnational adoption narratives also fit exceptionally well with Homans’s ideas. Korean transnational adoptees face vast obstacles in searching for their birth families—a significant piece in the puzzle of their “authentic origins”—due to falsifications in their birth records or a lack of records altogether. If a child was abandoned at a police station or orphanage with no information left by a member of the birth family, the staff there would only be able to guess at the child’s age and birth date.

Someone would also have to make up a name for the child. As a result, even if a Korean adoptee has a file of her birth records, there is no guarantee that any of the information listed on the documents—not even the date of birth, not even the Korean name—is accurate, because the information may have simply been made up. It was also not uncommon for institutions to switch around children and mix up their records. For example, if a child being prepared for overseas adoption was suddenly claimed by a biological relative, an orphanage or agency might simply send a different child in her place, using the same name and records as the original child. The second child's own records could be erased or otherwise destroyed, and the adoptive parents often did not notice any difference between photos they had been sent and the child whom they picked up at the airport<sup>11</sup>.

All of these possible complications and more make it extraordinarily difficult for Korean transnational adoptees to trace their “authentic origins,” which is why they must invent or reconstruct them instead. I will discuss several ways in which adoptees create their own “authentic origins”: via mythologization of their birth families and birth country; by traveling to Korea and reuniting with their birth mothers; and through writing their own personal narratives.

### **Queens and dragons in a faraway land: Mythologizing the birth family**

---

<sup>11</sup> In her documentary *First Person Plural*, Korean-American adoptee Deann Borshay Liem narrates how her identity was switched with that of a girl named Cha Jung Hee, whose family claimed her from the orphanage in Korea. Although Deann's adoptive parents had “sponsored” Cha Jung Hee and exchanged letters (and photographs) with her for years, they did not notice the difference when Deann, not Cha Jung Hee, was brought to them for adoption.

Trenka opens *The Language of Blood* with a legend about a Korean temple called Haeinsa. The legend says that Haeinsa was built after two Buddhist monks miraculously saved a dying queen's life by tying one end of a string to the queen's tumor and the other end of the string to a tree. As the monks chant through the night, the tree absorbs the queen's cancer through the string. The beloved queen lives, but the tree withers and dies (*The Language of Blood*, 13).

The myth of the ailing queen becomes all too real later when Trenka's birth mother falls ill with cancer. But long before they meet, Trenka constructs myths surrounding her origins and birth family throughout her childhood. She has no choice. Her adoptive parents never discuss her birth family, adoption ("the a-word"), or Korea ("the K-word"), focusing only on raising Trenka and her sister "the way they were supposed to—like we were their own" (38-39). Lacking any kind of story about her origins or her birth family, Trenka invents her own, "one that made sense to a child" (44). In her imagination, she conjures up a fairy tale to explain why she and her sister had been adopted: "I decided that my mother was a beautiful princess. Something terrible had happened to her (probably involving a dragon), and her children were taken away. I drew pictures of her inside her tower, where she was trapped, so far away from me. Of course she missed me and thought about me constantly" (44). To a child, it must take "something terrible" to separate a mother and child. Knowing that mothers are supposed to love their children—"Don't all mommies love their babies?" (44). Five-year-old Trenka can only infer that something must be trapping her birth mother and preventing her from finding Trenka and her sister.

Jo also utilizes myth in the early pages of her memoir, but rather than only mythologizing her birth mother, she also mythologizes herself by declaring, “I’ve always known I am a myth” (12). She “keep[s] score” of what makes her “real;” namely things she can perceive via the five senses. She has an equally long list of things that make her “unreal”: “Real people are born, but I came off an airplane. My mirror face is opposite from my family faces. I have feelings inside my body but they can’t come out. Sometimes people can’t see me, but sometimes people constantly stare at me. The thoughts in my brain don’t sound like the words spoken around me” (13). Like Trenka, Jo takes on the voice of a child to describe how her seven-year-old self attempted to make sense of her adoption.

Unable to determine whether her “realness” outweighs her “unrealness,” Jo invents an even more detailed fairy tale to mythologize her birth family. Her seven-year-old self believes that a fairy tale is the only story that fits the paradoxes of her “real”/“unreal” identity: “I think I’m probably Korean royalty—the daughter of a forbidden romance between the astonishingly beautiful young princess and her one true love, the handsome and brilliant prince of a neighboring kingdom” (13). Similar to Trenka, Jo decides that only some kind of catastrophe could explain her separation from her birth mother: “To save the kingdom from some terrible thing (or maybe to protect me, like Sleeping Beauty), I was fake-born from an airplane delivery in O’Hare International at the age of three” (13). These fanciful fairy tales may sound outlandish, but to the young adoptee, they are no more implausible than being suddenly taken from her mother and dropped into a new country and a family with whom they bear no resemblance at all.

### **Merging myth with reality to create authentic origins**

After years of clinging only to myths, reunion with their birth mothers provides adoptees with physical proof of their reality. During her first visit to Korea and her birth family's home, Trenka marvels at her birth mother's collection of family pictures and trinkets, which even includes one of the letters Trenka had sent as a child. After years of only being able to wonder and imagine, this collection of souvenirs solidifies her birth mother's existence: "Here is the evidence that she was there all along; she wasn't a myth or a made-up person. She wasn't just a name on a piece of paper. She was a *real person* all along, a mother who saved things in boxes for the day she would see her children again" (*The Language of Blood*, 127). The photographs and trinkets provide physical evidence to accompany the stories that Umma has told in her letters and conversations. Unlike fairy tales or even adoption records, this collection of souvenirs cannot be invented, which is why their existence makes Trenka's family history all the more real.

For Trenka, the physical body is one of the most important pieces in affirming the reality of her connection with her birth mother. During the first few days of Trenka's first visit to Korea, her mother bares her breasts and asks Trenka to touch them: "*Touch me here, where I gave myself to you. I made you with my own body*, she seemed to say" (116). Her mother's body is proof of Trenka's physical birth and origin: she was born from her mother's body, not from the airplane that brought her to America. Trenka's mother also insists on bathing her like a child: "She needs to see that my body is well, that I have eaten good food and have grown healthy and strong" (122). Their roles are

reversed when Umma falls ill with cancer. Trenka longs to take the illness from her mother somehow, “like the tree took the cancer from the queen” in the myth that opens the memoir (162), but Trenka can only feed, bathe, and massage her mother’s body as it wastes away: “I came to know your body, each part of it, your nakedness never shocking to me nor embarrassing to you. I saw for the first time what you as a mother already knew: that I am made in the image of you; I am a daughter after your body and after your heart” (160). After growing up as a physical and racial Other in her adoptive family and white hometown, Trenka finds a crucial piece of her “authentic origins” in the body of her birth mother and in her own body’s likeness to her mother’s.

For Jo, this physical connection with her birth mother comes from dressing in *hanbok*, a traditional Korean dress. Rather than the Southern belle costume of her beauty pageant days, donning a Korean *hanbok* aids Jo in her construction of an authentic origin. True to the dissonance that she carries throughout the memoir, however, wearing a *hanbok* still results in a split in Jo’s mind. On one hand, trying on her birth mother’s *hanbok* is a defining moment of connection for Jo, a moment in which she feels that she truly becomes her mother’s daughter. On the other hand, even this visible representation of Korean identity and Jo’s connection with her birth mother remains shrouded in myth. As Omma dresses her in the first layers of the *hanbok*, Jo feels like she is in “an unexpected dream.” “This is enough, I think. Just this one, long elegant garment has fulfilled every transformative wish I’d ever had” (Jo 138). As Omma completes the outfit with a silk jacket and slippers, reality merges with myth as Jo and her birth mother look in a mirror:

I see once upon a time and a kingdom far, far away where a Korean princess lived in a lonely tower. I've become the dream I once had. Then Omma stands next to me and I see something even more miraculous—I see my mother's daughter. Omma's face shines with unabashed pride to be living in this moment neither of us thought possible. Together, we have stepped through the looking glass, and the White Queen tells us this memory of an alternate future. (139)

This convergence of myth and reality turns Jo's fairy tale into an authentic origin. The physical reality of the moment cannot be denied. Jo and her mother are together in the present, gazing into the same mirror, but the realization of her connection with her birth family still feels like a mythical dream. For Jo, the "authenticity" of her origin lies in the juxtaposition of myth and reality, of truth still marked by dissonance.

### **Memoir as creation of authentic origins**

If Trenka and Jo create "authentic origins" through their reunions with their birth mothers in Korea, the act of writing is a means to testify to both their own journeys and the stories of their birth mothers. Their memoirs also function as another form of witnessing to adoption trauma.

Writing as a form of self-witnessing is especially poignant for Trenka, whose birth mother passes away from cancer. In her second memoir, *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka grapples with her ongoing grief and the lingering effects of trauma. She admits that even after reuniting with her birth family and moving to Korea, she still struggles with the

many losses inflicted by her adoption, but she could not tell her mother about this while she was alive: “I told the truth about my life only after you died, because even though I needed you so desperately, you needed even more for me to say that in the end, everything turned out fine. How could you have accepted forgiveness from a person as broken as I?” (*Fugitive Visions*, 88-89). Without her birth mother, Trenka must seek another witness to her trauma. Writing memoir provides her with one such outlet.

Memoir also allows both Trenka and Jo to witness the trauma of their birth mothers. Like many adoptees, both women grew up hearing similar explanations for why they were sent away for adoption: “‘Your mother loved you very much, but she could not take care of you.’ Or, ‘Your mother wanted to give you a better life. She knew that you would have more opportunities here’” (*The Language of Blood*, 44). However, after reuniting with their birth families, both Trenka and Jo learn that their birth mothers never wanted to relinquish them for adoption, but abusive husbands, poverty, and pressure from orphanages left them with no choice. Trenka’s mother tells her “how her mind split from grief after [Trenka and her sister] were taken away and she carried a dog on her back, as she used to carry her daughter” (116). Jo’s Omma tells her that every year on Jo’s birthday, Omma would prepare *miyeokguk*—a seaweed soup traditionally eaten on birthdays—and “cried [her] name in despair, *Soojung-ah! Soojung-ah!*” (Jo, 134). By threading their birth mothers’ stories into their memoirs, Trenka and Jo record a testimony to the trauma that their birth mothers endured. Jo in particular enacts this witnessing by weaving letters from her birth mother throughout the entire memoir. Narrating her mother’s story alongside her own not only represents a form of witnessing



to both of their traumas, but also intertwines their stories to create one story of authentic origin.

If, as Homans argues, “authentic origins” can only be constructed in the present, both Trenka and Jo use memoir as a way to build their authentic origins by weaving together their personal narratives with the histories of their families. Jo recognizes that her feelings of unworthiness grew in part of out her association worthiness with “authentic” identity: “I’ve wasted so many years reaching for some identity that suits what I think other people wanted or needed me to be, thereby earning their love and justifying my existence” (170). Combining her birth mother’s story with her own into one memoir and recognizing them as two pieces of the same puzzle therefore constructs an authentic origin grounded in their personal testimonies rather than the expectations of others. Trenka acknowledges this construction as a multifaceted process:

I have made it my task to reconstruct the text of a family with context clues, and my intent is this: to trust in the mysterious; to juxtapose the known with the unknown; to collect the overlooked, the debris—stones, broken mirrors, and abandoned things. With these I will sew a new quilt of memory and imagination, each stitch a small transformation, each stitch my work of mourning. (*The Language of Blood*, 150)

As healing as the creation of authentic origins can be, grief and mourning remain inseparable from the adoptee experience. In the following section, I examine how adoptee narratives steeped in mourning hold the power to disrupt the dominant discourse on adoption via the fusion concept of mel-*han*-cholia.



CHAPTER 5: ADOPTEE MEL-*HAN*-CHOLIA AND POLITICAL PRACTICE

The Korean concept of *han* (한) is difficult to define even in Korean, let alone translate into English. Literary scholar Elaine Kim defines *han* as “the sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression shared among the Korean people” (270). Jennifer Cho expands upon this definition, calling *han* a representation of “an irreducible, intergenerational feeling of communal grief, suggesting that the pervasive memories of foreign invasion and colonization, civil war, and internal division in Korea continue to impinge upon and redefine the safe boundaries of the present” (39). In a country whose history is littered with wars and invasions, and in a society that places high emphasis upon *oori* (우리)—we, us, the collective over the individual—it is little wonder that Koreans share a communal grief like *han*.

As a specifically Korean form of grief, *han*, like everything else relating to Korean culture and identity, poses a difficult question to adoptees: are adoptees, born in Korea but raised in a different country and culture, able to experience *han*? I would argue that *han* is certainly relevant to Korean transnational adoption, as the adoption system was born out of the aftermath of the Korean War. But in considering *han* in the context of adoptee memoirs, I am more interested in Cho’s idea of mel-*han*-cholia, merging Korean *han* with Freud’s conception of melancholy. I agree with Cho when she notes that the point is not to debate how *han* may or may not “communicate a kind of true Korean identity” (39); rather, the importance of *han* and mel-*han*-cholia lies in its potential as a subversive political practice.

Writing about Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, Cho applies mel-*han*-cholia to Cha's experience as a Korean immigrant in the United States. As an immigrant, Cha is expected to "renounc[e] the past of her departed homeland" and fully assimilate into "the future of her adopted nation" (42). Implicated in this process of assimilation, which is meant to "enable a threatening outsider to be transformed and disciplined into a docile national citizen" (40), is the "subjugation of minority others" (38). Cho suggests that by insisting upon American assimilation and pathologizing mourning for the homeland, the U.S. "refuse[s] to acknowledge minority histories as grief-worthy" and "gloss[es] over its own participation in producing the grievous histories among its subjects" (37). In *Dictee*, Cha uses mel-*han*-cholia to protest this silencing of Korean immigrants' traumatic histories, using unresolved grief to "defer closure to the processes of assimilation and post-traumatic recovery" and thus burst[ing] open seemingly closed historical discourses of the U.S. from the inside" (40). By prolonging her mourning, Cha insists upon the magnitude of Korea's traumatic history as well as America's instigating role in it.

Adoptee memoirs like those of Trenka and Jo serve much the same purpose. Transnational adoption is perhaps the ultimate attempt at complete assimilation: American adoptive parents take children from other countries into their homes and are advised to simply raise them as if they were their own, without acknowledging racial differences, cultural backgrounds, or the child's own history. By using memoir to voice their trauma and complicate the child-rescue narrative of adoption, adoptees "protest the U.S.'s reified modes of remembering the traumatic histories it incurred in distant places like the Korean peninsula" (40). The memoirs also function as forms of prolonged

mourning for the many losses of adoption: loss of the birth family, loss of language, loss of culture, loss of homeland. Through these memoirs, adoptees resist the idea of a clean break from the motherland to fully assimilate in America.

Through the paperwork of adoption, orphanages and adoption agencies literally documented this “clean break” on paper. The Korean government uses family registries instead of individual birth certificates. This family registry, called a *hojuk*, begins with the male head of a household. His wife and any children are then added to his family registry. For a child, the *hojuk* therefore represents “social and legal Korean citizenship in the fullest sense—membership in a patriarchal family lineage, and membership in her nation” (Oh 118). However, for a child to be eligible for adoption, she had to be an “orphan,” regardless of whether she truly was an orphan or if she still had biological relatives. Government officials could make “paper orphans” by creating a new *hojuk* for a child, which listed the child at the head of the registry and her parents as unknown. With this new *hojuk*, the orphan was supposed to have a clean break: “This document, containing one lonely name (often made up), was a literal representation of the child, stripped of her family, history, and nation. It produced an orphan, ostensibly free of family ties, who was available for overseas adoption” (118). If immigrants are expected to “renounc[e] the past of [their] departed homeland” (Cho 42), Korean adoptees do not even have a past to renounce because it is wiped away in the creation of their orphan *hojuk*.

In *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka writes scathingly about the systemic erasure that occurs through the creation and adoption of “paper orphans.” By returning to Korea and

reuniting with her birth family, Trenka goes against the one-way street of adoption: “With my identity stripped and family removed through a perfectly legal process of paperwork, the adoption agency gave me a ‘clean break’ . . . I was never supposed to return” (15). Trenka does return, not only to visit her birth family several times, but to move permanently to Korea. However, as easy as it is for officials to create a “clean break” for an adoptee, Trenka discovers it is much more difficult to reverse it: “I will never be able to think like a Korean person, no matter how hard I study, no matter which language holds my thought. . . . In my heart’s irrational math one Korea plus one America equals nothing—equals motherless, languageless, countryless” (186). In her Minnesotan town, Trenka was treated like a foreigner because of her race; in Korea, she is treated like a foreigner because she is not fluent in Korean language or culture.

This eternal sense of being caught in between two countries and two different versions of her identity fuels Trenka’s *mel-han-cholia*. Because she can never resolve the supposed “clean break” from either country, neither can she resolve her mourning—and it is exactly this unresolved mourning that lies at the heart of *mel-han-cholia*. Trenka lists the many losses of adoption and criticizes the way that these losses are deemed unworthy of grief: “Our adoptions would take our language, our culture, our families, our names, our birth dates, our citizenship, and our identities in a perfectly legal process. And the world would view it as charitable and ethical” (89). As Cho writes, the U.S. “gloss[es] over its own participation in producing the grievous histories among its subjects” (37) by portraying transnational adoption as a purely benevolent act. By asserting the losses of

adoption, Trenka resists the dominant discourse that casts adoption as a gift for which adoptees should be grateful.

Trenka even counters the legal basis for making “paper orphans.” She argues that the purpose of making orphan *hojuk* is not merely legal: “. . . [P]retty much nobody wants to adopt a child who comes from an intact family with married parents. Nobody wants to adopt a child who has been taken from her mother and whose mother is desperately searching for her. People want real orphans, not kids whose parents have put them in an orphanage on a temporary basis as an emergency measure while the family recovers from a crisis” (92-93). Not only do the grievous losses of adoption complicate its supposed benevolence, Trenka implies that adoption agencies and adoptive parents *invent* the charity of adoption. Adopters believe that adoption is a charitable act because they believe that they are rescuing an orphan. When adopters believe that they are acting as Good Samaritans by adopting an “orphan,” they are complicit in the erasure of the child’s history and her grief for that lost history.

If moving permanently to Korea is Trenka’s trigger for mel-*han*-cholia, for Jo it is becoming a mother. Jo notices a strange trend in the superhero and fantasy stories that her children read: “The central conflict of most of these stories originates in the same place: the loss of one’s parents” (Jo, 102). Jo interprets this recurrent theme as an American acknowledgement that “the most galvanizing and enduring—indeed, transforming—trauma that a person can survive is the loss of one’s parents” (102). But Jo notes that despite this apparent affirmation of trauma and loss, the adoption system “intentionally create[s] this loss through an industry that sometimes strives to serve itself more than the

families it was created to serve” (102). Not only do adoptive parents stand to benefit from the “benevolence” of adoption, but the adoption industry is exactly that: an industry. As an industry, adoptees’ loss of their birth families and culture translates into profit for adoption agencies. In the dominant discourse, the portrayal of adoption as a gift omits the possibility of profit as a motive for a supposedly charitable act.

When Jo adopts a six-year-old girl from China, experiencing adoption from a parent’s perspective only intensifies her grief as an adoptee. Witnessing her daughter’s loss forces Jo to realize the magnitude of her own loss. Overwhelmed with grief, Jo takes to an online blog to express her emotion:

*For those of you who might be confused as to why adoption bothers adoptees so much, I’m going to give you the short version. When a family walks away from a child, that child loses everything. Have you ever lost EVERYTHING? Every person you know, item you possessed, every feeling of security and happiness—gone without explanation. Do you have a young child? Take that kid to the mall and then leave them there alone. See how they react. Now multiply that times forever. (103)*

Jo also recognizes that for those who view adoption as a gift, the blessings of life in America are supposed to outweigh any losses that the adoptee suffers in her adoption. This weighing of pros and cons constitutes another way for the U.S. to discount its role in creating the traumatic history of adoptees: if adoptees live happily in America, why should they have anything to complain about? However, in the sustained grief of melancholia, Jo resists this notion of a “better life”: “*Just because I have an awesome life*



*now doesn't mean that I don't have a right to know about my personal history. Stop trying to make me feel like I should get over it"* (105). If full assimilation requires "getting over" the trauma of her adoption, Jo refuses to comply.

In writing and publishing their memoirs, Trenka and Jo not only resist the dominant discourse that seeks to erase their trauma, they also tap into the communal aspect that is unique to Korean *han*: "[H]an can mobilize a dispersed people around shared political and cultural struggles, resisting the kind of forgetting on which the rise of new national subjectivities depends" (Cho 39). The powerful political practice of adoptee memoirs like those of Trenka and Jo, therefore, is twofold. The testimony of adoptee memoirs pushes back against the dominant discourse of adoption that erases adoptee trauma, loss, and grief in favor of upholding adoption as a benevolent and ethical act. But the reach of these memoirs extends beyond the voices of individual authors like Trenka and Jo. Through the communal grief of *han*, adoptee memoirs have the power to mobilize the 200,000 adoptees scattered across the globe, uniting them in their experiences, good and bad.

Trenka captures this mobilizing grief that connects Korean adoptees, their birth families, and the Korean motherland itself in the closing pages of *Fugitive Visions*:

We Koreans—whatever that means—have emerged from the disaster of the twentieth century, bumping and scratching our way into the next, disoriented and confused, not knowing the difference between stranger and family, friend or enemy. In less than two hundred years we have gone from a nation closed and hostile to Westerners to a nation that makes an

offering of its own children to them. And the sparkling miracle upon the Han River that Seoul has become, with all its great wealth laid out upon the skyline, came to pass because of the endurance of many people. We—the outcasts—are numbered among them. And now to this place we have returned, a stain upon the conscience of Korea, straddling two centuries with our brokenhearted mothers, our guilt-ridden fathers. We took no vow of silence, nor did our families, yet still we can hardly speak. (188)

Indeed, for decades adoptees were hardly able to speak of their trauma, their losses, or their grief. But with mel-*han*-cholic memoirs like those of Trenka and Jo, adoptees are finally beginning to break the silence.

## CHAPTER 6: THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

My undergraduate institution, one of those small, private liberal arts colleges that no one has ever heard of, was only twenty minutes away from my hometown. I studied creative writing, Spanish, and French, and worked several part-time jobs to avoid student debt. There were no Korean language or history courses. I studied abroad in England, traveled around Europe, and did not think about Korea.

Because my GPA was high, I was automatically included in a mass email that encouraged students to apply to the U.S. Fulbright Program. I had never been abroad for more than a few months at a time, but the travel bug had left its mark after my trips to Europe. I was also interested in trying my hand at teaching. Although I didn't see myself being naturally suited to the job, my peers and mentors had been encouraging me to be a teacher for years. With the possibility of graduate school (and thus a potential future in teaching) on the horizon, a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship seemed like a sensible post-undergrad plan—and why not do it in Korea?

And so, in the summer of 2012 I headed off to Korea for the first time since my adoption. After six weeks of Fulbright orientation in the Korean countryside, I was placed in the suburban city of Iksan, where I was assigned to teach at a private all-girls' high school. I lived with a host family in a modest apartment. My host sister was one of my high school students, and her mother worked at home as a nanny to a neighbor's two-year-old son. My host sister introduced me to K-Pop music, walked with me to get fish-

shaped **붕어빵**<sup>12</sup> from the stand down the street, and begged me to watch movies like *The Avengers* with her on Friday nights at home, only to fall asleep halfway through because she was so exhausted from studying all day at school. My host mother, who spoke no English, insisted on doing my laundry, cleaning my room, and above all, feeding me a *lot* of food.

The pigtailed girl turning up her nose at her father's buttery sugar rice could never have imagined eating rice for every single meal. My father never could have guessed that in Korea, I would actually look forward to a small bowl of plain white rice in front of me at mealtimes. But it was never just a small bowl of rice. My host mother would set the table with dish after dish of kimchi, bean sprouts, quail eggs, pork stir-fried in spicy *gochujang*, and bubbling-hot stew. She always refused to be convinced that I simply could not eat it all.

“더 먹어,” my host mother would insist without fail at every single meal, *eat more*.

I'd shake my head and smile politely. “배 불러요”—*I'm full*. I learned these Korean phrases very quickly.

“Eat just a little more,” she would beg, indicating a small ladleful of stew.

“Well...okay.”

She always took my bowl and filled it to the brim, smiling as she set it back in front of me. “많이 먹어,” she would say cheerfully. *Eat a lot*.

---

<sup>12</sup> *Bungeobbang*, a pastry filled with red bean or sweet cream, usually made in the shape of a fish

“I feel like I got a chance to see the road not taken,” a Fulbright alumna and Korean adoptee wrote to me in an email a few days before I left America. The road not taken, the rice not eaten.

“Do you know your 한국 엄마<sup>13</sup>?” my host mother asked me one night, without prelude or warning, as we sat in front of the living room TV.

“No...”

“Why not?” she pressed. “Don’t you want to meet her? Don’t you miss her?”

Miss her? Miss someone I’ve never met, someone whose face, whose name I don’t even know?

“Do you know your Korean name?” my host mother continued.

“Yes...”

“Then it’s easy,” my host mother said. “All you have to do is put your Korean name on TV. People do this all the time. Your 한국 엄마 will be watching the news and she’ll see your name, and she’ll cry and cry and cry, and then she will find you and you can meet her. Don’t you want to?” Then, without waiting for a reaction: “What is your Korean name?”

“Um...it’s 오민지 (Oh Min Ji)...” The unfamiliar name fell clumsily from my tongue.

The name not taken, the family not known or loved. To see the road not taken: Don’t you want to?

---

<sup>13</sup> *Hanguk umma*, Korean mother

## CHAPTER 7: THANKSGIVING

약속대로 한국에 왔군요.  
 7월 19일 일요일 익산에 올 수 있나요? 20일 케이틀린 생일날 내가 미역국 끓여주고  
 싶어요.  
 작년에 입교증 줄 때 보니 생일이 7월이기에 일정에 기록했었는데... 이렇게  
 가능하다니 놀라워요.  
 월요일 생일날이 어려우면 하루 앞으로 당겨 일요일에라도 미역국 끓여줄게요.  
 엄마처럼요.  
 엄마는 그럴수있어요. 아기를 길러본 어미의 정서라고 할까... 뭐 그런. 말로는  
 설명할수없는. 우리 한국사람이 갖고있는 정이라고 해야하나. 뭐 그런. 좀  
 이상하죠. 설명이 안되니...

*As promised, you came to Korea.  
 Can you come to Iksan on July 19? I want to make seaweed soup for your birthday on the  
 20th.  
 Last year, when I gave you your church ID card, I saw that your birthday is in July and  
 recorded it on my calendar, but... This kind of possibility is surprising.  
 If it's difficult because your birthday is on a Monday, even if you come one day ahead on  
 Sunday, I will make seaweed soup for you. Like a mother.  
 A mother can be like this. The affection of a mother who raised a child... what to call it?  
 It's something that can't be explained in words. Is it the "jeong" that we Korean people  
 have... what is it? It's strange, isn't it? It can't be explained...*

—Messages from my co-worker Choi Young Hee, July 2015

Back in Michigan, my mother set the table for Thanksgiving dinner five days  
 early.

My parents inherited a heavy, round wooden dining table from my grandparents,  
 my mother's parents, after my grandmother passed away and my grandfather moved into  
 a senior community. We used to sit around that table at my grandmother's house on  
 Thanksgiving, counting our blessings with permanent markers on a plain white  
 tablecloth. My grandmother would roll the tablecloth up and save it until the following  
 year, when she'd bring it out so we could see what we had written last year: my father's

chicken scratch, my doodles of barn cats and Disney characters, my grandmother's fine cursive, delicate and perfect even in purple Sharpie.

At my parents' house, though, no one hardly ever sits around the table. My father is gone at least five days a week, working as a semi truck driver; my older brother, a steadily employed accountant since graduation but still living at home at 27 years old, often works late hours and eats leftovers in front of the TV when he comes home. I haven't really lived at home since college. My mother goes to work early in the morning and comes home in the late afternoon to an empty house.

And so for this year's Thanksgiving, knowing that I would be coming home for the first time in six months and that the whole family would finally be there to sit around the table for dinner, my mother set the table five days early.

I wonder if my mother has ever thought about another woman, thousands of miles away, who has never had the chance to set a place for me at the table, whose home I have not returned to for more than 25 years, whose face might look just like mine.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

The ability to tell a story, after all, is one of the things that make us human.

—Arissa Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*

In recent years, South Korea has been steadily decreasing its amount of international adoptions. According to the U.S. Department of State, there were only 370 Korean-American adoptions in 2014. But this does not mean that the work of those who advocate for the rights of adoptees and single mothers is finished, nor does it mean that adoptees no longer need to tell their stories. In fact, thanks to the internet, social media, and easily accessible DNA testing via companies such as 23andMe<sup>14</sup>, Korean transnational adoptees are connecting with each other—and their birth families—more than ever. Be it through memoirs like those of Trenka and Jo, documentary films such as the recent film *Twinsters*<sup>15</sup>, activist work in Seoul, or simply posting to adoptee groups on Facebook, Korean adoptees are carving out spaces to witness each other’s trauma and support each other as they grapple with their identities. Through these various works and the sustainment of *mel-han-cholia*, adoptees are slowly but surely finding ways to “flip the script<sup>16</sup>,” search for truth, and create their own authentic origins in ways that both acknowledge and begin to heal the trauma of adoption rather than erasing it.

---

<sup>14</sup> A private biotechnology company that offers personal genetic reports

<sup>15</sup> A 2015 documentary that tells the story of twin sisters who were separated at birth and adopted from Korea into two different families

<sup>16</sup> #FliptheScript is a movement started by adoptee organization Lost Daughters. It promotes the representation of adoptee voices in the adoption discourse.



## EPILOGUE: 민지라고 — I WILL CALL YOU “MIN JI”

민지는 나의 또다른 자식이지요. 살면서 보람을 느끼는 것, 그것이 기쁨이지요.  
 열심히 한국어 공부하는 민지가 난 참 예뻐요. 다녀가면 공부하는것도 얼마나  
 예쁘지...  
 앞으로 민지라고 부를게!  
 우리 선화은화현종처럼  
 민지라고

*You are like another child to me. Feeling worthwhile in one's life, that is happiness, you  
 know.*

*I think it's so beautiful that you are studying Korean so hard. And the studying that you  
 will do when you go back to America, how beautiful is that...*

*From now on, I will call you Min Ji!*

*Like my children Seon Hwa, Eun Hwa, and Hyun Jong*

*I will call you Min Ji*

## Works Cited

- Caruth, Cathy. "Trauma and Experience: Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. 3-12. Print.
- Cho, Jennifer. "Mel-*han*-cholia as Political Practice in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*." *Meridians* 11.1 (2011): 36-61. Print.
- Docan-Morgan, Sara J. "'They Were Strangers Who Loved Me': Discussions, Narratives, and Rituals During Korean Adoptees' Initial Reunions with Birth Families." *Journal of Family Communication* 14 (2014): 352-373. Print.
- Homans, Margaret. "Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origins." *Narrative* 14.1 (2006): 4-26. Print.
- Kim, Eleana J. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010. Print.
- Laub, Dori. "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. 61-75. Print.
- Oh, Arissa. *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015. Print.
- Trenka, Jane Jeong. *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea*. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009. Print.
- Trenka, Jane Jeong. *The Language of Blood*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2003. Print.