

Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies
6 (2015) 45-59.

Fictional and Fragmented Truths in Korean Adoptee Life Writing

by *Jenny Heijun Wills*

It is publically argued how much I write is true and whether the truth matters, what kind of truth is mine, who is entitled to my mind and body, what I can possibly know of anything after a rupture of this magnitude.

—Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*

For many transnational, transracial Asian adoptees, complex negotiations of truth, reality, and identity are a part of their subject formations, particularly given the enigmatic nature of their ancestries. Adopted Asians are asked to simultaneously embody a non-essentialist understanding of identity—to reflect the ways that kinship, race, ethnicity, and nationality are constructed, not fixed—and yet their subjectivities are choreographed in relation to their access to “authentic” biological kin or information. How much, or how little, birth information one has shapes the adopted person’s social and kinship relations. Motivated by the work of scholars like Mark Jerng, Eleana Kim, and Kim Park Nelson, in this article I explore the ways that life writing allows transnational, transracial Asian adoptee authors to navigate their complex experiences of truth and authenticity, as well as the transformations adoptee authors make to the memoir genre in order to accommodate the particularities of their experiences. Here, I analyze Jane Jeong Trenka’s foundational Asian adoption memoir, *The Language of Blood*, and Kim Sunée’s national best-seller, *Trail of Crumbs*, paying attention to the ways that the authors’ hybridized and deliberately constructionist approaches to genre parallel some of the identity issues that are brought out in their respective books. I explore the significance of the scrapbook form in *The Language of Blood* and the recipe book structure in *Trail of Crumbs*, arguing that Trenka and Sunée create hybridized life narratives because, like many transnational, transracial Asian adoptee life writers (and subjects), their identities are so inescapably predicated on assemblage. I argue that they reconsider some of the customary structures, styles, and themes found in traditional memoirs, and in so doing they participate in the postmodern project of

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de-essentializing truth claims that is crucial to their negotiations of their transnational, transracial Asian adoptee identities.¹

I chose these books from a growing bibliography of transnational, transracial Asian adoptee-authored life narratives because the authors offer diverse tones, perspectives, and literary voices. While they both address themes of racial marginalization (especially in relation to childhood), alienation and displacement, cultural insecurity, and the challenges of returning to Korea, their representations of the Korean adoptee experience in the U.S. are strikingly different. I consider the difficulties faced by Korean adoptee life writers who are under pressure to fulfill audience expectations of what a memoir *should be*—particularly in light of the fact that they were produced by large publishing houses and became incredibly popular, mainstream texts—while negotiating the many contradictory narratives about their origins with which they have had to contend their entire lives. Certainly, numerous critics of autobiography² and memoir have contested the possibility that an author might consistently and unquestionably tell the truth. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue:

Any utterance in an autobiographical text, even if inaccurate or distorted, is a characterization of its writer. Thus, when one is both the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative, as in life writing, the truth of the narrative becomes undecidable; it can be neither fully verified nor fully discredited. We need, then, to adjust our expectations of the truth told in self-referential writing. (15-16)

But in the memoirs that I will explore here, narrators are not intentionally deceitful; nor do they solely exhibit what Smith and Watson call the “paradoxical ‘truth’ of experience itself” (15)—that is deliberately and strategically misleading the reader in order to challenge generic conventions. Instead, the authors of *Trail of Crumbs* and *The Language of Blood* encourage us to rethink debates about truth in life narrative, as truth is both ambiguous and impossible for these authors. Unlike other examples of life writing, where fictionalization certainly occurs as authors articulate their own versions of the past, in transnational, transracial Asian adoption narratives “truth” is not just a prevalent theme, but it is also the goal that many of the writers are searching for. These texts are shaped around adoptees’

¹ Although both Trenka and Sunée are Korean American authors, my analysis might be equally applicable to Asian adoptees in a variety of adoptive lands and from different countries of origin. That said, Korean adoptees make up the largest group of transnational adoptees and were the first cohort of Asian adoptees raised by non-military families in the aftermath of the Korean War.

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quests for truths about their origins and biological pasts; as readers, we are aware that these truths are not only unattainable but are also unreliable.

“Who will listen to me?”

Published in 2003, *The Language of Blood* follows Jane who, after being adopted with her older biological sister and raised in Minnesota, decides to re-establish contact with her Korean family. When Jane documents her return to Korea in her early twenties (what is sometimes called a “roots trip”), the estrangement this trip causes between her and her white adoptive parents, and her activist work against adoption agencies that prevent adoptees from accessing their personal files, she addresses the ways that racial Otherness in the United States and cultural homogeneity in Korea make her feel disconnected to both spaces and she ponders the ongoing affinity for and connection with her biological family years after they have been separated. The story wavers between a memoir and a political call-to-arms, as Trenka uses her own life experiences to explore the shortcomings of transnational, transracial Asian adoption systems, legal policies, and the unbalanced social support practices offered to everyone involved. In all, *The Language of Blood* challenges some of the idealistic ways that transnational, transracial Asian adoption has been narrated as a safe haven for abandoned orphans; she exposes some of the troubles faced by adopted Asians who grow up in families and communities that refuse to talk about racial difference or privilege, and the identity crises that can be the result.

Trenka uses a non-linear and fragmented style to explore some of these challenges. The narrative makes temporal shifts between Jane’s childhood, adolescent years, and adulthood, sometimes without warning to the reader.³ Trenka’s use of this non-linear structure mimics the way she views transnational, transracial Asian adoption as something that brings past events into collision with the present in jarring and intrusive ways. In *Claiming Others*, Mark Jerng reads the structure of this memoir as a series of framing devices layered upon one another, “as if Trenka is meditating on the ways in which one life can be inflected and conditioned by so many different external conditions” (154). The fragmented structure also points to what Jane implies is the duality of her identity. She describes herself as identifying simultaneously as “Jane Marie Brauer, created September 26, 1971” and “Jeong Kyong-Ah” whose “family register states the date of [her] birth [to be] the lunar date January 25, 1972” (14). Introducing herself to the reader in this manner, Jane emphasizes not just the two identities that make up her

³ For instance, the book opens with a letter that Trenka receives from her biological mother midway through the time span of her narrative, next it jumps to twelve years later when Trenka is visiting the Haeinsa temple in Korea. In the next chapter the narrative relapses into the past, beginning with Trenka’s childhood in Minnesota and continuing, for the most part, chronologically until the book’s close, with Trenka philosophizing about adoption, fantasizing about her biological mother (who has since died), and anticipating her future in Korea.

subjectivity, but also the incongruence between those different selves. Eleana Kim explains that broken identities and destabilized notions of identity impose upon transnational, transracial Asian adoptees the “challenge of constructing identities and places of belonging out of bits and fragments” (12), and Jerng suggests that these efforts are translated into the “tragic trope of ‘divided identity’” that frequently appears in the literary representations of transnational, transracial Asian adoptees (153).

The Language of Blood is also shaped by the insertion of various extra materials throughout the text, interrupting Jane’s introspective ponderings. Poems, letters, articles, and theatre scripts are interwoven with the life narrative, shaping the memoir in the image of a scrapbook, the pieces of which Trenka is putting together in order to make sense of her experiences and identity. One striking example occurs when Trenka inserts the “Exile’s Crossword” between two chapters (figure 1).

Exile's Crossword

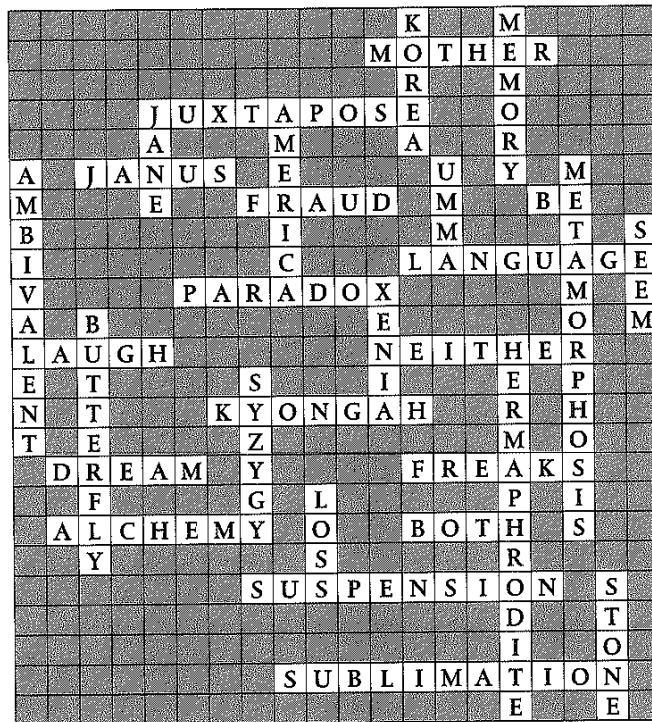


Figure 1. The Exile's Crossword from Jane Jeong Trenka's *The Language of Blood*

197

Literally in the shape of a word puzzle, this image tellingly features "America" spliced with "fraud"; "Korea" and "memory" are connected with "mother" (197). Trenka offers no explanation for the insertion of this crossword, but the intention is clear: Jane's identity resembles a puzzle, comprised of various clues that intersect in contingent ways. Suspended in the middle of the crossword is Jane's Korean name, Kyong Ah, suggesting the centrality of her birth identity to the solving of her identity puzzle; directly beneath her Korean name, descending vertically, is the word "loss," hinting at the sadness of those labours.

In another moment, Trenka inserts a classified advertisement, the authenticity of which is a mystery:

SWM, 29, SEEKS ASIAN

You: Submissive, petite, long hair.

Your Master is 6'3", brown/brown,

185 lbs. Looking for fun. Will

respond to all that send pictures. (69)

Like the crossword, this excerpt appears without reflection from the narrator, but points to Trenka's frustrations with how Asian women can be exoticized and fetishized by certain "single, white men." The language of domination that Trenka includes here points to the way that Asian women's subjectivities are shaped by stereotypes that, in the words of Hyun Yi Kang, frame them as examples of "the submissive Lotus Blossom" who offer a "welcoming image of exotic difference and erotic possibilities" (*Compositional Subjects* 72). Though Jane does not comment on either of these inclusions, their presence in the book still speaks to the significance of their messages with regards to her sense of identity. Jane, like many transnational, transracial Asian adoptees, had to face Orientalism, stereotypes, and racism alone because her adoptive parents were unequipped to help her.

Trenka also experiments with her narrator's perspective in a reinterpretation of the traditionally retrospective voice of the memoirist. Jane relates some of her earliest childhood experiences by adopting the voice of her younger self. In one scene, five-year-old Jane asks her adoptive mother to explain why her Korean mother abandoned her. Her adoptive mother refuses to answer Jane's questions and leaves the room, prompting the narrator to declare: "I know I've made my mommy angry. I want to run and say I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I made you mad, I won't ask again. . . . I must be very, very good so my mommy will keep me. I won't ask any more stupid questions. I won't do anything to make her mad" (23). Trenka uses a restricted narrative voice, to borrow Gérard Genette's terminology, whereby the narrator takes on a five-year-old's perspective in the telling of this anecdote. Jane's perspective is not "defined in connection with h[er] present information as narrator" but is presented "in connection with h[er] past information as a hero" (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 198-99). Elaborating upon what he identifies as the "internal focalization through the hero" as featured in autobiographical narratives, Genette claims, "[i]t is the 'hero's point of view' that governs the narrative, with his restrictions of field, his momentary ignorances, and even what the narrator inwardly looks on as his youthful errors, naivetés, 'illusions to lose'" (199). In the above passage Trenka's use of the hero perspective makes this anecdote stand out; its non-linear rendering is hyperbolized when Jane uses the word "mommy" and Trenka entirely shifts the time frame of the story and the narrative voice to match it. By fusing childhood and adulthood, past and present, Trenka points to the fact that for transnational, transracial Asian adoptees, there cannot be an identity politic that ignores that initial rupture of separation from the biological family, and that those early life moments interrupt adoptees' lives in ongoing ways. This impacts the ways that transnational, transracial Asian adoptee

memories are authored, as the past is difficult to restrict, control, and separate from the contemporary authorial moment.

Untethered and Unclaimed

Like Trenka, Kim Sunée also experiments with style and structure in her memoir, *Trail of Crumbs: Hunger, Love and the Search for Home*. In contrast to *The Language of Blood*, a text that is unquestionably about Korean adoption and adoption politics, *Trail of Crumbs* depicts adoption as a theme; sometimes the narrator's adoptee status is discussed directly, at other times it is a subtle (though perpetual) underlying presence. Whereas much of Trenka's memoir focuses on her relationship with her adoptive parents, Kim's American parents are practically absent in *Trail of Crumbs*. Set in a variety of locales, Sunée's memoir offers the perspective of a cosmopolitan woman, or "traveler" to borrow from James Clifford (*Routes* 36), whose adoption leaves her untethered to either space or person. The narrative documents Kim's childhood in New Orleans where she grows up with her younger sister, who is also adopted from Korea.⁴ Kim describes her travels to Sweden, romanticizing her adventures as a student and her various relationships, before elaborating on her pastoral life in the French countryside with her controlling common-law spouse, Olivier. At one point she returns to Korea, but finds herself alienated and unclaimed, prompting her to explore her identity in a variety of other countries and cultures.

Like Trenka's *The Language of Blood*, Sunée's memoir disrupts chronology to mimic the uncertainty that the adoptee protagonist feels about her identity. The time shifts in *Trail of Crumbs* mimic Kim's emotional anxieties as she is haunted by feelings of non-belonging and alienation. For instance, snippets of Kim's pre-adoptive childhood memories pepper her life narrative, but are triggered by moments of anxiety and fear, not just in relation to the memories themselves but also as Kim tries to register the significance of the out-of-place recollections. "Nightmares sometimes help discern what's true and false," she states, imagining a younger brother with whom she awaits her Korean mother's daily return from work: "It gets dark fast, and the house fills up with damp shadows before we can even sense her shape." In some scenes, adult Kim becomes an omniscient narrator, describing the thoughts and feelings of her child-self. She recounts, "Quiet as Hansel and Gretel, we listen as the wind picks up strength and the sky darkens above us. When I start to worry that we may not find our way back out, the branches shift in the breeze, opening up points of light along the path" (300) The use of present-tense here collides Kim's childhood past with her contemporary, adult temporality, again reflecting the ways that past and present merge uncontrollably for transnational, transracial Asian adoptees who are simultaneously asked to be separated from and connected to their birth histories.

⁴ Unlike in *The Language of Blood*, Kim does not have a biological connection to the sister with whom she is adopted.

One of the central indicators of Kim's troubled and fragmented identity is connected to how naming occurs in the text. As Ann Anagnost explains, transnational, transracial Asian adoptees' names hold particular importance because "[t]he child's name raises the problem of how the child is to be positioned in the realm of the symbolic" (407). In other words, "[r]etaining the child's [original] name promises the eruption of 'difference'" (407), whereas renaming an adopted child can be considered a "violence" and the "erasure of a difference that will eventually reassert itself" (408). The theme of dividedness that we see in Trenka's memoir is tied to her two separate names and the identities that are associated with them. In *The Language of Blood*, Jane feels disembodied each time she is called by a different name; as I mention earlier, she introduces herself both as Jane and Kyong-Ah, two separate selves (14).⁵

This is certainly not unique to adopted people, as subjects often change names when they migrate from space to space, kin to kin. But the gesture of renaming in *Trail of Crumbs* is particularly disorienting and is enacted upon the adopted children by caregivers on their behalves. At first glance, a reader might assume that "Sunée" is Kim's adoptive family's name, a reflection of their francophone, Louisiana roots. Within the text, however, Kim reveals that her adoptive family does not have French ancestry and that, in fact, "Sunée" is a translation of her Korean given name, "Sun Ae."⁶ The revelation of Kim's younger sister's name (that is discussed nearing the end of the book) exposes how both girls' were given a "name [that] was made up" (225). Kim explains of her sister: "Han Sun Ae. A Korean judge named her. . . . it meant 'little girl'" (225). Both Kim and her sister, adopted from the same orphanage, are given the first name "Sun Ae," which their adoptive parents misinterpret mistakenly to be their family names (unaware that Koreans' family names come first and are followed by their given names). As a result, her adoptive parents call her "Kim" because they take her Korean family name to be her given name. I believe that Kim's initial feelings of non-belonging can be linked to the way that she has been renamed. Not only does the term "Sun Ae" imply that she is common and not unique, but it is also apparent that she does not know her pre-adoptive name and that her adoptive parents do not give her their family name. With a separate family name, Kim and her sister are Othered from their adoptive family, contributing to, at least in Kim's case, her ongoing fixation with securing a stable and united subjectivity.

Kim turns to other sources, most notably food and cooking, to explore her identity and feel a sense of belonging. In *Consuming Geographies* authors David Bell

⁵ Jane and Kyong-Ah have two families, ancestries, citizenships, religions, and birthdates (14). When Jane returns to Korea, she is known as Kyong-Ah (경아); in the United States she is called Jane. This is further complicated by the fact that Jane's adoptive maternal name is Brauer.

⁶ Kim's parents literally translate "little girl 'Kim'" (김수녀) to "Kim Sunée." It is this name that her Korean language teacher in France uses years later (147).

and Gill Valentine argue that much of our identities are shaped by the foods that we eat. For Bell and Valentine, we use food “to locate ourselves within narratives which are not of our own making—electing us to a shared form of identification” (491) and subjectivity through community building. Put another way, food and eating practices are important cultural qualities that simultaneously distance subjects from dissimilar consumers and identify subjects with like ones. Along this vein, the cliché, “you are what you eat” reminds us how selfhood and food can be bound within the imaginings of identity development. Sunée’s memoir challenges this belief, demonstrating that some figures, like transnational, transracial Asian adoptees, find that no matter how much they eat, they sometimes never find a satisfactory answer to their confused and conflicting identities, let alone a community with others who consume the same hybridized menu. As Jennifer Ho points out, “it is never as simple as eating Chinese food makes one Chinese or its opposite” (5), a sentiment that is echoed by an interviewee featured in *Adopted Territory* who has been told, “you’re a real Korean because you eat kimchee” to which she responds: “That doesn’t make me a real Korean!” (Kim 192) Since transnational, transracial Asian adoptees have such tenuous connections to race, culture, kinship, and nationality and because adopted Asians often find themselves between their Asian origins and Western upbringings, their relationships to consumption, being consumed, and the importance of different kinds of food in their quests for claiming subjectivity becomes a valuable lens through which they might explore the issues of adoptee identity. In other words, we see how “[f]ood as an access point creates an awareness of the estranged position adoptees find themselves in and the incompleteness of their cultural memory” (Bergquist 150). Kathleen Bergquist explains that “[i]nstead of feeding a hunger,” food that is used by adopted people as a way of consuming culture actually “exposes a void” (150). This is the lesson that Kim comes to at the end of her narrative.

In *Trail of Crumbs*, one of the ways that Sunée tries to force a link between food and her sense of identity is by hybridizing the form of her memoir with a recipe book. Chapters conclude with actual instructions of how to prepare the dishes described in the preceding pages. For instance, after Kim describes her disappointing trip to Korea, Sunée ends the chapter with a recipe for kimchi soup. The matter-of-fact tone of the directions, as they instruct, “taste and add more salt” and “serve with garnishes, if desired” (184), acts to reclaim control at the end of an emotional journey. This pattern interrupts the narrative and frames it as instructional. In *Eat My Words*, Janet Theophano explains that in “evocative culinary memoirs composed of directions for cooking ... women inscribe themselves in their recipe texts as testimonies to their existence” (121). Theophano’s argument recalls Sunée’s reasons for recording past recipes—so that she can better understand her identity. She refers to her collection of “tasting notes, menus, and jotted down recipes” as “clues as to what I crave and may help me know who I am” (61). In other words, Sunée thinks that acts of recording recipes and notes validate her existence and help her to understand her position between

cultures, nations and families. The recipe book memoir form thus speaks to Kim's fragmented notion of identity and Sunée's attempt to resolve it. The memoir is filled with metaphors for food, consumption, and nourishment, and Sunée organizes her text not around her experiences of being an adopted person (as Trenka does), but around her relationships to different kinds of food.

When Kim returns to Korea in her twenties she secretly wishes that "someone will recognize [her]" (146), that someone will claim her, so that she can overcome her feelings of rootlessness. The goal of Kim's quest is not entirely to find out who she is, but to find out where she came from and where she might belong. Barbara Yngvesson states, an adopted person's

search for roots assumes a past that is there, if we can just find the right file, the right papers, or the right person. This kind of search is part of a familiar story of belonging and of lost belongings in which an alienated self must be reconnected to a ground (an author, a nation, a parent) that constitutes its identity. (32)

Yngvesson claims that adopted people embark on roots trips to recuperate a sense of belonging that has been compromised through transnational, transracial Asian adoption. In *Trail of Crumbs*, Kim hopes to resolve her feelings of rootlessness by being recognized by someone in Korea, since she feels unclaimed by her American family and is overly-claimed (and controlled) by her "family" in France. When no one recognizes her in Korea, Kim feels dejected and her quest meets its greatest obstacle. She mourns, "[b]ecause there are no formal records, because I was abandoned, I realize that Seoul is not where I can validate myself. I cannot look to this part of the world to see where I belong. No family faces, and certainly no one to claim me" (166). Here, Kim conflates the act of being claimed with a feeling of belonging; she thinks that belonging to someone is the equivalent to belonging in a community. Unclaimed in Korea, Kim grows disappointed in her "roots trip," but she also realizes that she cannot passively wait to be claimed by others in order to feel as though she belongs. She takes it upon herself to experience the Korean culture around her to investigate more active ways of belonging. But even the food in Korea (which is not surprisingly the focus of her cultural tour) disappoints Kim, who, like Marcel Proust, searches flavours for something "so long abandoned and put out of mind" (*Remembrance of Things Past* 63). For the first time, Kim finds that glutting herself on food does not connect her to the local culture and that eating is not a resource for assimilation. Instead, because of the pressure that she places on these dishes to fill in the gaps of her past so that she can feel grounded, she is scalded by the food. "I devour the dumplings whole," she recounts, "burning my throat with this food I so long to remember" (163). Finding no connection to the dishes, Kim is rendered speechless, staring into the steam produced by the vendor's cart. She physically experiences the cultural "void" Bergquist warns that adoptees are exposed to when they eat food from their pre-adoptive cultures (150).

Fictional Memories, Telling Stories

Both *Trail of Crumbs* and *The Language of Blood* are books about a kind of memory work that exceeds the typical labours of life writing for a variety of reasons. As some of the examples above illustrate, part of the challenge is the legal and bureaucratic limitations that restrict transnational, transracial Asian adoptees from accessing their files—though we also know that those files themselves are rhetorical tools used to promote the international adoption industry and therefore are neither politically neutral nor necessarily reliable anyhow. It is also apparent that the memory work in transnational, transracial Asian adoption life writing can be influenced by the emotional burden not just of the kinship and cultural loss that is necessary in order for the adoptions to have occurred, but also by fragmented identities, versions of racial melancholia and invisibility, as well as liminal and rejected subjectivities. And yet these tasks of sometimes futile memory work are undertaken by many transnational, transracial Asian adoptees, perhaps because it is one of the few ways that we have access to our pre-adoptive lives and the people and places we have lost. The act of doing this work, then, becomes a subject matter in and of itself.

As we often see in life narratives, in both of these Asian adoptee memoirs, narrators reflect on the process of life writing and memory excavation. For Kim, this point occurs when she returns to New Orleans as an adult; writing becomes a way for her to overcome what she thinks is her lack of either identity or home. She begins by first recording “a few lines of a poem and then longer paragraphs about Korea and Provence” and is overwhelmed when “[p]ages and pages come to [her]” (315-16). Jane, on the other hand, begins to record her story as a gift to her biological mother and as a way of understanding the different narratives she has encountered during her roots quest in Korea. She writes,

I have made it my task to reconstruct the text of a family with contextual 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. (130)

Writing demonstrates an effort to control the narratives surrounding her, as well as those that are prohibited to her. Writing also becomes a way for Jane to understand, or “mourn,” what she thinks she has lost: an intimate relationship with her biological family as well as her alternate self, Kyong-Ah, who she fears was erased through adoption. Writing allows Jane to “grieve a host of losses both abstract and concrete... including homeland, family, language, identity, property, [and] status in the community” (Eng and Han 680). What is interesting here is that these losses are magnified after Jane’s return to Korea where her cultural and linguistic differences make it difficult for her to find a sense of belonging and identity. That is to say, Jane’s losses are ongoing; she mourns the erasure of her pre-adoptive self and she mourns the irreversibility and irreconcilability of that event.

In the end both authors include meta-narrative moments in their memoirs as a disclaimer, confessing what they see as one of the obstacles of adoptee life writing: their relative lack of personal background information. As Jane says in the passage above, she will reconstruct, collect, and create a story that is larger than any of the narrative pieces she has gathered or lacked. *The Language of Blood* and *Trail of Crumbs* make so many references to the challenges faced by transnational, transracial Asian adoptees on account of their missing origins, ambiguous identities, and enigmatic pasts that Trenka and Sunée must acknowledge that they are simultaneously creators of and characters in their elaborate life stories. Transnational, transracial Asian adoptee narratives in general contradict our assumption that life writers can express to readers who they are and where they come from—and that they are telling the truth about themselves. So how, then, do we read Trenka and Sunée’s memoirs knowing that their authors do not believe that they have access to their truthful identities—or at the very least, a starting off point from which to narrate their lives? Moreover, what to make of the fact that these memoirs are written by subjects who reveal that truth and memory are inaccessible, fluid, and enigmatic concepts for transnational, transracial Asian adoptees amidst the din of the innumerable narratives that surround and shape them?

In the introduction to a recent collection of essays entitled, *The Ethics of Life Writing*, editor Paul John Eakin claims that, in our “pervasive culture of confession” (1), the reading audience of memoirs insists, amongst other things, that the implied author’s assertions be truthful. Eakin alleges, “[w]hen life writers fail to tell the truth, then, they do more than violate a literary convention governing non-fiction as a genre; they disobey a moral imperative” (2-3). “Truth” is the central facet of Eakin’s collection, as narrative quality and authorial integrity are frequently evaluated in their relativity to it. Eakin divides essays into sections with titles like, “Representing Others: Trust and Betrayal.” Articles feature titles such as, “Mapping Lives: Truth Life Writing and DNA,” by Alice Wexler. Noticeably absent from this collection, however, is any thoughtful consideration of what “truth” is—that elusive, ambiguous, mutable, and contextual “chose du monde” to paraphrase Foucault—especially when we think about the life narratives created by transnational, transracial Asian adoptees. Perhaps more importantly, Eakin does not enquire *why* truth is so compulsory a staple in his criticism of life writing, so much so that he is urged to describe ostensibly deceptive authors as “violators” and “moral disobeyers.” Do we not already agree with Stanley Fish who, like countless other scholars, reminds us that “autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not” (A19)?

I wish to take Fish’s statements in an additional direction, in order to question how life narratives can be knowingly fictionalized in circumstances where authors lack accurate facts about themselves, but that these, too, constitute autobiographical realities because they are what the author must or wishes to

believe is true. Indeed, *Trail of Crumbs* and *The Language of Blood* complicate the relationship between truth, memory, identity, and life writing. Truth, while an undeniably subjective and already-weighted notion for every person, is particularly evasive to transnational, transracial Asian adoptees, as language barriers, repeated examples of institutional dishonesty, missing (or withheld) information, and multiple conflicting narratives, make truth claims about things that many of us take for granted (their names, birthdates, parentages, and nationalities) impossible. In many cases, denied access to the “autobiographical claims such as date of birth” that Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue “can be verified or falsified by recourse to documentation or fact outside of the text” (*Reading Autobiography* 13), transnational, transracial Asian adoptees struggle to understand their identities especially within the confines of life writing. As Elizabeth Honig points out, “[m]any transnational adoptees live phantom lives” whereby, from the “scraps” of identity given to adoptees, “a story is invented, one that begins ‘what if...’” (215).

We might feel the urge to believe that transnational, transracial Asian adoptee memoirs thus undermine and dismantle the significance of truth and memory for life writing—that they de-essentialize the genre in terms of its previous connection to the “truth.” Yet Sunée and Trenka continue to uphold what they believe is the significance of truth. They frame their memoirs through events that posit a claimable truth as their ultimate objective, but Sunée and Trenka’s memoirs are not claims to tell the truth, at least not in the conventional sense that Eakin espouses in his collection. That kind of truth is already disputed and undermined by their experiences. Instead, *Trail of Crumbs* and *The Language of Blood* demonstrate that life writing *can* arise from the untangling of false truths, desired truths, myths, and interpretations, all of those narratives that frustrate and burden transnational, transracial Asian adoptees. It is pointless to try to evaluate Trenka and Sunée on the basis of their reliability or the truthfulness of their descriptions of themselves and their lives, since truth seems to slip through their fingers with each grasp they make towards solving the mysteries of their pre-adoptive pasts and origins.

The roots trips in *Trail of Crumbs* and *The Language of Blood* highlight the necessity of fictionalization in transnational, transracial Asian adoptee life writing. In her essay entitled “Adoption Narratives, Trauma and Origins,” Margaret Homans convincingly argues that adoptee “roots trip[s] make origins seem knowable, memorable, [and] documentable” (5), but that “in the narratives of such journeys, origins are fictionally constructed in the face of admissions that cannot otherwise be known” (5). From Homans we learn that when transnational, transracial Asian adoptees, those who Trenka refers to in her second memoir as “people with whole sections of their lives missing” (*Fugitive Visions* 88), are faced with contradictions and prohibitions about themselves, they resort to fictionalizing their pasts in an effort to organize and control the various narratives that may otherwise deny them a comprehensible sense of identity. For instance, in *The Language of Blood*, Jane is distraught to discover that she cannot access her own adoption records as an adoption agency employee guards them from her. She tells

herself, “[d]on’t scream at her just because she, a perfect stranger with probably minimal qualifications, can sit there and read my file with all my information in it and all my family’s information and all the crap that determined my life and *I am not allowed*” (171). Here, withheld adoption papers amount to withheld identities, demanding that adoptees fictionalize their birth and adoption histories since, as Homan’s states, “western cultures tend to equate biological origins with identity” (5).

These fictionalized memories become invented truths that shape adoptee protagonists’ understandings of who they are and how they came into being. Jane invents a story about her origins: she supposes “something terrible had happened” to her biological mother, and thus “her children were taken away” (40). The memoir becomes a combination of her childhood fantasies and some of the narratives she has been told.⁷ “Her stories worked their way through my skin and into my blood,” Jane says of her mother’s narratives. “I felt her bravery seeping . . . into my own stories, merging with them, transforming me into her daughter” (103). Explaining the memoir’s title, this passage importantly highlights the way that fictionalized memories can be born out of a combination of missing documents, fictionalized substitutions, and remembered and recounted testimonies. And despite the urge to misread Jane’s statement about blood to be “a signifier of biology,” I concur with Eun Kyung Min who deems “the language of blood” to be “that which ‘remains through the rubble of the years,’ in the cracks of documents and official truths” (125). In another moment, Trenka even fictionalizes a scene wherein her adoptive parents considering the process of adoption with their church leader, long before Jane was even born. These fictional memories and fabrications become the backbone of Trenka’s memoir.

We see the same kind of fictionalization in *Trail of Crumbs* as Kim explains the ways that her memories are compromised in part because her “adoptive mother keeps changing the story every time” (2). Relying on her adoptive mother’s admittedly inconsistent stories that are filled with “discrepancies,” Kim tells the reader that she is “still questioning where it is [she] is from” (1). Kim even acknowledges that the so-called “official documents” about her adoption have been

⁷ One of these narratives, Jane does not come to until she returns to Korea. Jane’s Korean mother repeats her version of Jane’s origin narrative so many times that it becomes “creased into [Jane’s] mind with repetition” (102). At first, Jane is bewildered by her Korean mother’s need to reiterate her story, again and again, but later understands that her mother “hoped that this act of storytelling would redeem her, that through the telling people could see what she wanted to be and not what she had become” (101). Articulated through the many translators that “transform[ed] each person into her mouthpiece” (101), and then later, through Trenka’s act of writing those stories into her own memoir, Jane’s Korean mother witnesses her past traumas in a “one-woman theatre, five feet tall and one hundred pounds, full of fire and hot red pepper paste” (101). The stories are physical, as Jane’s Korean mother weeps, gestures, and exposes her body filled with scars from her abusive ex-husband. Jane’s Korean mother tells of her abusive ex-husband who denied that he was the father of their youngest daughter; relinquishing Jane and Carol was the only solution that Jane’s Korean mother could imagine for saving her baby’s life.

fictionalized; intentionally invented facts about her birth have been created by the doctor who examined her in Korea. He records in her file that Kim is “[b]orn between January and June,” making her “Maybe a Pisces?” (3). Kim elaborates on the doctor’s intentional fictionalization of her origins, saying that although “he validated me and decided my place among the stars, ... My birth date is a compromise, my beginnings a constellation of in-betweens and connect-the-dots” (3). Kim recounts her life in Korea through a series of dreams and broken memories, experiencing an example of what Beth Kyong Lo and Phyllis Solon call transnational transracial Asian adoptees’ “[f]antasies and conceptualizations of their birth origins—in particular regarding their birth mothers” (284). But even Kim must admit, “[o]f course, I don’t remember everything,” and that aspects of her story and different characters “are figures I am told existed, like in any ordinary fairy tale” (1). Indeed, in Sunée and Trenka’s memoirs, memories are born out of falsehoods, inventions, and deceptions, but these fictions are undeniably significant parts of the transnational, transracial Asian adoptee experience of self-narration.⁸

As I conclude, I would like to turn to Michel Foucault, who in *The Order of Things*, requests: “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same. More than one person, doubtless like me, writes in order to have no face.” He asks that impeding so-called “truth” documents that are used to register and define French citizens release him from their confining grasps when it is time for him to write. He is here describing his reluctance to define himself in terms of outside narratives (namely, registry documentation) since these forms demonstrate the impossibility of disclosing some kind of immutable truth of the self. Trenka and Sunée seem to be asking for the same thing in *The Language of Blood* and *Trail of Crumbs*; they long to be liberated from the “truth-tools” that we traditionally employ to determine our identities and evaluate life narratives. In Jane’s words, she wishes to critique those institutions, agencies, and genres used to “[t]ell her who she is. Tell her what is real” (118). At the close of *The Language of Blood*, Jane asks, “Who decided that the truth presented on official documents is more truthful than stories?” (118)

And so Trenka and Sunée create hybrid texts, experiment with form, and challenge official documents as the sole bearers of identity, truth, and origin. Their life narratives are strategically composed of a combination of fairy tales, dreams, stories, histories, intertexts, inventions, and confessions, and are the literary objects

⁸ I do not mean to suggest that transnational, transracial Asian adoptees are the only life writers that fictionalize parts of their subjectivities through narrative. Life writing is so often practiced by those who, for a variety of reasons, do not have access to their personal pasts (African American slave narratives are a perfect example). What is unique here is the fact that transnational, transracial Asian adoptee subjectivity is already bound to the “psychic quandary embodied in the impossible question of the ‘real’” (Eng, *Feeling of Kinship* 132), be it through the labeling of “real” biological mothers or the identification of “real” versus “fake Koreanness.” These dilemmas find their ways into the memoirs wherein adoptees are asked to set the record straight, despite their precarious relationships to “truth.”

that arise out of the muddled narratives of transnational, transracial Asian adoptee personhood. They are the way that the multiple and conflicting narratives that shape real life adoptees' identities are transformed and articulated as literary expressions. Ironically, they have also become the bases for the fictional representations of transnational, transracial Asian adoptees that emulate them and make use of their voices, experiences, structures, themes, and styles. These stories, with their fictionalized truths and meta-narrative elements are evidence of transnational, transracial Asian adoptees' abilities to represent themselves and work through the obstacles of missing information about their pasts. The labour of memory work in Asian adoption memoirs, and the challenge of facing what is lost and irretrievable, is mitigated and transformed into a creative reinterpretation of genre, identity, and style.

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