Reconstructing Identity: Korean Adoptee Memoirs as Cultural Memory and Testimony

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In this paper, adoptee life writing acts for a substantial remaking of knowledge about identity, origin, and belonging that makes a difference in public understanding. This study explores how Korean adoptees who were raised in the United States negotiate cultural memory, racial identity, and belonging through life writing. By means of Jane Jeong Trenka's works, *The Language of Blood* and *Fugitive Visions*, this review explores the ways that adoptee memoirs offer spaces where fractured histories are reconstructed and hybrid identities articulated. Using a qualitative close-reading approach informed by theories of cultural memory, diasporic and hybrid identity, and testimonial literature, the study examines how Trenka narrates the loss of linguistic, familial, and cultural ties in her new life, as well as of spaces of reconnection, agency, and identity construction. The results indicate that Trenka's memoirs are indicative of the challenges and possibilities of adoptee identity work. The stories she tells illustrate how institutional silences, gaps in documentation, and social stigma impact adoptee experiences, but they can also celebrate resilience, community, and renewed cultural involvement. Our position here is that memoir is not only personal testimony and the act of telling a story but also a cultural intervention in larger discussions related to the ethics of adoption, claims of historical accountability, and, importantly, the politics of memory. This single-author case study cannot account for the range of adoptee experiences, but it shows how memoir can shed light on the emotional and cultural impact of international adoption and involve itself in new kinds of memory activism. In this paper, adoptee life writing acts for a substantial remaking of knowledge about identity, origin, and belonging that makes a difference in public understanding.

Keywords: Korean transnational adoption; cultural memory; Diasporic identity; Hybrid identity; Testimonial literature; Adoptee memoir; Jane Jeong Trenka

Introduction

What does it mean to belong to a place you've never been? This question has actually influenced the lives of thousands of Korean adoptees who had been sent to settle in other countries when they were young. For these adoptees, who are raised far away from their country of origin, identity is not simply inherited but rather assembled through their personal experiences, sociocultural upbringing, and dominant narratives that exist within their day-to-day lives.

South Korea has historically been one of the largest "baby exporting" countries in the world, sending about 160,000 children to the United States alone[1]. Exceptionally high rates of relinquishment emerged from intertwined historical, social, and structural forces. Soon after the Korean War, it created war orphans, setting the ground for adoption in the 1950s and 1960s[1]. Aside from the aftermath of war, socio-cultural pressures such as patrilineal family structures and the social taboo against children born outside of marriage, and the strong Confucian norm of stigmatizing single motherhood, also contribute to mothers' relinquishing of children due to social pressure[2,3]. Furthermore, the rapid economic growth from the 1970s to 1990s had also led to poverty and limited welfare support, leaving low-income or single mothers with no institutional support[3,4]. After historical, cultural, and economic elements came together, the rates of relinquishment stayed high[5].

Recently, the legacy of international adoption is being reexamined. This move is because of the action of adoptees publicly articulating the personal, cultural, and political consequences of their displacement. An increasing number of memoirs, visual art, and activism reflect identity, belonging, and loss. These moves shed light on how adoptees construct their narratives, confront institutional silences, and navigate cultural connections.

This paper considers memoirs as a site of cultural memory for Korean adoptees through a single-author case study of Jane Jeong Trenka's The Language of Blood[6] and Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea[7]. Rather than representing adoptees in the broad sense, Trenka's memoirs illuminate how a single person can try to revisit fragmented histories, articulate the emotional impact of institutional silence, and negotiate a sense of identity in racial, national, and

cultural contexts through personal narrative. To explore these processes, the study attends to three guiding questions:

1. How does Trenka reconstruct or interpret cultural and familial memory?

2. How does she stitch the strands of her being an adoptee, balancing white American culture with her return to Korea as an adult?

3. How is memoir important in terms of finding one's roots while feeling removed?

Trenka's writing presents as a potent bridge for cultural memory, helping to mend fragmented histories and express an identity forged in the vigorous dynamic of the interactions between cultures.

Methodology

Research design

This study uses a qualitative close-reading methodology for the analysis of memoirs by Jane Jeong Trenka, which articulates memory, identity, and reconnection in *The Language of Blood*[6] and *Fugitive Visions*[7]. The analysis applies an integrated theoretical framework of cultural memory by Jan Assman[8], diasporic identity by Stuart Hall[9], and Homi Bhabha's concepts of diasporic and hybrid identity[10]. Testimonial literature by Felman and Laub[11] acts as a methodological tool for interpreting memoirs as acts of witnessing rather than purely literary artifacts. This research provides insight into broader trends of identity formation among Korean adoptees but is limited to U.S.-based adoptees whose experiences are articulated in memoirs. The purpose of the analysis is to understand Trenka's process of reconstructing fragmented histories and negotiating across national, racial, and cultural boundaries.

Analytical Framework: Testimonial Literature and Witnessing

Testimonial literature guides the analysis in this study. It doesn't treat memoir as simple autobiography. Instead, it views memoir as a mode of bearing witness—something that emerges through gaps in official records, through emotional complexity, and through the labor of assembling narrative from what's available. As explored by Felman and Laub[11], testimonial literature provides the lens of methodology for the interpretation of these narratives. Testimony is an act of witnessing, not merely autobiographical recounting that can bring silenced histories and injustices into public eyes.

Trenka's memoirs are read here as personal narratives that wrestle with memory, displacement, and what it means to be culturally dislocated. Research by Novy[12], Willis[13], and Hemmeke[14] shows that adoptee life writing tends to roam around certain recurring challenges: incomplete records, family histories that have been interrupted or erased, and the fraught process of trying to locate the origins. This study takes those observations to examine how Trenka uses narrative to interpret her past, to sort through questions about where she belongs, and to articulate the emotional and cultural weight of what being adopted has meant for her.

Data Source

This study works primarily with Trenka's two memoirs. Beyond that, it draws on a range of secondary sources—research on Korean adoption history, diaspora and hybridity, and cultural memory about testimonial literature. It also uses publicly available policy documents related to Korean adoption. Collectively, these resources offer the necessary historical context and conceptual framework for understanding the ideas that are needed to read her memoirs.

Trenka's two memoirs are the primary sources that provide personal narratives of memory, identity, and what it means to be adopted across borders. Her memoirs form the main material for close reading. Secondary sources such as academic research, policy documents, historical records were incorporated to offer context, and not to draw broader claims beyond Trenka's personal experiences. Publicly available documents from the South Korean government, including TRC statements and adoption-related legislation, are treated as primary historical materials where relevant.

Limitations

The research is based on one author's memoirs, and results are illustrative rather than representative of adoptee experiences. It doesn't speak on behalf of Korean adoptees as a whole. Experiences of adoptees vary enormously depending on, e.g., a combination of factors including adoption era, geography, family context, whether someone has access to their records, and a range of personal circumstances. Trenka's writing is from her perspective, influenced by her background, by her place in the world, and by what choices she makes when telling her story. So the findings here represent how one memoirist works through questions of identity and memory, rather than a generalizable account. Korean-language scholarship and legal documents provide further context on the Korean adoption policy development, but this investigation employs them selectively to enable contextual understanding, as opposed to broadening the methodological scope beyond its textual focus.

Definitions of Key Analytical Terms

This study draws on several conceptual categories that guide the close-reading analysis. To maintain clarity and consistency, the following terms are defined as they are used in this paper.

Cultural Memory

Based on Jan Assmann's framework[8], cultural memory refers to forms of remembrance preserved through symbolic media—such as literature, ritual, or collective narratives—rather than through direct interpersonal exchange. Cultural memory is distinguished from communicative memory, which is short-term and rooted in everyday interactions. In this study, "cultural memory" means how Trenka uses narratives to recreate, imagine, or symbolically express histories that she can't access through her experiences.

Communicative Memory

According to Assmann, communicative memory is made up of informal, lived memories that are shared between generations in families or communities[8]. For Korean adoptees raised overseas, access to the communicative memory of their birth families and early histories is frequently constrained. This idea gives us a different way to think about how Trenka uses written stories as a different way to remember things.

Diasporic Identity

Diasporic identity is not fixed but a process, according to Stuart Hall[9]. History, social positioning, and cultural interaction create it. The term is thus linked to the way Trenka describes her sense of identity as something being continuously exercised—both from her American upbringing and her Korean heritage.

Hybridity / Hybrid Identity

Drawing from Homi Bhabha's discussion of the "third space"[10], hybridity reflects a practice of identity construction at sites of cultural overlap or ambiguity. Rather than producing a unified identity, hybridity indicates the negotiation of meanings in cultural contexts. Here we apply the term in a study of specific sites within Trenka's memoirs situated between belonging, recognition, and cultural positioning that remain unresolved.

Testimonial Literature / Testimony

Testimony is a type of narrative that tells about experiences that were affected by trauma, absence, or institutional silence[11]. Testimonial literature is not treated as objective documentation but as an interpretive and affective mode in which authors articulate what official histories may omit. This concept helps interpret Trenka's memoirs as acts of narrating memory rather than as empirical accounts of adoption policy.

Analytical Procedure (Coding & Interpretation Process)

This study utilizes qualitative close reading to examine Trenka's portrayal of memory, identity, and reconnection in The Language of Blood and Fugitive Visions. The steps of the analysis are listed below to ensure clarity in both the content and the methods.

Step 1: Textual Selection

Both memoirs were read closely, and passages referencing one or more of the following themes were identified:

- memory, forgetting, or gaps in personal history
- language, embodiment, and racialization
- belonging, unfamiliarity, or cultural dissonance
- encounters with institutions or documentation
- reflections on heritage, kinship, and origin
- moments of self-interpretation

These passages were marked as potential analytical excerpts.

Step 2: Initial Thematic Coding

The chosen excerpts were inductively organized into three overarching thematic categories that matched with the theoretical framework:

1. Cultural Memory Reconstruction (e.g., attempts to interpret or recreate missing histories)
2. Diasporic or Hybrid Identity Negotiation (e.g., descriptions of belonging, unfamiliarity, or dual positioning)
3. Testimonial Reflection or Witnessing (e.g., articulations of institutional gaps, uncertainty, or narrative reconstruction)

These categories were chosen because they reflect the interpretive lenses drawn from Assmann[8], Hall[9], Bhabha[10], and Felman & Laub[11].

Step 3: Interpretive Analysis

Interpretation of each selected excerpt by category was analyzed using:

- Assmann's framework to interpret memory reconstruction
- Hall and Bhabha's models of identity negotiation
- Felman & Laub's theory to interpret testimonial narration

Interpretations were based on the textual evidence and not applied according to a prescriptive principle. The analysis did not generalize Trenka's experiences to adoptees widely and concentrated instead on her personal story.

Step 4: Cross-Comparison Across Memoirs

Divergences between the two memoirs were examined to find out whether Trenka framed her sense of memory or identity changes or continuities over time and to map these differences to her experiences with memoir. This step let the findings differentiate between reflection as a child (*Language of Blood*) versus returning to childhood (*Fugitive Visions*).

Step 5: Limitations

Because it is an interpretive analysis based on literary texts, the categories do not represent universal features of adoptee experiences. The coding takes one analytical method and is limited to English-language memoirs by a single author. Transparency rather than empirical generalization is the aim of the process.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Historical Context of Korean International Adoption

South Korea's adoption practices need to be looked at in a larger historical and social context. Before the mid-twentieth century, adoption of children in Korea followed patrilineal norms shaped by Confucian family structures, and adoption was mostly performed within extended kin networks to maintain lineage and ancestral continuity[3,4]. Adoption of unrelated children was uncommonly conducted, not due to a universal social taboo, but because the dominant model for keeping families in line was via kinship-based succession[1]. This is the situation that the Korean War (1950–1953) changed most radically. Thousands of children were displaced or separated from their families, and international humanitarian organizations sprang into action for children's welfare. This situation helped launch organized overseas adoption in the 1950s and 1960s[1,2]. Longer-term, sociocultural and economic factors—limited social welfare for single motherhood, stereotyped gendered perceptions about out-of-wedlock births, and industrialization—have allowed international adoption as a policy response to extend over time[3,4].

The subsequent subsections illustrate this evolution in a linear fashion: from the immediate postwar period via institutionalization in the late twentieth century and the ongoing reforms, critiques, and re-evaluations to the present time. Such historical background is important to provide a necessary context for understanding the circumstances that many adoptees later went through and the identity questions raised in memoirs such as Trenka's.

Korean War and Early Adoptions

The Korean War (1950–53) spread social upheaval and forced migration through the peninsula. An estimated 2.8 million civilians and soldiers lost their lives, leaving many families separated or unsupported[1]. The postwar assessments reported high numbers of widowed women and children who had experienced orphanhood or displacement or had been separated from their families[2]. Humanitarian and religious organizations, as well as volunteers from abroad, got involved with child welfare work in these times.

International adoption started in the 1950s to assist children who had been estranged from their families. There is evidence that foreign soldiers, particularly in proximity to U.S. bases, contributed to the birth of mixed-race offspring. Nonetheless, several children faced social and economic ostracism following the Korean War[15]. Some of these children were placed in institutions, while others were adopted by families abroad. The inaugural official adoptions occurred in 1953, establishing a framework for enduring international adoption.

Institutionalization and Export Markets

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, international adoption had become more structured. One influential development was the establishment of Holt International in 1955, following Harry Holt's adoption of eight Korean children. Holt's involvement drew widespread public attention in the United States and contributed to the growth of interest in adopting children from Korea[1].

In 1961, the South Korean government enacted the Special Adoption Law, which standardized legal procedures for international adoption and established regulations for the placement of children designated as orphans or wards of the state[3]. Scholars have noted that the new legal framework expanded the authority of institutions to place children for overseas adoption when parental or guardian information was incomplete or unavailable[4].

During the 1970s and 1980s, international demand for Korean children increased, partly due to demographic and social changes abroad, including declining numbers of adoptable infants in some Western countries[2]. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare[16], annual overseas adoptions

from Korea rose from 59 children in 1955 to a peak of 8,837 in 1985. Adoption agencies such as Eastern Social Welfare Society (ESWS), Korea Social Service (KSS), and Korea Welfare Services (KWS) contributed to the system's expansion.

This type of growth brought criticism also. Korean commentators as well as international observers raised concerns about documentation practices, informed consent, and the broader social and economic pressures shaping adoption practices[1]. Korea also emerged on the world stage, particularly during the 1988 Seoul Olympics, drawing more focused attention to these debates.

Global Criticism, Reform, and Legislation

The South Korean government was grappling with the increasing public interest and had introduced a series of policy reforms. The 1976 Extraordinary Adoption Law sought to increase placements within Korea to discourage adoption abroad[1,4]. Placements abroad had fallen initially under the policy, but long-term consequences were tempered partly by political and institutional resistance.

Reforms followed, which include welfare measures supporting single-parent families[5] and 2012 amendments to the Special Adoption Law, including registration of birth as well as the procedural protections[16]. These developments reflected a national debate on transparency and adoptees' rights and were highlighted in more recent scholarship[13,14].

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has only recently examined these specific irregularities of adoption history, e.g., incomplete or inaccurate documentation and concerns over consent processes[17,18]. The remedies from a TRC study consisted of increased access to records, a legal mechanism for reviewing lost records, and recognition as legal by the state of past practices[19]. As Korean-language studies have also examined the structural and historical forces of the adoption system, it has helped analyze critically to form views of such reforms[20,21].

Yet as consumption has declined on an international scale since its peak in adoption in the 1980s, academics and decision-makers have shifted their attention to the legacy of past work and to the sufficiency of present-day reforms. These discussions shape much of the discourse that arises from the narratives in this article; the article focuses on a literary approach rather than policy evaluation.

Theoretical framework

The study draws on cultural memory theory, diasporic and hybrid identity theory, and testimonial literature to interpret how Jane Jeong-Trenka, makes sense of identity, loss, and reconnection in *The Language of Blood*[6] and *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea*[7]. These frameworks advocate an interpretive reading of her memoirs by illuminating how personal narrative can function as a site of memory reconstruction, identity negotiation, and testimony in the context of transnational adoption. Although the experiences of Korean adoptees cannot be generalized in the analysis, the focus will be on how one author interprets fractured histories and cultural dislocation via memoir.

Cultural Memory Theory

The idea of cultural memory, which Egyptologist and cultural theorist Jan Assmann came up with, helps us comprehend how Trenka deals with histories that are only partly available or broken apart. Cultural memory refers to a society's consciously maintained forms through texts, symbols, and institutions, rather than through everyday interpersonal communication[8]. Such a distinction is useful to analyze adoptee memoirs, as individuals separated from birth families often lack access to communicative memory, which is stories, linguistic continuity, or intergenerational exchange[8,22].

Within this framework, memoir is a remarkable symbolic site, especially for Trenka, where she reconstructs aspects of her personal and cultural past. In her narrative, metaphor, sensory detail, and emotional reflection are key in her interpretation of uncertain memories. Memoir serves as a site of memory—repositories of silenced histories and emotion that invite adoptees to reconnect through metaphor, affect, archival fragments, and narrative imagination[23]. In this study, cultural memory theory would help examine how Trenka uses narrative to imagine, retrieve, or reinterpret elements of origin, belonging, and family history.

Diasporic/Hybrid Identity

Employing the dual lens of cultural memory and diasporic identity theory will allow us to read these adoptee memoirs alongside, rather than alone within, their theories. Cultural memory theory unpacks how these adoptees organized (or processed) suppressed histories, genealogies, and origins, and diasporic/hybrid identity theory unpacks how identity constructions in this reconstruction unfold psychologically, racially, and culturally as adoptees navigate their quotidian lives.

Stuart Hall describes the concept of diasporic identity, and you probably see how his theory could really inform how Trenka was dealing with defining who she was across different cultural contexts. As Hall stated[9], identity isn't something we're born with, not even an essence; it's something we create and remake in regard to who we are in history and our relationships to others in terms of how we interpret life experiences. For people who were born and raised away from their home country, identity becomes very relational. It's in the space between feeling like you belong and feeling like you don't, between what you have and what you don't.

Trenka's memoirs persistently reveal this tension. Trenka

shares her experiences of feeling racially different in America and culturally adrift in Korea. Her story is a form of what Hall calls "positioned" identity—one that tends to evolve from movement across social landscapes, rather than being anchored in one.

Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the "third space" serve as additional layers to this [10]. Bhabha was writing about postcolonial contexts, but his framework does much to help contextualize Trenka's experience of straddling Korean heritage and American upbringing. In Fugitive Visions, she talks about being in Korea and feeling both connected and foreign at the same time. Where her account ends up is in places of discomfort between identity and nostalgia. What her narrative offers isn't so much a pursuit of some lost authentic self as it is an attempt to make sense of those awkward spaces in between. This kind of hybrid not only reintegrates people with what they lost; as Bhandari argues, this interstitial space can open up a new space [24].

What Hall and Bhabha then provide is a lens through which to read Trenka's story as something other than a tale of disorientation or cultural deprivation. Her identity forms not in spite of the linguistic, racial, and cultural dissonance she feels, but actually through it in the friction and the gaps between her two worlds.

Testimonial Literature and Narrative Reconstruction

Testimonial literature serves as the theoretical basis of the present study. Felman and Laub regard testimony as transcending individual recollection [11]. Testimony itself is a way for them to bear witness—it collects experiences that might otherwise be scattered or never be vocalized at all. This work is the subject of Trenka's memoirs. She writes through gaps in her adoption records, through the silence of institutions that don't (or can't) answer her questions, and through the strange emotional terrain of trying to reconstitute a place of origin both familiar and thoroughly alien to her.

Her memoirs are less retrospective than they are works of reconstruction—cobbling together memory and then trying to figure out what those fragments mean. Willis [13] and Hemmeke [14] have observed that adoptee life writing is fraught with gaps—missing paperwork, broken family histories, and things never documented. Trenka's story, too, treads a similar path. She uses storytelling to process themes of belonging, to express what displacement feels like, and to try to bear the tension of looking for origins that seem both familiar and completely out of reach. The testimonial frame works for this reason because it allows her work to be characterized as working with a narrative that is not just the recitation of the facts. She's recording the emotional weight and the cultural complexities of being adopted from one country and brought up in another—and giving voice to things that don't always make it into official records.

Integration of Cultural Memory and Diasporic Identity

This approach draws on three frameworks to analyze aspects of Trenka's memoirs: cultural memory theory, diasporic and hybrid identity theory, and testimonial literature. Cultural memory theory clarifies the manner in which Trenka contends with histories that are incomplete or closed off to her. The diasporic and hybrid identity theory is a fitting approach that sheds light on her negotiation of selfhood within and across the various cultural contexts she navigates. The testimonial literature informs our understanding both of how her writing gives form to a kind of thing that might otherwise lie fragmented or go unsaid and of how her narratives provide the means to show the shape that others find difficult to articulate.

Together, these frameworks position Trenka's memoirs as spaces where she reconstructs memory while also working out who she is. Her writing doesn't aim to restore some original or fixed sense of identity. What it does is show how meaning can be created in the process—through telling a story that's full of gaps and through figuring out where she belongs across cultures. This theoretical grounding informs the close reading that follows.

Competing and Alternative Frameworks

This study is primarily concerned with cultural memory theory, diasporic and hybrid identity theory, and testimonial literature; however, other frameworks exist to engage adoptee narratives. Research on archival silence considers the impact of missing or incomplete institutional records and the effect of these shortcomings on an individual's ability to reconstruct their personal history [25,26]. Memory activism offers a different angle. It views memoirs and public testimonies not merely as personal narratives but as instruments of political resistance that challenge official narratives and facilitate the inclusion of marginalized stories [27].

Strategic essentialism [28] helps us in understanding how marginalized groups in the postcolonial world try to present themselves as cohesive while striving to be politically recognized. But that framework is geared towards collective mobilisation—not individual narrative reconstruction; that's what Trenka does in her writing. As well, the testimony studies provide another perspective that makes it clear, as LaCapra [29] argues, that testimony shaped by trauma or fragmented recall is not an integrated historical narrative: witness is incomplete, ambiguous, and contains aspects unable to be fully articulated.

All of these are viable analytical paths, but they extend beyond the focus of a study centered on one author. The frameworks selected here—cultural memory, diasporic identity, and testimonial literature—align more closely with the research questions: how Trenka assembles her narrative, how she negotiates identity across cultures, and what memoir does as a mode of interpretation.

Findings and Analysis: Reconstructing Identity through Memoir

This section examines two works by Jane Jeong Trenka, *The Language of Blood* and *Fugitive Visions*[6,7], through the theoretical frameworks of cultural memory, hybrid identity, and testimonial literature. Both works are deeply autobiographical testimonies from the standpoint of a single Korean adoptee growing up in America. Trenka's memoirs contain profound exploration of childhood memories as well as attempts to reestablish contact with a lost origin. In the process, Trenka shows how the ethnic dissonance between her Korean heritage and American background can lead adoptees to form their identities in the wake of being displaced from their native land.

The following analysis will follow a chronological structure, beginning with *The Language of Blood*, which traces Trenka's childhood by providing initial reflections on being raised in Minnesota and her early efforts to reconnect with her Korean roots. This text introduces the foundational elements of identity confusion and longing for reconnection. Subsequently, *Fugitive Visions* will then be examined as a continuation of this process. With a deepened sense of personal tone, this text documents her return to Korea and the embodied tensions of language, memory, and social belonging.

Each memoir will be analyzed within three thematic frames: how cultural memory is retrieved and reshaped, how hybrid/diasporic identities are articulated, and how life writing functions as testimonial resistance. Finally, by embedding close readings of key excerpts, this section seeks to reveal how Trenka's life-writing negotiates the scars of adoption but also constructs a dynamic identity in the process. Together, these texts shed critical light on the ongoing struggle to understand origin through memory, body, and voice.

The Language of Blood

In *"The Language of Blood,"* Trenka recounts her childhood as a Korean adoptee in rural Minnesota. Trenka talks about her experiences with racism in a welcoming but culturally homogenizing atmosphere, as well as a sense of displacement. Trenka's memoir is a way for her to reclaim her heritage, being Korean, as she tells her own life stories against those set by others. Her themes for examination for the rest of this text are (i) her hybridity, (ii) encounters with racial discrimination and exclusion, and (iii) emotional disconnection from adoptive parents. These are the themes with which we can help make sense of how Trenka's childhood memories emerge to become sites of conflict, cultural forgetting, and resistance.

Throughout the story, Trenka repeatedly asserts how everything that she is can be read as embedded in her own self because of what has been excluded or obscured from her perspective by dominant American tales of her upbringing. So, Trenka's writing is a deep-based effort to reclaim a cultural memory and identity that was cut through her neglect as a child of her Korean heritage. Trenka looks back on her upbringing and says,

> "Many Americans may not know about this time of suffering in Korea's history because in America, we focus on American and Western European war history - the Holocaust in particular. And, while in our popular culture there is a fascination with all things Japanese or Chinese, very few people know about the unique culture that lies between those two countries[6]." (Trenka, 2003, p. 41)

This excerpt can be aptly read through Assmann's cultural memory theory as a dynamic process of remembering and forgetting shaped by institutions and ideology. Trenka's American upbringing lacked access to the historical trauma that makes up the cultural memory of an average Korean. Her lack of knowledge of Korean history—its colonization, war, and poverty—renders her origins absent. This absence of origin is not merely personal to Trenka but also cultural: her American environment excluded Korean memory from its national consciousness, as seen in the excerpt above; this ignorance towards the historical trauma of Korea severs Trenka from a more profound understanding of her heritage.

Trenka, in her memoir, confronts the common stories that have circulated about her adoption, and particularly that international adoption amounted to humanitarian rescue. This framing was dominant among media in the United States and Korea in the late 20th century[18]. Later, the investigations started by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to unveil the gaps, anomalies, and lost records on adoption files. The resources shed light on the structural silences that heavily influenced the pasts of many adoptees[19]. These unveiled resources can illuminate the larger context that Trenka was navigating towards, although her stories would not be able to speak for all adoptees in general.

Her childhood perceptions in Minnesota show the racial environment she encountered:

> "Asians were scary...We had no way of knowing if our hideous generalizations were the least bit accurate, but we were—or at least I was—curious about who was who and how I fit into the scheme of things[6]." (Trenka, 2003, p. 66)

This framing was common. Stereotypes and sweeping generalizations of Asian identities dominated U.S. media at the time, shaping how people make sense of racial belonging[2,13]. In such an attempt, Trenka's reflections arise in a racialized landscape that presents almost no nuanced or accurate depictions of Korean identity, and she struggles to discover her way

through the world. Her memoir enacts what adoption scholars have called narrative reconstruction—focusing on storytelling to reconstruct fragmented memories, to untangle the realities of being culturally displaced, and to speak to her place in these larger sites of representation [12,14].

Hall and Bhabha's work on diasporic and hybrid identity helps us comprehend the parts in Trenka's book when she doesn't know who she is. Hall argued that identity is perpetually "produced," affected by our historical and social context [9]. Trenka writes to make sense of her place in the racial and cultural aspects of her childhood. Her close look at a childhood photograph reflects this self-examination:

> "I hold the picture by its frame, and then it occurs to me to look at my face more closely, to see if what Carol had told me was true: that we were given away because I was too ugly. I examine the face for a deformity. Is the mouth too large? Are the eyes too small? Do I really look like a frog [6]?" (Trenka, 2003, p. 22)

This scene is not representative of adoptees as a whole—it is Trenka working through her own struggle to understand how she was perceived in her immediate world. Other scholars in the field of adoptee memoir have found that moments like this often show how racialized perception and personal memory come together to shape how someone interprets their identity [13,14]. To Trenka, this reflection suggests an awareness of how other people's judgments seeped into her sense of self, signaling those quiet, steady negotiations of identity that play out in childhood.

When she arrives in Korea, that tension becomes more acute. She describes standing in front of two immigration lines—one for Koreans, one for foreigners:

> "Two lines: one for Koreans and one for foreigners...For a moment, I stood in the rear of the room, wondering which line to join [6]." (Trenka, 2003, p. 96)

This moment captures how Trenka interprets her position between cultural categories. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" may be of concern here, as the area where identity "worked" is not just accepted [10]. The scene is not claiming to be a substitute or proxy for adoptees as a whole. It chronicles Trenka's battle to discover meaning and where she fits in with cultural systems that are alien to her. Scholars working with transnational adoptee memoirs have argued that such moments reveal personal negotiations with belonging, a process that is not only influenced by racial visibility but also by unfamiliarity with culture and the social environments people move through [13,14].

When Trenka writes regarding names—her transition from Jeong Kyong-Ah to Jane Brauer—she struggles with cultural displacement as it manifests itself in her life. She later writes about what it means that this documentation is missing:

> "If I had to legally prove that my Korean family is my Korean family, I would be at a loss because the adoption agency won't give me the documents that fill in the gap between the time I was Jeong Kyong-Ah and when I became Jane Brauer [6]." (Trenka, 2003, p. 203)

Trenka's use of this excerpt shows how much she recognizes systemic opacity in her adoption documentation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's investigations have also uncovered similar inconsistencies in some historical adoption files, and that assists in contextualizing some of those gaps as to what kinds of gaps people like Trenka encounter as they attempt to document their histories [19]. Her story illustrates how she addresses these absences.

She responds directly to this interpretive work:

> "I have made it my task to reconstruct the text of a family with context clues, and my intent is... to trust in the mysterious; to juxtapose the known with the unknown; to collect the overlooked [6]." (Trenka, 2003, p. 130)

Historical sources in literature on adoption have shown that memoir is often viewed as a place where people attempt to stitch together fragmented or incomplete histories when official documents fall short [12,14]. Trenka's work isn't asserting a claim of resistance on behalf of adoptees broadly. It reveals her specific effort to extract meaning out of the uncertainties her adoption records left behind.

Her ruminations reflect the emotional tension associated with race and belonging most of the time. She writes:

> "What I longed for was wholeness, for my body to be as white and Northern Minnesotan as my mind. I longed to be normal, to not have to emotionally excavate myself to find my place [6]." (Trenka, 2003, p. 207)

Hall describes diasporic identity as the identity constructed over time as it relates to experiences, contexts, and history [9]. Trenka's passage illustrates how her memories, physical exploration, and the culture in which she grew up inform the way in which she is able to contextualize who she is within her experience and context. Such passages, researchers say, address racially based experiences of their upbringing and cultural ties that are incomplete or fragmented due to adoption [13,14].

The Language of Blood depicts how Trenka approaches the gaps in her cultural, linguistic, and familial history and her use of narrative to make sense of the gaps she recognizes. Instead of universalizing her memoir among Korean adoptees,

the analysis proposes that it be documented so that she can examine her particular efforts to construct a sense of self, belonging, and memory in different national and cultural contexts.

Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea

Trenka documents, for instance, how she physically and emotionally returned to South Korea as an adult adoptee in her book Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea. This text departs from fractured memories of her childhood in the United States and focuses on her painful reintegration into her home country almost in the same way as The Language of Blood. Trenka turns the narrative toward the difficulty of attempting to navigate an environment where the language isn't even her own, where she's never been familiar with a cultural context, and where she feels estranged from people after her childhood was long gone. This memoir is about reclaiming identity from a time of exile, however fraught that experience can feel: inherited culture feels close while also alien. These events, including changes in Korean society, international adoption, and Trenka's reflections along with their political critique, shaped her quest for an origin.

A key part of rekindling her connection to her Korean heritage is confronting the beliefs that American families impose upon adoptees. Trenka, in her memoir, recounts a set of beliefs and narratives that her adoptive mother had repeated:

> "If you had not been adopted...
> —I would have died, I would have become a prostitute... I would have been an orphan, I would have been homeless.
> My American Mother believes all of the above[7]." (Trenka, 2009, p. 47)

Rather than generalizing this point about adoptive parents, the excerpt makes certain claims we can see in Trenka's very own family. As academic scholars have noted, Western adoption discourse sometimes relied heavily on stories of humanitarian or rescue efforts that collapsed the rich dimension of relinquishment in Korea[1,2]. Through this personal narrative, Trenka shows how these stories shaped her observations of Korean society and of her background.

While living in Korea, she describes the stigma associated with relinquishment and how these tales influenced her efforts to reconnect to her heritage. She writes:

> "In Korea, I started to understand the logic of the society that would not help our family... If parents fall so low that they would even give their own children away, why should anyone else help them[7]? " (Trenka, 2009, p. 88)

Rather than making a blanket assertion about Korean society, this passage shows the manner in which she understands the attitudes that she encountered. Studies of adoption in Korea have shown stigma against relinquishment and single parenthood has historically influenced both the policy and public discourse[3,4]. Trenka's chronicle shows her attempts to place her experience within these cultural frameworks.

Her thoughts then extend the topic to consider how collective histories shape contemporary identity:

> "In this country that pulses with the collective memory of an unfinished war... the collective imprint of a desperation that will not go away, I am still at war with myself[7]." (Trenka, 2009, p. 139)

In this excerpt, Trenka expresses her own inner conflict in relation to the larger historical tensions that she perceives in Korea. Through Assmann's cultural memory theory[8], this scene can be interpreted as her attempt to understand how national histories of division influence the cultural context she returns to. Rather than asserting a universal claim about Koreans or adoptees, the memoir documents how she interprets her personal sense of dislocation in relation to collective narratives she observes.

Her difficulties with language further highlight these tensions:

> "At thirty-six years old, I am the mother of no one, the ex-wife of a New Yorker, an ex-Korean possessing Korean language skills inferior to those of my nephew, a two-year-old Korean boy being raised by Korean parents. I am functionally illiterate, deaf, and mute in what should have been my native language in my native country[7]." (Trenka, 2009, p. 14)

This insight emphasizes the disconnection of her sense of physical belonging and linguistic fluency. Scholars of adoptee memoirs point out that language is frequently situated where adoptees make sense of cultural loss and recognition[13,14]. So, too, for Trenka, restricted competence is a shorthand for the gap between her genealogical identity and her lived cultural experience.

She elaborates on this tension through an embodied contrast:

> "In Korea, I am pretty. My mother's genetic gift to me is natural *ssang kapul*, the coveted double eyelids obtainable to most only by surgery...In Korea, I cannot speak Korean. In Korea, I am not a real Korean[7]." (Trenka, 2009, p. 31)

She has conformed to the traditional Korean beauty norms, while she still feels culturally out of place physically. Placing

this moment in Hall's conceptualization of identity as ongoing and contextually bound enables us to evaluate her negotiation among competing contexts for belonging, namely appearance, fluency, and cultural participation[9]. This passage is no longer presenting a neat end—it has much to tell us about her understanding of identity as structured by intermingling cultural expectations.

In the memoir she recalls conversations with adoptees she had met in Korea and talks about the disparity between what they learned from their biological families and what was told to them during adoption:

> "Those adoptees who have been reunited with their families know exactly how they came to be adopted, and usually, the story their Korean families tell is not the same story that the agency told their adoptive parents at the time of adoption[7]." (Trenka, 2009, p. 89)

Trenka offers these observations as aspects of her interpretive experience and does not treat them as patterns. In some cases, investigative reports by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission[17] have also noted similar discrepancies that further contextualize the stories she sees.

She adds other stories she heard:

> "Children were switched for others who were scheduled to be adopted... mothers were told the children were not there or had died, when in reality they had been selected for international adoption[7]." (Trenka, 2009, p. 92)

Felman and Laub's theory of testimony says that these narratives have emotional and interpretative value even if they fail to resolve any confusion in the archives[11]. Fugitive Visions pits Trenka against multiple, sometimes conflicting narratives in her quest to understand her origins.

Taken together, these excerpts demonstrate how Fugitive Visions documents Trenka's attempt to process cultural memory, identity, and displacement during her return to Korea. The memoir is not meant to be viewed on a broad scale as generalizable to adoptees; rather, in it, we receive examples of how she comes to frame her position in overlapping cultural, historical, and narrative settings. Her reflections depict identity not as a settled category but as a procedure mediated by memory, language, embodiment, and changing cultural environments.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analytical study proposes that Trenka's memoirs reveal different interpretive processes that build identity following transnational adoption. Her writing does not provide an integrated or final sense of self; it proposes identity as fluid—as shaped by memory, cultural context, language, and relationships. Through the lens of the theories of cultural memory, diasporic identity, and testimonial literature, this analysis reveals the restrictions and the scope that give voice to Trenka's construction of belonging.

The results of this research are not generalizable to all adoptees; they capture the tale, situation, and point of view of one author. But her memoirs add to larger conversations around transparency, access to records, and the emotional dimensions of reconnecting with one's origins. Research in the future could investigate memoirs from adoptee backgrounds raised in other countries or other forms of testimony—oral histories, visual narratives, and documentary film—to allow for the emergence of a more nuanced picture of adoptee identity creation. Attention to factors such as gender, class, sexuality, or disability might add depth to this field of study even more fully.

It is with Trenka's memoirs, eventually, that readers are asked to consider how memory is constructed through narrative—and how people make sense of their own past when formal histories or familial records are incomplete. Her research illustrates that the development of one's identity can entail the difficulties of dislocation, as well as the potential values of reconnection, reflection, and self-understanding.

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