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Language, Racial Performativity, and the Body as a Sign: Adoption and the Transnational Subject

When I was nine months old, I was adopted from China and became a citizen of the United States. As a transnational subject, I have always struggled with my identity. However, it was only during my sophomore year of college, when I enrolled in "Asian Americans & the Psychology of Race," that I was given the language to think more deeply about my background. For the course, I was assigned a study on familial tensions between second-generation Asian Americans and their immigrant parents and came across the term "Asian American ethnic development" (Akiyama 7). What is "ethnic development?" I had always conceived of "ethnicity" less of a marker of geographical location and cultural practice, and more as a descriptor of physical phenotype, a term interchangeable with "race," not something that was developed. Was I "Chinese" if my language and cultural practices were not? Was I simply "Asian," if the only thing that I've retained from my birth country is biological phenotype?

Over the course of my research for this essay, I've found that my identity crisis as a transnational subject is perhaps symptomatic of many converging factors having to do with racial surveillance, expectation, and performance. Judith Butler, in her "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," describes a distinction between "sex as biological facticity," and "gender as the cultural interpretation or signification of that

facticity" (522). In other words, gender is divorced from biological fact; it is historically constructed and socially reproduced, internalized, and performed. In this same way, one could understand ethnic expression as a performance of phenotypical difference. However, it is impossible not to interpret ethnic expression as performance without first acknowledging the racialization of non-white bodies. Max Tuan, in his book *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?*, coins the term "ethnic expectation" to characterize Asian racialization: because of biological phenotype, "Asian ethnics are expected to 'be ethnic' in spite of the [loss] of cultural authenticity accompanying extensive acculturation" (Tuan 156). Thus, having been raised and socialized by white American parents, I felt that I was performing my ethnicity wrong. The problem with this sentiment, however, is that it reflects the American presupposition that looking Chinese equates to being from China and partaking in Chinese ethnic practices; racialized bodies are expected to perform ethnic identities that conform to conceptions of nationality, race, and ethnicity as fixed and interchangeable categories. However, in an increasingly globalizing world, such categories as nationality, race, and ethnicity become less cohesive and struggle to codify migrant and transnational subjects.

In this paper, I explore Jane Jeong Trenka's memoir *The Language of Blood.* A literary mosaic, *The Language of Blood* employs various literary formats, such as the play, to convey Trenka's story as a South Korean adoptee growing up in a homogenous small-town in Minnesota with her white parents and her biological sister. The memoir's conscpicuous use of language allows me to explore the migrant body as a sign that, like language, performs and is inscribed with national, racial, and ethnic meaning. Although Trenka's adoptee narrative suggests that there is inherent significance in biological

facticity, I argue that, in the context of the transnational and transracial adoption, the meaning of blood relatedness is largely produced and perpetuated by the history of Western imperialism and by racialized conceptions of national identities.

It would be useful to contextualize transnational adoption as a unique kind of immigration. Jessica Leinaweaver, in her text *Adoptive Migration*, acknowledges the differences in these two processes: transnational adoption and labor migration are "regulated by different laws, overseen by different administrative departments, and governed by different regimes" (2). However, they both describe transnational phenomena where, through bureaucratic processes, individuals "come to possess new civil statuses and new identities" (Leinaweaver 3), and until the passage of the Child Citizenship Act of 2000, transnational adoptees underwent the same process of naturalization as immigrants: they were admitted on immigrant visas, and their adoptive parents applied for green cards and certificates of citizenship on their behalf (Jacobson 85). Thus, transnational adoption, like immigration, must be examined within a larger global context. Global movements, such as the intake of East Asian babies into Western nations, are affected by Western imperialism and persist in shaping rationales behind wanting to transnationally adopt.

In *The Language of Blood*, Trenka's father expresses: "often the mothers are prostitutes or teenagers, and they cannot take care of their own children. But these babies need homes and parents who love them, and they need to be brought up in the love of Jesus Christ our Savior" (Trenka 25). His sentiment reflects the post-World War II conception of transnational adoption as an humanitarian gesture (Jacobson 15). In addition to the transnational adoption of children, white-East Asian family-making in

general has a historical background of Western imperialism. War brides, for example, were non-American immigrants who "married or were engaged with American servicemen stationed or assigned in a foreign country during, or as a result of World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War." Like transnational adoptees, war brides were subject to the same naturalization processes as other immigrants, but later became exempt from quota limits (Bankston 763). Trenka, adopted from South Korea in 1972, was herself part of a spike in the United States' adoption of more than 1000,000 Korean children that occurred at the end of the Korean War. This was a global movement that began as a "response to the overwhelming number of children in state care following the Korean War" and a response to the "the plight of children fathered and abandoned by U.S. servicemen" (Jacobson 85). Thus, the colonialist history of interracial family-making involved, at least initially, the naturalization of East Asian wives and children into the United States as objects of Western sexual imperialism and humanitarianism.

Exploring the colonialist history of white-East Asian family formation enables me to discuss Trenka's use of language, specifically how her language configures the body as a sign that comes to bear national and cultural signification. At the beginning of the memoir, she offers two juxtaposed conceptions of herself:

> My name is Jeong Kyong-Ah. My family register states the date of my birth, the lunar date January 24, 1972. I am the fifth daughter of Jeong Ho-Joon...my ancestry includes landowners, scholars, and government officials…I am a citizen of the Republic of Korea. I come from a land of pear fields and streams… (14)
>
> Halfway around the world, I am someone else.
>
> I am Jane Marie Brauer, created September 26, 1972, when I was carried off an airplane onto American soil. My State of Minnesota birth certificate declares my date of birth to be March 8, 1972. I am the younger daughter of Frederick Brauer…my ancestors were farmers, factory workers…I became an American citizen at age five, when I stood before a judge and pledged allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. I come from a land of plains, where the sky touches the earth…(15)

Here, language enables the expression of two identities upon the same body; identities that are circumscribed by signifiers such as given name, date of birth, familial relations, ancestry, citizenship, and markers of geographical belonging.

The language that Trenka uses to describe herself suggests the foundational importance, yet arbitrariness, of national markers of belonging. Trenka precedes her Korean name with "my name is…," and her American name with "I am…created…". That Trenka was "created" implies that her American identity is a construct, with her use of the verb "carried" to imply that was a passive agent in its creation. Trenka's use of "my name is…" also implies that her Korean name is a possession, a signifier divorced from the embodied subject. Furthermore, Trenka does not explicitly say that she "was born" on any particular day, again deemphasizing an imaginary fixed relationship between the facticity of the body and its actualization through language. She instead only alludes to being born through the language inscribed on legal documents. By positing her Korean self and American self as binary and oppositional entities, Trenka highlights language's arbitrary power to mark the body as a fixed ethnic, national, and familial subject. However, migrant transnational identities, such as mine and Trenka's, interrogate the concept of fixed identity along these lines. Language can thus be understood as an act of performance, a mode of actualizing different realities across transnational borders.

Trenka's text contends specifically with the performance of racial identity. *The Language of Blood* formats three chapters in the memoir as dramatizations, whether in the form of a play, a musical, or a monologue. It would thus be useful to examine these instances within the theoretical apparatus of performance, and how that performance is

inevitably racialized, and informed by concepts such as transnational movement, racial surveillance, and Tuan's framework of "ethnic expectation."

The first performance, titled "Highway 10: A Play for Imagining," establishes each individual in Trenka's family as characters. In the character lists preceding the performance, Fred is described as "Caucasian husband of Margaret and father of Carol and Jane," while Jane is described as "Korean birth sister and adopted sister of Carol, 6 months old" (Trenka 16). In the context of the play, the individuals in Trenka's family are identified purely by signifiers of familial relations, race, and ethnicity. "Caucasian," used to signify Trenka's father, is a racial category, while "Korean" is an ethnic category.

This is made all the more significant in the context of the performance's content: Fred, Margaret, Carol, and Jane ride as a family through the Minnesotan countryside against the backdrop of a video reel of Carol's memories in Korea. However, "at the end of the movie sequence, the Korean memories are completely erased…CAROL has willed herself to become a girl with no history and is now ready to start her new life" (Trenka 18). Trenka's adopted sister experiences what is referred to as the "clean break" model, in which "birth parents were figuratively erased out of existence" and "cultural and racial identities of the children were 'removed' and 'replaced' by those of the adoptive parents" (Jacobson 91). However, *The Language of Blood* questions the feasability of this "clean break" model.

The second performance in *The Language of Blood,* titled "The Ice House Restaurant: A Musical" illustrates the flaws with the "clean break" model, especially within the context of racialized phenotypical difference in the American landscape. In this second performance, the descriptors characterizing Trenka and her family members

remain the same: Jane is identified as “Korean,” while her parents are “Caucasian.” Furthermore, her father Fred is identified as “husband and father” while her mother is characterized as “wife and mother.” Jane and her sister Carol, however, are purely identified by the fact of their “Korean-ness.” Unlike their white parents, Jane and her sister are not characterized by any familial relationship, which suggests that the only family the racially uniform family, a concept of kinship that Jane and her sister do not belong to.

The scene depicts the family eating dinner at a rural Minnesota restaurant. Trenka and her sister are soon bombarded by odd looks, and their parents racialized comments and questions: “what cute little girls you have! Do they speak Chinese?...Can they use chopsticks? (Trenka 34). These questions are symptomatic of what Jacobson refers to as “interracial surveillance,” a public evaluation of families that “assess the degree to which they fit the ideological normative family mold” (146). In America, the ideological normative family is “white, middle-class, with heterosexual married parents and their biological children” (Jacobson 87). At the same time, the questions that their parents receive in the restaurant is an expression of ethnic expectation, in which “[Asian ethnics] must deal with others’ expectations and an imposed racialized ethnic identity despite their generally loose ties to traditional cultural patterns” (157). Thus, play format of this chapter underscores that the ideal American nuclear family is implicitly a racialized unit. The memoir describes the performativity of the ideal American family while at the same time describing its impossibility within the context of transracial adoptions.

Ethnic expectation, of course, yields performance, which Trenka explores in her third dramatization, a comedy routine style monologue titled “Don’t Worry I Will Make

You Feel Comfortable: A Monologue for Imagining." She performs to a Western audience, a "smorgasbord of Caucasians," and is described in her character listing as "generically Asian, in her early twenties," a characterizaton that reduces her, in the audience's eyes, to nothing but phenotypical difference. As she panders to a Western gaze, she performs: "no matter mail-order bride or mail-order kid – Oriental woman love you long time! *Kamsahamnida*! I have designed this stage with Zen candles and feng shui from Pottery Barn!" (Trenka 97). Here, Trenka performs and satirizes a Western conception of East Asian identity that is most aptly characterized by a conglomerate Pan-Asianness. Although Trenka's ancestry is Korean, she refers to the Chinese practice of "feng shui" and alludes to Stanley Kubrick's film "Full Metal Jacket," in which a Vietnamese prostitute propositions herself to American GIs.

Trenka's performance in her third chapter is thus a response to Orientalism and the Western sexual gaze. The implications of Trenka's satirized Pan-Asian performative response can perhaps be compared to the phenomenon that "Asian ethnics are coming to embrace a racialized and panethnic identity" as a response to their common experience of being marginalized and lumped together as a distinct racial group in the United States (Tuan 167). It can thus be inferred that the Western gaze, and the process of "Othering" Asian bodies, create and produce the very differences within the American racial landscape that they superimpose. Such a development is not unlike Butler's theory that "to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and corporeal project" (Butler 522). The memoir's use of dramatization to convey

Trenka's experiences as a racialized body in the United States make visible the codifications of the Western gaze on the Asian body.

I now link Trenka's use of dramatized narrative device back to the original thesis. Performative narrative technique in *The Language of Blood* is a response to racial surveillance and the ethnic expectations that emerge from that racial surveillance. These expectations can be understood as cultural significations imposed upon bodies; cultural significations that are steeped in Western colonialist history and sexual imperialism. Thus, it is important to recognize the performance of identity in the context of Butler's theory as well as how this performance is specifically informed by history and processes of racialization.

A deeper a exploration of ethnic performance necessitates an analysis of Trenka's struggle with her cultural identity. On recounting her experiences as a teenager taking the SATs, Trenka checked "'white' in the identification box, because she was "culturally white" (Trenka 129), a mistake that brings up two phenomena. First, Trenka's categorical mistake makes visible the socially constructed, historically reproduced, and hierarchical conception of "white" and "non-white" as binary oppositions and distinct cultural categories. Second, Trenka interrogates the boundaries of ethnicity as a fixed category. The question that Trenka implicitly asks through this mistake is one that I have frequently struggled with as an adoptee. What is my ethnic culture? These inquiries, of course, reproduce the false ideology that "[areas] of culture are watertight compartments, when on the contrary they are for the most part permeable as traditionally distinct cultures draw closer and closer" (16). These inquiries also implicitly involve the role of a second party, of an agent that surveils the performance of phenotypical difference.

The same dynamic expresses itself when Trenka plays a game with one of her white friends, called "Name That Asian." She makes a game out of distinguishing between "Korean Korean" and "Adopted Korean," identifying the former as "[speaking] English with an accent, fake designer shoes and handbag, matching husband and kids," and the latter as "having no accent, sweatshirt and jeans, goes shopping with and dates white people" (74). Trenka creates a dichotomy between "Korean Korean" and "Adopted Korean" based on visible signifiers such as language and accent, clothes, and others with whom they associate. In the context of "ethnic performance," these signifiers are, arguably, performative at the same time that they are as surveiled and imbued with cultural meaning. The dichotomy furthermore presupposes a fixed cultural essentialism of "Korean Korean" and "Adopted Korean." It is both important to note that individuals falling within thesed fixed cultural categories ethnically perform in this way, and at the same time, the game inherently objectifies Asian bodies through a Western gaze. Historical global power dynamics thus inevitably shape the emergence of the performance of bodied experiences along the lines of racial phenotype, and the perception of these performances.

Trenka grapples with ethnic performance herself, both in her town in Minnesota and later when she returns to Korea. At college, she describes her experiences with her college Pan-Asian student association. She describes humiliation and confusion with her own cultural identity: "what was I supposed to do if I went in there? Introduce myself as Jane the Twinkie, the Pan-Asian fraud?" (Trenka 75), demonstrating the belief that it is possible to be "fraudulently" Asian. She perpetuates the idea of the "authenticity" and legitimacy of the Asian body lies purely in its ability to "perform" ethnicity correctly.

She, herself, enacts an ethnic expectation that presupposes the fiction of cultural essentialism.

Trenka also struggles with ethnic performance when she visits South Korea. While traveling with her tour group, she describes "all the sights described in advertisements for the tour: the Korean Folk Village, where she saw traditional Korean arts and crafts; the royal palace with its ponds full of carp…" and even witnesses other recently adopted Koreans attending "Camp Kimchi for cultural education" (Trenka 110-114). Here, Trenka participates in what Heather Jacobson introduces as "culture keeping," a practice aimed at ensuring that transnationally adopted children "have access to their ethnic pasts" by, for example, by purchasing and consuming new ethnic foods, partaking in new holidays, adorning the home with new ethnic decorations, and, in Trenka's case, partaking in "heritage tours." As a transnational subject who wishes to familiarize myself with my birth culture, I resonate with the idea behind culture keeping. However, I must acknowledge the ways in which this practice, as Jacobson discovers in her comparison of culture keeping practices between Russian and Chinese adoptees and their families, emerges from the ethnic expectation that those who look Asian should "act Asian." Culture keeping is ethnic performance. Inherently, it assumes and enacts culture as "a particular set of traditional practices (holidays, foods, language) that is stable and unchanging" (Jacobson 73).

While on the tour, Trenka comments that "in a country of Koreans, the Americans began to change in my eyes…I wanted to get away from them and their greed, the way they bought souvenirs in Itaewon, haggling and always calculating the bargain price in U.S. dollars. I couldn't stand the way the tour was like their vacation, the way it seemed

that they could compartmentalize their experience of Korea into alternating intervals of group therapy and shopping" (Trenka 118). As Trenka experiences, it is difficult to untangle the commodification of culture, the "industries to support international-adoptive parents…online adoption shops, and malls" (Jacobson 2), and especially the marketing tactics of culture, from the fact that they are often catered "to and for Western eyes" (Jacobson 53). Thus, the nature of ethnic performance, in the case of transnational and transracial adoptees, perhaps emerges from a Western colonizing gaze, but also interrogates the concept of cultural "authenticity."

Tying the conversation of culture keeping and ethnic performance back to transnational and migrational implications, Trenka confronts the problem of national identity while in border control line at the airport in Seoul. She notices "two lines: one for Koreans and one for 'foreigners'…For a few moments I stood in the rear of the room, wondering which line to join…then, observing my travel partners' example, I correctly joined the foreigner line along with all the other Americans and said 'thank you' in English to the Korean man who stamped my American passport with a Korean sixty-day tourist visa" (Trenka 109). In South Korea, Trenka is no longer racialized as Korean American; rather, she becomes defined by citizenship and, in the airport, is purely identified by her American national identity.

Language identifies individuals and objects with national signifiers of "Korean" and "American" that feel oppositional in this context, and yet Trenka's confusion over which line to join is subversive, by interrogating ideas of national identity, racial identity, and ethnic identity. Trenka's birth country is not necessarily her national identity nor reflective of her ethnic identity, a discrepancy that both highlights the arbitrariness of

these individual categories to codify the transnational migrant subject and their power in shaping identity.

Thus, if the category of "ethnicity" is to persist in an increasingly globalizing world, as *The Language of Blood* suggests, these definitions must be stretch to accommodate the fluidity of transnational subjects such as Trenka and myself, though at the same time without relinquishing its power as a political tool. Butler's theory of gender performance may better help make sense of this bind; that "feminists [must] use the category of women as a political tool without attributing ontological integrity to the term, and adds that, strictly speaking, women cannot be said to exist" (529). Framing this theory in the context of Trenka's memoir, there is no such thing as "Korean," and yet it is the history of global inequality and racial hegemony that renders necessary the persistence of this category, for social and political purpose. These developments also yield ethnic performance, and the fact of its performativity will be explored further in this paper through the concept that language, like the body, is also a locus of performativity; and its translation, across national and ethnic lines, only makes visible the increasing lack of fixity and stability in defining national and ethnic identities.

The way in which Trenka configures her relationship to her mother is useful in exploring this idea, particularly as she addresses the biological facticity of relatedness between herself and her Korean mother. Earlier in the paper, I discuss the biological facticity of racial phenotype, and here expand its definition to encompass blood relatedness, its corresponding cultural significance, and how this significance is shaped through the use of language. When Trenka meets her Korean birth mother for the first time, she claims that "there was nothing we could say to each other, since I spoke no

Korean and she spoke no English. So she held my hand, and all I could think of was how hot my hand was, how small she was, how her hand was bony. So, I thought, this was mother" (Trenka 112). Here, Trenka describes a confrontation with the biological facticity of their relatedness, and yet the language barrier, emerging purely from the fact of geographical distance, prevents any means of linguistic communication to take place between them. Trenka describes, instead, physical sensation to communicate their reunion; the hotness of her hand, the boniness of her birth mother's hand, biological facticities that language, due to transnational movement, is unable to qualify. Trenka's following up with the fact that "this was [her] mother" juxtaposes the facticity of their shared biological relationship with the socially constructed language of kinship that is meant to infuse that relationship with cultural meaning, which ofers a space to interpret a disjunction between biological facticity and inscription of meaning onto it.

As they converse, Trenka recounts that "because I understood no Korean, she played out her stories in charades…she was a one-woman theater, five feet tall and one hundred pounds…I think she 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" (Trenka 116). Here, the description of Trenka's Korean mother as a a storyteller, a charader, a "one-woman theater," configures her body as a sign that creates its own meaning through performance. In other words, Trenka's Korean mother is a self-determining sign. Accordingly, Butler articulates that "the formulation of the body as a mode of dramatizing or enacting possibilities offers a way to understand how a cultural convention is embodied and enacted" (525). In the context of Trenka's mother, the formulation of the body as a mode of dramatizing possibilities offers a way to understand

not only how cultural convention is embodied and enacted, but how storytelling frees up historically inscribed meaning onto bodies. Bodies and signs become "what they want to be," rather than "what they've become;" her mother's performance imagines the possibility of communication without the language barrier, a language barrier that both produces and is produced by national and cultural difference.

Trenka's description of getting acquainted with Korean culture further sheds light on the concept of performance, and the implications of performance for the transnational subject. She describes the fact that "some things I will never know; others I am learning gradually, with effort and determination. In the latter category are Korean manners and language, including names of things with no English equivalents…I am learning to navigate the gap in perception that lies between my view of the world, the white American view of the world, and the Korean view of the world" (Trenka 148). Here, Trenka learns how to "act" Korean; how to perform her ethnicity. Drawing on Butler's theory of the body as a sign that performs signification, and Santoyo's theory of language that "when a unique area of unshared activity begins to be assimilated by another culture, which knew nothing of it up to that point, the importing culture, logically, lacks the terms necessary for the designation of the new activity, event, or foreign object" (Santoyo 16).

It is useful to think of Trenka's transnational movement between America and Korea, here, as equivalent to the process of translation. "White American" and "Korean" are ethnic categories that are, problematically perhaps, established as a binary oppositions to each other. Yet, as a transnational subject, Trenka navigates the spaces between them, an identity that can be best understood through looking at Santoyo's study on bilingual self-translators:

> Under the supposed rules for translation, the solutions that a self-translator adds to the transference of a specific cultural identity may or may not be correct, equivalent, or acceptable. But the truth is that they are indisputable, because both texts, the original and the translation, have the same signature and the translated text is subject to the same authority and creative licence out of which the original emerged. (Santoyo 30)

Thus, Santoyo's bilingual self-translator should be used as a metaphor to describe Trenka's identity as a transnational adoptee. More specifically, if language can be used as a metaphor for the body, then Santoyo's mode of self-translating aptly describes the transnational process of Trenka returning to Korea and immersing herself in her birth culture. Like the English and Korean language, Trenka's "white American" self and her "Korean" self are not two perfectly equivalent oppositions, and yet both are indisputable; these selves are unfixed and performative, derived from the same body, the same locus of possibilities, and therefore both legitimate in their expression. There are limits to this metaphor, however. If I was to frame Santoyo's theory in the context of the body as a sign, his theory on self-translators is an optimistic touting of self-determinism that precludes the history of Western imperialism and racialization. In "Culture Keeping," Jacobson asserts that white adoptive mothers have the element of choice in decisions regarding ethnic expression, a choice that they, "through their approach to culture keeping, attempt to construct [for] their children" (Jacobson 128). Such privilege is an impossibility for the transnational adoptee, due to the racial surveillance of "foreign bodies" that yields the expectation of ethnic performance.

Trenka explores the concept of biological facticity through describing her relationship to her Korean mother. Trenka describes the experience of talking with her Korean mother: "her stories worked their way through my skin and into my blood. I felt her bravery seeping in…into my own stories, merging with them, transforming me into her daughter" (117). Here, she describes language as a participant in the making of

identity, which conflicts with Butler's assertionthat "it is [unfortunate] grammar to claim that there is a 'we' or an 'I' that does its body, as if a disembodied agency preceded and directed an embodied exterior" (Butler 521). However, language here has the same power to actualize culturally constructed kinship bonds as it has the same power to racialize and imbue physical phenotype with cultural significance. A closer look at how Trenka conceptualizes the actual significance of biology is useful in understanding the relationship between signs, signification, and embodiments of meaning.

Trenka claims, "even without language, through the amniotic fluid and the faint light coming through the walls of your belly, I understood the brute emotions of fear and hunger. I absorbed them, made them part of my life's fabric, so that I would go out and find men like my father, so that fear and intimidation and love became the same experience for me" (188). Trenka suggests here that there is inherent meaning in the biological facticity of their blood relationship. However, according to Butler, such facticity should be divorced from the historically and socially constructed cultural expectations of that biological connection.

Framing Trenka's description within the context of performance theory, there is no inherent meaning in the facticity of biological connection, and yet Trenka defines its significance through describing "fear and hunger" as shared genetic material. These materials, however, like intergenerational trauma, emerge from historical imperialism and violence, and are not inherent symptoms of phenotype. Thus, when Trenka later commemorates her mother by saying: "I will carry you with me, in the language of blood" (160). A close reading of this phrase yields two meanings: the first concedes to the idea that biological facticity of relatedness must be in itself significant. The second is

a more subversive reading; that what Trenka carries with her is not some imaginary conception of familial connectedness that inevitably stems from biological connection. Rather, what Trenka carries with her is biological phenotype that is racialized and made to bear cultural meaning. Thus, there is no inherent meaning in the biological facticity of phenotype and or blood relatedness. Rather, these facticities come to bear meaning through generations of Western imperialism, hegemonic conceptions of normative kinship, and processes of racialization that, no doubt, have a hand in influencing adoptees' longings to explore and perform their birth culture.

Though it may appear so, as it was in my experience, the unique struggle of the East Asian transnational adoptee does not originate from any illusion of biologically inherent and displaced "Korean-ness" or "Chinese-ness." To conceive of the East Asian transnational adoptee experience as such would be to endorse the belief that racialized bodies have an inherent ethnic quality. Rather, the transnational adoptee struggle emerges as a symptom of the imposition of cultural meaning onto bodies, whether in the form of racialization and interracial surveillance, or the expectation that non-white phenotypical difference must reflect ethnic expression. These cultural meanings are created and reproduced from larger historical patterns of global inequality and racial hegemony, and in turn attempt to codify bodies into neat units along the lines of nation, race, and ethnicity. Transnational and transracial adoptees are racialized bodies that do not inhabit neat national and ethnic categories, nor are they able to "perform" their expression.

In her memoir *The Language of Blood,* Trenka explores this problem through her use of language. In the memoir, language can be interpreted as a metaphor for the body, in that both inhabit an imposed and reproduced cultural meaning that is, at its core,

arbitrary. Language is understood then as both a metaphor for the body, and an apparatus to explore performance and storytelling as the means by which identities can be freed up and reimagined.

Trenka's description of having a transnationally adopted body highlights the problem of racial surveillance and ethnic expectation: "what I longed for was wholeness, for my body to be as white and northern Minnesotan as my mind" (Trenka 237). However, migration, movement, and the making of transnational subjects in an increasingly globalizing world interrogate the idea that there is such a thing as "wholeness," insofar as wholeness is categorized as some fictional alignment and uniformity of national, racial, and ethnic identity. The transnational migrant subject makes conspicuous these categories at the same time that they interrogate them, and therefore their influence on the formation of identity.

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