“The Ending Is Not an Ending At All”:
On the Militarized and Gendered Diasporas of Korean Transnational Adoption and the Korean War

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In this country that pulses with the collective memory of an unfinished war, an artificial boundary etched through the middle of her body and the collective imprint of a desperation that will not go away, I am still at war with myself. How does one live in the condition of being separated from oneself? Separation turns into national obsession: war as theme park; adoptee as stock character who makes everyone cry when the sad music comes on; hokey movies about the destruction of family ties. . . .

—Jane Jeong Trenka, Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee’s Return to Korea

How does one write about a war that is unfinished yet forgotten? The unending Korean War, and thus the still enduring division of the Korean peninsula, constitute a “banal exceptionality.” While North Korea remains a spectacular fixture in the US news media and in its Manichean geopolitical imaginary, what is rendered banal through this very spectacularization
is the very reason why there are two Koreas to begin with. That is, the instrumental role of the United States in dividing Korea at the 38th parallel remains obscured, and the political existence of the two Koreas as \textit{two} goes unremarked. In the epigraph above, Jane Jeong Trenka challenges such strategic US forgetting by meditating on Korea’s separation from itself as the product of an “unfinished war” and as marked by an “artificial boundary.” She links, moreover, her own separation from Korea to Korea’s separation from itself. Adopted as an infant by a Lutheran white couple in rural Minnesota, Trenka returns to Korea as an adult and decides to live there. By connecting these two separations—separation \textit{of} the nation itself and separation \textit{from} nation—Trenka situates transnational adoption as intimately linked to the Korean War. While the United States forgets, South Korea cannot but remember. While the United States produces a political demonology of communist evil, South Korea produces a national melodrama of separation. In this melodrama, war is a “theme park,” and the adoptee is a “stock character who makes everyone cry when the sad music comes on.” Yet these collective tears are not simply symptoms of the emotional manipulations of melodramatic emplotment. Indeed, they index South Korea’s ongoing attempts to reckon with a war that continues to divide nation and family.

I begin with these observations as a point of entry into this article’s focus on the diasporas and temporalities of Korean transnational adoption. The story of transnational adoption arises out of and parallels another story. It is the story of the unending Korean War. The division of Korea at the 38th parallel and the 1953 armistice have no predictable resolutions to this day, over a half century later. Through an analysis of two recent films, Deann Borshay Liem’s \textit{In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee} (2010) and Jane Jin Kaisen’s \textit{The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger} (2010), I argue that Korean transnational adoption is constituted by militarized and gendered diasporas that mark the ongoing presence of the US military in South Korea.\textsuperscript{2} Borshay Liem’s and Kaisen’s films make visible how such diasporas, linked to the larger diaspora produced by the Korean War, unsettle linear narratives of migration, arrival, and settlement. Rather, they are a looping back or boomerang in which “we are here because you were there.”\textsuperscript{3} The failures, contradictions, and irresolvable ambivalences of the rescue narrative point to how the very problems that transnational adoption putatively resolves or
puts an end to—those of displacements wrought by war, global inequality, uneven development, reproductive injustice, severed kinship, gendered racial hierarchy, and so on—loop back in disturbing and unending proliferations.

As I elaborate throughout this essay, the militarized and gendered diasporas of Korean transnational adoption constitute a particular mode and temporality of migration whose specificities and complexities cannot be captured sufficiently via general tropes of immigration, refugee displacement, and adoption. As a militarized diaspora, Korean transnational adoption gives witness to the ways in which, as I have written elsewhere, militarization exceeds the temporal parameters of war, the spatial demarcations of military bases, the functional ends of military institutions, and the enlistment of military personnel. Militarization is the colonial and neocolonial nexus of state and capital that generates a proliferation of military logics beyond formal military institutions and sites, and beyond the war-making, peace-keeping, and security functions of the military itself. As such, to conceptualize Korean transnational adoption as a militarized diaspora is to gesture to the pervasive force of militarization as a logic that structures not only international geopolitical relations but also the intimate scales of adoptee kinships and subjectivity. Moreover, as we shall see, this militarized diaspora is also gendered, revealing a transnational and transgenerational economy of reproductive injustice for Korean women. This is to speak about a regime of reproductive injustice as a significant and gendered biopolitical effect of the Korean War.

What Might Have Been

In the opening moments of *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, filmmaker and Korean transnational adoptee Deann Borshay Liem meditates on the complex problem of memory. Hers is a broken history, one that can’t be unbroken by acts of recollection or pictorial representation. Faced with this impossibility, she “invent[s] stories of what might have been, inserting [her] self into spaces [she] never occupied.” This subjunctive mood of the “what might have been” haunts the lives, subjectivities, and narrative trajectories of those who have undergone (forced) migration and displacement. For transnational adoptees in particular, the literal and metaphorical “spaces” they
might have occupied include not only nation and home but also the very intimate spaces of family, kinship, and subjectivity. Indeed, the proliferating possibilities of the “what might have beens”—the exponential multiplication of the different kinds of spaces that they might have occupied—constitute a recursive temporality that refuses to come to a linear end. Precisely because so many possibilities can be—and can only be—imagined, this temporality indexes a longing for an ontological and epistemological plenitude or intactness that ultimately evades fulfillment. As the film unfolds, what we see is that Borshay Liem’s meditation, far from being a narcissism that relentlessly loops back (in)to the self simply in the service of fortifying adoptee subjectivity, is one that loops and rebounds outward. This centrifugal movement highlights the broader geopolitical context and Cold War conditions of possibility for her adoption from Korea by a white US family in California. *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* thus allows a generative reframing of the adoptee quest or search narrative, typically driven by the desire to locate birth mothers and families, to one that ultimately stages an ongoing historical reckoning with the Korean War and its enduring gendered biopolitical effects. A tracing of family genealogy, and in this case the search for a single person named Cha Jung Hee, also produce a genealogy of war.

The film’s conceit and driving narrative, the search for the figure of Cha Jung Hee, returns Borshay Liem back to Korea and finds her encountering many Cha Jung Hees. Cha Jung Hee is the name of the Korean girl whom Borshay Liem’s adoptive parents, the Borshays, were set to adopt. Right before the adoption, however, Cha Jung Hee disappeared from the orphanage, presumably reclaimed by her still-surviving birth father. The Korean social worker sent Borshay Liem, née Kang Ok Jin, in Cha Jung Hee’s place. In other words, pictures on passports were switched, and Borshay Liem was passed off as Cha Jung Hee and instructed not to reveal her true identity as Kang Ok Jin to the Borshays. However, after acquiring enough English, and still having memories of her birth mother (who had taken her to the orphanage as a temporary measure in the face of poverty), Borshay Liem attempted to tell her adoptive mother the story of her true identity. The response from Alveen Borshay was that it was all just a dream, and that Borshay Liem was a war orphan. Throughout her life, Borshay Liem is
haunted by Cha Jung Hee, whose place she took in being adopted by the Borshays and coming to the United States. This question of who, where, and how Cha Jung Hee might be, only briefly posed in Borshay Liem’s previous film, *First Person Plural* (2000), is fully explored in this second installment of her adoption trilogy. And the exploration, as we shall see, belies happy endings, or any endings at all. In *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*, scholar Eleana Kim writes about a photo series by the adoptee artist Soon Ja Terwee. Kim observes that Terwee’s disjointed portraits of adoptees, assembled out of strips of before-and-after images, fracture linear and progressive narratives. Such narratives promote the market and moral logics of transnational adoption through the emplotment of the orphan’s successful salvation from a life of abandonment and poverty. Kim argues, “Adoption is often framed as the happy ending to a sad story, but Terwee and the other adult adoptees suggest that the ending is not an ending at all. Rather, it is the middle of an ongoing narrative that offers no predictable resolutions.”7 This sense that the “ending is not an ending at all” plays out poignantly in Borshay Liem’s film.

Just as Borshay Liem’s legal identity as Cha Jung Hee is a constructed fiction, so too is her status as a “war orphan.” It is an enabling legal construction and fiction for her transnational—and transracial—adoption. While one of the devastating effects of the Korean War was certainly the actual biological orphaning of large numbers of children and infants, a related effect was the production of legal or social orphans who actually had at least one surviving biological parent. In many cases, these parents believed they were only temporarily surrendering their children to orphanages. In this context, the production of legal orphans made available for adoption was a process of natal alienation that disembedded those “orphans” from history, family genealogy, and sociality.8 Stripped bare, the orphan could then presumably establish family connections and sociality as if they had not existed before. The orphan was and continues to be a legally constructed figure, an abstract or undifferentiated fungible body upon which a constellation of desires condenses. In this sense, adoption, as Barbara Yngvesson argues, operates “as a kind of legal laundering of a child.”9 Borshay Liem’s film provides a meditation on this fungibility:
It scared me to think how easy it was to replace one girl for another. The first step was to take my picture and simply write Cha’s name on the back. Then, I was given a guardian who certified that I was an orphan. He, rather than my birth mother, gave his consent to my emigration and adoption. The shoes completed the deception. Looking at these documents made me see my relationship to my adoptive family in a new light. Because I wasn’t the child my parents had originally fallen in love with, there was a part of me that always questioned whether I belonged, and whether I had a right to accept my family’s love and to love them.

If the consent of the birth mother is not required, and the transnational adoption is only preceded by letter correspondence between the social worker and the prospective adoptive parents, it is indeed scarily easy to “replace one girl for another.” Borshay Liem observes further that “Cha Jung Hee became a template for a perfect orphan. Once the template existed, any girl could step into it.” While she is able to recognize this intellectually, what she has a more difficult time reconciling affectively is the feeling that she is an imposter undeserving of her adoptive parents’ love. This produces a looping back to who Cha Jung Hee might be and the conditions that made the legal deception possible. This disjuncture—the simultaneous acknowledgment of the fungibility of the orphan and the singularity of personhood that merits love—is an irreconcilable tension.

We might ask exactly whom the Borshays had “originally fallen in love with.” In a sense, the girl named Cha Jung Hee could have been any girl, a composite figure produced as a “war orphan” in order to elicit a “transnational politics of pity.” Indeed, before changes in immigration policy that made it possible to adopt Asian children, US citizens engaged in “moral adoptions” or sponsorships. In 1949, Norman Cousins, editor of the Saturday Review, encouraged US citizens to morally adopt or sponsor children orphaned by the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima. His Moral Adoptions Program resulted in the sponsorship of four hundred Japanese children. Cousins, as Christina Klein observes in her study of Cold War Orientalism, was likely inspired by the Christian Children’s Fund. Originally founded in 1938 as the China Children’s Fund, it had by 1955 successfully appealed to US donors to sponsor children in fifteen Asian countries, many of whom
were Chinese and North Korean refugees. This Cold War convergence of the politics of anticommunist fear and the transnational politics of pity found its ready object in the figure of the war orphan or refugee. The end of the Korean War saw these virtual adoptions being followed by the adoption of waifs and mascots by returning US servicemen, leading in turn to the growing adoption of orphans by the broader US public. Cha Jung Hee was herself sponsored by the Borshays through the “Foster Parents’ Plan” for $15 a month before she was adopted. In letters to the Borshays that are crafted by a social worker at the orphanage, she is described as a “true orphan who needs and is worth saving,” yet by the time the Borshays paid for and finalized her adoption, it was of “a girl who wasn’t even there.”

The conditions that made this adoption possible—the discursive figuration and legal construction of the “war orphan” as well as the identity switch—are the gendered and uneven displacements of war. The Korean War, and the Manichean Cold War geopolitics of which it was a part, remain the obscured conditions of possibility for the transnational adoption of Korean infants and children. Eleana Kim notes that were it not for the devastation caused by the war and the subsequent US military occupation, “Korean adoption would probably not exist today.” She observes further that adoption became a means through which the South Korean government attempted to manage its mixed-race population produced by the war, and it later functioned as a substitute for domestic welfare and social services. At the same time, adoption also allowed South Korea to maintain positive diplomatic relations with the United States. In this sense, it served both biopolitical and geopolitical functions, constituting “a form of transnational biopolitics in which domestic population problems were converted into diplomatic solutions,” and thus revealing the ways in which “the Korean and American states leveraged differential values of human life across enormous scales—from that of individual bodies to international political relations.”

More pointedly, Korean adoption also indexes the ongoing presence of the US military in South Korea. Korean adoptees are a militarized population and constitute a militarized diaspora. While mixed-race adoptees born during or in the immediate aftermath of the war were literally born out of militarized relations, to the extent that geopolitical relations between South Korea and the United States continue to be militarized in the extended
aftermath of the war, Korean transnational adoptees in general and indeed the practice of transnational adoption itself are militarized.

Since the war, Korean adoption has continued uninterrupted, and it constitutes the largest and most long-standing adoption program globally. The unending Korean War is itself a recursive loop in Borshay Liem’s film. Archival footage of the war appears repeatedly throughout the film. This is punctuated by Borshay Liem’s voice-over narration: “Although I was adopted after the Korean War, in many ways, the war still shaped my destiny. The war brought appalling destruction, killing some 4 million people. Hundreds of thousands of orphans were left wandering the streets seeking food and shelter.” What began, then, as a militarized project renarrated as “humanitarian rescue” has become a global industry—what Borshay Liem calls a “business transaction”—precisely dependent on and enabled by the leveraging of “differential values of human life across enormous scales.” This leveraging effects the commodification of the orphan, simultaneously producing the orphan’s embodied “worthlessness” as an unwanted or relinquished child as well as its desired value or “pricelessness” as a subject of Western demand. Indeed, it is worth looping back here to Borshay Liem’s previous film, First Person Plural (2000), which contains the following voice-over paired with archival footage of the Korean War:

The Korean War ended in 1953, leaving the country devastated. A huge international relief effort began, aimed at helping thousands of destitute families and orphans. In 1955, Harry Holt began a small rescue operation of children orphaned by the war. Tens of thousands of orphans were subsequently sent overseas for adoption by American and European families. As the years passed, the South Korean government began rebuilding the country, but there was no plan to deal with widespread poverty, orphans, or families in need. Even though the war was long over, the number of orphans and orphanages continued to multiply. The more children orphanages had, the more money they received from abroad. By the 1960s when I was adopted, the government was expediting overseas adoptions at an unprecedented rate. What Harry Holt began as a humanitarian gesture right after the war became big business in the decades that followed. South Korea became the largest supplier of children to developed
countries in the world, causing some to argue that the country’s economic miracle was due in part to the export of its most precious natural resource—its children.

The South Korean child, legally produced as an orphan and geo-economically positioned as a lucrative “export,” is a significant part of what Seungsook Moon calls South Korea’s “militarized modernity” in the protracted aftermath of the Korean War. As Borshay Liem relates, “even though the war was long over, the number of orphans and orphanages continued to multiply.” In In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee, this statement that the war is over is revised to reflect Borshay Liem’s coming-to-historical consciousness that the war is in fact unending. We can thus see that the export of South Korea’s children, “its most precious natural resource,” and its growing institutionalization are a significant component of the economy of the unending Korean War. An industry and “big business” that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, adoption continues to take on its own generative logic. In this sense, Korean adoption is part of a war economy that feeds the militarized relations between South Korea and the United States and starves South Korea’s domestic social services.

The differential valuing of human life also produces a complex economy of debt both figuratively moral and literally financial. On the one hand, the “business transaction” that is adoption gets converted to a moral debt that the transnational adoptee feels compelled to repay, and on the other, adoptees have become Korea’s national assets—a precious resource for export—in the nation’s accelerated yet uneven project of modernization. The moral economy of debt is registered by Borshay Liem when she states, “I feel I’m not supposed to question the charity that determined my fate.” Yet how does one quantify a moral debt? How does one know when and whether such a debt can be repaid? The temporality of this debt is itself an unending loop, and it outlasts the lives of the Borshays themselves. Even after Alveen Borshay’s passing, Borshay Liem feels compelled to try to repay the debt—this time in memoriam. Indeed, her film is dedicated to Alveen and Arnold Borshay, and to her birth mother, Chun Kil-Soon.

Alongside this never fully repaid moral debt, the literal financial economy of debt becomes visible when we consider that “what began as a humanitar-
ian effort during the Korean War became an industry that brought millions of dollars into the Korean economy.” In this equation, adoptees are national assets in Korea’s balance of payments. Borshay Liem explains in her film, “Following the war, South Korea suffered from dire poverty. Almost 100 percent of the country’s economy depended on the United States. Koreans came to think of the United States as a country with streets paved of gold. This helped to rationalize my adoption and that of thousands of others. The switch with Cha was born out of a desire to save yet another child from poverty and at the same time it was a business transaction.” This voice-over is coupled with close-ups of adoption documents revealing the actual dollar figures associated with the transaction: “Application Fee $5.00; Home Study $100.00; Adoption Services $200.00; Processing Costs $300.00; Transportation Costs $286.00; Attorneys [sic] Fees $200.00.” We might see this business transaction—consisting of the sum total of the costs associated with each adoption, now including the sizable donation that adoptive parents are required to make to the orphanage from which they are adopting—as the microeconomics of transnational adoption.

This microeconomics is part of the broader macroeconomics of transnational adoption, constituted by the economic role that transnational adoption plays in Korea’s national economy and that economy’s link to a US-led global economy. If transnational adoption was one “solution” to the devastation wrought by the Korean War—the orphaning of large numbers of children as well as pervasive poverty—then what would explain the uninterrupted continuation and growth of the practice long after the rapid and putatively “miraculous” development of Korea’s economy? Borshay Liem explains:

When I was adopted in 1966, I was one of about five hundred children sent overseas that year. Then South Korea’s economy rapidly improved. But rather than ending the practice, the country continued to send ever larger numbers of children overseas. The largest number was in 1985, when on the eve of South Korea’s designation as the tenth largest economy in the world, almost nine thousand children were sent away in a single year. Because South Korea failed to invest in adequate social programs, thousands of infants of unwed mothers and children abandoned by families who could not feed or educate them were sent overseas.
The macroeconomics of the adoption industry is twofold: it funnels millions of dollars into the South Korean economy even as it functions as a substitute for government investment in social services that would make it possible for birth families to raise their children. This “fix” or substitute for a robust social welfare policy, moreover, is a profit-generating enterprise. In this sense, the leveraging of the differential valuing of human lives across enormous scales itself produces value for South Korea’s economy, an economy intimately tethered to and largely dependent on the United States. This represents not only a convergence of biopolitics and geopolitics but also of global economics. Even as women and children are displaced by this economy, value is produced on their very backs.

The convergence of the biopolitical, the diplomatic, and the economic constitutes the political economy of transnational adoption, and in this distribution of payments, it would seem that South Korea and the adoptive nations owe a debt to adoptees themselves. For adoptees are at once embodied forms of value (via their very lives as precious exports) and generate further value (via the affective labor they provide to their adoptive families and more recently to the Korean nation as desirable bridge-building cultural ambassadors in the era of globalization). Yet as with the moral debt, this financial debt is impossible to repay. Indeed, the debt is not even recognized as such. Rather, transnational adoptees are figured as “lucky” for having been saved from a life of abandonment and poverty, and if any debts are owed, it is they who owe a debt of gratitude to their adoptive parents. This moral economy of debt obscures the underlying economy of financial debt owed to transnational adoptees as value-producing and laboring subjects. And the temporality of this financial debt also involves a recursive structure, for it continually loops back not as the debt that is owed to the adoptee but as the debt that the “lucky” adoptee owes to her adoptive parents for “saving” her and to the Korean nation for brokering the rescue mission. At the macroeconomic register, the industry of transnational adoption as a substitute for social services exacerbates the conditions of possibility of Korea’s uneven modernization. The privileging of an export-led economy at once produces and renders vulnerable large segments of South Korea’s population, particularly the impoverished, the unemployed, unwed young mothers, the aging, the sick, and so forth. The biopolitics of this political economy is
one that makes live the transnational adoptee yet must correspondingly let
die these vulnerable segments of South Korea’s population. Moreover, as I
have argued elsewhere, this making live of the transnational adoptee is made
paradoxically possible by the legal production of the adoptee as an orphan.19
This legal production leads to a kind of adoptee social death by natally
alienating her and severing her from any recognizable form of social per-
sonhood. Such a social and legal stripping bare—of prior history, kinship,
identity, and sociality—is the precondition for transnational adoption.20
Indeed, recognition of the biopolitical structures of transnational adop-
tion in part drives Borshay Liem’s search for the actual Cha Jung Hee. Even
after a reunion with her birth family members, multiple trips back to Korea
to visit them, and the resolving of many questions about her past, she is
continually haunted by the figure of Cha Jung Hee. In the film, we see
her returning to Korea once more, this time specifically in search of Cha
Jung Hee. Starting with a name search in a telephone directory, numer-
ous phone calls, visits to local police stations and other agencies, an ad in a
newspaper, and even an appearance on a live national television show about
family reunions, we see Borshay Liem meeting and encountering multiple
Cha Jung Hees. These Cha Jung Hees are not the one she is searching for, so
the film is structured by the “returns” of many Cha Jung Hees and would-
be Cha Jung Hees. The long list of Cha Jung Hees gets winnowed down
through the categories of gender and age (one person who is called Cha Jung
Hee actually turns out to be male), but what strikes the film viewer is that
all the Cha Jung Hees whom Borshay Liem meets face-to-face are working
class. Logically, it would make sense that all the would-be Cha Jung Hees
would be working class, for they would have been placed in the orphanage
because of poverty and the war’s displacements. In this sense, the figure of
Cha Jung Hee is not only an individual person but all the would-be Cha
Jung Hees constituting an alternative community of women rendered vul-
nerable by the war. Thus, even as we are confronted with Borshay Liem’s
relative privilege as a first world subject, specifically as a filmmaker and
middle-class US citizen, she and the community of Cha Jung Hees are tied
gether by gendered vulnerabilities to war. As Eun Kyung Kim argues,
transnational adoption is a gendered practice not only because female chil-

transnational adoption is fundamentally about women’s bodies and their reproductive labor, about the social and economic value not only of children but also of maternity.” She asks, “What does it mean that the mother must give up, and be given up, and how is this related to the increasingly globalized ‘traffic of women’?” In a transgenerational economy of reproductive injustice, any of the Cha Jung Hees could have been compelled to give up her child for adoption, just as she herself could have been given up. In this economy, Cha Jung Hee is both the given up child and the mother who must give up, and in this sense, she is the literal embodiment of and the metonymic figuration of an unending transnational economy of reproductive injustice produced by the unending Korean War.

The militarized and gendered practice of transnational adoption in turn produces a militarized and gendered diaspora. Borshay Liem’s multiple returns to Korea are part of a wave of return migrations undertaken by Korean Americans beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet she is not a “typical” Korean American or immigrant. As a transnational adoptee, she is “an immigrant without an original home, exiled from nowhere, uprooted in the most total way imaginable, without the memory of what it is she has lost.” Indeed, unlike second-generation Korean Americans raised by ethnically Korean parents, the vast majority of transnational adoptees who are now adults would have been raised by white parents and given little to no exposure to Korean culture. As such, the diaspora of Korean adoptees is, as Eun Kyung Min argues, “a modern diaspora that has been marginalized even within diaspora discourse. The relationship between the transnational adoptee and the other figures of diaspora—the immigrant, exile, expatriate, refugee, labor migrant—is not simple.” She goes on to explain that while the migration of Korean transnational adoptees to the United States and that of Korean military brides (an issue I discuss later in this essay) might seem similar, there is a significant difference. Both diasporas were produced by the Korean War, yet we cannot ascribe to the adoptee, following Eleana Kim, the measure of agency and rational choice (however limited and exercised under extreme duress) that we can to the exile. Adoptee artist kate hers (Hershiser) responded to this specificity of the adoptee diaspora by composing and distributing a calling card based on her experiences in Korea in 1998. Her “Calling Card (after Adrian Piper)”
is composed in Korean and English. By literally translating the adoptee’s identity, it challenges the Korean public’s conflation of adoptee and Korean American (or overseas Korean) by calling out the equating of blood with culture and nation. It reads, “Yes, I am speaking English. Your comments prompt me to tell you that as you probably guessed I am a kyopo (overseas Korean). However, what you probably aren’t aware of is I was adopted from Korea when I was young.” Such works by adoptee artists and cultural producers make visible not only what has been lost but also the very fact that the loss itself is lost, or goes unacknowledged. In Borshay Liem’s film, we see what has been taken or appropriated—Cha Jung Hee’s identity—yet even that act of possession is a kind of dispossession that propels a quest for self and the selves that “might have been.” This is why Borshay Liem’s relative class privilege cannot account or make up for what she has lost. The very act of having to imagine or wonder about “what might have been” indexes a loss. This subjunctive mood cannot ever be converted to a simple past, present, or future tense.

Ultimately, Borshay Liem’s search gets narrowed down through a process of elimination. Finally, she meets one particular Cha Jung Hee who could very well be the one, yet there is no certain verification procedure. Borshay Liem muses, “Many of the facts I thought were important don’t match her history. But my heart tells me she’s the one I’ve been looking for. I believe she was the original Cha sponsored by my parents.” While the search for Cha Jung Hee thus ends when Borshay Liem meets this one, there remains a trace constituted by the gap between the “facts” not matching up and Borshay Liem’s affective belief that the woman in front of her is the one for whom she has been searching. While the search for origins and birth mothers, a significant part of adoptee discourse and social formation, relies on accuracy, facticity, and verifiable blood relations, in the matter of Cha Jung Hee, what we find instead is an affective structure of “belief” that exceeds facticity.

In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee thus provides a complex meditation on the militarized and gendered diasporas of transnational adoption, demonstrating how even when an ending is seemingly possible—in this instance the end of the search for Cha Jung Hee—it is “really not an ending at all.” In what follows, I turn to another film, Jane Jin Kaisen’s The Woman, the Orphan,
and the Tiger, and focus on the ways in which it reveals the links among the comfort woman, the camp town sex worker, and the transnational adoptee as repressed histories of Japanese colonialism and US neocolonialism. These repressed histories, as we shall see, have a way of returning.

Mode of Production

While In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee foregrounds Borshay Liem’s voice as both filmmaker and pro-filmic subject, Jane Jin Kaisen’s film, The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger, does not focus on a singular voice or subjectivity. Rather, it puts the comfort woman, the camp town sex worker, the adoptee, the mixed-race subject, and the queer diasporic subject into conversation with one another. The film is composed of their voices, and its representational strategy is only to list their names at the end as the credits roll rather than identifying each person when she is onscreen or providing the voice-over.25 This strategy of refusing to identify each speaker by name links together these gendered subjects and diasporas of the unending Korean War, focusing on the collective rather than a privatized individual experience. Their voices literally come together at the end of the film in a polyvocal babble, vocalizing how the gendered racial labors of these women—labors that are at once reproductive, sexual, ideological, and affective—undergird and stitch together the projects of US empire, Korean modernization, and neoliberal global capitalism. In my analysis, I focus on an issue punctuated throughout the film: the mode of production. I am especially interested in mode of production in three related senses: first, the film itself as a mode of production; second, the modes of producing adoptees; and third, the mode of producing the Korean diaspora. These modes of production shatter linear temporalities, producing instead alternative temporalities that cannot be synced with the conjoined projects of Korean modernization and US neocolonialism.

To call attention to this film itself as a mode of production is to call attention to the work that cultural production performs and the knowledge it produces. Linear recuperation, narrative consent, positivist empiricism—these are the modes and forms through which knowledge is produced about the transnational adoptee in the social and medical sciences, particularly in
psychology and public policy. More broadly, the practice of transnational adoption, as we have seen, is driven and overdetermined by the rhetorics and affects of humanitarian rescue, altruism, and compassion. Instead, *The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger* offers us another mode of production altogether, a palimpsest of voices, narratives, storytelling genres, and images sometimes juxtaposed, at other times superimposed. The geopolitical partition of Korea has been accompanied by an epistemological partition and political partisanship that make it difficult if not impossible to see how the comfort woman, the camp town sex worker or *yanggongju* (Western princess), and the transnational adoptee are all gendered racial and militarized products of empire.²⁶ By bringing these figures into an intimate proximity with one another, the film generates a feminist critique and highlights how the violent intimacies of empire are connected to one another. In making such connections, *The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger* does not attempt to engage in a linear or positivist recuperation of converting invisibility into visibility and silence into voice. Rather than offering narrative closure and resolution, the film hauntingly gestures to the ways in which such histories and present tenses of violence, though linked, can be told and imagined only in fragments. This, as articulated through one of the film’s voice-overs, is to tell and imagine ghost stories.

The mode of production of *The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger* is as much about the modes of producing ghost figures as it is about the modes of telling ghost stories. Writing in the context of US colonialism in Guam, Michael Lujan Bevacqua argues that unlike highly visible spaces such as Guantánamo Bay, Guam “is spectrally indistinct, meaning that whatever specters of colonization or injustice it conjures up, they remain the type that do not haunt.”²⁷ If the ghosts of US colonialism in Guam refuse to haunt, the ghosts of US neocolonialism in Korea similarly refuse to haunt. In many cases, even Koreans themselves remain unhaunted. To produce ghost figures, then, is to inquire into this spectral indistinctness and to conjure other modes of apprehending US imperial violence. The refusal to be haunted is significantly structured by US strategic disavowals, South Korean denials of its complicity with the United States, as well as a transpacific masculinist epistemology. This requires a feminist task that asks us to inhabit a non-linear temporality—of going back and unveiling not only how gendered dias-
poras are produced but also how that very production of life lived elsewhere comes with a body count of the casually buried yet uncounted.

The sexual violence underwriting both Japanese colonialism and US neocolonialism in Korea is a particularly vexed ghost story that emerges in the film. This history of violence has been systematically repressed, yet there remains a residue that we can detect through the figure of a woman called, as voiced in the film, “yanggongju, which literally means Western princess. It refers to the women who were sex workers around US military bases; it refers to the women who ended up having romantic relationships with American men and that line, the line between the two is often really blurred.” The film also reveals how the yanggongju is related to comfort women:

The yanggongju has her beginnings in Japanese colonialism because of the comfort women who are conscripted by the Japanese military. The whole movement around reparations for the comfort women has always made a distinction [between] those women who were supposedly forced and the ones who were supposedly willing. So the yanggongju is kind of a distinct figure from the comfort woman because it’s always assumed that she went into sexual labor willingly whereas the halmoni who was previously a comfort woman was a sexual slave. But in fact there’s not that much of a distinction between the two; there’s almost the seamless continuity between Japanese colonialism and US militarism. At the end of World War II the US occupied the southern half and basically took over the comfort stations that were left by the Japanese. The US inherited that system and really benefited from it in a lot of ways.

In their important anthology Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific, Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho make this precise connection between colonialism and militarism. They analyze militarism as “an extension of colonialism and its gendered and racialized processes,” noting that Japanese and US “colonial histories constitute the conditions of possibility for ongoing forms of militarization.” They argue, moreover, that the “comfort women’ system was directly linked with subsequent forms of organized U.S. militarized prostitution, pointing to the interpenetration of these [Japanese and US] imperialist systems.”28 Yet these
connections between colonialism and ongoing forms of militarism, and in particular the institutionalization of gendered and sexualized violence as a structuring force of geopolitical relations, remain obscured by a transpacific masculinist compact. If the unending Korean War remains unfinished in the formal geopolitical sense, then the armistice has also suspended critiques that center the ways in which multiple generations of Korean women and female children bear the scars of that unending. It is precisely their bodies that remain spectrally indistinct, that do not haunt, in the ghost stories that are told by the US, South Korean, and Japanese governments. Yet it is the repressed figure of the yanggongju, as I will discuss later, who has significantly set into motion the gendered diaspora of the Korean War.

These figures of the yanggongju and comfort woman, thus connected, are in turn also linked to the transnational adoptee through a militarized nexus. The film contains this voice-over: “One step away from a Korean American woman married to a white man, one more or the same step away from a Korean wife with an American soldier husband. Another step away from a war bride. Another step: war booty. Step: camp town prostitute. Step: comfort woman. Step again: comfort child.” In other words, how many degrees of separation are there between a transracial adoptee, a military bride, a camp town prostitute, a comfort woman, and the child of a comfort woman? Indeed, the first generation of adoptees in the wake of the Korean War was largely constituted by the abandoned mixed-race offspring of US servicemen, on the one hand, and “army boys” who had functioned as mascots on army bases and camp towns, on the other. As figures of both abjection and fetishization, these adoptees blur the line between subjecthood and objecthood, between subject of humanitarian rescue and objectified war booty. The film reveals, “If you take a look at the history of adoption, trophies, souvenirs, fetish objects can be read alongside adoptee bodies as well, particularly with that first generation. Trying to bring with you some abject object, some figure that represents your time at that particular location. Your masculinity, your great sympathy that you can extend as an occupying force can dwell within the body of an adoptee, or child rather who becomes the adoptee.”

The Korean transnational and transracial adoptee, though hypervisible in particular ways, is a ghostly figure. This is so precisely because these
vexed modes through which she was produced as an adoptee remain buried. This second sense of the mode of production that I am discussing, the mode of production of the adoptee, is what I have argued elsewhere is the conjoined social death of the adoptee and the birth mother. As *The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger* reveals, even when adoptees attempt to “reverse” this process by searching for their birth families, what is found instead is the apparatus of this process itself:

What are we searching for exactly? When we search, what is the objective of that search? What do we expect to find? What do we end up finding instead? . . . Because what’s uncovered in the process of the search itself is the modes of producing adoptees. It is the apparatus of the adoption industry itself that one ends up uncovering through the process of search. So for instance the way in which information has been mobilized, the way in which records have been reclassified, suppressed, rewritten, altered in some way.

To speak about the “apparatus of the adoption industry itself” is to speak about a transaction that produces a violent arithmetic, a calculus through which lives are commodified, discarded, and unevenly valued. This process is also revealed in Borshay Liem’s film when she attempts to get access to her adoption records. Her search for Cha Jung Hee and how she was made to take on Cha’s identity reveal the violent arithmetic of the adoption industry that I cited earlier: “Application Fee $5.00; Home Study $100.00; Adoption Services $200.00; Processing Costs $300.00; Transportation Costs $286.00; Attorneys Fees $200.00.” As an article entitled “The Lie We Love” reminds us:

Westerners have been sold the myth of a world orphan crisis. We are told that millions of children are waiting for their “forever families” to rescue them from lives of abandonment and abuse. But many of the infants and toddlers being adopted by Western parents today are not orphans at all. Yes, hundreds of thousands of children around the world do need loving homes. But more often than not, the neediest children are sick, disabled, traumatized, or older than five. They are not the healthy babies that, quite understandably, most Westerners hope to adopt. There are simply
not enough healthy, adoptable infants to meet Western demand—and there’s too much Western money in search of children. As a result, many international adoption agencies work *not to find homes for needy children but to find children for Western homes.*

That is, the mode of production of the adoptee is now a lucrative global adoption industry, one driven by the Western demand for healthy babies. As I observed earlier, this a political economy with significant gendered biopolitical effects.

The global adoption industry depends upon and exacerbates a global regime of “stratified reproduction,” and in this stratification, questions of reproductive justice for birth mothers do not figure highly. So the mode of production of the adoptee is intimately linked to the mode of perpetuating reproductive injustice for birth mothers. As Kaisen’s *The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger* reveals:

What comes out through the process of search is the way in which the birth mother’s body is mobilized to produce adoptees. One finds maternity homes, one sees young women who oftentimes are pregnant, third trimester, one comes face to face with different spaces and the way in which the space is organized all toward this singular migration, often times not intended for it to be round trip so that you are not expected to return. I think adoptees looking for roots oftentimes uncover pathways, oftentimes uncover that production structure itself. And I think that’s what can be so disturbing.

The “birth mother’s body is mobilized” in this way to produce adoptees, yet she herself is immobilized (and hidden away) not only literally within maternity homes but by the very processes of reproductive injustice that compel her to give up her child. While the generation of women who had to relinquish their children in the years immediately following the Korean War needs to be distinguished from this more recent generation, what binds them together is a transgenerational regime of reproductive injustice that makes it impossible for them to raise their children if they wish to do so. And this ongoing regime of reproductive injustice is itself a significant and gendered biopolitical effect of the Korean War, a war that enchained South
Korea’s economy and future to a US-influenced export-driven model and more recently to neoliberal globalization.

We see how reproductive injustice loops back again and again to multiple generations of women and their children. The children who then return to search for their mothers—“looking for roots”—loop back not always to the self “but oftentimes uncover pathways, oftentimes uncover that production structure itself.” This is a looping back with a difference, a centrifugal movement that might begin with the self but ends up uncovering broader “pathways” to how it is that the adoptee “self” was produced in the first place. One particularly significant pathway is provided by a queer Korean Danish adoptee in the film. Her return to Korea and reunion with her birth family allow her to broaden her perspective on the question of queer right to adoption in Denmark. She relates:

We must see international adoption in a larger context. The fact that people who are more economically privileged have a right to adopt, even talking about international adoption as a right is problematic in the first place. I interpret many of the arguments against granting homosexuals the right to adopt as discriminatory. But when I am here in Korea where I am part of a larger community of adoptees who live here, then the perspective changes because here there is much more focus on the rights of the original parents. The most important thing is to ensure that the biological parents have a real choice as to whether they want to relinquish their child or not.

Rather than focusing strictly on gay rights, this adoptee articulates a powerful critique of first world and bourgeois privilege. In making central the question of whether biological parents have a “real choice,” rather than the question of first world “rights,” she provides a pathway to reproductive justice for Korean women. The film reveals how even Korean feminisms, their middle-class focus, have not dealt sufficiently with issues that concern working-class women, single women, and birth mothers. Even a feminist organization, we learn, insists that adoption is not a “woman’s issue.” How can this be, when a woman is compelled to relinquish her child because of the violent coupling of poverty and patriarchy?

In this sense, The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger, as part of an adoptee
counterpublic,\textsuperscript{31} demonstrates how the militarized and uneven modernity ushered in by the war significantly owes its existence to the simultaneous mode of production of the adoptee and the mode of producing reproductive injustice for her mother. The adoptee (rendered abject and “exported” by the South Korean government until her recent neoliberal incorporation as a “cultural ambassador”) and her mother (who remains unsupported by the government but is consumed as a televised figure of the melodrama of family reunion) have made possible South Korea’s “economic miracle.” That is, South Korea’s “economic miracle” is not a miracle at all, but rather a form of gendered economic injustice indexed by enduring reproductive injustice. This injustice remains “spectrally indistinct” from the colluded vantage of South Korea’s militarized modernity and the United States’ imperial modernity. More specifically, what remains spectrally indistinct are the multiple gendered labors—including but not only that of literal biological reproduction—provided by the adoptee and her mother.\textsuperscript{32} Such labors are compelled yet unacknowledged. This is voiced in the film as “the Korean economy is built on my back, my mother’s back.”

Finally, the third sense of the mode of production that the film elaborates is the mode of production of the Korean diaspora. The larger Korean diaspora is constituted by the linked but distinct diasporas engendered by war, and the Korean American diaspora in particular is itself an index of the ongoing militarized and neocolonial relationship between the United States and South Korea. As I have stated, adoptees constitute a specific gendered diaspora, one that cannot be conflated with other diasporas in which some degree of agential will is involved, however circumscribed it might be. Nor can this diaspora be conflated with the diaspora of children who have no choice but to follow their parent(s). It is preconditioned by a social, physical, and legal severing of ties between child and parent(s), whereas the latter preserves those ties. In \textit{The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger}, this distinction is made clear:

\textit{I separated, I escaped, I shine with good luck. I was, at first glance, the person my students wanted to be. I didn’t tell them that whereas their parents chose American citizenship for them because they could pay for it and that’s how their futures were secured for them through emigra-}
tion before they were even born. . . . I didn’t tell them that the Korean economy is built on my back, my mother’s back, that I am the garbage of Korea who can pass as one of its elite in a school that hires primarily Korean American teachers from Harvard and MIT. That I was expendable. That the only thing Korea gave my mother was an infinite capacity to suffer. My fluent English is worth everything, my broken Korean worth nothing. All I have to offer is my English, my occupation.

Even as this adoptee’s perfect English is envied, admired, and valued within a regime of neoliberal globalization, that English is the effect of this prior violent severing and compelled transplantation to the United States. She marks her membership in this adoptee diaspora, one that makes her the “garbage of Korea” that is “expendable,” yet the voice-over also describes how she chooses to “pass” as an “elite” Korean American who is precisely not an adoptee. In other words, she doesn’t tell her students “that the Korean economy is built on [her] back, [her] mother’s back.” She is able to sell back to Korea the very thing, English, that marks her previous separation from Korea. English, in this sense, is her “occupation” or job. But occupation also signifies the United States’ ongoing military, economic, and cultural occupation of South Korea.

Even as the film thus highlights the specificities of the Korean adoptee diaspora, adoptee transplantations and traversals are juxtaposed with what Grace M. Cho calls a broader gendered “diaspora of camptown” set into motion by Korean women who are pejoratively called yanggongju. That is, the majority of Koreans in the United States can trace their immigration sponsor back to a female relative who married a US serviceman. These military brides—the abject figure of the yanggongju—literally and figuratively gave birth to the post–World War II formation of Korean America. The film reveals:

If you talk to any Korean American of my generation they can tell you there’s someone in their family who married an American serviceman. But usually that person is kind of marginalized in the family and community. Sometimes that person is even referred to as the family secret, the shameful thing that nobody wanted to talk about. Before 1965 it was mostly Korean women who married American soldiers who came to the
US and later were able to sponsor their family members. So from the 1950s up until the end of the eighties almost every Korean in the US came through a woman who had married an American soldier and brought the rest of the family members there.

The film links the unacknowledged conditions of possibility of this diaspora to the adoptee diaspora, revealing the ways in which the Korean War has produced a gendered diaspora that has as yet been unable to reckon with the conditions of its own making.35

By meditating on this abject and therefore unacknowledged mode of production of the Korean diaspora, The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger suggests modes of theorizing the Korean diaspora productively beyond the heretofore prevailing frameworks of trauma, forgetting, and silence. Rather, we might be more attentive to the affects and economies of desire and ambivalence structured by the wedding of US and Korean militarized modernities. Still yet, we might query the teleological temporality of these modernities and of Korea’s modernization projects. Indeed, the film poignantly asks, “What is new about your erasable Korean mother? What is new about the disaster combination of our faces and our speech, our inability to be identified by Koreans as anything? What is new about our histories of artifice? Nearly unrecognizable we pull the batteries out of the clock, tear down the calendar, disregard measurements of time, and decide for once upon a time that is purely our own.” This time, “a time that is purely our own,” is an unending historical present, or a time of the now that is linked to ongoing histories of US militarism and imperialism in Korea. The film ends with all its voices coming together, a sonic merging of the linked histories that the film has displayed. We are taken to the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul, and an “interpretive adaption” of kkoktu kaksi (traditional Korean puppet drama) is staged. The War Memorial is a monumental and decidedly masculinist memorialization of Korean military history, complete with a “Statue of Brothers” and exhibitions of military weapons, vehicles, and equipment (tanks, aircraft, armored cars, field artillery, guns from warships, submarines, radar, and so on) that visitors can touch and occupy. Indeed, there is even a “Combat Experience Room” that simulates, via elements such as audiovisual effects and the smell of gunpowder, what
soldiers in combat experienced during the Korean War. In this setting, the interpretive adaption of the puppet play ends with a puppet getting beaten and lit on fire. This adaptation at the site of the War Memorial “tear(s) down the calendar,” indeed burns down, the calendar of monumentalized military time. It gestures to an alternative politics of commemoration, memory, and temporality.36

In the space and time of this essay, I hope to have demonstrated how cultural forms such as *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* and *The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger* powerfully articulate the stakes of such an alternative politics. These films provide and make possible an alternative reckoning with the violence of transnational adoption and its intimate connection to the multiple ongoing violences of the Korean War. We are confronted with this: “If we are fools reckless with your hearts somehow disabled by our adoptions, made crazy from our time in orphanages, and all the lapses in time between orphanages, or in transit, when we seem to have not existed. If we have been damaged from violence and the act of our bodies and lives handed over for our price to complete strangers why wouldn’t we try to salvage what remains of our precious humanity?” These times—the time in orphanages, the time between orphanages, the time in transit—that would seem to negate adoptee social personhood are the times and the militarized diasporas that constitute the unending Korean War. They are the nonmonumentalized gendered temporalities and diasporas born of violence that the smell of gunpowder at a war memorial refuses to salvage but explodes into oblivion.

**Notes**


2. *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, directed by Deann Borshay Liem (Mu Films and Independent Television Service, 2010), 62 minutes; *The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger*, directed by Jane Jin Kaisen (Jane Jin Kaisen, 2010), 76 minutes.

3. This postcolonial mantra was initially articulated in the context of the formerly colonized
of England migrating to the colonial metropole. It also applies to the sites of US colonial, neocolonial, and military intervention.


5. See Tobias Hübinette, Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture (Edison, NJ: Jimoondang, 2006). He writes, “Together with other critical postcolonial and feminist writers on international adoption, I consider the involuntary transferal of hundreds of thousands of non-Western children on a worldwide scale after formal decolonisation as a clear reflection of a global colonial reality and racial hierarchy, and a grim reminder of the still existing astronomical power imbalance between the West and its former colonies” (16).

6. I use the terms birth father, birth mother, or birth parent(s) not because I am reducing them to a biological or reproductive function, but simply because these terms have become the convention and also as a way of distinguishing them from adoptive parents.


8. In his classic comparative study of slavery, Orlando Patterson argues that slaves undergo a “social death” owing to processes of natal alienation, violence, and generalized dishonor. His analysis has relevance for forms of social death beyond the context of formal slavery. See Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

9. See Barbara Yngvesson, Belonging in an Adopted World: Race, Identity, and Transnational Adoption (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010). She writes:

   Legal fictions that underpin adoptive kinship, such as the voluntary consent of the birth mother to the child’s relinquishment (the child as “gift”), the legal orphan status of the child (the child’s “abandonment”), and in some nations the reinvention of the child as the biogenetic descendant of the adopting parents, work to maintain this stratified system of reproduction, while affirming the centrality of blood (and of the “natural” connection of mother and child) as the foundation of familial and national belonging. . . . Adoption operates as a kind of legal “laundering” of a child whose capacity for belonging in its nation of birth is jeopardized by such factors as the marital status of its mother, its gender, ethnic identity, skin color, and health status; and more generally its “origins” in a population whose poverty bespeaks its abandonment by the nation state, so that it can be transformed into “one of ours” in its new family and nation and potentially (should it return to its native land as an adult) into “one of ours” in that nation, as well. (26)

11. Cousins wrote in an article:

Several people had told me they would like to adopt Japanese children orphaned by bombing. Under the Oriental Exclusion Act, however, these adoptions are not possible. I should like to suggest the next best thing—moral adoptions. By moral adoption I am thinking of Hiroshima children who would be adopted by American families and who would carry the names of the people adopting them. The children would continue to live in Japan—perhaps in some place like Mrs. Yamashita’s [orphanage]—but the American families would be responsible for their care and upbringing. Then, later, if Congress passes a law permitting Japanese children to come to America, these morally adopted children could become legally adopted as well (Norman Cousins, “Hiroshima—Four Years Later,” Saturday Review, September 17, 1949).


14. Ibid., 72, 76.

15. Eleana J. Kim writes:

According to the South Korean Ministry for Health Welfare and Family Affairs (MIHWAF), between 1953 and 2008 a total of 161,665 children were adopted into families to North America and Western Europe. . . . The reasons for adoption are complex and have shifted over the course of the half past century, and at every stage they have been shaped by conjunctures of state control over population and the management of bodies, gendered practices of moral persuasion and coercion (what Ann Anagnost [1997] in the context of China’s population policies calls “euphemized violence”), and the unevenness of Korea’s fitful modernization—all of which help to determine “who is considered to be in the national body and who out of it” (Kim, Adopted Territory, 24).

16. See Yngvesson, Belonging, 68.


20. Eleana J. Kim writes:

Borrowing from Giorgio Agamben’s critique of modern state sovereignty (1998), I argue that the humanitarian orphan in transnational adoption is constructed as a figure of “bare life” that the adoptee must pass through in order to be included in the politi-
cal life guaranteed by the adoptive family and the nation-state. In the contemporary world, Agamben argues, humanitarianism is increasingly separated from politics. Just as humanitarian organizations “can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life” (133), I suggest that adoption agencies are unable to grasp the orphan as anything but bare life, thereby “maintain[ing] a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight” (133). In other words, the orphan, especially as a highly mediated, sentimentalized image, obscures the very structures of power and global inequalities that produce the problem of the orphan in the first place (Kim, Adopted Territory, 255).


22. Ibid., 117.

23. Ibid., 116.

24. Kate Hershiser Park Kum Young, “Calling Card (after Adrian Piper),” Voices from Another Place: A Collection of Works from a Generation Born in Korea and Adopted to Other Countries, ed. Susan Soon-Keum Cox (St. Paul, MN: Yeong and Yeong Book Company, 1999), 28–29. See also Kim, Adopted Territory, 191.

25. The voices listed in the credits are Grace M. Cho, Tammy Chu, Jennifer Kwon Dobbes, Soni Kum, Maja Lee Langvad, Jane Jeong Trenka, Mihee-Natalie Lemoine, Yu Young Nim, Pak Chun Sung, Myung Ki Sook, Isabelle, and Rachel. Given my ongoing work on the topic of transnational adoption, I was able to identify most of the speakers and writers in the film. However, I follow in this essay the filmmakers’ representational politics of not naming each speaker.

26. For a compelling analysis of how the figure of the yanggongju haunts the Korean diaspora, see Grace M. Cho, Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).


31. For a discussion of how adoptee discourses, social practices, and expressive cultural forms constitute a counterpublic, and of how this counterpublic is more a site of an emergent social formation and less a mediation of adoptee “identity,” see Kim, Adopted Territory, 5.

32. For an analysis of the labors provided by the adoptee in shoring up the white heteronormative nuclear family ideal, see David L. Eng, “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas,” Social Text 21, no. 3 (2003): 1–37.


