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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Connecting the Plots: The Extension of Return and Korean Ethnic Nationalism in Jane Jeong Trenka's *Fugitive Visions*

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Abstract

Thousands of overseas Korean adoptees return to Korea temporarily each year in search of their true origin, but few choose to stay permanently. A prominent member of this small community is Jane Jeong Trenka, author of two memoirs: *The Language of Blood* (2003) and *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea* (2009). This article analyses Trenka's literary struggle for permanence in *Fugitive Visions* through theories on Korean ethnic national identity. Using Marshall McLuhan's idea of media as the 'extension of man', it explores the symbiotic relationship between literary media and identity, connecting colonial-era writings on Korean ethnic nationalism to Trenka's portrayal of transnational return.

KEY WORDS

Fugitive Visions; Korea; memoir; adoption; identity

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Introduction

One of the most meaningful events in the formation of identity for Korean transnational adoptees is the return to Korea. Package tours and government-sponsored education programs have naturalised return as a temporary phase in the post-adoption process of self-discovery. The terminology used to promote return tourism—'roots tours' or 'motherland tours'—is underscored by the long-standing belief that all Korean-born people, even those who were separated at birth, are essentially united by a single ethnic 'root'. This essential racial/ethnic connection has structured dominant narratives of return. Adoptee filmmakers and authors—compelled by the desire to validate their racial difference from their white adoptive family—travel to Korea in search of an essential bond to the birthmother and/or the motherland. In turn, problematic historical and familial relationships become neutralised by the myth of racial sameness, the discovery of which allows the adoptee to go back to their true home in the West and integrate the birth country as an unexamined piece of the larger puzzle of hybrid transracial adoptee identity.¹

Far from a naturally occurring phenomenon, Korean ethnic national identity first appeared during the colonial era. Nationalist writers such as Sin Chae-ho and Yi Kwang-su posited not only that all Koreans could trace their ancestry back five thousand years, but that inherent to this lineage were the uniquely Korean characteristics of 'fighting spirit' and emotional collectivity which Koreans call *jeong*. This article discusses how adoptee activist and author Jane Jeong Trenka uses these theories to inform the literary construction of repatriation in her second memoir, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea* (2009).²

Fugitive Visions was composed between 2004 and 2008 and chronicles Trenka's sixth and final return to Korea. She devotes extended passages of the memoir to documenting the inner workings of adoption's legal processes of identity erasure and the psychic after effects such destructive practices have upon return adoptees. The critical tone with which Trenka reports on the adoption industry—revealing legal abuses such as kidnapping, child-swapping, and forgery—reflects the author's drive to enact direct political change on the system itself, a desire which would eventually take her from 'literary activism' to 'organized activism'.³ In the same year *Fugitive Visions* was published, Trenka became the president of TRACK (Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoptee Community of Korea), an organisation that advocates examining the full truth of the Korean adoption system and legislative change. In 2017, Trenka still lives in Korea, where she continues to fight for truth in the political realm—but her second memoir divulges an antecedent struggle for truth which takes place in the personal realm.

One of the main themes of *Fugitive Visions* is the personal struggle to identify with the motherland, but at its core this negotiation is, itself, a creative literary process. Thomas Larson has described the act of writing for memoirists engaged in such identity struggles as highly dependent upon the emotional immediacy of a singular relationship.⁴ Marshall McLuhan,

1 Eli Park Sorenson, 'Korean Adoption Literature and the Politics of Representation', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, p. 173.

2 Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea*, Graywolf, Saint Paul, 2009.

3 Jane Jeong Trenka, 'International Adopted Koreans and the Movement to Revise the Korean Adoption Law', *Ehwa Journal of Gender and Law*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2011, p. 141.

4 Thomas Larson, *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading And Writing Personal Narrative*, Swallow Press, Athens, Ohio, 2007, p. xii.

early innovator of media studies, famously described all forms of media as extensions of man. He asserted that to behold these extensions of ourselves was to embrace ‘new transforming vision and awareness’.⁵ McLuhan elaborated: ‘To behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to embrace it ... to accept these extensions of ourselves into our personal system.’⁶ The printed text is a particularly powerful medium in the reorganisation of our ‘sense lives’, which McLuhan describes as a ‘homogeneous and malleable milieu in which the mobility of armed groups and of ambitious individuals, equally, was as novel as it was practical’.⁷ During the early nationalist movements of Korea’s colonial era, writers such as Sin Chae-ho and Yi Kwang-su understood the potency of printed media to collectivise the disparate experiences of diverse populations inhabiting the Korean peninsula. Yet, the genre of memoir differs greatly from nationalist literature in that, as Larson asserts, writing memoir is primarily a pragmatic act to connect ‘the past self to—and within—the present writer as a means of getting at the truth of his identity’.⁸ Simply put, memoirists only discover the ‘extension’ of self through introspection of self.⁹ In this vein, Trenka attempts to discover a form of truth in relation to the birth nation to which she returns as a linguistic and cultural foreigner.

Since its release, numerous academic studies, both English and Korean, have cited *Fugitive Visions* in a variety of ways.¹⁰ Ethnographer Eleana Kim offers a thorough investigation of adoptee return migration in the current era of neoliberal values and rising desires to learn English; she cites the memoir in her critique of post-IMF globalisation policies and discursive constructions of international adoption as a form of study abroad.¹¹ Connecting transnational adoption to Korea’s militarised and gendered diaspora, ethnic studies scholar Jodi Kim investigates how *Fugitive Visions* portrays the militarised violence that extended from Korea’s unfinished war, affecting the lives of adoptees as well as Amerasians.¹² The most thorough

5 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Gingko Press, Berkeley, 2013, loc. 918.

6 Ibid., loc. 724.

7 Ibid., loc. 1273.

8 Larson, p. 24.

9 Ibid., p. xii.

10 See Eunsook Koo, ‘Reconceptualizing the Myth of Origin and Homecoming in a Korean Adoptee Narrative: Jane Jeong Trenka’s *Fugitive Visions*’, *Comparative Korean Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2011, pp. 293–315; Eleana Kim, ‘Human Capital: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Neoliberal Logic of Return’, *Journal of Korean Studies*, 2012, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 299–327; Jungha Kim, ‘“I’m Still at War with Myself”: Transnational Adoption and Endless Labor in Jane Jeong Trenka’s *Fugitive Visions*’, *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2014, pp. 83–101; Jin-Hee Yim, ‘Jane Jeong Trenka’s Adopted Body Made of Lange, Sound of Blood, and Music [제인 정 트렌카의 입양의 몸: 언어, 피의 소리, 그리고 음악]’, *The Korean Association of Modern Fiction in English*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2013, pp. 129–50; Jodi Kim, ‘“The Ending Is Not an Ending At All”: On the Militarized and Gendered Diasporas of Korean Transnational Adoption and the Korean War’, *Positions* vol. 23, no. 4, 2015, pp. 807–35; Jeong-jun Park, ‘Issues in the Reformation of Self in Literature of Korean-born International Adoptees [한국 출신 국외입양인 문학에 나타난 자아 재구성의 문제]’, PhD thesis, Seoul National University, 2014; Kim Su Rasmussen and Eli Park Sorensen, ‘The Temporality of the Late Arrival: Fanon, Trenka, and the Question of Returning’, *The Jungang Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2011, pp. 301–24.

11 Eleana Kim, ‘Human Capital’, p. 299.

12 Jodi Kim, ‘“The Ending Is Not an Ending At All”: On the Militarized and Gendered Diasporas of Korean Transnational Adoption and the Korean War’, *Positions*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2015, pp. 808.

literary analysis of the work to date was conducted by literature scholar Jung-ha Kim, who synthesises discourses of neoliberal global capitalism and histories of war with psychoanalytic theories to frame Trenka's participation in the English industry as form of affective labor, where successful commodification of symbolic value as transnational mobility depends on simultaneously concealing collective traumas of war, violence and forced migration.¹³

What is missing from most research conducted on *Fugitive Visions*, return adoptee migration and adoptee literature in general, is a critical meditation on how adoptees, specifically, represent themselves within theories of Korean ethnic nationalism.¹⁴ This article argues that Trenka uses the theories of 'fighting spirit' and *jeong* to extend herself into the ethnic nation and to challenge the vision of pure Koreanness promoted by the original theorists. By foregrounding the seldom-acknowledged effects of literary media in shaping the writing of memoirists and nationalists alike, this article attempts to offer a new perspective on Trenka's work. It explores the respective histories 'fighting spirit' and *jeong*, their colloquial appearance in *Fugitive Visions*, and their relationship to the medium of printed text. The following section frames the traumas of mother and daughter depicted in the memoir within linguistic and legal constructs of exclusion, and discusses how Trenka uses the fighting spirit and a form of postmemory *jeong* to extract 'truth' from these collective experiences. Finally, the conclusion briefly discusses how Trenka's memoir suggests the significance of 'fighting spirit' and *jeong* as literary strategies that extend beyond national borders.

Ethnic nationalism and literary media

In 1999 at 'The Gathering', the first conference organised for and by adult adoptees, Eleana Kim writes that First Lady Lee Hee-ho offered an apologetic video address, imploring adoptees: 'forget your difficult past and renew your relations with your native country in order to work together toward common goals based on the blood ties that cannot be severed'.¹⁵ As readers of *Fugitive Visions* witness Trenka's everyday encounters with Koreans, it becomes apparent that such arguments for inclusion based on essentialist terms of 'blood ties' cannot fully account for the adoptee's real absence of cultural and linguistic bonds to the motherland. The incongruity of racial sameness and perceived foreignness bring about what Trenka describes as 'our inability to be identified by Koreans as anything'.¹⁶ Thus, it is with a critical awareness of these opposing attitudes that Trenka first approaches the myth of ethnic national origin.

Somehow even Korean people themselves ... mistakenly think that what they proudly claim as five thousand years of unbroken Korean culture can be erased in

13 Jungha Kim, pp. 82–101.

14 There is a brief discussion of Korean ethnic national ideology in Jeong-jun Park's PhD thesis, as well as in Jin-Hee Yim's literary analysis. See Jeong-jun Park, pp. 180–2 and Jin-Hee Yim, pp. 133–9. Literature scholars Jenny Heijun Wills and Margaret Homans also cite *Fugitive Visions* within ongoing debates over Western theories of essentialism and anti-essentialism in adoption literature. See Jenny Heijun Wills, 'Paradoxical Essentialism: Reading Race and Origins in Jane Jeong Trenka's Asian Adoption Memoirs', in *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2016, pp. 202–2 and Margaret Homans, *The Imprint of Another Life: Adoption Narrative and Human Possibility*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2013, pp. 1–67.

15 Eleana Kim, 'Wedding Citizenship and Culture: Korean Adoptees and the Global Korean Family', in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Toby Alice Volkman, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2005, pp. 63–5.

16 Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, p. 131.

one generation. As if culture doesn't come about for a reason, as if nothing is carried by the body but the hair, its color and texture wrapped around the brain, or the skin wrapped around the ribs that wrap around the heart.¹⁷

At the outset, Trenka tentatively locates the origin of Korean cultural identity as physical inheritance. Her apprehension in embracing the myth of ethno-national resilience derives from an introspective view of the problematic path that leads adoptees from exile to return. Often perceived as a form of upward mobility, overseas adoption granted individuals the opportunity to 'rise above the shameful facts of how they came to exist and ... regenerate their identities', while simultaneously erasing 'the qualities Koreans think make a Korean'—namely the bonds of language and culture.¹⁸ And although the legal measures taken to guarantee a 'clean break' originally precluded the possibility of return, the recent drive for neoliberal globalisation and multiculturalism has led to a state-reimagining of the ethnic national landscape. Within these shifting boundaries, return adoptees derive meaning as symbols of Korea's own national narrative of historical redemption, rising from postwar poverty to successful examples of transnationalism.¹⁹ In *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka's reckoning with the myth of Koreanness traces the ethnic nation beyond these postwar histories of adoption, implying its colonial-era origin:

I was not supposed to know the suffering of my own Korean mother as a young woman, bearing a Japanese name not her own, chewing on a language not her-our own, her-our country filled with a foreign military, a barbed-wire gash running through the body of her-our nation, running through her-our family, her-our country now filled with another foreign military.²⁰

In identifying a primary force in the development of cultural media, Marshall McLuhan writes that periods of rich technological innovation are often spurred by 'war and fear of war' and 'the aftermath of invasion', at which time 'the subject culture has to adjust all its sense ratios to accommodate the impact of the invading culture'.²¹ The development of ethnic national identity at turn of the nineteenth century on the Korean peninsula—theorised in response to the kinds of divisions and repressions Trenka describes—accelerated in direct correlation to new technologies for printed media such as Western-style newspapers. Adjusting to the invading cultures of the West and Japan, the anti-colonial archetypes of nationalism were formulated through a 'triangulated structure' of colonial influences, disseminating through newspaper articles written by elite Korean scholars educated in Imperial Japan. Their theories combined the Japanese theories of collective organic nationhood and Western ideas of Social Darwinism.²²

In the *Toksa Sillon*, published in 1908 and cited as one of the most influential works of early Korean nationalist writing, elite scholar Sin Chae-ho appropriated an origin myth

17 Ibid., p. 14.

18 Ibid., pp. 15, 190.

19 Elean Kim, 'Human Capital', p. 309.

20 Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, p. 16.

21 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, loc. 734.

22 Gi Wook Shin, p. 29; Jini Kim Watson, 'Imperial Mimicry, Modernisation Theory and the Contradictions of Postcolonial South Korea', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2007, pp. 171–90.

from a Confucian historiography originally written by Kim Pusik in 1145, called the *Samguk sagi* (Historical Record of the Three Kingdoms Period) to claim that all Koreans are direct descendants of the Supreme Spirit, Tan'gun, who founded the first Korean nation in 2333 BC.²³ From this unbroken lineage, Sin evoked the word *minjok* to signify the nation as an 'organic entity formed from the national spirit'.²⁴ In his national historiography, he divested possession of *minjok* from the monarch, instead locating it in the 'fighting spirit' of Korea's great military leaders. This national spirit was defined as a primordial, universal characteristic capable of resisting absorption by colonial influences and 'inclusive of every Korean without regard to age, gender, or status distinctions'.²⁵ The sanctity of the collective racial consciousness was predicated upon a struggle to uphold the connection between nation and ethnicity. The task of subsequent nationalist scholars and historians was to locate the Korean people's experience within what Sheila Jager Miyoshi calls the 'struggle to preserve their "core" identity'.²⁶

In the literary realm, the reconstruction of national identity was a task first taken up by the prolific writer and influential nationalist intellectual Yi Kwang-su. Credited with producing the first modern theory of Korean literature, in his 1916 essay 'What is Literature?' Yi theorised that modern Korean literature would serve as a vessel to develop unique Korean national identity that would stand up against both subjugating colonial and imperial forces and the deleterious and backward influences of Confucianism. He asserted that by developing *jeong* (emotion), authors would discover a spiritual link between the individual and the collective political identity of the nation. Yi claimed that literary pursuits would evolve 'the spiritual culture of a people and the foundation of its national character', through which *jeong* would spontaneously arise in individuals, eventually connecting them through shared values that give us 'faith and love'.²⁷ Yi's original desire for literature to unify individual emotions within collective experience of nationhood relates closely to McLuhan's correlation of technological advances in printed media with a demand for unity of vernacular and aesthetic expression. Through these new, unified forms of expression, McLuhan asserted, the 'outing and uttering of private inner experience' would be consolidated in 'a massing of collective national awareness'.²⁸ By 1933, however, Yi had reversed his view on the individual origins of collective consciousness, locating moral attachment to nation, instead, in an eternal bond of kinship. In 'Theory of the Korean Nation', he asserted: 'Koreans cannot but be Koreans ... even when they use the language of a foreign nation, wear its clothes and follow its customs in order to become non-Korean.'²⁹ By creating a unified collective consciousness through

23 Henry Em, 'Minjok as a Modern and Democratic Construct: Sin Ch'aeho's Historiography', in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson, Harvard University Asia Center, Cambridge, MA, 1999, pp. 340–1, 439. Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea: A Genealogy of Patriotism*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 2003, pp. 14–15.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 339.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

28 Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2011, p. 199.

29 Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2006, p. 46.

which disparate individuals could imagine themselves as members of the same ethnic nation, the theories of ‘fighting spirit’ and *jeong* would come to have a profound impact on modern economic and political developments.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the military regime of Park Chung Hee promoted the idea of a ‘miracle on the Han’ through ideologies of national survival and organic nationhood.³⁰ The *minjung* (populous) movements of the 1970s and 1980s would also embrace these same ideologies of ‘fighting spirit’ and *jeong* to empower those who had been marginalised during the nation’s rapid industrialisation, and promote the view that everyday Koreans were active agents engaged in an ongoing struggle for historical redemption. In present day articulations of Korean ethnic nationalism, Eleana Kim writes that adoptees have been appropriated as figures of ‘latter-day *minjung* ... formerly unacknowledged and rediscovered victims of the authoritarian state’ and symbols of the ongoing struggle for democratisation.³¹ With these disparate historical movements looming in the background, Trenka returns to the motherland to find that both *jeong* and the ‘fighting spirit’ have been sublimated into colloquial Korean language.

The slow recovery of what Trenka asserts ‘should have been my native language’ opens up new possibilities for reconciliation between Trenka and her native country. For, as McLuhan writes, ‘each mother tongue teaches its users a way of seeing and feeling the world, and of acting in the world, that is quite unique’.³² Indeed, through everyday encounters with her mother tongue, Trenka begins to understand the significance of *jeong*, ‘that emotion unknown by individualist Western cultures, that emotion that makes Koreans say not “Korea”, “Korean language”, or “my mother”—but “our country”, “our language”, and “our mother”’. Exemplified by the substitution of the personal possessive pronoun ‘I’ for its collective form ‘we’, *jeong* is a way for the author to begin filtering the experience of return through a shared lens. Trenka also recognises that the language of *jeong* presents a potent medium through which she may argue for inclusion ‘when speaking to people who insist upon my foreignness’. As a means of contesting exclusion, *jeong*—as a collective emotion—allows Trenka to circumvent the problems associated with oversimplified racial assertions of Korean national identity. Despite her ambivalence about the personal significance of *jeong* (a word she was ‘never supposed to know’) Trenka is quick to observe the historical relationship of *jeong* to a century’s worth of hardships on the Korean peninsula, from Japanese colonial occupation and US military occupation to the enduring legacy of national division. And while she describes *jeong* as the feeling through which ‘Koreans recognize themselves and each other as Korean’, Trenka is hesitant to replace the third person possessive ‘her’ for ‘our’ as she contextualises the suffering of her mother, whose experiences of colonisation and occupation were immediate. The hyphen in the phrase ‘her-our’, is, then, perhaps a spatial representation of the limits of language’s collectivising powers or, alternatively, it could symbolise the ongoing struggle of the author to reconcile her own foreignness with the personal suffering experienced by her Korean mother.³³

30 Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., New York, 2005, pp. 312–13.

31 Jager, p. 101; Eleana Kim, ‘Beyond Motherlands and Mother Love: Locating Korean Adoptees in Global Korea’, in *Multicultural Korea?*, ed. John Lie Berkeley, Institute of East Asian Studies, California, 2015, p. 172.

32 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, loc. 1156.

33 Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, pp. 14–15.

While *jeong* appears in Chapter 1 of the memoir, it isn't until chapter 6 that Trenka portrays an encounter with the 'fighting spirit' in everyday usage.³⁴ 'A Korean woman once told me this: "Life is fighting. Go and fight, then take a rest, then go and fight more. Fight every day." Is fighting what being Korean means?'³⁵ In contemporary colloquial Korean, the term '*hwaiting*' or '*paiting*' (pronounced '*hwa-ee-teeng*' and '*pa-ee-teeng*', this is a transliterated word for fighting, imported via Japan) is often used to encourage a spirit of industriousness. This characteristic connects back with the industrial labor force that fostered the Park regime's 'economic miracle' during the 1960s and 1970s, but the word itself did not become popular until much later. At the 2002 FIFA World Cup, co-hosted by South Korea and Japan, chants of '*Daehanminguk, hwaiting*' ('Korea, fighting!') galvanised Koreans across the globe in collective support of their national team. Either as a morale booster for the weary or overworked, or as a rallying cry of collective unity during international competition, these colloquial uses of 'fighting' intimate—albeit, indirectly—the same familiar tropes of Koreanness explored earlier in this article. Thus, when Trenka parrots 'fighting' from the Korean woman's facile statements on life—almost facetiously asking, 'Is fighting what being Korean means?'—the connection between 'fighting' and collective Korean ethnic national identity appears, at first, satirical, or at least ironic. However, as chapter 6 progresses, 'fighting' becomes the pivotal trope, collectivising multiple portrayals of struggle—both physical and psychic—and, more importantly, allegorising the act of writing memoir itself.

If *Fugitive Visions* is the extension of a memoirist fighting to prove her own identity, then her primary medium of mobilisation is the written word. Trenka describes this medium accordingly: "The words accumulate across the page like rows of soldiers."³⁶ To allegorise the medium of printed text in the cold repetition of soldiers and mechanisms of war reflects a fundamental psychic effect of the act of writing, the cause of which McLuhan identified as 'the power to extend patterns of visual uniformity and continuity'.³⁷ Defining the printed word as the architect of both nationalism and individualism, McLuhan asserted 'print presented an image of repeatable precision that inspired totally new forms of extending social energies ... by breaking the individual out of the traditional group while providing a model of how to add individual to individual in massive agglomeration of power'.³⁸ Certainly, printed media's psychic effect—wherein 'boldness of type created boldness of expression'—inspired both the memoirist and the nationalist to embrace the power of written language. Trenka, Sin and Yi are all emboldened by its power in corresponding ways. Sin's writing—emboldened by new print technologies—connected nationhood to a military spirit of survival. This in turn inspired future writers like Yi to consolidate individual experiences into collective literary extensions such as *jeong*. For the memoirist Trenka, transcribing into print the spoken philosophy heralded by the unassuming Korean woman, 'Life is fighting', inspires her connection between

34 Given its nearly ubiquitous contemporary colloquial usage, it is unlikely that Trenka's encounters with '*hwaiting*' were limited only to the scene portrayed here.

35 Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, p. 147.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 150.

37 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, loc. 1205–15. According to mythology, when Cadmus—whose introduction of the alphabet to Greek society gave way to the project of Western empire building—founded the city of Thebes, he brought with him an army of soldiers born from the teeth of a dragon (McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, loc. 1187–97).

38 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, loc. 2448.

'being Korean', 'fighting' and, later, the act of writing. As we will see, these connections between writing and fighting eventually produce transgenerational bonds of *jeong* from shared histories of marginalisation. However, the similarities between the nationalists and memoirist end there. For while the former prioritises unity of vernacular and aesthetic expression, the latter places a higher value on a form of individual truth retrievable through the personal act of writing.

For Trenka, the singular source of truth which remains essentially undeniable is the body, not as an inborn sign of the collective Korean nation, but as the location 'from which all my thought and emotion arises', and as evidence to the world 'that my birth mother existed on this earth'.³⁹ The next section investigates the ways Trenka mobilises her own personal 'truth' in relation to her mother, across time, space and language.

Transnational trauma and truth

From within the spatial boundaries of the Korean nation, Trenka is not of a racial minority, because her Korean family members 'are not people of color'. Nonetheless, since Trenka is an 'overseas Korean' who, more importantly, 'cannot speak Korean,' she is thus 'not a real Korean'.⁴⁰ In everyday interactions, speech is one of the most important indicators of 'true' Korean ethnic national identity. As Trenka's written struggle grows in correlation to the length of her return, the ability to find self identity through printed Korean words proves equally revelatory. The 'mother tongue' appears throughout the memoir, performed repeatedly in spurts amid the adopted English language.⁴¹ In what Trenka calls the 'language of my lost mother', *Fugitive Visions* recasts mother and daughter together within the same etymological light, permeating to broader pathways of understanding how nationalism and gender intersect within ideological and linguistic structures of logic.

외: 外: *wei*: outer, foreign ...

외손: 外孫: *wei son*: one's daughter

외족: 外族: *wei jok*: maternal relative ...

외국인: 外國人: *wei guk in*: foreigner

해외입양: 海外入養: *hae wei ibyang*: sea outside enter nourish, i.e., overseas adoptee...⁴²

The connection between the 'maternal' (mother) and 'foreigner' (adoptee) is forged through the same root, *wei* (외), from the Chinese character (外). The implicit counterpart of *wei* is signified by *chin* (친), from the Chinese character (親). *Chin* is the root of words such as intimacy, closeness, love and friend, and also connotes the paternal side of the family. The ideological implications of gender and nationalism which emerge in this linguistic binary between *wei* (outer, foreign, maternal) versus *chin* (intimate, friend, paternal), loop back to the neo-Confucian principles of male-blood line which still affect Korea's structures of kinship and ancestry. Beyond these etymological connections, the association of the adoptee with 'foreignness' also has concrete historical, legal and cultural precedent.

39 Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, p. 166.

40 Ibid., pp. 30, 147.

41 Ibid., pp. 28, 182.

42 Ibid., p. 145.

Intercountry adoption was originally implemented as a means to find homes for the mixed-race offspring of Korean women and Western military men, but since the 1970s the children put up for adoption have mainly been full-blooded Korean, predominantly born to single mothers.⁴³ SoYoung Lee asserts that after the Park regime came into power in 1961, Koreans could claim ‘democratic citizenship’ by participating in and maintaining stable family units defined legally through patrilineage. Orphaned children or those with foreign fathers were thus seen as a threat to the nation-building project. Their exclusion from the collective family unit was expedited by legal measures as a simple solution to congruent transnational desires of married couples without children in the West and the promotion of social welfare in Korea. Lee found that in media portrayals throughout the 1960s and 1970s the figure of the orphan was relegated outside the imagined borders of the family and nation, and marginalised as a sign of social delinquency, corruption and poverty.⁴⁴ In *Fugitive Visions*, intersecting discourses of gender and nation overlay the origin stories Trenka reconstructs.

In 1988, when Trenka was still living in rural Minnesota, she began receiving letters from her Korean mother, recounting the details of her birth. These letters appear in her first memoir, *The Language of Blood* (2003). Born Kyong-ah An in 1972, she was the child of her mother’s second marriage to an abusive, alcoholic husband. As the fifth daughter in a sonless patriarchal line, her father once tried to kill her with a blanket. Then, after being placed in an orphanage, she nearly starved. Before Trenka reached the age of one, she was sent with her four-year-old sister Mi-Ja (now Carol) to America. Her mother indicates that this was partly because of financial issues and partly because her husband’s violence made her fear for their children’s safety. Trenka’s Korean father was later arrested for domestic abuse. During his time in prison, he promised to his wife that, upon release, he would kill the entire family. For the next ten years, Trenka’s mother and her two remaining daughters were forced to live as fugitives, constantly migrating to different areas around Seoul.⁴⁵ Framed by the linguistic binary between *wei* (foreign, maternal) and *chin* (intimate, paternal), Trenka begins to recreate these stories as a cyclical narrative of transgenerational suffering. Jodi Kim describes the memoir’s narrative progression as ‘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’.⁴⁶ Returning to the spaces of her parents’ memories, Trenka reconstructs the logic behind the anger and violence with which her father reacted to her birth through the stigmatisation of *wei* and the hegemony of *chin*.

In the district where you were born, you begin to understand your father’s rage. First there was your sister ... light-skinned for a Korean and assumed to be half-American in a public setting such as this, packed with a foreign military. And then you came

43 Rosemary C. Sarri, Yenoak Baik and Marti Bombyk, ‘Goal Displacement and Dependency in South Korean-United States Intercountry Adoption’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 12, nos 1–2, 1998, pp. 87–114; SooJin Pate, ‘Genealogies of Korean Adoption: American Empire, Militarization, and Yellow Desire’, PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 2010, p. 35.

44 SoYoung Lee, ‘Embodiment of the Orphan in the Novels of Kim Wonil and Lee Mungu in Relation to Democracy [김원일·이문구 소설에 나타난 고아의 형상화 연구: 민주주의와의 관련성을 중심으로]’, PhD thesis, Seoul National University, 2016, pp. 2–8.

45 Jane Jeong Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, Borealis, St Paul, 2003. There are also fragmented accounts throughout *Fugitive Visions* which help ‘fill in the gaps’ of Trenka’s true origin.

46 Jodi Kim, ‘“The Ending Is Not an Ending At All”: On the Militarized and Gendered Diasporas of Korean Transnational Adoption and the Korean War’, *Positions*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2015, p. 827.

along, also light, when your father was already ‘suspicious of his wife’s chastity’ ... If I had been born the first son of my Korean father—not his fifth daughter—I don’t think he would have tried to smother me with a blanket when I was born. I probably would have grown up in Korea and continued my father’s family line.⁴⁷

From anti-colonial nationalist literature of the early twentieth century until the postwar era of rapid economic development, Sheila Jager Miyoshi observes how the signs of man, woman and nation have interacted in several ways within the discursive formation of gendered nation. Failed manhood, male-instigated suffering of women, the disciplining of the female body and the woman’s sexually violated body as a sign of divided nation—tropes that have continued to dominate the nationalist discourse—are also present in *Fugitive Visions*. During the colonial period, failed manhood became a symbol of how public male authority had succumbed to colonial dependence and despair. In *The Tale of Ch’ungyang*, a significant romantic work of numerous retellings within the Korean literary canon, the male is the instigator or object of female suffering; this theme would persist in the ‘master narrative’ of collective national suffering. Meanwhile, Jager writes that the disciplining of the woman’s body has continuously been evoked in nationalist discourses, prescribing that Korean women remain chaste and loyal to the patriarchy, particularly by rejecting the sexual approach of foreign men who were viewed as ‘not only a threat to the sanctity of the Korean female, but to the nation itself’.⁴⁸ In these national narratives, only through the ‘vigilant virtues’ of women is the nation able to both preserve core cultural identity and achieve reunification of the divided peninsula. Conversely, the sexually abused, raped and wounded female body ‘as an icon of a dislocated world’ was often metaphorically used by dissident writers and intellectuals to portray the division of their homeland.⁴⁹ Looping back through the spaces in her mother’s letters, the ‘failed manhood’ of Trenka’s father is portrayed as an effect of the trauma of war.

This is the country where my father took off my mother’s nose with his teeth. This is the country where my father was jailed for violence against his family. I could ride the subway to Hannam-dong right now, and stand in the alley where I was born, or in the place where the house once stood, where my own father tried to kill me. *Aboji*, maybe war made you like that. Maybe that’s where you found the bayonet. But now you are dead and I am still living, even with my shattered tongue, my blinded eyes.⁵⁰

Through these instances, Trenka’s extension of body through the written struggle links her to the mother and motherland through metonyms for pain and suffering. Within the same space where, Trenka writes, ‘my own father tried to kill me’, the suffering of her mother in the past re-inscribes itself upon the body of the narrator in the present; for her the losses of language and family are symbolised by the ‘shattered’ tongue, and ‘blinded’ eyes.⁵¹ As this passage suggests, the wartime traumas of *Aboji* are transferred to his daughter—both as the real violence incurred at birth, and the metonymic bodily afflictions of violence for loss of identity. Though she never saw *Aboji*’s face, in this reenactment Trenka’s own face has been

47 Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, pp. 134–5, 146.

48 Jager, pp. 72.

49 Ibid., pp. 4–69.

50 Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 147–8.

51 Ibid., pp. 11, 147–8.

disfigured so deeply by his violence that her 'blinded eyes' couldn't recognise him, even if he were alive. Trenka seems to suggest these disfigurements of the women relate to the violent historical legacies of a war that turned Aboji into an abusive, vengeful man. Intercountry adoption grew from the war and the US military occupation of Korea during the 1950s. It was then institutionalised as a large export-based form of social welfare. The long-standing failure of national leadership to address the destructiveness of its practices—forbidding families from seeing each other, inadvertently erasing the child's mother tongue and neglecting domestic issues of birth families—manifest themselves figuratively as wounds upon the faces of the women. The collective grief shared between mother and daughter—as much as it is the product of modern historical trauma—should be defined through the Korean word, *han*.⁵²

In terms of the inventive representational strategies through which Korean American writers portray transgenerational transmissions of violence and suffering, Seo-Young Cu borrows from Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory to posit a theory of 'postmemory han'.⁵³ Just as *jeong* is uniquely Korean, so is the comparatively well-known phenomenon of *han*, which Trenka defines as 'deep sadness, anger, and wish for revenge whose reverse side is deep love'.⁵⁴ Thus, if the idea of postmemory han is understood as a powerful force of pain children inherit through ancestral memories of loss, then how might we understand the equally powerful longing for attachment left in its wake? Perhaps it is possible to understand this emotional drive for solidarity which emerges after the struggle to reconcile transgenerational loss, as a form of postmemory *jeong*.

At the end of Trenka's extended exploration of postmemory han and transnational trauma, the question still lingers: 'Is fighting what being Korean means?' With the metonym of writing for fighting established through the allegory of words-as-weapons, Trenka asserts that the struggles which characterise so much of Korea's modern history might be sublimated away from the pain of real violence—like that of her father—into the literary creation of collective attachment. It is through the collective 'we' that Trenka begins to construct truth from shared bonds of otherness: 'If we want to stop fighting, we should be able to. If we want to stop running, we should be able to. If we want to love, if we want to live, if we want to stop being lonely, if we have come this far just to be with each other, then we should be able to.'⁵⁵ In this scene, the act of naming enables Trenka to give 'true' meaning to her return. Though the individuals she names—return adoptees, her sister, *Umma* (mother)—all fall into the category of *wei*, the question of whether a 'we' absent of *chin* 'truly' constitutes the Korean ethnic nation becomes insubstantial. Rather, what is important about the *jeong* produced in Trenka's written struggle is that it allows her to frame the choice between permanence and mobility, between fight and flight, between embracing love or embracing pain as a choice of identifying with different group formations. In the collective name of *wei*, she ultimately chooses permanence: 'I am naming the reason why I want to live. I am naming the reason why this time, I will stay, and I will fight.'⁵⁶

52 Elaine Kim, 'Home Is Where the Han Is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals', in *Reading Rodney King / Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams, Routledge, New York, 1993. Elaine Kim defines *han* as 'accumulated experiences of oppression', p. 215.

53 Seo-Young Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?: A Science-fictional Theory of Representation*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2011, pp. 189–92.

54 Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, p. 14.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Conclusion

Throughout most of *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka seems to exercise great restraint in her use of ‘we’ or ‘our’. Although she switches to second- and third-person points of view with frequency, most of the memoir stays within the immediacy of a present-tense ‘I’. It is not until Trenka’s revelation of permanence in the aforementioned scene that we behold the extension of the memoirist’s accumulated written struggles, articulated in the name of the plural, ‘we’. By the final chapter, Trenka’s use of the collective pronoun appears fluid, as if the emotion of *jeong* itself has become an equally mobile instrument for her to shift in and out of both overlapping and distinct boundaries of belonging.

We Koreans—whatever that means—have emerged from the disaster of the twentieth century, bumping and scratching our way into the next, disoriented and confused, not knowing the difference between stranger and family, friend or enemy. In less than one hundred years we have gone from a nation closed and hostile to Westerners to a nation that makes an offering of its own children to them. And the sparkling miracle upon the Han River that Seoul has become, with all its great wealth laid out upon the skyline, came to pass because of the endurance of many people. We—the outcasts—are numbered among them. And now to this place we have returned, a stain upon the conscience of Korea, straddling to centuries with our brokenhearted mothers, our guilt-ridden fathers. We took no vow of silence, nor did our families, yet still we can hardly speak.⁵⁷

In this passage, Trenka sublimates the collective emotion of postmemory *jeong* through the shifting first-person plural point of view, creating a concise, latter-day *minjung* historiography of the modern Korean nation. From the ‘disoriented and confused’ collective-national ‘we’ who emerges from colonialism and war ‘not knowing the difference between friend or enemy’, Trenka moves fluidly into the collective point of view of the ‘outcasts’ upon whose ‘endurance’ the ‘miracle’ on the Han depended, and finally into the intimate plurality of transnational adoptees who return in silence because they can ‘hardly speak’ Korean. Perhaps most importantly to the overall project of this article, this passage represents the most complete instance of Trenka joining the ethnic national theory of ‘fighting spirit’ with both the act of writing and the writing itself, to produce a more flexible version of *jeong* through which her movement both into and out of the multiple ‘we’s’ of history forms an air of uncertainty around the stability of collective Korean ethnic national identity. In this sense, in *Fugitive Visions* the use of these two theories of Korean identity—*jeong* and ‘fighting spirit’—also seems to suggest literary functionality in excess of the ethnic nation.

By way of conclusion, let us return to the memoirist’s pursuit of truth through the written medium. The ‘fighting spirit’—as it alludes to the idea of survival—presented Sin a potent means to connect the myth of the ethnic nation with the written struggle to uphold the sanctity of the myth’s truth. On a micro-scale, Trenka’s ‘fighting spirit’ mimics these dual functions. As an act of psychic survival, the writing struggle connects the memoirist-in-search-of-identity with the act of giving ‘true’ meaning to their own identity. Unlike the ethnic nationalist, however, the memoirist’s construction of truth is not limited to boundaries of nation or race. Thus, the idea of *jeong*—as it alludes to an emotional force of collectivity—appears to be a tool for the memoirist to personify personal truth through feelings of group solidarity. In this sense, the theories of Korean ethnic nationalism as they appear in *Fugitive*

57 Ibid., p. 188.

Visions present the memoirist with a blueprint to navigate the struggle for ‘true’ identity through multiple definitions of what Trenka calls, ‘the indefinable, *uri*, we’.⁵⁸

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⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 194.

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