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An “Orphan” with Two Mothers: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Cultural Politics

Jodi Kim

Officially she was never born. You will not find a record of her birth, not even in her small hometown. A miraculous conception in Korea, an anonymous drop-off at an orphanage, a hasty but surreptitious send-off to a foreign land. She is a paper child of ghosts.

—Me-K. Ahn, *Living in Half Tones*

Society has already told you and me that we have become Americans because of someone else's charity. Now we're being told that our cultural displacement had a purpose—multiculturalism. By growing up in white families, we can be examples, Luuk. We can show others that racial harmony is possible. We just can't show our burdened backs . . . I guess someone forgot to ask us if we wanted to become America's diversity mascots.

—Kari Ruth, “Dear Luuk”

Recent high-profile transnational, transracial adoptions by white U.S. über-celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, coupled with dramatic increases in the numbers of such adoptions in the last decade, have made what Toby Alice Volkman calls “new geographies of kinship” highly visible.¹ Yet this “new” visibility and relative “popularity” of transnational adoption obscure the long-standing history of the practice, a history whose modern origins we can trace back to the end of World War II and one that intersects in complex ways with America's imperialist and gendered racial cold war in Asia.² Indeed, America's protracted cold war military interventions in Korea and Vietnam have helped to produce the significant migration of Koreans and Vietnamese to the United States not only as immigrants, military brides, and “refugees,” but also as transnational and *transracial* adoptees.³ The adoption of Korean babies after the end of the Korean War inaugurated what ultimately developed into the world's largest and longest standing transnational adoption program, and the adoption of Vietnamese babies was made possible in the final days of the Vietnam War, when the U.S. government launched a controversial “campaign” called Operation Babylift to airlift more than

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two thousand “orphans” out of Vietnam.⁴ This intersection, or conjoined genealogies of cold war imperialisms in Asia and transracial adoptions out of Asia, impels us to reckon with the complex politics and affects of transracial adoption as not simply or solely an individual private matter motivated by altruistic desires to form new kinships and to provide better lives for orphaned and abandoned children. It is also a highly racialized and gendered process implicated in the United States’ imperialist, capitalist modernity and indeed its foundational or constitutive projects of racial formation and “nation building” both domestically and internationally. In this article, I seek to highlight the cold war relations between the United States and Asia as a particularly charged, protracted, and significant condition of possibility and locus for a practice whose disturbing intersections with imperialist violence witnesses a proliferation of global locations.

I grapple with these complex intersections, politics, and affects by analyzing Deann Borshay Liem’s *First Person Plural* (2000), a fraught autoethnographic documentary on Liem’s experience of being a transracial Korean adoptee, and *Daughter from Danang* (2002), a PBS documentary about the Vietnamese “Babylift” and a transracial adoptee.⁵ I argue that these films constitute an important site of knowledge production and representation that offers an unsettling hermeneutic of the imperialist and gendered racial logics of the U.S. cold war in Asia by displaying the psychic and material complexities of adoptions that are not only transnational, but also *transracial* and gendered. The films make visible how the conditions of possibility of transracial adoption surface at the disturbing nexus of the successive forced migrations engineered by U.S. and Western capitalist modernity, cold war imperialism in Asia, the white heteronormative bourgeois nuclear family ideal, and the long-standing imperialist desire to “save” the world. More specifically, within the context of the cold war in Asia, American military intervention and war produced the conditions—the birth of GI babies, increasing numbers of orphaned and abandoned children, devastation of local economies, and unequal economic and neoimperial dependencies, to name just a few—that led to the availability of children for adoption. This new supply of potential adoptees coincided with the demand to “rescue” Asian girls from a putatively more pernicious Asian patriarchy and, more recently, with the maternal desires, nontraditional (re)productive possibilities, and middle-class material privileges afforded by liberal feminism.⁶

Moreover, to the extent that the adoptees of *First Person Plural* and *Daughter from Danang* have, like many other orphans, at least one living birth parent, they are not biological but rather what are called “visa” or “social orphans,”

who are legally produced and made available for adoption as such. Given this, I contend that a particularly elided yet significant condition of possibility for transracial adoption is the conjoined “social death” of the adoptee and the birth mother.⁷ The very production of the adoptee as a legal orphan, which severs the adoptee from any kinship ties and makes her an exceptional state subject, renders her the barest of social identities and strips her of her social personhood.⁸ This social death is paradoxically produced precisely so that the orphan can legally become an adoptee, a process that presumably negates her social death through a formal reattachment to kinship and thus a restoration of social identity and personhood. Yet this “temporary” social death that is contradictorily a precondition for its very (presumably permanent and complete) negation indexes the lingering displacements, irrecoverable losses, and unhealed wounds that come to complicate adoptee subjectivity and affective economies. “Successful” placement and adoption cannot fully account for or resolve these residues. Similarly, the disparate conditions and circumstances that make it disproportionately difficult or unlikely for racialized birth mothers to keep or *parent* their children produce a social death for such mothers and, by extension, for their families and communities. This is not to reify and naturalize motherhood by presuming that mothers should always mother, or want to mother, their children, nor is it to imply that parenting by birth mothers is naturally superior to or should necessarily be preferred over other kinds of parenting. Rather, it is to analyze the multiple dislocations—in this instance, the exigencies and violences of the cold war in Asia—as significant forces that would compel a birth mother to give up her child. Within this context, such profound natal alienation, or the capacity to give life but the severing of rights to claim and parent that life, radically circumscribes the quality of the lives of birth mothers such that they undergo a social death. That is, if we are to adopt an expanded notion of transnational reproductive justice, one that includes the right of birth mothers to parent their children, then the denial of that right—and of the material conditions that make it possible to exercise that right—constitutes a biopolitical regime contributing to the social death of a growing body of poor, racialized, and gendered birth mothers throughout the world, including the United States.⁹ Yet still, such an expanded conceptualization of transnational reproductive justice, even as it would seek to recognize the right of birth mothers to parent their children, would situate that right within a broader and wide-ranging framework of reproductive autonomy, one that does not necessarily privilege the biological. Within this framework, reproductive autonomy would also recognize a birth mother’s active choice or ability *not* to parent.

Thus, I depart from studies of adoption that have focused largely on medical, legal, and social services issues and on clinical assessments or “outcomes” of the pathologized adoptee’s adjustment and assimilation. Such quantitative studies buttress fantasies of U.S. liberal multiculturalism and tend to elide enduring racial hierarchies by plotting a linear, developmentalist teleology of arrival, settlement, and assimilation without interrogating why the adoptee is impelled to be in the United States in the first place. Instead, I build upon work coalescing as an emergent interdisciplinary field of adoption studies. For example, while the modern origins of transnational, transracial adoption in the United States date back to the immediate post–World War II period, Pauline Turner Strong’s analysis sheds light on how the history of this practice intersects with the very formation of the U.S. nation-state from a white settler colony. Strong writes within the context of a protracted history of generations of Native American children being forcibly removed from their homes, relatives, and communities by government officials, missionaries, and service workers who believed that assimilation into the dominant society via adoption, foster care, or education in off-reservation boarding schools served the children’s best interest. She poignantly captures the complex, irreconcilable contradictions of adoptions that are not only transracial, but also transnational or nation-to-nation interactions between a settler colonial state and putatively sovereign “domestic dependent” indigenous nations. She writes, “Adoption across political and cultural borders may simultaneously be an act of violence and an act of love, an excruciating rupture and a generous incorporation, an appropriation of valued resources and a constitution of personal ties.”¹⁰ Similarly, in a study of more recent U.S. adoptions of Chinese babies in large numbers, Sara K. Dorow writes of “the joyful intimacy of making family next to the unjust history that it might recall.” For her, this disjunctive juxtaposition materializes as three “impossible contradictions”: (1) the “uneasy relationship between commodification and care”; (2) the “demands of dislocation and relocation,” of biological origins and culturally chosen kinship; and (3) “fixed and flexible racialized imaginaries.”¹¹ Critically attentive to such “impossible contradictions” and “excruciating rupture[s],” I analyze recent cultural productions and articulations of Asian American transracial adoptees (a critical mass of whom have come of age as adults) as a heretofore largely untapped source of knowledge.

The Production of “Social Orphans” and the Social Death of Birth Mothers: The Korean War and *First Person Plural*

I begin with a brief discussion of the cold war context of transracial adoption. While the cold war is a metaphorical “cold” war when seen from the vantage point of the United States and (Western) Europe, it was a literal “hot” and bloody war in much of the rest of the world, the terrain on which the West’s cold war was actually waged and fought. Indeed, the peculiar metaphoricity of the term “cold war” itself is not simply symptomatic of an innocuous Euro-Americanism. Rather, the metaphors and logics of the cold war engage in significant performative and ideological work. Most notably, they cloak and obfuscate the imperialist violence of U.S. global hegemony inflicted upon gendered racial bodies and terrain. During the cold war, we see the United States applying the imperial tactics of anticommunism to Asia, and “Asia” as a region gathering increasing coherence and strategic importance for the United States in economic, military, and political terms. What is taken to be the bipolar Manichean rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union was triangulated in Asia, among other sites. The “loss” of China to communism in 1949 would overdetermine America’s cold war (ad)ventures in Asia. Anticolonial nationalisms in Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere would be interpreted as metonyms or specters of a “Red Asia.” This, as well as the long-standing hypnotic power of imagining a billion Chinese consumers, would haunt cold war logics and geopolitics. After Mao’s Communist victory in 1949, Washington deployed an effective rhetorical construction, the “domino theory,” to articulate the fear that if communism were left unchecked, adjoining Asian nations would successfully fall like a row of dominoes.¹² The sense of urgency, to which this image graphically contributed, provided the justification for a strong doctrine of (military) containment that reduced and simplified complex and heterogeneous formations, on the one hand, and expanded the category of “communism” to capture or ensnare these formations, on the other.¹³ Thus, the vexed triangulation of the cold war in Asia saw the United States aiding the Nationalists in China’s civil war, occupying Japan in the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945–1952), performing a “police action” in Korea (1950–1953), entering a protracted “conflict” in Vietnam (circa 1959–1975), and instantiating North Korea as part of the “evil empire” and later the “axis of evil” (2002).

U.S. military intervention in Asia was overdetermined in no small part by policy analyses that figured Asian nations as particularly vulnerable to the ideology of communism. For example, W. W. Rostow argued, “There is a much

closer connection between the military, or security, threat and the ideological threat in Asia than in Europe . . . The attitudes of educated Asian leaders have been deeply affected by the wide circulation of Lenin's theory of imperialism and by the respect and awe with which they regard the Soviet example of rapid industrialization. Aspects of Communism interest and tempt Asians with peculiar strength."¹⁴ In the face of such "interest" and "tempt[ation]," Rostow called not only for "economic assistance, military protection, and alliance against Communism," but also for "disinterested good will, human concern, and [a] willingness to help which run deep through the American people."¹⁵ In the wake of the Korean and Vietnam wars in particular, the suffering "war orphan" becomes a significant figure upon which the Manichean anticommunism of the cold war—as at once a geopolitics and "good will" structure of feeling—condenses and coheres. As *First Person Plural* and *Daughter from Danang* make visible, transracial adoption thus constitutes a particularly fraught locus of cold war geopolitical and ideological anxieties and the management of those anxieties.

I turn now to Deann Borshay Liem's highly personal documentary *First Person Plural*, an emotionally charged account of a transracial Korean adoptee's attempt to remember and reckon with her lost Korean origins, and as the title suggests, her plural identities. Liem's story is especially complex, for she discovers that she was not an orphan at all, but had been given up for adoption by her poor, widowed, and still surviving Korean mother who could not feed all five of her children in the aftermath of the Korean War and her husband's death. She further discovers that the orphanage in Korea forged her adoption papers and passed her off as another girl who was scheduled to be adopted by Alveen and Arnold Borshay in California, but who was reclaimed by her birth father. Afraid that Deann's Korean mother would also change her mind, the orphanage passed Deann off as this other girl, told her to be silent about her true identity, and sent her to the Borshays. This case of a forced "mistaken identity" and the proliferation of identities it sets into motion reveal the complex gendered, racial, psychic, and material economies of transracial adoptions. Indeed, the film opens with Liem's face shot from different angles and with different lighting effects, including an unsettling solarized silhouette, coupled with this voiceover: "My name is Kang Ok Jin. I was born on June 14, 1957. I feel like I've been several different people in one life. My name is Cha Jung Hee. I was born November 5, 1956. I've had three names, three different sets of histories. My name is Deann Borshay. I was born on March 3, 1966, the moment I stepped off the airplane in San Francisco. I've spoken different languages and I've had different families." This triplicate of names

and identities—the person she was literally born as, the person she was passed of as, and the person she was figuratively (re)born as when she landed in San Francisco as the adopted daughter of the Borshays—produces an affective and cognitive dissonance for Liem. Her film stages this dissonance and displays an attempt to get to know and negotiate her complex subjectivity vis-à-vis multiple filiations and affiliations, whether familial, cultural, racial, or national. This negotiation is overdetermined by fantasies of return, projections of loss, and desires for reunion. It is a fraught process that at once enables and disables a coherent narrative of self and kinship.

My analysis begins by asking why a white American middle-class family—already an ideal nuclear family unit with a mother, father, and a son and daughter—would seek to adopt a child from a foreign country in the early 1960s? And how might the knowledge of such adoptions have been disseminated? In the opening moments of *First Person Plural*, amidst a structured montage of voiceovers, on-camera interviews, and old 8mm home movies shot by Arnold, Alveen explains why they decided to adopt. Moved by an NBC television segment on a “Foster Parents’ Plan” for the “thousands of needy children in Europe and Asia,” Alveen decides to “sponsor” a child for \$15 a month, and after about two and a half years, adopts the eight-year-old girl from South Korea. This 1960s television segment, complete with pathos-generating footage of suffering orphans, constitutes what Laura Briggs calls a “visual iconography of rescue,”¹⁶ and was one among many such “sponsorship” programs as the end of World War II soon inaugurated the cold war. For example, in the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Norman Cousins, the editor of *Saturday Review*, conducted two sponsorship or “adoption” programs: the Hiroshima Maidens Project, through which women disfigured by the bomb were brought to the United States for reconstructive surgery and housed by “host” families, and the Moral Adoptions Program, through which Americans “adopted” four hundred Japanese children orphaned by the bomb. As Christina Klein notes, these adoptions were virtual, consisting of the donation of money and the exchange of letters, because U.S. policy barred the actual immigration of Japanese people. She notes further that Cousins was likely inspired by the Christian Children’s Fund (founded originally in 1938 as the China Children’s Fund), which by 1955 had successfully appealed to U.S. donors to sponsor children in fifteen Asian countries, many of whom were Chinese and North Korean refugees. The Christian Children’s Fund grew and expanded in step with the cold war in Asia. By yoking the “politics of pity” to an anticommunist politics of fear and by figuring sponsorship as “adoption,” it constituted one important site of

cold war ideological and epistemological formation.¹⁷ The trope of adoption, Klein observes, symbolically “solved” even as it obscured the problem of racist exclusion laws, and through a logic of consumption, the fund’s advertisements made it possible for Americans to “purchase a child, [get] protection from communism, and [achieve] relief from a sense of political helplessness”—all for the sponsorship cost of \$10 a month.¹⁸ Moreover, these print ads allowed Americans to engage in a politics of pity, fear, and salvation, and also presented an educational opportunity to learn and gain more knowledge about Asia through the charged anticommunist and Manichean rhetorics of the cold war. These affective politics and politics of affect strategically attempted to displace and obscure cold war militarism and imperialism, but are themselves part and parcel of the imperialist project. Indeed, such sentimental affective labors have a long-standing history, constituting what Briggs calls a “secular salvation theology,” often working alongside a sometimes *not* so secular theology.¹⁹ Evangelical Christian organizations and adoption agencies, particularly Holt International, played significant roles in spearheading adoption from countries such as China and Korea and in efforts to liberalize restrictive immigration laws that prevented such adoptions.

By the 1960s, when Liem was adopted at the age of eight, it was possible to go from virtual adoption or sponsorship to actual legal adoption. Transracial adoptees such as Liem constitute a gendered, “privileged”²⁰ form of cold war Asian migration to the United States and represent the displacements precipitated by the Korean War and the protracted presence of the U.S. military in Korea. While the “privileged” gendered immigration of Asian females to the United States—as military or war brides, mail-order brides, and transracial adoptees—might be seen to reverse the gendered racial exclusion of Asian immigrants dating back to 1875, Liem’s searing personal trauma forces us to reckon with the violent terms, historical catastrophes, multiple losses, and costs under and through which such a “reversal” takes place.

First Person Plural makes visible one of the most troubling “costs” of transracial adoption: its literal saturation with the logic of consumption and the marketplace. The very existence of transracial adoption, and the various options and choices that are afforded prospective adoptive parents, bring up disturbing questions of “supply” and “demand.”²¹ Indeed, the racialized hierarchy assumed by Deann’s white adoptive family is most tellingly displayed by the racialized logic of consumption, possession, and ownership. Denise is Deann’s adoptive sister, and in a film otherwise filled with emotionally overwrought episodes, her affect on camera could best be characterized as oddly flippant. She recalls the day the family picked up Deann from the airport:

"I think mother went up to the wrong person. Yeah. I think we didn't know until we checked her name tag or somebody told us who you were. It didn't matter. I mean one of them was *ours*." She also recounts how she had to take an upset Deann home early on her first day of school: "I carried you kind of *like a little monkey*, your little arms and legs just kind of wrapped around me and we just started walking home." Though Denise repeats throughout the interview segments that Deann is her family, her sister, despite differences in appearance or "nationality or whatever," there are moments when consumerist and racial logics erupt and ultimately exceed the rhetorics of kinship. The racial complexities, contradictions, and ironies of the multiracial Borshay family are further revealed in a home movie of them enjoying breakfast at a restaurant called "Aunt Jemima's Kitchen." This moment makes palpable and resurrects the tangled legacy of a previous moment in the logics and institutions of racial possession, that of racialized chattel slavery. Moreover, although Duncan, Deann's adoptive brother, also insists that "color and look doesn't make any difference," and that Deann is just as much his sister as Denise is, in a telling grammatical slippage he reveals, "You didn't come from *my* mommy's womb but I don't care." Why would he say "*my* mommy's womb" to his sister? Wouldn't this normally be articulated between siblings as "*our* mommy's" or simply "mommy's?" And in a brutally honest moment, he betrays a profoundly imperialist attitude: "Of course I can't help as a red-blooded American boy only knowing America and this culture, I think it's superior to everywhere else in the world in every way. That may be arrogant and condescending of me, but I can't help it."

Even Alveen participates in this discursive economy of ownership, saying, "I didn't care that they had switched a child on us . . . You were Deann and you were *mine*." When Deann qua Cha Jung Hee arrives in the United States, Alveen does not notice that the girl with the stricken expression on her face, née Kang Ok Jin, does not resemble the picture of Cha Jung Hee sent to her by the orphanage. Moreover, when she and Arnold make a trip with Deann to Korea for a "reunion" with the long lost Korean family, she cannot "equate" Deann with Korea at all. When asked by Deann why not, she answers, "You belong *to* us, at home." Deann does not simply belong *with* her adoptive parents in America; she belongs *to* them. In discussing these contradictions, my point is not to question the sincerity of the Borshays' motivations or their love for Deann. Rather, my aim is to highlight transracial adoption's messy affective economies and racialized terrains.

For social orphans like Deann, having multiple sets of parents complicates an already fraught transnational geography of kinship, instantiating a cogni-

tive and affective economy that is at once one of excess and one of lack. Once Deann travels back to Korea and meets her birth mother, she finds it difficult to have room in her mind for two mothers. Yet this excess of mothers also signals a lack. Deann is differently estranged from both of her mothers precisely because there are *two* of them. This multiplicity of mothers is articulated by Deann as a confused and confusing tautology: “I didn’t know how to talk to my mother about my mother because she was my mother.” While Deann’s estrangement from her birth mother results from the effects of their physical separation, her estrangement from her adoptive mother is specifically racial. She confesses tearfully: “There’s a way in which I see my parents as my parents, but sometimes I look at them, and I see two white American people that are so different from me that I can’t fathom how we are related to each other and how it could be possible that these two people could be my parents.” This tear-filled admission conjures the specter of racial difference. Indeed, because of such racial estrangements, there is in transracial adoption, as Dorow observes, “an oblique return of biologism to the racialization of ‘different types of human bodies’ . . . because . . . race doubles as an expression of biological difference between parent and child.”²² This biological difference, made visible as racial difference, also signals different racialized experiences, treatment, identifications, and hierarchies for parent(s) and child.

By representing the ruptures of racial estrangement, *First Person Plural* interrogates the ideological labor—of reproducing the white heteronormative nuclear family ideal and mediating domestic black-white race relations—that the transracial adoptee presumably provides.²³ As an adult, and indeed through the very making of her documentary, Deann refuses to perform the ideological labor pre-scripted for her. Stereotypes of Asian female filial piety (even as the Asian child’s very adoption removes her from the culture that presumably inculcates such piety), the related trope of Asian Americans as the “model minority” in the United States, and patriarchal protocols in Asia overdetermine the desirability and availability of Asian female babies.²⁴ Such a high demand for Asian female babies is linked to the gross overrepresentation of African American children within the child protective system, in foster care, or waiting to be adopted. On the one hand, this is a result of racism in the child welfare system, which often denies the right of African American parents to *parent* their children. Yet as Dorothy Roberts observes, the debate over domestic transracial adoption obscures why there are so many African American children waiting to be adopted in the first place.²⁵ On the other hand, African American children are not “model minority” transracial adoptees in the way that Asian babies are. Indeed, in recent high-profile cases such as

those of Madonna and Angelina Jolie, when black babies have been adopted, they have been from Africa. African *American* children are thus being adopted abroad because of a shortage of parents in the United States willing to adopt them.²⁶ This is the case even though the National Association of Black Social Workers' controversial 1972 position against whites adopting black children was never enacted as law, and the federal 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) and its 1996 amendment, the Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP), provide against the consideration of race in domestic adoption practices. That is, the acts render "race-matching" illegal and thus in effect promote transracial adoption.

The social reproduction of the white heteronormative bourgeois nuclear family ideal was especially prescriptive before the advent of more recent practices of "open adoption" and attentiveness to the child's different background. For those like Deann, who were adopted in this previous period, their forced migration to the United States also meant a forced cultural Americanization. This, and the denial of her true family history and identity, produce an unmourned, indeed an unmournable, loss for Deann. It is so precisely because the Borshays not only refuse to investigate or even simply acknowledge her true family history and identity, but also because they cannot fathom that their affective *gain* derived through the joys of having Deann as their daughter, and the material comforts that Deann herself gains by joining a middle-class American family, come at the price of a great affective or psychic *loss* for her. She confesses: "There was also a lot of sadness that I think that we couldn't deal with as a family. And a lot of that sadness had to do with loss. I was never able to mourn what I had lost with my American parents."

Korea thus becomes the site of repression, and the repressed returns to Deann when she moves away from home. Ghosts visit, and dreams return. Deann gradually realizes that her dreams must actually be memories of Korea coming back to her. She tells her viewers, "I was beginning to unravel the mysteries of my past." What ensues immediately after this is a voiceover (paired with archival film footage of the Korean War and its aftermath) providing an abridged historicization of the conditions of possibility for her adoption. A significant part of the unraveling constitutes a contextualization of Deann's personal past within Korea's national past. It is worth quoting at length:

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. In 1965, the adoption procedure for Cha Jung Hee was completed. My [adoptive] parents signed the papers and sent money to the adoption agency in Korea.

The first wave of South Korean transracial adoptions was of abandoned mixed-race GI babies, many of whom were adopted by American military families. The U.S. military, then, at once gives birth to, abandons, and adopts its Korean offspring. Liem critically links transracial adoption to the Korean War and the political economy of the cold war. This global economy, spearheaded by the United States, shaped South Korea into an export-led economy that left no room for social services and produced a modernization project with a host of brutal contradictions. Within this economy, children like Deann became one of Korea's many exports. We see a "bartering" of children, if you will, as a form of natural resource extraction and exportation. Within this nation-to-nation bartering of children, we also see multiple complicities at work, complicities that make visible the manifold role of the state in producing, on the one hand, the *social* orphan through brutal economic and social welfare policies with uneven gendered effects, and the *legal* orphan through juridical procedures, on the other.²⁷ More recently, these layered complicities have also included the shifting politics of gender, motherhood, and reproduction in the United States, leading to such developments as the legalization of abortion, delayed motherhood for professional women, and a broadening of reproductive and parenting possibilities (including single motherhood, same-sex parenting, etc.). As I discussed earlier, these complicities are further imbricated with U.S. racial politics.

By providing this critical context, *First Person Plural* allows us to see transracial adoption as a type of forced migration, one among a succession of forced migrations. In the past fifty years, transracial adoption has been responsible for the migration of almost half a million children to Western countries.²⁸ The geopolitics of the Korean War and subsequent cold war policies impelled Deann's Korean birth mother to give her up for adoption, entering Deann into the growing ranks of "social orphans," a situation in which at least one

biological parent is alive but cannot bear the burden of continuing to care for the child's precarious life. Indeed, the term "orphan," precisely because it is so rhetorically powerful, acts as a legal fiction that obscures the material reasons why so many children in regions throughout the world—particularly those facing a U.S. military and/or missionary presence—are socially orphaned or made available for adoption in the first place. In countries such as Korea, the "production of the legal orphan" involves removing the orphan from the family registry, placing her into an orphan registry, and stripping her of Korean citizenship. Eleana Kim writes that through "this disembedding of the child from a normative kinship structure and its legal reinscription as a peculiar and exceptional state subject," the orphan "becomes a person with the barest of social identities, and in the context of Korean cultural norms, she lacks the basic requirements of social personhood—namely, family lineage and genealogical history."²⁹ Therefore, we can say that the legal production of the orphan renders her socially dead, and her formal adoption into the United States—which itself engenders more irreconcilable contradictions and losses—does not necessarily constitute or lead to a complete reversal of this social death.

Moreover, as Christine Ward Gailey notes, through this legal sleight of hand, birth parents also become "socially dead" or rendered invisible and nonexistent.³⁰ While Gailey thus registers social death at the level of recognition, especially in terms of the law, I would also stress that this necessary social death of the birth parents also functions to cover over—even as it is intricately linked to—the material conditions of possibility for the making of the "social orphan" and transracial adoptee. That is, the confluence of forces that makes it disproportionately difficult for racialized birth mothers to exercise the right to keep or *parent* their children and to then give up their children to strangers (as opposed to their extended kin or friends) itself constitutes a social death for such mothers. These forces include, but are not limited to, the multiple dislocations related to imperialism, war, poverty, sexual and gendered violence, efforts at ultra-rapid modernization, racism, sexism, and disruption of local social networks, resources, and institutions. Today, such imperialist violences and uneven global economies continue to produce a "supply" of children, especially female babies of color, for "consumption" by the West and privileged classes worldwide, thus constituting a biopolitical regime of global proportions. Within this context, Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin argue for an expanded definition of reproductive justice, one that goes beyond issues relating to abortion, contraception, and sterilization. They write, "We must work to create and sustain a world in

which low-income women of color do not have to send away their children so that the family that remains bequeaths power to some mothers but not to others . . . It is critical . . . that a real transnational feminist solidarity be created, one that leads women to fight for each others' most basic human rights to parent their own children and that rejects transactions that pit (birth) mother against (adoptive) mother."³¹ Indeed, the forces that compelled Deann's birth mother in 1960s Korea to give up her daughter for adoption are intimately linked to the forces that compel an African American mother in twenty-first-century America to surrender her child to the "protective" services of the government. And these forces are in turn also linked to the historical reification, emulation, protection, and rewarding of (white) middle-class motherhood.

I point to the social death of racialized and poor birth mothers, then, not to privilege or reify biological kinship, nor to argue that all mothers should (or should want to) parent their children. Rather, I am analyzing a biopolitical regime that disproportionately works against the desires and abilities of birth mothers who *do* wish to parent their children, or *would* wish to do so if their material circumstances were different. This call for transnational reproductive justice is particularly urgent in the contemporary context of greater numbers of babies being, as reported in a November/December 2008 *Foreign Policy* article, "systematically bought, coerced, and stolen away from their birth families." Indeed, "Westerners have been sold the myth of a world orphan crisis . . . [but] many of the infants and toddlers being adopted by Western parents today are not orphans at all. . . . 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." Titled "The Lie We Love," the article goes on to report how astoundingly easy it is to "manufacture an orphan," to produce "'paper orphans' for lucrative export" by separating children from vulnerable birth mothers who are often "poor, young, unmarried, divorced, or otherwise lacking family protection."³²

First Person Plural at once works against and reveals the social death of the birth mother. The film gives visibility to the figure of the birth mother, whom we see when Deann returns to Korea to meet her birth family.³³ If we consider how Deann's birth mother has been rendered "socially dead" through the mechanics of erasure and invisibility, and the legal severing of her natal ties to her daughter, her appearance in the film and Deann's reclaiming of her work against this social death. If, however, we also see her social death as constituted by the material conditions, geopolitical mandates, and biopolitical regimes that make it insurmountably difficult for her to parent her child, her visibility

and voice in the film function to explain, critically unpack, and give embodied form to such social death. She acknowledges her natal alienation from her daughter, explaining to Deann that although she is Deann's mother, she only gave birth to her. Indeed, Deann's birth mother's emotional pain and regret are visceral and searing. She explains, "If she [Deann] had lived with me, she wouldn't have been educated. She would have just suffered. At that time, we were very poor. We had to send her to be educated and to have a worthwhile life. Instead she is filled with endless heartache. So my own heart aches."

Liem's personal and historical reckoning in *First Person Plural* thus also offers a critical genealogy of the gendered international division of labor and the commodification of racialized and gendered Third World bodies. Increasingly, Third World women and women of color (even in so-called developed economies such as South Korea) are not only forced to provide productive labor, but as birth mothers living in countries that can make it extremely difficult for them to parent their children, they are also providing crucial reproductive labor (literally, in this case) to First World nations. This is not to reify the dichotomy between First and Third Worlds or to posit them as internally homogenous, undifferentiated sites. Rather, I am indexing relative levels of geopolitical, economic, and racial power, which have historically condensed and congealed in the United States and (Western) Europe. Within this context, we can speak of a transnational politics of motherhood and care that disrupts normative economies and taken-for-granted familial arrangements. We can speak not only of birth mothers who are compelled to give up their children, but also, for example, of great numbers of Filipinas, many with children, who must go far overseas to places such as the Middle East to work as domestics and nannies. In this case, mothers do not formally give up their children, but must in effect give up their right to parent or raise them directly because they need to seek employment caring for and raising other people's children, precisely so that the remittances they send home will allow them to "keep" their children (alive). *First Person Plural* enables us to connect these contemporary arrangements of labor and care to one another, and to the longer historical genealogies out of which they arise. The figure of the birth mother, hitherto largely absent in adoption discourses, is given voice in the film, and the reproductive labor that she provided back in the 1950s is linked to the ideological labor provided by her daughter, the transracial adoptee. In the United States, the transracial adoptee provides the ideological labor of reproducing the social relations of the white heteronormative bourgeois nuclear family ideal, while the South Korean government has now legally incorporated adoptees into the nation's "global family" and increasingly showcased them as

privileged overseas Koreans who link Korea to global capitalism.³⁴ However, Liem attempts to resist such a positioning and appropriation, and thus reveals the repressed gendered racial excesses and cold war imperialist histories upon which they depend. While *First Person Plural* thus displays the formation of a “new geography of kinship” and the subsequent disidentification with that kinship, I turn now to *Daughter from Danang*, a film that shows how a newly reconfigured form of kinship through transracial adoption might be foreclosed altogether.

The Return of the “Gift Child”: The Vietnam War and *Daughter from Danang*

On April 2, 1975, President Ford announced that \$2 million would be directed from the Special Foreign Aid Children’s Fund to fly 2,000 South Vietnamese orphans as soon as possible to the United States for adoption by American families. Many critiqued what came to be called “Operation Babylift” as one last desperate publicity ploy or photo opportunity to gain sympathy and thus more funding for the war. Indeed, Ford flew from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco to meet one of the planes from Vietnam, and was photographed carrying a baby off the plane. Tragically, the first U.S. government plane, a cargo plane, flying the babies out of Saigon crashed within minutes after take-off due to equipment malfunction, killing 134 of the 330 on board.³⁵ In the ensuing four weeks, more than 2,000 children boarded nineteen flights bound mostly for the United States, but also for Europe and Australia. It was later discovered that many of the children were not orphans at all, and about 200 were later reclaimed by their Vietnamese families who had subsequently immigrated to the United States. Operation Babylift represents, then, at once a special campaign in the Vietnam War, a militarized case of transnational adoption, a tragic plane crash, and to some, a mass kidnapping of Vietnamese babies by the U.S. government—what could be called “Operation Babysteal.” It provokes the mantra: “First you destroy our country, and then you rescue our children.”³⁶ While Operation Babylift was very much a public or *overt* campaign in the closing days of the Vietnam War, such a cold war “operation” involving the coordinated transfer of children finds a *covert* antecedent in the CIA-backed “Operation Peter Pan,” a clandestine scheme through which 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children were brought to Miami between 1960 and 1962. Cuban parents were pressured to send their children through tactics such as CIA-sponsored propaganda that the new Cuban revolutionary government would strip parents of their parental rights and “nationalize” Cuba’s children.

Horrific rumors led parents to believe that their children would be sent to the Soviet Union for indoctrination or harsh labor, or even that they would be eaten! As cold war tensions heightened between the United States and Cuba, these parents and children could not be reunited. Many of the children, placed in long-term foster care and orphanages throughout the United States, spent their childhood “as miniature icons of anticommunism, appearing at American Legions and Catholic Church functions, for example, to narrate their story as an anti-Castro parable.”³⁷ Forty years later, one of these “Peter Pan” children, Republican Mel Martinez of Florida, became a U.S. senator, and, not surprisingly, used his story of the “escape from communism” to link the cold war to the “War on Terror” in Iraq and Afghanistan.

By focusing on “Operation Babylift,” the critically acclaimed documentary *Daughter from Danang* offers an unsettling hermeneutic for interpreting America’s war in Vietnam.³⁸ We meet Heidi Bub (née Mai Thi Hiep), a Babylift orphan who returns to Vietnam to reunite with her birth mother. While the film’s directors Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco have been rightly critiqued by Gregory Paul Choy and Catherine Ceniza Choy for turning what could have been a critical collective history of the “political, social, and economic contexts of international adoption” into “an individual West-meets-East story of culture clash,” and for compromising Heidi’s “integrity” in the process, my analysis reads against the grain of the film’s trope of “culture clash” as a problem of individual naiveté or selfishness.³⁹ Rather, I argue that the irreconcilable collisions (which cannot be reduced to “culture clash”) and limits of knowledge (which cannot be reduced to “naiveté”) in the film symptomize the disparate geopolitical and racial economies and terrains traversed by Heidi and her Vietnamese birth mother, Mai Thi Kim. While Heidi’s experience is singular, and while the film attempts to frame her story, through the reigning trope of “culture clash,” as a privatized family melodrama, it also reveals how her adoption is part of a longer history of collective imperial violence that refuses to be assimilated within or sutured to contemporary discourses of “healing” and reconciliation in the prolonged aftermath of America’s war in Vietnam.

Daughter from Danang begins with a layered montage that situates Mai Thi Kim’s difficult decision to give up her daughter, and Heidi’s vivid memories of her separation from her mother, within the context of the Vietnam War. The voices and images of mother and daughter are intertwined with documentary footage of the war and specifically of Operation Babylift. What is soon revealed is that Operation Babylift was not solely or necessarily a humanitarian mission representing a departure from an otherwise bloody, imperialist war,

but rather a convergence of a variety of racialized and militarized imperialisms driving America's (and Europe's) multiple campaigns in Vietnam. In giving visibility to the birth mother, the film intervenes in a discursive and representational field in which birth mothers are often invisible or spectrally visible, since adoptees, after all, are presumed to be "orphans." As with the appearance of Deann Borshay Liem's birth mother in *First Person Plural*, Mai Thi Kim's appearance simultaneously makes visible and contradicts her social death. Instead of appearing at the moment in the film when Heidi meets her in Vietnam, Mai is first featured in the opening sequence, before Heidi appears, and her image lingers beyond Heidi's departure from Vietnam. The film begins with stock footage of the war but then quickly turns to Mai's on-camera testimonial: "There were so many rumors; I was so frightened. If I didn't send my child away both she and I would die." This anticipates and responds to what follows it, Heidi's question: "How could you give up a child like that?" Such a reversal, of posing the answer before the question, is one of many reversals represented in the film. Mai goes on to reveal that after her Vietnamese husband left to join the North Vietnamese Army, she was compelled to work at a U.S. military base, where she met the white American GI with whom she would have an extramarital relationship. He leaves four months after Mai becomes pregnant with Heidi. Struggling to feed her family within the precarious confines of a wartime economy, subsisting in effect as a single mother in the absence of both her Vietnamese husband and Heidi's biological father, and scared by rumors that the Viet Cong would burn mixed-race babies, Mai decides to give her daughter Heidi up to Operation Babylift. Such reversals foreground the figure of the birth mother, and at once explain and attempt to "reverse" her social death.

In these opening scenes, directors Dolgin and Franco critically represent the militarized, imperialist, and gendered racial cold war conditions of possibility for transracial adoption. In what could be described as a sentimental imperialism articulated with a militarized imperialism, we see America's long-standing "secular salvation theology" condensing around the figure of the Vietnamese "war orphan." In one particularly disturbing interlude, we see a white female volunteer social worker, who represents a U.S. adoption agency, pressuring a young Vietnamese mother into giving up her toddler son for adoption. She insists, "You can help me if you know people who are poor, who cannot take care of their children, their mixed children. I would like to help them. I'm not taking them [the babies] away from them [the parents] . . . I'm sending them to good families. Tell them, because I can take their children and send them to America and it's better for everyone . . . Can I take him, can I take him [to

the] United States?” When the Vietnamese mother responds in the negative, the volunteer worker says, “Oh . . . you think, you think about it because he saw me take other boy, other boy very happy, very happy.” Ultimately, the Vietnamese mother relents, and is told that she has done a “good thing” for her son, and should be “proud.” Like many other Vietnamese mothers, she relented without necessarily signing official documents, and only after being told that the Americans would come back and that her baby would be returned to her. Indeed, as recounted in the film by Tom Miller, an American attorney, the U.S. government never had a complete list of the children, even as the children were literally being “dumped” on the plane. Tom and his wife, Tran Tuong Nhu, a Vietnamese American journalist who helps Heidi find her family in Vietnam and accompanies her there, recall how they met one of the Babylift planes in San Francisco and heard many of the children talking about their families. Tom immediately notified the adoption agencies and the U.S. government that many of the babies were not in fact orphans. He was met with “zero response,” because as he explains, Vietnam had become the site of an adoption “industry” for American adoptive parents wishing to adopt “cute” Vietnamese children from families who had been “induced” to give them up. Indeed, as with Deann Borshay Liem’s adoptive father’s home videos, in the footage of the children’s arrival in the United States, there cannot be a wider disjuncture between the tearful, stricken, and frightened expressions on the Vietnamese children’s faces and the smiling, elated, and joyful expressions on the faces of the white American social workers and adoptive parents.

One of these frightened, tearful faces belonged to Heidi Bub. Born to a white American GI father (whom she never meets or knows) and a Vietnamese mother in 1968, Heidi was airlifted out of Vietnam in April 1975 as a part of Operation Babylift and adopted by a single white American woman at age seven. Like Deann in Fremont, California, she undergoes a process of rapid assimilation in Pulaski, Tennessee. In the film, Heidi comments that her adoptive mother, Ann, tried to make her as “American as possible,” while a Girl Scout leader and family friend recall respectively that they “made a southerner out of her real quick as far as that goes,” and she became “strictly all American.” And just as Deann’s Korean past was erased, Heidi’s Vietnamese side is kept hidden. Unlike Deann, however, because Heidi is mixed-race, she is able to pass as white American. The family friend observes that she was “like an American with a suntan,” “not much Oriental in her.” Indeed, her adoptive mother tells her not to tell anyone that she is Vietnamese, and chooses a fictive birthplace, Columbia, South Carolina, for her. However, Heidi’s attempt at passing, by all accounts successful, is as much an effort to “Americanize” or

assimilate as it is to evade the racism of Pulaski, Tennessee, a southern town where the Ku Klux Klan originated.

Heidi's experience disrupts the presumed teleology from orphan to adoptee to the formation of "new geographies of kinship." The summer after her sophomore year in college she has a falling out with her adoptive mother, one that ends their relationship altogether. Heidi explains that as she started dating more, Ann's anger grew: "I was going to be all of hers or none at all." As with *First Person Plural*, we see the logics of possession and ownership. Disowned by her adoptive mother, and bereft of unconditional parental love, Heidi decides to find her Vietnamese mother. She expects that a reunion will be "so healing" for both of them, "make all bad memories go away," and make "all those lost years not matter." She successfully locates her birth mother with the help of Tran Tuong Nhu, and makes a trip to Vietnam (with Tran, who acts as a translator) to be reunited with her.

Ann's severing of her kinship ties with Heidi reverses the dominant U.S. narrative, where adoption is figured as an act of salvation in which the adoptive parents "save" the orphan child from a life of misery and suffering. This reversal becomes even more pronounced when, soon after the reunion, Heidi rejects the role of savior to her birth mother and siblings. Mai explains that the daughter who went away prospered, while the one who stayed behind, Heidi's older sister, leads a miserable life. She asks Heidi to help out her sister. Heidi does give her some money, but is "insulted" when she is asked for more, and explains, "I don't want them to put me on the pedestal and say, you know, this is the one that's going to save us, [be]cause I didn't come here to be anybody's salvation. I came here to be reunited." Yet as the film itself explains through the voice of Tran, it is common knowledge in Vietnam that the overseas relative is "the benefactor . . . who's going to save the family . . . [be the] life line." However, in Heidi's case, she is a specific kind of relative, a child who was given up for adoption, and her situation complicates this literal economy of relations. So when asked by her brother if she could take their mother to the United States and sponsor her immigration, or support her with a monthly stipend, Heidi breaks down emotionally. Visibly upset as well, her mother explains that they don't speak the same language, "so it's not clear. What does she [Heidi] know about the Vietnamese notion of love and emotion? . . . She doesn't understand it . . . Poor thing, she sees me and thinks I'm asking for money. And all I know is how much I love her." Her Vietnamese family's poverty and their expectations of Heidi, someone who describes herself as "110 percent Americanized," become too much to bear. Heidi's "110 percent" Americanization is significantly colored by what Fiona

I. B. Ngô calls “militarized orientalisms” in her analysis of the film. Militarized orientalisms range from Heidi’s imaginings of Asian women (particularly her birth mother) as “soft-spoken, kind, loving, caring,” to misgivings about her own birth being the result of an extramarital affair on the part of her birth mother.⁴⁰

Daughter from Danang makes visible not only the reversal of the salvation narrative, but complicates the notion that the adopted child is a “freely given gift.” In this gift exchange, it is presumed that a selfless mother freely gives her child away in order to provide it a better life. But as Barbara Yngesson observes, the discourse of freedom in the concept of the adopted child as gift elides the “enchainments of adoptive kinship.” That is, “imagining placement [of the child] to be a consequence of the voluntarism by a birth mother or of ‘choice’ by prospective adoptive parents obscure[s] the dependencies and inequalities that compel some of us to give birth to and give up our children, while constituting others as ‘free’ to adopt them . . . However freestanding the child is ‘made’ by adoption law, he or she can *never* be free of the ‘implicate field of persons’ in which he or she was constituted as legally adoptable.”⁴¹ In the film, Mai’s “freedom” in giving up her daughter was radically circumscribed by the exigencies of the Vietnam War. The “gift child” she gives to Heidi’s American adoptive mother is in a sense “returned” when Heidi is effectively disowned by this mother. The gift of a better life that Mai gives Heidi by giving her up does not free Heidi, but ultimately enchains her to her Vietnamese relatives when they expect her to repay them by sponsoring Mai’s immigration to the United States or by supplying a “monthly stipend.” The economic and geopolitical inequalities that compelled Mai to give up Heidi continue to enchain their (newfound) relationship. These complex entanglements become too suffocating and heavy for Heidi to bear.

In displaying this reunion gone awry, and highlighting the differences between Heidi and her Vietnamese family, *Daughter from Danang* is on one level a melodramatic “culture clash” narrative. As Choy and Choy argue, although the film challenges “the popular conceptualization of this phenomenon as primarily humanitarian rescue and colorblind love, these critical interventions become lost as the film continues.”⁴² The film devolves into an individuated culture clash narrative that ultimately overshadows the critical interventions and possibilities suggested by the opening scenes. Indeed, both Heidi and Mai are cast in a rather unsympathetic light. Heidi is framed as a typically clueless “ugly American” figure and shown in ways that circumscribe her agency. Mai can appear to be disingenuous, and as some might see it, instrumental or manipulative in her newfound relationship with Heidi. She is in fact asking Heidi

for money, but insists that all she knows is how much she loves her. Moreover, she asks for money from a daughter she gave up, and upon this daughter's very first trip of reunion back to Vietnam. While some might wonder how Heidi could have been so ignorant as to be surprised and offended by the request, others might similarly wonder, given the fraught circumstances, how Mai and the rest of the family would even "dare" to make such requests in the first place. By interrogating the "not-so-innocent politics of [documentary] filmmaking," Choy and Choy thus contend that the filmmakers, despite their best intentions, "inadvertently perpetuate a key aspect of the violence of war—specifically, the objectification, infantilization, and dehumanization of Asian adoptees in the United States—through the film."⁴³

What interests me about the film, however, is that there are moments that exceed its generic containment as a West-meets-East story of "culture clash." This reading against the grain is not an effort to recuperate the film or its directors, but rather an attempt to highlight how the film's very problems, failings, and lost critical interventions reveal the "impossible contradictions" constituted and engendered by transracial adoption. Such impossible contradictions are precisely those that erupt in such vexed and disturbing ways in the film: how to reckon with a perhaps unrecoverable loss, and how to show that reckoning in ways that do not contribute further to the abjection and conjoined social death of the adoptee and the birth mother. Instead of faulting Heidi for not being able to handle her family's request for money, I would like to ask why the request was made in the first place. Because of Vietnam's relative lack of economic and political power vis-à-vis the United States, Mai's love for and relationship to her daughter are necessarily overdetermined by material and ideological exigencies. This overdetermination was set into place long before Heidi made her trip back to Vietnam. Indeed, it is the very reason why Heidi had to leave Vietnam in the first place. That is, Mai had to give up Heidi because of material exigencies, the violence of war, and because Heidi is the product of an interracial and extramarital affair. The persistence of those exigencies mediates and ultimately ruptures their reunion. Heidi and her mother are severed from one another and remain so because of America's imperial and economic dominance over Vietnam (despite Vietnam's formal war victory), as well as the racial taxonomies and conventions governing both nations. Rather than solely representing a case of "culture clash," what *Daughter from Danang* makes visible, then, is also a clash of uneven geopolitical hierarchies, economies, and power. It is this clash that so discombobulates Heidi, and her psychic economy—her acute longing for "unconditional love," healing, and reconnection with lost origins—cannot make room for her

mother's literal "Third World" economy precisely because her psychic losses are so excessive. Moreover, these psychic losses are themselves conditioned by Heidi's geographically and temporally specific ideology, indeed her romance, of what constitutes the desired mother-daughter relations and her acute need for such relations in the wake of her abuse and disownment by her adoptive mother. *Daughter from Danang* therefore exposes the painful crossings of "new geographies of kinship," and the multiple losses engendered when the fictions and fantasies through which the "adoption triad" of birth mothers, adoptive mothers, and adopted daughters manage and imagine their own subjectivities, lives, and relationships with each other refuse to be reconciled.

Cultural works such as *Daughter from Danang* and *First Person Plural* are thus potent sites where the fraught politics and affects of transracial adoption are not resolved, but are complexly displayed as profound losses that cannot be regained and as multiple violences that cannot be mended. These losses and violences, and the unfulfilled yearning to overturn them, mark America's cold war in Asia as an imperialist and gendered racial project. In the contemporary moment, as we see in ever starker ways, some lives are viewed as valuable while others are deemed "redundant" or disposable. The high U.S. "demand" for babies of color from abroad would seem to address and challenge such inequalities. Yet the peculiar overvaluing and fetishizing of transnational, transracial adoptees, taking place within the context of a relative paucity of white babies available for domestic adoption, lead us to ask how such adoptees are positioned within, and what kinds of labor they provide for, the white heteronormative bourgeois nuclear family ideal. Moreover, as I have suggested, it is precisely in and through the parallel social death of birth mothers that the conditions of possibility for transracial adoption materialize. By making this visible, these films can help us to imagine and form alternative kinships, those that resist the seductions of normative family ideals and do not exacerbate or depend upon the differential valuing, protection, and "making possible" of some lives over others.

Notes

1. Toby Alice Volkman, "Introduction: New Geographies of Kinship," in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Volkman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–22.
2. Eleana Kim notes that the number of transnational adoptees in the United States has "nearly doubled from a mean annual rate of approximately 16,000 children in the 1980s to nearly 32,000 in 1998 . . . and these numbers have no doubt increased in the past several years." The United States has been

- the primary “receiving” country throughout the history of transnational adoption, and the number of U.S. adoptions from foreign countries has exceeded 20,000 per year since 2001. See Kim, “Our Adoptee, Our Alien: Transnational Adoptees as Specters of Foreignness and Family in South Korea,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 80.3 (Spring 2007): 495–531; 527.
3. Adoption discourses have typically separated interracial domestic adoptions, labeled *transracial*, from international or intercountry adoptions, labeled *transnational*. This obscures the extent to which most transnational adoptions, particularly from Asia, have historically also been transracial. See Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, “Introduction,” in *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, ed. Trenka, Oparah, and Shin, 1–15 (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 3, 5. I have thus chosen to use the term *transracial* in most instances, rather than *transnational*, to emphasize the significance of race. When I do use *transnational*, I do so to reference transnational adoption more broadly as a practice that is mostly but not exclusively transracial.
 4. After World War II, Americans began adopting European war orphans, but it was the aftermath of the Korean War that inaugurated transnational adoption as a continuous, institutionalized practice. Since then, the “sending” countries have tended to be the sites of America’s cold war military operations and covert actions, particularly in Asia and Latin America. According to Eleana Kim, the history of adoption from South Korea spans five decades, which makes it “the country with the longest continuous foreign adoption program in the world.” Since 1954, over 200,000 children have been adopted from South Korea, including 150,000 sent to the United States and the remaining to Europe and, more recently, Australia. In the 1980s and early 1990s, this constituted over half of all international adoptions in the United States. Until 1991, South Korea sent the largest number of adoptees to the United States and in 2000, it ranked third after China and Russia (with more than 5,000 adoptions from these countries), and in 2002, it ranked fourth after China, Russia, and Guatemala. Since the early 1990s, particularly in the wake of negative media attention during the 1988 summer Olympics in Seoul that characterized South Korea as an “orphan-exporting-nation,” Korean adoptions have been tightly regulated, numbering about 2,000 per year. More recently, as reported in an October 9, 2008, *New York Times* article, the South Korean government has made concerted efforts to encourage local adoptions by offering incentives such as monthly allowances and greater health benefits. In 2007, for the first time, the number of babies adopted locally by South Koreans (1,388) exceeded the number adopted transnationally (1,264), and the government has established a goal of eliminating foreign adoptions altogether by 2012. See Kim, “Wedding Citizenship to Culture: Korean Adoptees and the Global Family of Korea,” in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, 58–59, and “Our Adoptee, Our Alien”; and Norimitsu Onishi, “Korea Aims to End Stigma of Adoption and Stop ‘Exporting’ Babies,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2008.
 5. *First Person Plural*, directed by Deann Borshay Liem (San Francisco: National Asian American Telecommunications Association, 2000), 56 minutes; and *Daughter from Danang*, directed by Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco (distributed by PBS Home Video, a copresentation of ITVS and NAATA with *American Experience*, WGBH Boston, 2002), 81 minutes.
 6. This is especially the case with more recent adoptions of Chinese girls in the wake of China’s one-child policy, in effect since 1980. Almost all transnationally adopted Chinese babies are abandoned girls.
 7. I borrow this term, “social death,” from Orlando Patterson’s classic analysis, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Patterson argues that slaves are “socially dead” because of their natal alienation, or “loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations,” as well as “the important nuance of a loss of native status,” of having been born in a particular time and place to a particular people. Natal alienation severs the slave from belonging to, or having rights within, any formally recognized community or sociality. See *Slavery and Social Death*, 7. In using this term, I am not, of course, arguing that transracial adoptees and birth mothers are slaves. Rather, I am building upon extensions of Patterson’s work that take up “social death” to analyze the persistence of gendered racial domination, violence, and the production of degrees of social nonpersonhood within the context of formal emancipation, freedom, or sovereignty. That is, I am pointing to the ways in which natal alienation and gendered racial governmentalities outside the space of formal slavery persist in creating a variety of “social deaths” for subjugated groups.
 8. For a discussion of how this operates specifically in Korea, see Kim, “Our Adoptee, Our Alien.”
 9. For a discussion of such an expanded notion of reproductive justice, see Trenka, Oparah, and Shin, *Outsiders Within*, 13.
 10. In 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was enacted to restore tribal jurisdiction over the adoption of Native American children. See Pauline Turner Strong, “To Forget Their Tongue, Their

- Name, and Their Whole Relation: Captivity, Extra-Tribal Adoption, and the Indian Child Welfare Act," in *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*, ed. Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, 468–93 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 469, 471.
11. Sara K. Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3, 17, 19, 21.
 12. The "domino theory" was explicitly articulated and explained by President Eisenhower in an April 1954 news conference to justify increasing American involvement in Southeast Asia. Previously, Truman had used the same logics in his famous 1947 Truman Doctrine speech calling for American interventions to contain communism in Greece and Turkey.
 13. See Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 161.
 14. W. W. Rostow, in collaboration with Richard W. Hatch, *An American Policy in Asia* (Cambridge, MA and New York: M.I.T. Press and John Wiley & Sons, 1955), 5.
 15. *Ibid.*, 11.
 16. Laura Briggs, "Mother, Child, Race, Nation: The Visual Iconography of Rescue and the Politics of Transnational and Transracial Adoption," *Gender & History* 15.2 (2003): 179–200.
 17. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 152.
 18. *Ibid.*, 153, 158.
 19. See Briggs, "Mother, Child, Race, Nation," 182.
 20. David L. Eng uses "privileged" to describe the transnational adoption of Asian babies as a particular kind of immigration. See his "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," *Social Text* 21.3 (Fall 2003): 1–37; 7.
 21. For analyses of this commodity logic implicated in transnational adoption, see Volkman, *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*; Barbara Yngvesson, "Placing the 'Gift Child' in Transnational Adoption," *Law & Society Review* 36.2 (2002): 227–56; and Kim Park Nelson, "Shopping for Children in the International Marketplace," in *Outsiders Within*, 89–104.
 22. Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 21.
 23. For an analysis of how Deann fulfills this labor, see Eng, "Transnational Adoption."
 24. Kim estimates that the female to male ratio of Korean adoptees was 2 to 1 until the mid-1990s, by which point single motherhood replaced poverty as the main reason for child relinquishments. This, combined with a mirroring by Korean adopters of the Western preference for girls, and with the priority given to domestic Korean adopters, has led to more boys than girls being placed overseas since the mid-1990s. The gender ratio is different for Chinese adoptions, in which almost all children are girls. See Kim, "Our Adoptee, Our Alien," 525.
 25. Dorothy Roberts, "Adoption Myths and Racial Realities in the United States," in *Outsiders Within*, 49–56.
 26. Trenka, Oparah, and Shin, *Outsiders Within*, 15.
 27. For a discussion of the role of the state in "producing the physically abandoned child" (236), see Yngvesson, "Placing the 'Gift Child.'"
 28. Tobias Hübinette, "From Orphan Trains to Babylifts: Colonial Trafficking, Empire Building, and Social Engineering," in *Outsiders Within*, ed. Trenka, Oparah, and Shin, 139–49.
 29. Kim, "Our Adoptee, Our Alien," 521.
 30. Christine Ward Gailey, "Race, Class, and Gender in Intercountry Adoption in the USA," in *Intercountry Adoption: Developments, Trends, and Perspectives*, ed. Peter Selman (London: British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, 2000), 305.
 31. Trenka, Oparah, and Shin, *Outsiders Within*, 13.
 32. E. J. Graff, "The Lie We Love," *Foreign Policy*, November/December 2008, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4508=1
 33. Deann's birth mother's full name is not revealed in the film.
 34. For a discussion of this incorporation, see Kim's articles.
 35. A series of lawsuits was later filed against Lockheed, the manufacturer of the C-5A plane that crashed, and the U.S. government, resulting in settlements of more than \$36.7 million paid to 52 survivors living in the United States and 78 living abroad.
 36. Karen Dubinsky, "Babies Without Borders: Rescue, Kidnap, and the Symbolic Child," *Journal of Women's History* 19.1 (2007): 142–50; 147.

37. Ibid., 143, 146.
38. Since its 2002 release, the film has garnered eight film festival awards and honors, received an Academy Award nomination for best documentary feature, and aired on PBS's program *American Experience*. See the film's official Web site, <http://daughterfromdanang.com/>, and the extensive PBS educational Web site, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/daughter/>.
39. Gregory Paul Choy and Catherine Ceniza Choy, "What Lies Beneath: Reframing *Daughter from Danang*," in *Outsiders Within*, 222–23.
40. Fiona I. B. Ngô, "A Chameleon's Fate: Transnational Mixed-Race Vietnamese Identities," *Amerasia Journal* 31.2 (2005): 51–62; 57.
41. Yngvesson, "Placing the 'Gift Child,'" 230.
42. Choy and Choy, "What Lies Beneath," 222.
43. Ibid., 225, 223.