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*Who is Park Joo Young?*, A Documentary Film

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Asian American Studies

by

Elizabeth Min-Sook Kopacz

2014

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2014

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Who is Park Joo Young?

by

Elizabeth Min-Sook Kopacz

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Renee Tajima-Peña, Committee Chair

### ABSTRACT:

*Who is Park Joo Young?* is a documentary project that seeks to explore how Korean adoptee narratives of kinship and belonging become circulated, cohered, and mobilized. As the central figure, Robyn Shultz's personal journey becomes the vehicle by which to consider adoptee desires for reconciliation of ruptures born out of fraught U.S.-Korean geopolitical contexts and desires for current promises of science and genetic technologies. The film is also invested in a critical foregrounding and investigation of the visualization of Korean adoptee narratives as constructions that are deployed to fulfill ontological, familial, national, and transnational longings.

The thesis of Elizabeth Min-Sook Kopacz is approved.

Victor Bascara

Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns

Renee Tajima-Peña, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

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## I. Project Summary

Adoptee-created documentary work has become part of a larger epistemological project that distinctly contributes to how adoptee subjecthood is constructed, known, and negotiated. This project is implicitly guided by that framework, facilitated through the perspective of Korean American adoptee Robyn Shultz. *Who is Park Joo Young?* is invested in not only foregrounding the content of her story, but also, more importantly, in exploring and centralizing its construction. That is, it is a significant goal to consider how the construction of adoptee as subject and the methodological construction of documentary as narrative can reflect investment in a particular type of adoptee representation in the U.S. imaginary.

Materially, *Who is Park Joo Young?* considers the moments of dissidence and tension that characterize Robyn's personal quest for identity, family, and belonging. It situates the messiness that arises around her birth search, reunion, genetic test-taking, and results-processing as central points of departure. Through her narrative, the idealized and imagined Korean birth family reunion becomes a catalyst towards conceptualizing how definitions of kinship and home are redeployed. The film also explores Robyn's investment in biology, uncovering this pursuit for answers as a manifestation of the broader conflicts and consequences that arise in the wake of the transnational Korean adoption system. While this project is situated around Robyn's experience, it also employs news footage, interviews with family, and home movies to flesh out different circulating, and potentially conflicting, narratives.

The film ultimately seeks to intervene in discourses around Korean transnational, transracial adoption and science and technology, while also intersecting with questions that arise through Korean adoptee efforts to delineate kinship, utilize genetic testing, and fulfill narratives

of reunification. As these interests converge, it becomes necessary to re-center and reexamine the geopolitical conditions that produced the transnational adoption system. Such a reexamination ultimately uncovers and re-situates U.S. involvement as both knowable and prolonged.

As a primary optic, Robyn's story offers a compelling starting point to explore the painful ruptures of identity, narrative, and kinship network that emerge out of Korean adoptee search for belonging and family. Robyn's narrative demonstrates how the inclusion of genetic science and technology in the birth search and reunion process deepens basic questions in the nature and nurture binary. Although she primarily mediates her desire through the promises of science, technology, and genetics, her ultimate inability to achieve full reconciliation through these methods quickly becomes clear. Robyn's efforts to enact visibility and agency, especially in narratives of self and kinship, naturalize the place of biology through her singularly focused conceptualization and centralization of biological certainty and congruity. This demonstrates how the role of genetic testing in reunion narratives works to viscerally uncover state violence and recast biology as a discordant way to organize the kinship produced through global structural inequity. Exploring Robyn's investments in particular types of reconciliation have also benefited from an analysis of comparative narratives that emerge out of other marginalized and abject subjectivities. In particular, the discourses surrounding the construction of the black body and desire for reparation have been generative analytics for understanding the similarities for Korean adoptees. These factors directly lead to the following guiding questions: What does genetic testing do to the concept of kinship when such family formations are already inherently fraught by geopolitical ties to empire? More specifically, how does foregrounding the geopolitics of the

Korean War and its relation to US empire affect the way Korean adoptees understand and construct family? How do adoptees navigate these implications in the affective sphere of their everyday lives?

## **II. Project Need**

### ***Why is this Issue Important?: History, Implications, and Discursive Boundaries of Adoption Scholarship***

In order to understand how efforts for familial and national reconciliation and the construction of adoptee subjecthood figure into adoptee narratives, it is essential to theoretically, temporally, and spatially place Korean transnational adoption discourse in a larger global and geopolitical context. The history of adoption scholarship exhibits the boundaries of a larger epistemological project, tangibly tracing shifts in knowledge production. The narrative of Korean adoption serves as much a product of who creates the scholarship as its actual conditions of possibility.

As a result of the establishment and institutionalization of the Korean transnational adoption system in the U.S. imaginary, there has been a subsequent and growing body of scholarship that critically examines the emergence of adoptees in relation to kinship and identity formation. Much of the early work was produced by psychologists and social workers looking to analyze the assimilation of the adoptee within the newly formed family.<sup>1</sup> This research is primarily based on the lives and experiences of children, yet filtered through the conceptions and descriptions of their adoptive parents. Although the relevance and utility of such scholarship

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Bergquist, Kathleen Ja Sook, M. Elizabeth Vonk, Dong Soo Kim, and Marvin D. Feit, eds., *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice*. New York: Haworth P, 2007. 341-384. This work seeks to contextualize transnational, transracial Korean adoption by building an interdisciplinary understanding of the field. It also provides a detailed bibliography that chronicles how adoption has been studied, the major themes that have arisen, who has conducted the studies, and the ways in which the discourse has shifted over the years.

aided the smooth assimilation of adopted children and charted the “success” of the transracially formed family, it also limited critical engagement with the multiple factors contributing to the prolonged system, worked to inform future policy, and perpetuated hierarchical power dynamics. The “experts” conducting the studies often dominated scholarship with a directive pedagogy by speaking *for* and *about* adoptees. Their assertions reinforced prevailing ideologies that privileged a nuclear family formation and an altruistic humanitarian ‘salvation’ of unwanted and needy Third World children. White savior fantasies also inhibited a grounded understanding of the implications behind adopting children of color. Soojin Pate speaks to these failures of quantitative studies to address the manifold ways that intersections between class, race, gender, nation, and culture affect adoptee identity.<sup>2</sup> Occluding these factors limits an establishment of the systemic and structural marginalization projected onto the adoptee body.

In recent years, there has been a shift towards centering adoptees as scholars, activists, artists, and filmmakers who contribute to a growing collection of adoptee-produced work. Such an increase in the cohort of adoptee cultural producers is an inevitable correlation to the legacy of Korean adoption and its aging population. Their work offers alternative perspectives to the established body of scholarship. Adoptee-centric documentaries that chronicle search, reunion, and *return*, through feelings of confusion, awkwardness, and loss have proliferated since Deann Borshay Liem’s iconic film, *First Person Plural*. It is one of the first adoptee-created cultural productions to achieve widespread circulation and a critical presence that helped to pave the way for alternative narratives.<sup>3</sup> An entire genealogy of adoptee-constructed creative endeavors now

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<sup>2</sup> Soojin Pate, *Genealogies of Korean Adoption: American Empire, Militarization, and Yellow Desire*, diss., U of Minnesota, 2010, (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2010, 3408421) 19.

<sup>3</sup> *First Person Plural*. Dir. Deann Borshay Liem. Mu Films, 2000. The film aired nationally on PBS in 2000. Since then it has gained widespread notice and is one of the most cited Korean adoptee documentaries.

center around such self-motivated searches for family, identity, and belonging. These returns to biology and birth country are often motivated through the ideologies of lack and loss, becoming integrated as a central part of the adoptee ‘*lifecycle*’ and an inherent political effort to establish agency.

Eleana Kim explains the material nature of this lifecycle as one that is moving away from a singular, linear trajectory from sending to receiving country towards “the return” as an expected part of the journey.<sup>4</sup> While contributing factors to this shift can partially be explained by the increasing age and agency of adoptees, they can also be attributed to the emergence of Korea as an industrialized nation. The birth country has both literally and figuratively transformed into a place to which adoptees can return, a circumstance that has ironically been facilitated through the very growth and persistence of the Korean transnational adoption system. The shifting ideology surrounding birth country is aided by a perceived accessibility of Korea that has been supported by new, advanced communication technologies and globally circulated Korean cultural productions. Additionally, by virtue of the social class in which many adoptees are raised, they often have the resources, support, and capability to make the return possible. However, Kim, nor I, wish to suggest that this ‘return’ is a retrogressive and simplistic reclamation of what has been ‘lost’. These analytics instead allow for a nuanced understanding of the ways adoptees are renegotiating relationships with birth family and country.

Adoptee real-life/reel-life return and reconciliation demonstrates the increased space allowed for alternative narratives in a mainstream U.S. imaginary. *Outsiders Within* is another example of shifting representational power. It is one of the first written collections to finally

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<sup>4</sup> Kim, Eleana J. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 13.

bring adoptee scholars, artists, and activists together in one place.<sup>5</sup> Foregrounding the adoptee experience has been an important political tactic in efforts to gain rights, information, and visibility. Scholars have begun to utilize these cultural and academic productions to trace elusive structures of power and inequality in the United States. As Pate establishes, “the literary and cinematic narratives by Korean adoptees present a much more complicated, fraught, painful, and melancholic picture of adoption and identity formation”.<sup>6</sup> Against a celebratory, positivist account, they offer a counternarrative that details how cultural productions can be utilized as an optic to study larger structures of power, especially to distinguish U.S. hegemony.

Pate adds to the scholarship of Jodi Kim, Catherine Ceniza Choy, Eleana Kim, and David Eng, who are all producing work at the forefront of critical adoption studies in an effort to re-situate transnational adoption narratives. Their work is an essential interrogation and examination of how adoptee cultural works reflect past and present projects of US empire. Pate’s call towards a new genealogy of Korean adoption pushes the boundaries of critical adoption studies to center the effects of U.S. geopolitical interests in influencing the subject formation of Korean adoptee.<sup>7</sup> She demonstrates that altering an understanding of the ‘roots’ of Korean transnational adoption allows room to concretely understand its persistence.

*Who is Park Joo Young?* is situated in this especially exciting moment as these changing politics begin to place the role of U.S. militarism and empire-building as the basis by which to

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<sup>5</sup> Trenka, Jane Jeong, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, eds., *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Pate, “Genealogies of Korean Adoption,” 20.

<sup>7</sup> Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 3.

explore the enduring, nuanced figure of the adoptee/orphan.<sup>8</sup> The genealogies of Korean adoption become knowable in new ways through these investments in postcolonial and transnational frameworks. This project hopes to add to existing discourse by utilizing similar analytics to understand the effects of socio-historical context on the emergent and shifting kinship formation of Korean adoptees. Additionally, this particular contemporary moment provides the opportunity to explore how technoscience is being employed to create meaning, to achieve reconciliation, and to both reify and deconstruct kinship networks. Robyn's story demonstrates a consistent, and insistent, return to biology and an inability to effectively delink identity and kinship from it. Her desires, and their material investments, are also entangled in an exploitative framework that relies on the commodification of emotional memory. It is the hope that this project can begin to explore the tenuous relationship that arises from this merging of affective investment and capitalist, consumer logics that become mobilized through new scientific technologies.

Ultimately, emergent scholarship addresses two primary points. First, the shifts within critical adoption studies work to reflect a delineation of the discursive boundaries of both Asian American Studies and American Studies. Attempts to define the adoptee subject also define how fields are shifting and forming around and through it. Second, in so doing, this scholarship also inherently foregrounds a connection between geopolitical ties to the Cold War and the role of genetic testing in conceptualizing family. This renewed focus highlights the material and emotional consequences of family constructions that are created amidst unequal sociopolitical conditions. The presence of these underlying tensions affect adoptee desire for resolution and

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<sup>8</sup> As stated, Jodi Kim, Eleana Kim, and SooJin Pate are on the forefront of this intellectual shift. Pate situates herself in the contexts of U.S. militarism, Cold War Orientalism, and white heteronormative kinship formation and works to concretely understand the figure of the orphan in society.



return. That is, out of an already-present context of colonial violence and expansion of empire, the forces that facilitate transnational adoption also inherently inhibit adoptee endeavors to re-establish national, familial, and ontological wholeness. The ultimate inability for reconciliation is both cyclical and self-perpetuating. In other words, the enduring geopolitical narrative that allows for new conceptions of kinship is one that can simultaneously never be repaired, precisely because of those historical roots.

### ***Why is this Story Needed?: Adoptee Subjecthood, Kinship, and Links to Empire***

The figure of the Korean adoptee often becomes couched in a language that obscures its roots based in complex, intersecting narratives of war, empire, colonialism, militarism, and patriarchy. The construction of a visible, knowable adoptee becomes another manifestation of the way subjecthood is negotiated amidst complex, conflicting geopolitical narratives and epistemological projects. Partially in order to conceal such origins, orphans are socially and legally recast as *adoptees* who can then subsequently be embedded in American social consciousness as helpless recipients of humanitarian aid.<sup>9</sup> This social reinscription is actualized through reproduction into white, heteronormative U.S. families where adoptees are not only accepted into the family, but also become an integral part of it. Soojin Pate's disruption of these dominant narratives works to trace the 'emergences,' rather than the origins, of the adoptee figure amid *early* US military intervention in Korea. Pate contends that the body of the orphan/adoptee emerges in 1945, five years prior to the beginning of the Korean War.<sup>10</sup> This directly contests discourse that places the transnational adoption system as a consequence of the war in both a national and familial imaginary.

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<sup>9</sup> Pate, "Genealogies of Korean Adoption," vi-vii.

<sup>10</sup> Pate, "Genealogies of Korean Adoption," 10.

By defining this material and intellectual project, Pate establishes the legacy of empire within adoptee subject formation. She indexes the inescapable presence of such forces on the individual as also automatically implicated in family formations. As Pate argues for the prolonged legacies of militarism and humanitarianism as essential in the project to embody the adoptee, she simultaneously constitutes their influences on individual and relational efforts. Transnational adoption's existence as an alternative method for family building is naturally preceded by conflicting conceptions about the importance and interplay between biological and social embodiments of kinship. Adoption must fit into a world that is already overdetermined to privilege bio-centric conceptions of family and self. Recently, consumer-based genetic testing has joined the conversation, deepening basic questions about the role of biology in constructing family and selfhood. The deployment of DNA tests within the space of birth family reunions has normalized the way genetic science is being utilized to define kinship. How, then, are social ties affected by the promise of "science"? What desires are being fulfilled through a scientifically-sanctioned return to 'roots' that are lacking within other claims to knowledge?

Adoptee subjecthood becomes paradoxically constructed singularly, yet also always in relation to networks of kinship and always situated around a reorganization of both legal and social citizenship. Their orphan status is usually not based on a complete disconnection from biological ties. Instead, it arises as a form of "social death" in which their subjecthood manifests as "'visa' or 'social orphans' who are legally produced and made available for adoption as

such.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it is because of this social, but not biological, severing that adoptees are prompted to pursue reunion.

What these types of nuanced semantics ultimately demonstrate are the larger systems of power and control that subsume the subject of the adoptee. The enfiguring of the Korean adoptee becomes appropriated by different entities, whether this be the U.S., Korea, or Asian America, to each achieve particular goals. Within a U.S. national discourse, an important part of inscribing meaning on the adoptee body comes from the underlying desires of the U.S. nation-state in perpetuating its own motives while simultaneously espousing progressive or liberal thought. These concepts have been reflected in the work of scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Dennis Childs, who both call attention to the particular ways in which the black body has been inscribed by dominant groups in society.<sup>12</sup> Although their work considers questions around slavery, emancipation, and incarceration, it has been particularly generative in considering a larger conversation about the role of epistemological projects in the historical narrative. As their arguments disrupt the notion that freedom is the desired opposite of slavery and underscore the way in which liberal individualism is just another way to enact dominance under a containing guise, it is a productive point to consider the ways that subjectivities are always already affected by existing structures of power. For the Korean adoptee body, inclusion into the often-white, nuclear family model promotes the idea of a liberal multiculturalism that precludes individually lived experiences of race and racism.

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<sup>11</sup> Kim, Jodi. *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010. 169. Kim originally borrows the concept of ‘social death’ from Orlando Patterson to describe the “social nonpersonhood” that arises under the persistence of “gendered racial domination and violence within the context of formal emancipation, freedom, or sovereignty.”

<sup>12</sup> See Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1997). and Childs, Dennis. *Formations of Neoslavery: The Cultures and Politics of the American Carceral State*. (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley).

These ideas are echoed by Pate, who suggests the concept of Cold War Orientalism to situate the analytic of the family as the primary metaphor for U.S.-Asia relations. This demonstrates one specific way to read the labor enacted by the adoptee body. “Naturalizing the parent-child relationship between white Americans and Korean children through the practice of Korean adoption worked to naturalize and normalize the neocolonial relations between the United States and South Korea.”<sup>13</sup> Eleana Kim contributes to this point by examining discourses around Korean adoptee enfiguring and delineating the adoptees’ role within biopolitical and geopolitical projects. Adoptees become “tranquilizing conventions” deemed necessary to adopt through “sentimentalization and depoliticization... as orphans and pure humanity.”<sup>14</sup> The figure of the adoptee becomes representative of larger, national objectives through the relationships in the family. This role of ambassador ironically shifts as adoptees age, speaking to Korean state initiatives. “As adults in the context of South Korea’s self-conscious globalization drive, [adoptees] are being optimistically revalued as successful, model citizens of their adoptive countries who, it is hoped, will take on roles as cultural ambassadors or civil diplomats between the West and Korea.”<sup>15</sup> These uses of the adoptee body completely negate the material conditions that produced such citizens, aiming to forget that such cultural capital is only possible because of the prolonged transnational adoption system.

It is clear that adoptee enfigurement demonstrates the multiple ways subjecthood is mobilized. The nature of these discourses is dependent upon a formation of knowledge that reinforces, and is reinforced by, the increase of power. These conversations around adoptee

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<sup>13</sup> Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 76.

<sup>15</sup> Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 173.

subjecthood are especially important because representation and agency have been such critical goals of adoptee political action. Shifting representational power back to the subject of the adoptee uncovers disruptions in the role of the adoptee in dominant discourses. The way that adoptees become reproduced in documentaries is a critical way to understand these trends, and as a filmmaker it is my responsibility to understand the power dynamics within my own relationship in constructing Robyn as an adoptee. Documentary, as a visual medium with the power of greater dissemination and reach, necessitates consideration of how adoptees are constructed through the gaze of the camera as a stand in for the gaze of the audience.

### ***From Subject to Story: Korean American Adoptee Narrative***

These particular historical and geopolitical circumstances that initially facilitated the growth of the Korean transnational adoption system and the development of adoptee subjecthood now directly inform the narrative tropes that are connected to it. The construction of the multiple axes of adoptee identity are already “overdetermined by fantasies of return, projections of loss, and desires for reunion... [that as] a fraught process... enables and disables coherent narratives of self and kinship”.<sup>16</sup> These fantasies of birth search and reunion exist as inseparable to the Korean adoptee narrative objective, manifesting in different ways as new technologies emerge. The explicit goal of a return to biology is reflected in the narrative structure of documentaries that depend on the chronological trajectory. The current and prolific trend of utilizing genetic tests offers just one example of the way in which adoptees attempt to find information, cultivate a sense of identity, and find resolution through new technologies.

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<sup>16</sup> Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 172.

Indeed, the normative project of adoption documentaries is centered around the desire for reunion and reconnection with what has been ‘lost’. Yet, this particular type of reconciliation effort is not unique to Korean adoptees. Different diasporic communities are also situated around specific traumas and are created by central narratives that have their own distinct methods of reconciliation. The investments by those affected are often imbued with a particular type of energy that is concretely entangled in an imagined wholeness, idealized homeland, and desired return to biological harmony. Such efforts ultimately become dependent upon the labor of historical memory to achieve emotional and psychic reparation. Yet, as Robyn’s story demonstrates, biological truth, cultural memory, and emotional truth do not always match. What happens when these investments are not aligned? It is useful to briefly compare the investments of other communities in order to delineate the specific intentions produced by the Korean adoptee narrative.

Alondra Nelson and Jeong Won Hwang explore the particular histories relevant for African American root seekers within a larger framework of African roots tourism.<sup>17</sup> Through an examination of African American root seekers’ YouTube reveal videos, they establish the common desire to utilize technology to repair social traumas and reclaim identities, begging the question of why this particular historical context necessitates a certain type of staging and performance of revelation that Korean adoptee traumas do not. The African American experience seems to call back to lingering histories and discourses of the forced removal from land and country. For these root seekers scientific “certainty” of technological approaches in providing answers gives these claims a power that does not take the context and constructedness

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<sup>17</sup> Nelson, Alondra and Jeong Won Hwang, “Roots and Revelation: Genetic Ancestry Testing and the YouTube Generation,” Lisa Nakamura and Peter A Chow-White, eds., *Race After the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2012): 271-290.

of scientific claims into account. The desire for hard answers elides how numbers and facts can be multiply construed to empower differing claims. That is, the hard ‘facts’ upon which these truths are based can be co-opted to achieve different ends. Although the conception of reveal videos as staged performances are meant to reconcile the specific historical trauma of slavery and reconnect with perceived loss, this contemporary reconnection to a lost land and efforts towards reparation elides the database’s spacio-temporal limits. Race is used to link root seekers to specific origins and ostensibly repair “major voids,” yet it ultimately neglects the fact that this connection forgets historical movement of bodies.

Nelson and Hwang ultimately uncover the precarity of investing in commodified forms of memory. Such abstract conceptualizations of loss and grief that become mobilized through consumer projects risk reifying an essentialized conceptualization of Africa as static homeland. These sentiments are echoed in the work of Saidiya Hartman, who questions the work that historical memory performs in its connection to commercialization.<sup>18</sup> Hartman considers the temporality of memory and longing as realized tactics of reconciliation and technologies of commemoration.

The political imperatives around black identity formation mobilized by the commodification of these longings are not as politically relevant in the Korean adoptee community in the same way. For Korean adoptees, the noteworthy individualization of return journey to mythologized homeland is based on a decision that was also choiceless, yet always situated in a humanitarian discourse of ‘for your own good’. The invisibility this engenders in

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<sup>18</sup> Hartman, Saidiya. “The Time of Slavery.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (2002): 757-777.

the adoptee narrative mirrors similar silences around U.S. presence in the Korean War and the project of U.S. empire in perpetuating ideals of democracy and freedom.

From these socio-historical and political contexts, adoptee investments in proving particular ties of kinship cause them to seek these genetic technologies and utilize them to achieve biological harmony. “The difficult and painful searches undertaken by Korean parents and overseas adoptees suggest that desire for kinship knowledge and potential relationships is potentially informed by both Euro-American and Korean ideologies of blood and a belief in its ability to authenticate identity.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the reason why biological ties are so present in the adoptee imaginary is because of the pervasiveness and power of biology within both Euro-American and Korean family constructions. Although shifting desires for adopting have been part of a dynamic adoption discourse over the years, the presence of biology has been constant.

Therefore, the way Korean adoptees have always perceived kinship privileges biology.<sup>20</sup> Finding and trusting “truth” claims in other archives is a limited and ambivalent venture for a number of adoptees, causing new avenues of technological advancement to become the only way to premise and authenticate shared kinship connections. The hard “science” of genetic testing becomes indisputable fact, despite the social components that require consideration.

Looking specifically to Robyn’s story tangibly demonstrates some obvious restrictions to the ability of technology in reconciling social ills. She is an example of the multiple pitfalls and potentialities of DNA testing and it is important to break down and examine how it can be

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<sup>19</sup> Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> See Volkman, Toby Alice, “Seeking Sisters: Twinship and Kinship in an Age of Internet Miracles and DNA Technologies,” Diana Marre and Laura Briggs, eds., *International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children*. New York: New York UP, 2009. 283-301. Volkman explores the tension that emerges between genetics and biology between roots and identity, especially as manifested within the search for blood kinship. She conceptualizes how adoptive families usually try to subvert bio-based conceptions of family, yet often experience a consistent revisiting to the importance that is placed on biological kinship in society.



utilized in the pursuit for truth claims. Technology, genetic testing, and DNA all ultimately reinforce ways of constructing kinship by authenticating biologically based family, connecting distant blood relations through databases and commercial, direct-to-consumer companies, and linking adoptees with each other through social networks and listservs.

Robyn's original intention in using DNA was to genetically profile the missing birth father. Although she was resigned to the fact that she might never physically meet him, she was drawn to the fantasy of being able to see his information scientifically. However, the most she would ever have been able to see is a half-profile of his genetic markers. In comparison to the human connection and relationship she craved, the profile is a weak replacement. Yet, this desire for a connection through any means speaks to the power of technology in aiding otherwise formless desires. Is science able to provide that deeper social connection and address an inherent loss? What kind of closure or connection would a genetic half-profile of the biological father actually bring?

Robyn's search for greater connection ultimately severed the one biological link she thought she knew. The science of this claim is again in direct tension with other methods of knowledge and truth. Do the results invalidate the previous five-year long relationship? Prior to the news, both were mutually using each other to fulfill a certain loss within themselves. How does lack of genetic relation change this?

The performance of Robyn's DNA test, although not filmed, still acts as a turning point in multiple relationships. In fact, the pursuit of knowledge in the first place allows her to connect with a larger community of Koreans, Korean Americans, and Korean adoptees. Through her own private video logs, personal conversations, and activity within the adoptee community in

Korea and Los Angeles, it becomes clear that she finds her community through the process of search, reunion, and renewed loss.

### ***Viewing the Other: Visually Reimagining the Adoptee***

As Lisa Lowe argues, Asian American cultural forms “give rise to contradictory articulations that interrupt the demands for identity and identification, that voice antagonisms to the universalizing narratives of both pluralism and development, and that open Asian American culture as an alternative site to the American economic, political, and national cultural spheres.”

<sup>21</sup> The adoptee narrative manifests as one of these articulations. It is an important counterpoint in the U.S. national imaginary, demonstrating the surpassing of simplistic and tranquilizing representation. Using Robyn as the central character makes it especially important to consider how understanding the adoptee as subject and narrative also must accommodate shifts in visualization. What does it mean to know the subject of the adoptee visually? How does the enfiguring discussed earlier translate into how documentaries *look* at the adoptee? How does this intersect with the Asian American imaginary?

### **III. Synopsis**

*Who is Park Joo Young?* considers the implications of transnational, transracial Korean adoption through the experiences of Robyn Shultz, a Korean American adoptee whose conceptions of kinship and identity are shaken throughout her personal journey towards birth search and reunion. The film is based around key experiences that have shaped Robyn’s critical consciousness. Despite growing up in a loving adoptive family in Minnesota, Robyn continually desired a connection to biological family. Her longing for shared physical resemblance and an

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<sup>21</sup> Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 29.

imagined connection eventually lead her to initiate a birth search. Within a relatively short six months, Robyn finds herself reunited with the mother she had fantasized about meeting for 24 years. Although cultural and language barriers often compound their differences, Robyn and her birth mother establish and foster a relationship. Yet Robyn still wonders about her absent birth father. When she realizes the birth mother will not be forthcoming with information about him, she resorts to genetic testing for answers. Robyn reasons that if she can obtain the birth mother's DNA and compare it to her own, she can logically figure out the genes she inherited from her birth father. What she ultimately discovers is that the woman with whom she had spent the last five years building a relationship is not, in fact, her biological mother. Her adoption file was switched with another adoptee at some point prior to her arrival in the United States.

This film is both the continuation of, and the answer to, the first completed film I made in UCLA's EthnoCommunications class during the 2012-2013 school year. Although the story points remain the same, this version hopes to deepen explorations into questions that arose in the production of the first. It also acts as a critical investigation and deconstruction of both the promises and desires enacted onto Robyn's narrative. While it utilizes Robyn as the base by which to explore the larger themes that have been associated with Korean adoptee documentaries, it is also insistent in its desire to understand renegotiations of kinship arising out of advancements in technology and reinvestments in biologically-based frameworks of family.

#### **IV. Creative Approach/Treatment**

##### ***Style***

As previously stated, throughout this process, I have been continually aware of inherent questions emerging out of two separate levels of Robyn's narrative: content and construction.

The content offers an entry point to examine how DNA testing and technology can be deployed to repair particular losses that both recreate and disprove claims of kinship. Simultaneously, efforts to centralize the construction of coherent narrative challenge static conceptions of Korean adoptee search and reunion by intervening in how it has been presented and normalized within both a mainstream, dominant U.S. imaginary and as an implicit project of Asian American studies. These intersections ultimately allow an exploration in how and why there is an investment in such stories. Stylistically I have tried to attend to these guiding considerations by exploring the dissonance between interview narrative and visual language. I want to work against direct visualization and incorporate poetic visual sequences. In fact, it is the moments where audio and visual are paired unexpectedly that often seem to be the most generative of interesting material and force me to concretely consider how the decisions I make affect the overarching message that becomes conveyed to the viewer.

Yet, despite having these objectives in mind, I still struggled to establish a coherent aesthetic of my film. The material that I did capture was often too unsteady and did not include enough of the silence, stability, and grounded style that I found particularly compelling from an observational documentary style. I struggled through finding ways to include much of my early Minnesota footage because it was based around movement: pans of the Minnesota lake system, zooms of scenery and nature, and shaky closeups that did not rely on the steadiness of a tripod.

When I returned to Minnesota in late March 2014, my goal was to establish a quiet presence by returning to some of the same locations I found in the summer to reshoot with the tenants of observational documentary in mind. I tried to focus on thoughtfully choosing compositions that evoked certain feelings and set up my tripod with the explicit goal of capturing

extended sequences without interruption. Although the drastic weather difference made it challenging to access some of the spaces, it did provide a new aesthetic that I tried to utilize to my benefit. The snow offered a unique and serene sense of desolation and stillness that came to be eerily disquieting. I wanted to experiment with a juxtaposition of the iced-over and snow-covered lakes of the winter with the vibrant, lush lakes of the summer and hoped to explore how the same location can present vastly different emotions through changing environment. I am not sure if it entirely makes sense; yet I am also unsure if that is part of my intention. The figure of the Korean adoptee, and all the social, historical, and political contexts that inform her narrative, will always be ‘othered’ and different. I want to continue to make the uncertainty, confusion, awkwardness, and loss a present part of my film.

### ***Structure***

The first iteration of my film was heavily invested in following a very linear, chronological storyline that depended on continuity cutting to both establish and facilitate a coherent, smooth narrative. In its attempts to explicitly *tell* the story and ultimately connect with a larger audience, it sentimentalized Robyn’s journey and sought out a clean ending. Although the project was successful, this film is explicitly invested in exploring the potential of an alternative structure of storytelling by challenging the straightforward teleological trajectory of adoption documentary narratives. I am drawn to firmly establishing the constructed nature of film by not hiding the technologies and materialities of its production. By not relying on a ‘natural’ ending dependent on reconciliation, reunion, and reconnection, it is the hope that new narrative techniques consider how story structure can reflect political, affective, and social experiences of adoptees.

One of the main films that influenced my conceptualization both of narrative structure and style is *The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger* by Jane Jin Kaisen. Her rich poetic use of multiple modes of storytelling was especially useful in understanding the potential for this type of documentary work. I am mainly interested in the way she uses interview, poetry, and academic discourse to approach transnational adoption from different angles. She demonstrates the potential of constructing a story through various perspectives. Her visual choices strengthen her narrative, and ultimately disrupt an easy and expected convergence between the two. It is through her work that I begin to understand a practical application around using imagery to produce and reinforce certain emotional and sensory impacts.

Yet, despite these guiding objectives, I have still struggled throughout the construction of my film. Much of the footage I shot was unsteady and uncertain and I began to notice a reliance on found footage and material I had not directly shot. The structure of the film is of the main components that I continually revisit, but it has been extremely important to get right.

### ***Voice***

Robyn is the main character and hers is the voice that is most present. It is through her thoughts and words that we experience a quest for kinship, visibility, and agency. However, one of the explicit goals of this film is to also include the voices and perspectives of the multiple actors in Robyn's life. Mainly, I want to situate the presence of Robyn's immediate family: her parents and her sister. One of the struggles I continue to confront throughout my work with this family constellation is negotiating the different vested stakes of each collaborator. There were two major obstacles that occurred during filming that exemplify the complicated dynamics of representation and voice. Taken together, they almost act as ironic complements of each other.

The first occurred after translating my first film and adding subtitles. Robyn and I had agreed that once the film became larger than a class project, we both felt ethically compelled to share it with the ‘birth’ mother. We thought it was especially important that she become aware of its existence and give consent to use her image in any future iterations. After Robyn sent the subtitled version and initiated a conversation about its implication, the ‘birth’ mother decided not to give consent. Although she supports Robyn and feels that she will always be her ‘daughter,’ stigma and shame continue to affect her daily, lived experience. She ultimately did not feel comfortable with her physical presence represented in the film. Even though this development became a rather challenging obstacle, I also understood it to be symptomatic of the very real issues of class and gender that persist as tangible facets of her life. I had a hard time working through a way to include the ‘birth’ mother in a way that was not dependent on visual representation, especially since documentaries are visual by nature.

Along a similar line, I was supposed to film with Robyn and her parents at one point in February 2014, when they were visiting Los Angeles. It was the only time we would have to all meet together and we had gone so far as to actually set up a time, rent out equipment, and plan the day. Yet when the time came, Robyn’s mother backed out at the last minute, citing reasons of stress and general uncomfortableness with the process. I was surprised to hear this, especially because my interviews with her over the summer had gone well and I figured our established relationship would only work to make her feel more comfortable with me. I began to question if, as a filmmaker, I had acted inappropriately to elicit this unexpected response. When I spoke with Robyn, she assured me that her mother’s decision spoke more to the struggles within their own family dynamics than any other reason. It was less about me personally, and more an example of

the difficult family dynamics within Korean adoptee transnational family formations. What I ultimately find interesting is that these two examples illustrate the ways in which representation is differently accessed. Both mothers ultimately refused to partake in portions of the film, yet out of very differing power dynamics. The (in)ability to negotiate inclusion and exclusion tangibly affect the voice that materializes throughout the film.

Lastly, I hope to more prominently situate my own voice. As I noted earlier, I had previously felt an awkward tension when I did not acknowledge my presence. In this film I want to critically think through the ways in which my presence is always already a part of the film simply by virtue of the ways in which I build relationships with the subjects, the shots I choose, the edits I make, and the narrative I construct. As filmmaker, I want to overtly foreground my presence to disrupt the illusion that this documentary is objectively unfolding, to deconstruct the narrative and technical processes of filmmaking by showing the labor of the camera, and to interrupt a smooth narrative by offering alternative ways of understanding my own project. Ultimately, my goal in situating myself in this project is to delineate the significant ways my voice is always present, filtered through the narrative experiences of Robyn.

### ***Story***

To accurately understand how I arrived at this cut of my film, I think it is important to delineate the different turning points that have affected the development. For the most part, Robyn and I were in sync and transparent in our communication and desired outcome. However, there were times when there was a disconnect between the story that Robyn wanted to tell and the one that was emerging out of my own creative process. Throughout the development of my film, I continually felt an internalized pressure to pursue a “heartfelt story” that played into



Robyn's emotions of finding a long-lost mother. I felt compelled to craft a return and reconciliation journey that, although complex, still desired a clean ending. I felt invested in returning to the carefully structured, dominant narratives discussed earlier, and my first film ultimately played out some of those tropes. Tangibly, this means that when it came down to the final cut of my first film, I left out Robyn's relationship with her adoptive family, her post-reunion struggles with her birth family, her activism and connection with the larger adoptee community in both Korea and Los Angeles, and her personal quest in advocating for DNA testing. There was also a particular consciousness in the way I was including and representing Robyn's adoptive parents. I was consistently aware of their presence and was, at times, unable to be objective. I felt like I was walking a thin line between presenting them critically and wanting to 'protect' them from that criticism.

These subtle tensions that emerged between the story points of the journey I constructed caused me to question what makes a story "good," digestible, and legible to different audiences. Within Korean adoptee films, reproducing cogent figures, emotions, and story points has become part of reifying an almost canon narrative. Yet, do the benefits that arise from this particular way of storytelling ultimately limit the *type* of story that is told? The encouragement I received provides a lens into contemporary desires placed on adoptee narratives and the centrality of biological kin. Although those desires seemed to arise naturally out of the process, I think it's important to question what that means. Why did it feel natural to construct the story the way I did? How does that work in conversation with the historically situated narratives I previously chronicled? While the adoptee narrative provides an important counterpoint within those contradictory spaces of the U.S. nation, surpassing simplistic and tranquilizing representation,

the adoptee body is continually, and violently, used to fulfill certain desires. This includes adoptees that are subsumed into a white, heteronormative nuclear family ideal, the trope of the orphan, humanitarianism, and Korean-U.S. commodification. As I worked to construct this story, I wanted to consider how the narratives produced through current documentaries are part of that? What desires do adoptees continue to fill through these stories, even those of ‘triumph’ and agency? How can I, and should I, disrupt that?

By describing the shifting boundaries of this process, I hope to foreground my narrative goals. I want this film to be independent of investments in resolution or catharsis. I move against a commitment for the ‘clean and easy’ ending. I also work against an expository model with the desire to tell what has happened. I am not interested in making whole what has been lost. Instead, I want to press on those tensions and understand why a particular story is told.<sup>22</sup>

I do, however, want to note the limits of this creative endeavor. It is impossible to aptly address all the nuanced implications of Robyn’s story. Each aesthetic and structural decision I have made comes at the expense of a narrative style that I could not pursue. I hope that this written piece will act as an accompaniment to fill in those gaps and flesh out the socio-historical and creative contexts to give this film its greatest impact.

### ***Characters***

The film centers around the life of Robyn Shultz, Korean American adoptee, as she is challenged with negotiating kinship networks with birth family, adoptive family, and other adoptees. All of Robyn’s immediate family agreed to participate in the film as well and I was

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<sup>22</sup> In this respect, it has been particularly generative to consider Ann Stoler’s work on the archive. I have tried to think through “how people told stories, what they thought a good story was, and how they accounted for motive.” See Stoler, Ann Laura. “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form.” *Refiguring the Archive*. Ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, et al. Norwell: Kluwer, 2002. 88.

able to interview her parents, Mary and Tom Shultz, and her sister, Jessica Shultz. Other important people I interviewed, but who will not make it into the final cut, are Robyn's partner, Ernest, and another Korean adoptee who went through a similar experience, Michaela Dietz. Ernest has been a key person throughout Robyn's journey. His work as a forensic scientist has provided material, intellectual, and emotional support as Robyn was challenged to understand the results of her DNA test. Michaela is an adoptee that I was originally interested in more heavily incorporating into the film. Robyn originally saw a clip of her on the Ricki Lake show and, due to the extreme similarity of their experiences, connected. Although all these figures will not make it into the film, they have all offered important contributions to the way I have understood and constructed Robyn's story. Each conversation added another layer and a nuanced lens to this complex story.

Finally, I also hope to make the presence of science and technology central. I was encouraged to make the science of the DNA test a character itself and to weave it centrally into the story. To this end, I watched different representations of genetic science in popular culture and science education shows.

### ***Locations***

Although the film is not structured around a central location, it is situated around moments spent in Los Angeles, Minnesota, and Korea. Each of these three places ultimately speak to the formative spaces that have affected Robyn's growth and development. Inherently, they are representative of key, formative experiences. Korea is where Robyn was born and where she eventually returns. Temporally it is of her past, yet it also represents her present and

her future. All of the footage shot in Korea comes from Robyn's personal videos. This includes her thoughts and experiences leading up to the reunion with the birth mother.

Minneapolis, Minnesota, is the city where Robyn spent the majority of her adolescence. It is the destination to which she was adopted, the location of her childhood home and family members, and is the space where she became critically conscious and politicized. Footage was taken from Robyn's old home videos along with current scenery of the larger Twin Cities area.

Los Angeles, California, is Robyn's current city of residence and the place where she finds a balance. Her access to Koreatown and the Korean American and Korean adoptee communities are important influences in her development, often informing her activism for adoptee rights.

## **V. Audience, Impact, Dissemination**

### ***Audience and Impact***

Documentaries are projects that are inherently meant to be shown to larger audiences with the intention of education, connection, visibility, or conversation. On some basic level, they need to be general enough to relate to a wide audience while still upholding a narrative structure and purpose. The intended audience for this film includes all members of the adoption triad: adoptees, birth family, and adoptive family, along with other folks in the adoption-world, such as social workers and prospective adoptive parents. I also hope that the film will have some legibility for those who have a limited understanding of the personal and political issues inherent to the Korean adoptee community and can be used as a tool to demonstrate the diversity that exists.

Robyn's nuanced experience is one that is not necessarily based on sentimentalized celebration, an important counternarrative against dominant ideology that tends to pathologize adoptees who dissent from romanticized notions of assimilation and reunion. It is important to represent narratives like hers, which demonstrate the very material consequences that persist out of the transnational Korean adoption system. It is the hope that this film will offer yet another opportunity to spark conversation around the continuing struggle for adoptee rights and visibility.

### ***Dissemination***

Primary dissemination will likely be through a digital, online platform such as YouTube or Vimeo. This is due to ease of access for those looking to view the video transnationally. It will also potentially be screened at different adoptee organizational meetings or community events, and will be accessible through the Asian American Studies Department and the Center for EthnoCommunications at the University of California, Los Angeles.

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