

Writing Transnational Adoption Between Rights and Needs

Mark Jerng

University of California, Davis

mcjerng@ucdavis.edu

The legal struggle to open records, provide support services, and in other ways legally and socially recognize transnational adoptees as ‘real,’ autonomous, and agential subjects has been accompanied and fostered by an outpouring of first-person documentaries, non-fiction and fictional narratives, and memoirs by or about transnational adoptees. The struggle to write and be heard as transnational adoptees is itself an exercise in and advancement of political claims of respect and recognition. As the editors of the recent collection, *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, state in their introduction: “We are united here in our passion to be heard and to end the self-censorship and denial that have silenced us... We are gathered together to struggle collectively for dignity and self-determination. We are determined to make connections between personal struggles and broader movements for peace and social justice.” In this way, the writings of and about transnational adoption have not only drawn on the language of human rights, but also expanded its terms to include some rights previously not a part of the bundle of rights usually associated with the citizen: the right to know one’s biological origin and background; the right to a cultural origin; the right to continuity; the right to security; the right to preserve his or her identity.

But this combination of legal formation and narrative representation produces gaps and ambivalences of its own. Recognition of psychic loss and one’s needs is not equivalent to the social recognition of group rights as presently conceived. Narrative representations by transnational adoptees often enact this gap between what they claim in their stories and what they enact through their stories. For example, while some adoptees represent the need to be seen as sovereign, autonomous adults, their journeys to find out who they are end up enacting the importance of dependence and attachment for their sense of security. And on another level, though they seek legal recognition of their right to know their biological parents, their narratives reveal that being recognized by their biological parents is a different story altogether. Adoptees’ narratives thus rewrite rights precisely because they call attention to the adult-centered formation of rights and what it means to think about agency *and* dependence, rights *and* needs, adult *and* child together. In this paper, I first briefly address the gaps between legal and narrative recognition in the documentaries, *Daughter from Danang* and *First-Person Plural*; I then discuss the problem of voicing claims and narrating an expansive sense of personhood that fractures the divide between adult and child, independence and dependence, in Jane Jeong Trenka’s memoir, *The Language of Blood*, and Bharati Mukherjee’s fictional story *Leave It To Me*.