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“Transcultural Adoption, Identity and Belonging in *A Long Way Home* by Saroo Brierley and *The Language of Blood* by Jane Jeong Trenka”

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Introduction

Although the caretaking of a child through nonbiological kinship whose culture differs from that of the child's biogenetic family is not very frequently studied, neither in literary nor in postcolonial studies, it is an interesting research topic for both academic fields. Through studying this phenomenon designated transcultural adoption, we can learn about culture and especially about identity. The human search for personal identity is ever-present for many of us, which becomes apparent, for example, through people taking personality tests to categorize and determine their identity traits somehow. Factors such as our professions, education and social status also influence who we are, but our self-definition is dependent on our cultural origin to a very large extent (Welsch 199). Our culture is always connected to our nationality, ethnicity, gender and religion. We construct our cultural identity by being part of one or several communities, which practice certain traditions, norms, customs, speak the same language or share common heritage (Chen, n.p.). Hence, we are influenced not only by the surroundings in which we grow up in, but also by those in which our parents did, as they share their cultural identity with us. Therefore, it is often hard for transcultural adoptees to define their own identities as they are raised by nonbiological parents who do not share the same culture as their birth parents and most often live in countries of the global Northwest. Thus, people often judge transcultural adoptees in the Western world by assuming that their identities are connected to the culture of their biogenetic heritage. This is because usually "human lives are authenticated through the biocentric vocabularies of birth, blood and natal origins" (McLeod 9). However, sometimes the adoptees know nothing about their birth parents and their cultural heritage, but as they are asked about their origins so often and do not

know the answer, they feel inauthentic, as if a large part of their identity was missing, like a “jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces” (ibid. 17-18). Thus, many adoptees seek their birth parents in the hope of finally mending what is often perceived as a “divided identity” (Jerng 153), and this journey of finding cultural belonging has interested and moved many audiences of films, novels, and life-writing.

While the novel has been at the center of attention for scholars analyzing transcultural adoption literature (Stitt 182), I am more interested in memoirs, as they make truth claims about real life stories and feelings. Furthermore, I think it is important to focus on transcultural adoptees’ insights, since “white adoptive parents, academics, psychiatrists, and social workers have dominated the literature on transracial adoption” up to the mid-2000s (Trenka, Oparah, and Shin 1). I will therefore study the adoption narratives of two selected memoirs: *A Long Way Home* by Saroo Brierley (first published in 2013) and *The Language of Blood* by Jane Jeong Trenka (first published in 2003). Both memoirs depict cases of both *transnational adoption*, which means the child’s ‘new parents’ come from a different country than its biological parents, and *transracial adoption*, meaning that the child is of a different ‘race’ (primarily referring to skin color) than their adoptive parents. I will mostly use the umbrella term *transcultural adoption* which includes the other two, although transcultural adoption does not necessarily have to be transnational nor transracial, but can also describe, for example, adoptions of migrants within a country (McLeod 10). The reason for this choice is that the arguments I make in this thesis are mostly true for all forms of transcultural adoption. If not, this is of course differentiated.

It is interesting to compare the two life stories I chose as objects of analysis since both protagonists describe their identities as transcultural adoptive beings in great detail. They

also revolve around the ‘reunion’ of the adoptees with their consanguineous kin, and thoroughly describe their relationships to both their birth- as well as their adoptive parents. Moreover, they describe their life experiences and feelings in the countries of their biogenetic origin (India in the case of *A Long Way Home* and Korea in the case of *The Language of Blood*) and the countries they grew up in (Australia in the case of *A Long Way Home* and the United States in the case of *The Language of Blood*). All of these aspects convey important clues of their identities as adoptees in the texts. Although the stories share certain similarities, the protagonists’ motivations for writing and their ultimate identity definitions are entirely differently, enabling an analysis of influential factors that contribute to these distinctions.

The circumstances of Saroo Brierley’s adoption and his search for his biogenetic heritage in *A Long Way Home* are so incredible that soon after his reunion with his Indian family, his life story became of interest for media and press all around the globe. As he describes in his memoir, he was suddenly in the limelight and even had to hire a manager to schedule media engagements and “[s]oon book publishers and film producers were calling with offers” (225). He ended up publishing the memoir *A Long Way Home* which was co-written by Larry Buttrose. When a motion picture about his life story titled *Lion* came out in 2016, it even received six Oscar nominations (Fedosik, n.p.). The reason for the interest in Brierley’s life is that he was not purposefully given up for adoption but lost his family at the age of five by accidentally boarding a train that brought him to the far away megacity Kolkata. There, he ended up in an orphanage and was soon after adopted by an Australian couple. As if these circumstances were not unique enough, his way of reconnecting with his biogenetic family 25 years later is just as incredible, as Brierley used

only his own memories and Google Earth satellite pictures to find his 'hometown,' where he had lived the first five years of his life.

The adoptee of the second memoir under investigation, *The Language of Blood*, is Jane Jeong Trenka, who was originally named Jeong Kyong-Ah by her South Korean family and was raised as Jane Marie Brauer by her Minnesotan adoptive family. She was adopted to the United States at the age of six months together with her sister Carol (originally Mi-Ja), who was four and a half years old at the time. Similar to Saroo's case, Jane and Carol's biogenetic family was so poor that they often feared starvation and both children arrived in the US malnourished. Their birth mother was mistreated by her alcoholic birth father who was enraged to have received a fifth daughter with Kyong-Ah instead of a son. To get rid of his newest offspring, he denied being the father, almost suffocated the baby and even threw her out of a window until he convinced his wife to bring Kyong-Ah and Mi-Ja to an orphanage. Jane and Carol grew up in a town in Northern Minnesota with parents who were unable to conceive their own child. They are very religious and were talked into adopting transnationally by the Lutheran church. They raised their adoptive children as their own, neglecting all kinds of biogenetic relations and denying the children any knowledge about or experience with South Korea, and completely avoided discussing that they had adopted their daughters. Although Jane always longed for her birth mother and tried to reach out to her even as a small child, in the end it was her birth mother who managed to send a letter to her daughters in the United States, when Jane was in her junior high school year. However, Jane did not go to Korea to meet her biological mother until six years after she had first received a letter from her. According to Jenny Heijun Wills, the memoir was "produced by a large

publishing house and became incredibly popular, mainstream” (46). Particularly interesting is that Trenka moved to Seoul in 2004 shortly after publishing *The Language of Blood* and is an activist taking a stance against adoption (Seethaler 95).

Transcultural adoption is quite a controversial topic that can be viewed from various angles and can be criticized and praised in many different ways. The common Western phenomenon that “the biocentric is rendered essential to self-knowledge and the body’s biogenetic heredity is conceived as the *ur-text* of identity” (McLeod 26) can be challenged through adoption. Similarly, the pathologization of adoption, which implies that transcultural adoption must elicit trauma and brokenness for everyone involved (ibid. 16), can be discussed. Nonetheless, there is also a common perception that transcultural adoptees are better off living in ‘Western’ countries, despite the trauma of losing consanguineous kinship, because they would live under very poor and inhumane circumstances in the countries of their biogenetic origin. According to Ina Seethaler, there is a “‘rescue mission’ narrative surrounding adoption” (85), and “[t]he view of adoption as an altruistic act is certainly widespread” (81). This can be linked with the “white savior complex” and transcultural adoption’s connection with the historical subjugation of ‘Third World’ countries (McLeod) as well as of women (Seethaler). The upbringing of a child of a different ethnicity and nationality is very political, some may view it as acculturation (Small), while others say good parenting cannot be judged by the sameness of “race” (Gilroy).

In my thesis, I aim to analyze how the adoptees in *The Language of Blood* and *A Long Way Home* define their identities as protagonists in memoirs, but I am also particularly interested in how those identities are influenced by common Western perceptions of

transcultural adoption and how the adoptees position themselves in the aforementioned controversial discussions. Moreover, I want to consider how their identity definitions change after having met their birth parents in the texts. I will also analyze the narrators' relationships with both their adoptive and consanguineous parents and their social and financial contexts, and to what extent the adoptees feel belonging to both families or cultures. The authors Saroo Brierley and Jane Jeong Trenka use the genre of life writing to process, reflect and present their plural personhoods in different ways and make valuable contributions to the discussion of the ethics of transcultural adoption.

For my analysis I will use a postcolonial theory approach and a close reading method. Postcolonial literary studies is generally concerned with texts of marginalized, "subaltern" groups (Fay and Haydon), which includes transcultural adoptees. The academic field means to take a stance against common Western Eurocentrism that causes global inequalities (Lazarus). Therefore, it is an important tool to investigate the adoption of children from 'Third World' to 'First World' countries.

I deem it necessary to address my first Chapter to the explanation of the genre of life writing and the key concepts for studying life writing, following Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's ideas. Then I will move on to theorize transcultural adoption, starting with a more thorough presentation of the concepts of some scholars within the academic field of postcolonial literary studies, especially Homi K. Bhabha. I will then discuss the theory of cultural identity and transculturality and will outline the main reasons for transcultural adoptees' identity issues, namely the idealization of the consanguineous family, and the highly suppressive causes of transcultural adoption in the past century that still have an

impact on today, before moving on to the analysis of the memoirs *A Long Way Home* and *The Language of Blood*.

1. Life writing

I would like to begin with explaining some concepts salient for the study of life writing. The term *life writing* refers to all kinds of stories that focus on a person's life. Hence, examples for life writing would be biographies, biographical novels, or self-referential writing, although the term is most often used to speak simply of the last-mentioned category. Biographies are life stories that are written from an outside perspective by people who have conducted research in order to create a detailed life narrative about someone else, who is or was a real person. Novels which focus on one person's life and can therefore be categorized as life writing, sometimes employ a first-person narrative, which is why they might be confused with self-referential writing. The difference is that the last-mentioned category, which is the focus of this thesis, defines texts written by authors about their *own* life-story and is often referred to as "autobiography" (Smith and Watson 3-5, 9). Although autobiography is the "widely used and most generally understood term" (ibid. 2-3), it has been highly criticized by postmodern and postcolonial theorists. The reason is that it traditionally excludes certain narratives that do not solely focus on a typical autonomous individual of the Western world, such as, for example, narratives of women's domestic lives, or coming-of-age, slave and travel narratives (ibid. 3). Gillian Whitlock explains that autobiography "is now generally reserved for a literary canon that privileges a specific Enlightenment archetype of selfhood: the rational, sovereign subject that is conceived as western, gendered male and [...] racially white" (2-3). Most

transcultural adoption narratives would hence not be covered by the traditional “autobiography” paradigm, which is why the term will not be used to refer to them in this thesis, but only to those texts that do really conform to the “traditional Western mode of the retrospective life narrative,” as suggested by Smith and Watson (4).

Up to this point, the wording *self-referential writing* has been used, as it is regarded to be more inclusive than *autobiography*. Nevertheless, the umbrella term *life writing* is most commonly used under postcolonial theorists. Furthermore, the adjective form *autobiographical*, used in expressions such as *autobiographical discourse*, *autobiographical writing* or *autobiographical inscription* can actually help in shifting the reference to exactly those genres which are usually excluded as *autobiographies* (ibid.), and are thus the main interest of postcolonial literary studies. The term *memoir* has a similar meaning to the afore-mentioned expressions in contemporary writing and is even older than *autobiography*. In the traditional sense, memoirs used to describe personal experiences of a limited time span and also included reflections of the impact of the experiences on the writer’s self-understanding. Furthermore, memoirs were usually associated with “the publicly prominent who chronicled their social accomplishments” (ibid. 3-4). Nowadays, the word *memoir* is popularly used by publishing houses in book titles, cover pages or blurbs to indicate a wide range of self-referential writing. Julie Rak (316-320) notes that there is a tendency for the term to be used for marginalized authors, or scandalous or unexpected stories. Additionally, memoirs are associated with “foregrounding historical shifts and intersecting cultural formations” (Smith and Watson 4), as well as lexical density and a certain ability of the writer to reflect their own writing process. Since my objects of analysis, *A Long Way Home* and *The Language of Blood*

were both officially published as memoirs I will also refer to them in particular as such, however, the umbrella term *life writing* is preferred in the academic field and will hence also be prominent in this thesis. Thomas Couser explains that the “current critical preference for the umbrella terms ‘life writing’ and ‘life narrative’ is a function of the increasing diversity of texts studied by scholars and the impulse to deny any hierarchy among them” (142).

Now that we know how to refer to life writing in the sense of self-referential writing appropriately, I would like to discuss the most important considerations for an analysis thereof. The most recognizable and unique aspect of autobiographical texts is that author and narrator share the same personal data such as name, date and place of birth, education, etc. This creates, according to the French theorist Philippe Lejeune, an “autobiographical pact,” which provokes “truth claims,” meaning that readers tend to assess the narrative as fact (qtd. In Smith and Watson 21). Wills states that “the reading audience of memoirs *insists* [...] that the implied author’s assertions be truthful” (56, emphasis added). Another aspect that upholds the credibility of truth claims in autobiographical discourse is that the narratives must always be based within the author’s *own* “temporal, geographical and cultural milieu,” while novelists can completely invent personalities and stories (Smith and Watson 11-12). While adoptee narrators can adhere to the ladder principle, the first aspect might be complicated in adoptee life writing. The authors often do not even know about their biological personal data, which is why they may be unable to tell the ‘truth’ about themselves in this regard. Some scholars such as Paul John Eakin find truth-telling in life writing so morally compulsory and related to narrative quality and authorial integrity (Wills 56), that they would probably consider

adoptees unfit as autobiographical writers. Eakin claims that “[w]hen life writers fail to tell the truth, then, they do more than violate a literary convention governing non-fiction as a genre; they disobey a moral imperative” (2-3).

However, it is hard to define what ‘truth’ is. Even though the narratives of autobiographical writers may be based on their own personalities and life circumstances, they still only contain subjective ‘truth,’ not factual history about the writer or about the particular time the narrative is set in or a particular event happening in it. This is because the plots were written specifically for an audience and contain rhetorical and literary devices; they are more of a performative act than a reflection of reality. Furthermore, the stories are told only from the narrator’s ethical, political, and ideological standpoint, which is also influenced by their culture. Therefore, we must not forget to consider “the narrative tropes, socio cultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text” when studying life writing (Smith and Watson 13). Another point to prove that life narratives cannot be purely factual is that they are almost exclusively written in retrospective, meaning that autobiographical writers rely mainly on their personal memories, which can never be fully verified (ibid. 7). Daniel Schacter suggests that “memories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves” (6). Sometimes we might not even be able to recollect our own experience, we tend to forget small details, so we have to reinterpret the past when remembering. What we create, then, is often more like a dream or a “promissory belief” than reality (Smith and Watson 16, 22).

Wills states that life narratives are sometimes even deliberately “fictionalized in circumstances where authors lack accurate facts about themselves, but that these

[narratives], too, constitute autobiographical realities because they are what the author must or wishes to believe is true" (56). Stanley Fish agrees that "autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not" (qtd. in Smith and Watson 15). With this statement I want to shift the focus to the identities of life writers. As the narratives of self-referential writing are often idealized and written for a specific audience, the *narrating 'I'* is also not a 'real' identity, but only one version of the *autobiographical 'I'* that is chosen to be presented to the reader. The narrators might even present not one, but several versions and inconsistent or shifting views of themselves, because no one ever really has only one coherent self. Those versions are the *narrated 'I's* that are objects "that the narrating 'I' chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader" (73). The *real 'I'*, meaning the flesh and blood author as a "social, historical person, with achievements, personal appearance, social relationships" is yet another self, that we never really get to know (Smith and Watson 73, 6, 61, 14). Hence, autobiographical acts "are anything but simple or transparent" (ibid. 63).

Although I have just argued that life writing does not really depict 'real' events or 'real' identities in any simple, transparent fashion, it is capable of involving us more deeply in political and cultural contexts of the time and place of the narrative, as it projects histories of communities, families, nations and movements (ibid. 14, 18). Couser (140-141) even states that "it is generally admitted that one cannot write about oneself without representing others." Smith and Watson (63) suggest that autobiographical narratives are "culturally and historically specific" and "always symbolic interactions in the world." This is partly because life writers use norms and models of identity as their scripts to shape

the stories they want to present to the reader (Appiah 23), which causes a synchronization of individual and collective identities (McLeod 20). Whitlock argues that the testimonial narratives of autobiographical texts “trigger[...] advocacy, responsibility and accountability” (9), and according to Couser (146), life narratives “encode or reinforce particular values in ways that may shape culture and history,” instead of only telling the story of one single person. Thus, they “invite reading in terms of larger cultural issues” (Smith and Watson 25) and can be “engaged in an argument about identity” (ibid. 63), which is why using autobiographical writing to study identities of transcultural adoptees seems very fitting and was thus chosen for this thesis.

Although I chose to investigate autobiographical writing in this thesis, because I want to focus on how adoptees themselves create narratives of their personal experiences and identities as adoptees and their search for belonging, this does not mean that biographies or novels cannot tell great adoption stories as well. After all, the adoptee life writer Jackie Kay writes the following in her memoir: “The whole business of being adopted seems on the one level to be a fantastic fiction” (134). There are many contributions from non-adoptees in film and fiction who are taking up the adoption narrative as opportunity “to tackle widespread forms of marginalization and silencing on the grounds of ethnicity, race, cultural prejudice, economic disenfranchisement, gender and sexuality,” some of which are really inspiring representations (McLeod 31). In my analysis I am also interested in how adoptees manage to construct their identities considering common Western ideas about adoption, and how the memoirs engage with, or dismantle, these ideas. According to Bhabha, “many of the ideas we take for granted are actually politically charged, being

used to construct and justify the world around us” (qtd. in Fay and Haydon 13). That is why it is important “to challenge and question the ‘natural order’ of things” (ibid.).

In the next Chapter, I want to address postcolonial literary studies, an academic field which was formed by ideas such as Bhabha's, and I will explore what it can offer a study on transcultural adoption, as I am focusing on matters of subjugation, inequality, and racism, which are all concepts that have remained relevant since the colonial period.

2. Theorizing Transcultural Adoption

2.1. The Lense of Postcolonial Literary Studies

As the name might suggest, postcolonial studies investigate the influence of colonialism on present common ‘Western’ ideologies. Although the colonization period of the nineteenth and mid-twentieth century is long over, and most former colonies have been independent for some decades, even today there are still significant traces of this era, as well as neocolonial systems. A large group of scholars are dedicated to analyzing the consequences of colonialism and the ideas and strategies of colonial rule that remain until today (Ramone 1-2), such as the “self-affirming distinction between the civilization of Europe and the barbarity of the ‘Other’ or ‘the Rest’” (Fay and Haydon 25). The research interest of postcolonial theory is part of cultural theory and emerged in the late 1970s, highly influenced by “insurgent national liberation movements and revolutionary ideologies in the Third World” (Lazarus 4). The academic field later became prominent in Anglo-American universities in the 1980s and 1990s. Until today, postcolonial studies stand as an opposition against anti-liberationism and global inequalities, and one of their major aspirations remains the abolition of Eurocentrism (ibid.). Postcolonial theorists are

set on finding alternatives, redraw boundaries and reimagine common 'Western' thinking constantly, meaning for example, creating "more socially and ecologically responsible attitudes towards environment and place" (Huggan 15). Furthermore, they seek to bring awareness to the dangers of all ongoing neocolonial relationships and condemn colonialism in all its forms (Ramone 7). In their analyses, "[p]ostcolonial theorists are interested in how individuals are constructed and represented by the colonial power to which they are subject" (Fay and Haydon 20).

It is quite common for postcolonial scholars to focus their research on literature. In recent years, the area of life writing has increasingly been interpreted from a postcolonial perspective, resulting in the establishment of an interdisciplinary field known as *postcolonial life writing* (Whitlock 2). Postcolonial writing frequently includes "narrative[s] of resistance, of radicalism, activism and consciousness" (Ramone 7). Researchers mostly analyze stories of people with marginal, invalidated, and invisible, and therefore non-traditional, identities and experiences, which are usually seen as inferior to the 'Western' self and are also called "subaltern" narratives in postcolonial studies (Fay and Haydon 21-22). Reading such inscriptions means taking part in a negotiation and alteration of traditional frames of identity in the "West" (Rak 4). Mary Pratt explains: "If one studies only what the Europeans saw and said, one reproduces the monopoly on knowledge and interpretation that the imperial enterprise sought" (7). Indeed, Bhabha, who is considered to have written one of the most seminal texts of postcolonial studies, sees the main importance of postcolonial literature studies in "look[ing] upon the text as an ongoing process of sharing and questioning ideas" (Fay and Haydon 32). In my

opinion, life writing is a particularly great resource for postcolonial theorists to gain access to stories of powerless groups and interpret them innovatively.

Bhabha has developed the theory of “Third Space” (25), in which “colonized subjects” in postcolonial writing are supposedly located. The “Third Space” is a “place of hybridity” in a colonial encounter between two cultures, in which an entirely new political object is created through communication, negotiation or cross-translation. Thus, “exploring the contradictions within the textual narratives or depictions can act as a tool for resistance against the misrepresentation of colonized peoples” (Fay and Haydon 37). Smith and Watson also agree that narratives in postcolonial life writing are “often representative of a larger group’s experience at powerful moments of social change and an articulation of the desire for transformation as a social group” (46). In the context of adoption life writing, we can therefore deduce that those texts also “access issues of authenticity and belonging that resonate far beyond an individual family” (Callahan 3). Transcultural adoptees can be considered colonized subjects although they are not necessarily raised in ‘Third World’ countries, due to their conflicting cultural identities, which are actually the main research interest in this thesis. In postcolonialism, analyzing cultural identities is also essential. One of the major arguments of founding figures of postcolonial studies Homi Bhabha and Edward Said against Eurocentrism is that ‘pure’ cultures or identities are non-existent. This is supposed to undermine all claims of ‘purity’ and ‘superiority’ (Fay and Haydon 25).

Before continuing with an essential definition of cultural identity, however, I do not want to dismiss that there are a number of critics of postcolonial studies, one of them is Neil Lazarus. He notes that the term *postcolonial*, when speaking about postcolonial studies,

is never merely historical, in the sense of the period that came directly after the colonization, which is how it was used in the early and mid-1970s. It is actually always associated with a political desire and social activism. Since the meaning of the word was fairly different in the past, Lazarus finds that the retention of the term is misleading. He even argues that the modern meaning of 'postcolonial' is a euphemism and an eclipse of what we used to call the 'Third World'. Furthermore, he critiques how capitalism as the overarching reason for colonialism is commonly disregarded in postcolonial theory (4-7). David Farrier (5) critiques how asylum seekers and refugees are commonly left out in postcolonial studies. One could arguably note, then, that transcultural adoptees are under-represented within the academic field of postcolonialism as well. John McLeod claims that "[i]n literary studies, critical discussions of adoption representations have only just begun to appear" (4), and they are almost completely absent in postcolonial studies. However, adoption events are "shaped by the advent and legacies of imperialism, colonialism, migration and global conflict" (ibid.), which is why I think they should be read through a postcolonial lense. Although it is tragic that important history and certain communities are lacking attention in postcolonialism, I believe that this can simply be turned around by future publications in the field focusing more on what has not been studied to a great extent so far. The underlying theoretical framework of postcolonialism, namely challenging the prevailing global 'developed' culture and providing possibilities for social change, is still valid and useful when explaining issues of capitalism, refugees, etc. more deeply. Moreover, Elleke Boehmer and Alex Tickell suggest that postcolonialism could even be considered a transitional stage of English language literary theory:

From the vantage point of 2015 it is interesting to speculate as to whether the postcolonial will eventually be seen as less fixed and cumulative field of study, as

it appeared towards the end of the 1990s, than as a transitional stage from the Commonwealth to world literary criticism, or from a focus of what Amitav Ghosh calls the Anglosphere, to Immanuel Wallerstein's far more broadly conceived "world-systems" (326)

The concepts of postcolonial theory will be relevant for the rest of this thesis.

2.2. Cultural Identity and Transculturality

Now that I have established important fields of academic research on which this thesis will draw, this Chapter will deal with a key concept of the analysis: cultural identity, and further, the difference between the concepts of transculturation, hybridity and transculturality.

I would like to start with Paul Gilbert's definition of identity: "One's identity is the way in which one identifies oneself to others or is identified by them" (6). There are many sub-categories of identity, one of them being social identity. Social identities are associated with the belonging to certain groups (Hogg 503). Identities don't have a center but emerge from several sources, as Smith and Watson (38) explain:

Identities are marked in terms of many categories: gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, class, generation, family genealogy, religious belief, and political ideologies, to list the most obvious. These are differences that, at least for now, have meaning in the material and symbolic structures that organize human societies.

Our identities are therefore formed by the mixture of all of these factors in which we are part of certain groups of people with whom we have "some shared ground" (Friedman 19). Michael Hogg suggests that "individuality may 'merely' be the unique combination of distinct groups and categories that define who we are" (502). Belonging to these groups also differentiates us from other commonalities of the same category, sometimes in

“binary systems of ‘us’ vs ‘them’” (ibid.). These groups, which are a subtheory of social identity are most often called *collective identities* (Davis, Love and Fares 255). They work via similarity and difference and establish “otherness” and strategies of inclusion and exclusion (Seidl, n.p.). The alignment to those collective identities of individuals might be imposed, “and these collectivities themselves gauge the predominant ways in which human lives are categorized, divided and hierarchized” (McLeod 20). McLeod claims that “identity is fundamentally transpersonal rather than the discrete possession of a singular self” (20). Our identities are expressed through practices and concepts of the groups we belong to, which often include family or friends (Appiah 20). Thinking of our central topic of transcultural adoption, belonging to family genealogy, national or ethnic collectivities is not straightforward for transcultural adoptees and therefore creates uncertainty and disturbance in their identity definition. They might be immediately identified to belong to their biogenetic parents’ cultural identity because of their physical features, yet they sometimes do not even know their own biogenetic heritage, let alone the practices and concepts associated with it. In these cases, forming a social identity and developing a sense of belonging to cultural communalities becomes a problem for the transcultural adoptees and consequently has a huge impact on how they see themselves.

Since each person belongs to various groups of different categories of identity markers, just imagine “how many identities you cycle through in the course of a day, identities linked to gender, national citizenship, work status, sexuality, class location, generational location, ethnicity, and family constellation” (Smith and Watson 38). Depending on context, we are our parents’ daughters or sons, our company’s employees, our doctor’s patients, etc. Thus, identities are multiple, “contextual, contested and contingent” (Scott

36), “a fluid, ever-changing construct shaped by daily experiences, memories, and perceptions” (Hardwick 553). They are flexible, not secure or constant, and “all identities are composites of the many different cultures and beliefs with which they interact” (Fay and Haydon 46, 30). We are not born with our identities, they are not inherited or natural (Smith and Watson 39), but rather “a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process” (Hall 392). Since identities are so unstable, it is inadequate to adopt stereotypes or simple definitions (Fay and Haydon 13). The instability of identities also aligns with what I have discussed about the identities of autobiographical narratives in the Chapter on life writing. There is “no such thing as a pure or essential self” (ibid. 30), neither in reality nor in created narratives.

According to Wolfgang Welsch (199), the components of differing cultural origin have an increasingly important impact on forming our identity. The cultural identity is the one most central in transcultural adoption and hence in this thesis. Cultural identities in particular are always collective identities (Gilbert 3). There are some symbolic markers that make others categorize us into certain cultural identities, which are either physical features such as skin or hair color, or other features such as age, language, fashion, etc. Sometimes random, arbitrary features are connected to fixed identities and meanings, for example skin color seems to be more dominant than hair color or the color of eyes. The identification through these markers entails power relations and is a result of politics, *not* a question of biology (Seidl, n.p.). But what exactly is culture? Susan Cross and Jonathan Gore (587-588) deliver an accurate explanation:

Culture is a set of meanings, beliefs, and practices that guide the formation and maintenance of social institutions, the creation of social products, and the development of its members. [...] These meanings, beliefs and practices form

cultural models which are “presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not always to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it” (Quinn & Holland, 1987, p. 4). These widely shared understandings are shaped throughout childhood and beyond by stories, injunctions, morality tales, media, traditions, and everyday practices; over time, they become tacit, “natural,” or “obvious” ways of understanding oneself, one’s relationships, and the world. [...] Within a culture, individuals’ self-concepts will not be entirely the same, but they will overlap due to shared patterns of socialization, social norms, and cultural frameworks (Shore, 1996).

It is important to note that cultures are not simply national cultures, as there are countless cultural transactions and encounters within a nation, considering diasporic peoples “who live precariously in-between homelands old and new”, ethnic minorities, etc. (McLeod 7). Furthermore, globalization has contributed to making cultures “extremely interconnected and entangled with each other” (Welsch 197). Nowadays many people are “in different and highly dynamic social groups who regularly interact with others across social, national and linguistic borders and whose cultural thinking is constantly hybridised by various cultural ideas travelling across such borders” (Shmiley n.p.). Hence, it is “impossible to lay claim to any kind of authentic or unsullied cultural purity beyond the reach of outside influence” (McLeod 7). Edward Said (407-408), who is often considered to be the founding father of postcolonial studies, writes the following:

all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic [...] Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly exclusively, White, or Black, or Western, or Oriental.

Homi K. Bhabha supports this idea and proposes the concept of hybridity. Fay and Haydon explain his theory as follows:

Hybridity is the idea that identities are made up of all the different cultures with which they have contact. When two cultures or nations meet, ideas, language, and material goods are shared between them. That process of sharing forces them both to adapt and change. For this reason, there can be no “pure” Western or Eastern culture or nation. The act of creating a division creates an “Other” to engage with and to integrate (a process that denies its identity). (11).

As mentioned before, the concept is meant to undermine notions of ‘purity’ and superiority. In a cultural encounter between the subjugated and the dominant, subjugated peoples are able to “determine to varying extents what [cultural concept] they absorb into their own, how they use it, and what they make it mean” (Pratt 7). The only ‘problem’ with the concept of hybridity is that it implies that the meeting of two cultures is always between a dominant and a subordinate one. This seems to be outdated, as recently globalization has increasingly brought about new forms of transcultural contact, for example “post-diasporic societies and identities” (Helff 195). The older theory of *transculturation* which was put forward in 1940 by Fernando Ortiz also speaks exclusively about unequal relations between colonizers and the colonized and additionally, it fails to recognize that cultures are not just national cultures (Shmylev, n.p.). Frank Schulze-Engler explains: “they posit ‘cultures’ as separate entities and people as ‘belonging’ to these separate entities, thereby failing to acknowledge the fact that in an increasingly interconnected world, cultures are increasingly intertwined and people often constitute their cultural identities by drawing on more than one culture” (12). Ivaylo Shimlev suggests that the term *transculturality* is the most accurate one, which he describes as follows:

human cultures are open, internally differentiated and highly complex hybrid entities with blurry borders which constantly exchange cultural material and interpermeate each other to such an extent that individual cultural elements can no longer be labelled either entirely one’s own or completely foreign.

Although cultures are so connected and hybrid, it is important to note that this does not entail a homogenization of cultures and thereby the loss of cultural diversity. Quite on the contrary, transculturality observes that “cultural diversity increases high-exponentially with time because of the constant travel, borrowing, reworking, repurposing of cultural elements” (Shmlev, n.p.). Welsch states that “transcultural structures are those in which cultural elements, like millions of mosaic pieces, are constantly being re-arranged, reworked, added to and used to produce more and more functioning patterns” (ibid.). This means that, although collective identities still exist, belonging to these communalities is not fixed, as identities are contingent, flexible and in constant change. Nevertheless, knowing one’s identity is highly important because people make decisions based on their identities (Oyserman, Elmore and Smith 70-71). Cross and Gore note: “To be a person—to know oneself and one’s place in the world — one must be a part of groups (e.g., families, work groups, and communities) and must work through them, for such is the essence of being human” (588).

Transcultural adoptees, however, often feel as if they lack this knowledge as they do not know about their biogenetic cultural identity. Emotions of insecurity about one’s own identity and belonging to groups tend to come up when adoptees encounter people from their birth parents’ culture. As we will see in the analysis, this is also the case with Saroo Brierley, whose search for his consanguineous family is triggered by getting to know Indian students in college. This “‘search’ for biological family connections (literally, or as a psychological process) is common and not a sign of pathology or even a reflection of the love inherent within adoptive families” (Wilson 8). Adoptees do not only often try to find their birth families, but they also tend to imagine their alternative lives they would

have led had they been brought up in their 'original' families. This wondering is referred to as the "Ghost Kingdom" by the adoption psychotherapist Betty Jean Lifton. It can even lead to a feeling of a "doubled self" or "dual identity," the one within the adoptive family and the alternate one within the biogenetic family (*Ghost* 72). This will be more thoroughly discussed in the analysis of *The Language of Blood*.

The question why many adoptees feel an urge to connect with their birth families relates to the next Chapter about the idealization of the consanguineous family in the Western world.

2.3. The Idealization of the Consanguineous Family

The major aspect I focus on in this thesis is how transcultural adoptees construct their own cultural identities, given that they might be put into certain cultural groups that they know nothing about based on their physical features and biogenetics. McLeod claims:

Transcultural personhood is performatively constructed in real time, not a fact of natal or legal arrangements. Adoptees, especially the very youngest, do not mystically or reliably bring with them the inventories of one culture into another. They do not carry natal culture innately nor act as infant ambassadors for remotely headquartered cultural domains. As many adoption scholars have pointed out, the idea of 'birth culture' is an oxymoronic one which assumes the cultural provenance of one's birth constitutes an ever-present authentic origin of personhood (8).

The idea of "birth culture" that McLeod mentions is closely connected to the general idealization of the consanguineous family, which is a central topic in this paper and the focus of this Chapter. Biogenetic descent is associated with authenticity; "[t]he prizing of blood-lines, birthrights and national and cultural 'roots' has become the modern norm" (ibid.15). The cultural heritage of a child is considered to be "a vital and functional key to

the child's innate identity" (Cheng 66). McLeod suggests: "Transcultural adoptions offer particularly telling examples of how transcultural personhood might be formulated, experienced and legitimated" (9), implying that adoption narratives can present differing views from the predominant Western ideologies and can be approached through postcolonial theory.

Referring back to the concept of "birth culture," Toby Volkman explains: "In the absence of the mother's body, the longing for origins may be displaced onto the body of the nation and its imagined culture. The genetic lineage of the child is unknown, but the cultural heritage can be studied, celebrated, performed and embodied" (97). The communalities of ethnicity that are practiced in the child's biogenetic culture become role models. However, the cultural fragments that the child can adopt through studying the culture are translated and hybridized and can never be authentic (Homans 112-113). The reason why transcultural adoptees strive for belonging to their biogenetic cultural heritage is that in common Western ideologies "cultural identity [is] essentially consanguineous" (McLeod 17). Place of birth and biogenetic heritage "are regarded as constituting the true origins of self, anchor points of family and proper cultural and national identity" (ibid. 14). McLeod further argues:

For adoptees, growing up in a realm where consanguineous relations are the guarantors of racial and cultural identity and stabilizers of self has compelled many to think of themselves as incomplete, because they lack knowledge of their 'natural' beginnings and heritage from which they have been damagingly sundered (17).

It is fairly probable that the authors of the memoirs under analysis in this thesis feel, or have felt, somewhat incomplete without knowing their cultural heritage, as they have

sought to find their birth parents, and it is not far-fetched to suggest that most transcultural adoptees growing up in 'First World' countries have similar feelings. McLeod states: "More so than others, those impacted by adoption are acutely, sometimes obsessively concerned with matters of origins, blood-lines and natal culture" (26). Nancy Verrier has formulated a "primal wound" thesis which claims that adoptees experience an interruption in their "psychobiological continuum" because they are separated from their consanguineous family, which makes them emotionally scarred (29). This theory suggests that adoptees are pre-destined to live with trauma and behavioral difficulties and fails to recognize that their environment, which repeatedly deems them inauthentic, is responsible for their identity issues (McLeod 17). In fact, "the 'genealogical bewilderment' from which adoptees perennially are deemed to suffer, harmed by not knowing their biogenetic ancestry, is the product of the identitarian terrain in which they move, rather than an inevitable or inherent consequence of surrender" (Leighton 69 quoted in McLeod 20).

Not only adoptees, but everyone in the "adoption triad," including the birth parents as well as the adoptive parents, suffer from the biocentric norms of kinship. According to McLeod, "it is extremely difficult for those inward of the adoption triad to secure selfhood using identity's prevailing narrative resources" (21). Although birth mothers are usually "oppressed by unkind social circumstances," as we will learn in the next Chapter, they often live anxiously, as they are deemed "unnatural" for "abandoning" their own children (ibid. 16). This makes them feel deeply traumatized and "burdened with feelings of low self-esteem and unworthiness, and laden with secrets, shame, loss, and grief" (Fessler 152). The words of a birth mother that was interviewed by Ann Fessler prove the trauma

caused by the pernicious stigmatization; she said that she felt like an “unwilling accomplice in the kidnapping of her child” and like an illegal mother and never really whole (163). Once again, I want to emphasize that these issues are not naturally, inherently tied to adoption but occur due to biogenetic heredity being forthrightly connected to cultural identity. In McLeod’s words: “If identity must be a matter of biogenetic attachment to people, place, race, culture or nation, then each identity position in the transcultural adoption triad is inevitably characterized by broken lines of connection” (18). The last part of the adoption triad, the adoptive parents, might feel guilty for not being able to practice with their children the cultural heritage that they might think is inevitably handed down to them through their blood (Cheng 66-67). Vincent Cheng accurately identifies “the basically ethical impulse behind this urge for authenticity on the part of adoptive parents and adoption experts: the attempt to be sensitive to the issues of difference is an important, responsible, and honest response to the challenges of raising a foreign child” (79). Another reason why adoptive parents may feel emotionally freighted is that they might live in the fear that their children will want to find their birth parents and will prefer them over themselves (Lifton 75).

Whether adoption actually upholds or disrupts “the privileging of the biocentric filiation” is disputable. On the one hand, a mother giving her own flesh and blood away is against the common Western ideology regarding biogenetics, and therefore deemed “unreal, unnatural, pathological” (McLeod 16). On the other hand, adoption practices seem to mimic “real” biological families and thereby play along with Western standards (Sales 70). Hence, adoption is quite paradoxical; it is legitimate and lawful, but still perceived as “synthetic or second-hand” (McLeod 14-15). Adoption is both critical and complicit with

the idealization of the consanguineous family at the same time, creating “tension inherent in adoptive kinship” (Yngvesson 15).

Sara Dorow suggests another paradox of adoption; on the one hand, making a family is beautiful, on the other hand, adoption has a history of subjugation (3), which I will focus on in the next Chapter. McLeod argues that, considering the history and common mindset about adoption and also inside the adoption triad, its confirmation of the “primacy of biogenetic filiation” actually outweighs the disruption. In his view, adoption “upholds models of ‘natural’ kinship that have been secreted not expunged” (15). He also claims that “the voicing of opposition to transcultural adoption has often ended up paradoxically supporting the very conceptual vocabulary upon which the enforcing of transcultural adoptions has relied” (14). The “conceptual vocabulary” means colonial thinking that is still present even today, especially notions of cultural purity, nationalities as separate cultures and “the assumption that race carries culture or that culture is a matter of racial ancestry” (ibid.). These are also “the very ideas which have helped create neocolonial conditions of adoptability in the first place” (ibid. 19). The right for adoptees to have access to birth records has long been a point of debate; this right once again stabilizes the idea that birth certificates and birth records “are a vital and functional key to the child’s innate identity” (Cheng 66). Betty Jean Lifton, who is not only an adoption psychotherapist but also an adoptee and adoption rights campaigner, agrees that the search for biogenetic kinship is the only solution for adoptees to fill the empty void they are feeling. She compares finding out more about their cultural roots to awakening from their “Great Sleep” (71). Thus, even adoption activists embrace “the primacy of roots, race and natal origins as the essentials of self” (McLeod 19).

Whether or not adoptees identify with the idealization of consanguineous kinship, their feelings and social and political claims are valid and should be honored (Homans 18). Nevertheless, the emotional struggles and difficulties with defining one's identity of people inside the adoption triad that are caused by the assumption that birth, blood, and natal origins are essential factors of selfhood, suggest that alternative narratives are required. Otherwise, adoption facilitates nothing but "pathology and paradox" (McLeod 20). McLeod calls adoptees who try to build new, abnormal ways of thinking of adoption and identifying oneself "adoptive beings," in contrast to "being adopted" (23). A reconditioning and resequencing of adoptive identities is desirable, although bloodlines do not have to be neglected altogether but should just be demythologized and not be perceived "as the primary substance of inherent cultural identity and personhood" anymore (ibid. 26). In fact, bloodlines are "one filament of the polyform personhood that adoptive being proposes" (ibid.). They do matter, but "differently to the ways we are often schooled to think they matter" (ibid. 25). Biogenetic and adoptive models of kinship should not be "fated to be forever counterpointed as nature and nurture", but should collaborate with each other, as McLeod (27) suggests. The problem with transcultural adoption is that it usually "moves us away from familiar trajectories but provides no models" (Yngvesson). Adoption writing, however, is able to make us think about how consanguineous heritage can be revised and thought of differently (McLeod 26).

2.4. Transcultural Adoption as Subjugation

Adoption has a long and quite interesting history that should not be forgotten. It is normal for children to be raised by unbiological parents "in most human societies, from the Maori of Aotearoa in New Zealand to the Namibian tribes of southern Africa" (McLeod 2).

Adoption is also very likely to have been present already in the earliest societies of modern humanity: the classical antiquity, biblical times, post-classical Rome, the origins of the Muslim world and the European Middle Ages (Conn 26).

Looking at adoption in the last century in First World locations, adoptees have often come from working-class or lower-middle-class women, while adoptive parents have predominantly been “working-class professionals.” The birth mothers of the “sundered” children have often broken some kind of prevailing moral belief, like having unmarried sex, interethnic sex or sex with someone from a different caste, which was labeled as sinful, shameful, and illegitimate. This meant that they could not expect any support if they had their babies, neither from their families or communities nor from the state, which often made adoption the only solution to their social problem. Adoption almost exclusively came with a legal contract and a legal transfer of responsibility of the child that was irreversible. In the legal adoption documents, the identities of all participants were usually anonymized as to make a relationship between birth mother and child impossible (McLeod 2-3). Barbara Yngvesson calls these kinds of adoptions, where a “permanent and exclusive relationship of adoptive kinship cannot be ‘undone’,” strong adoptions (231). Birth mothers are often coerced into giving their offspring away through social pressure, as a “strategy of survival.” This choice “ultimately benefits the state in the form of hard currency that adopters from the global North willingly pay to satisfy a desire” (Brian 179). There are even examples in which women have purposefully been put into precarious situations and their children were simply stolen by others in a higher position of power. For example, in postcolonial Ireland’s catholic hierarchy (20th century), unmarried women were forced to have their children in “mother and baby homes” run by

the Catholic Church “and then work for at least two years after to pay for their keep – to construct a source of adoptable children, many of whom were adopted by Catholic families overseas in return for a suitable financial donation” (McLeod 12).

Thus, adoption itself reflects many layers of subjugation, especially of women. *Transcultural* adoption, however, adds another layer. Ina Seethaler speaks of a resemblance between transnational adoption and marrying off daughters: “the exchange in women lie in business transactions between people in power” (84). In transnational adoption, the situation is the same except that children, instead of women, are the ones being exchanged. It is “a systematic exchange of money and bodies in which *children* do not have full rights to themselves” (Min 25-26, emphasis in original), the reasons for which are “[c]apitalist demands of ownership” according to Seethaler (84).

In fact, historical events of transcultural adoption in the last century have almost always been involved with imperialistic thoughts or matters of subjugation. In 1938, there was a terrible genocide (some may also call it an ethnocide) of Kurds in the province of Dersim in Turkey. The Kurds are an ethnic minority in Turkey and make up around 20% of the population. In 1937, Turkey started an air attack on Dersim, dropping heavy bombs, in an attempt to “purify” the region. In February 1938 they then slaughtered thousands of people and relocated some of them to western Turkey to assimilate them to Turkish culture (Aras 57-59). Women and children were hiding in caves; however, they were found and “the orphans and other children were given to Turkish families as adoptees” (ibid. 60). The documentary film *The Missing Girls of Dersim* “gives the story of 150 ‘lost’ small girls who were forcibly taken from their families and given as adoptees to armed forces members, high state officials and Turkish families” (ibid. 60-61). A very similar

event happened in 1958 in the United States. In the Indian Adoption Project Native children were stolen from reservations and were relocated to white families, “away from their primary cultural and filial networks” (McLeod 11-12). Similarly, “First Nations children were taken from their parents and adopted by settler-descended Canadian families” from the 1960s to the 1980s (ibid. 11).

In the 1960s in Great Britain, a large amount of black or mixed-race adoptees appeared because of the social constraints against Black people due to racism. Many Black people had moved from the colonies to the UK after the second World War to find work and faced a very racist atmosphere there. The problem was that the racist attitudes that existed in the UK, even within the welfare services which tried to place adoptees, made it hard to find adoptive parents for the children. This started the British Adoption Project in London in 1965, “which attempted to place approximately sixty British-born adoptees of black, Asian or mixed-race ancestry with adoptive parents, the vast majority of whom were white” (ibid.). According to Lois Raynor, British adoption agencies “found it difficult, if not impossible, to meet the requests to arrange for the adoption of these babies” (24). The project was supposed to improve adoption services and prevent this problem from happening in the future (ibid. 23). In 1972 in the United States the National Association of Black Social Workers launched a project with aims distinct from those of the British Adoption Project. It assessed the adoption of black children into white families as deculturation and assimilation and ultimately managed to “slow down the rate of interracial placements” (Briggs 56). This seems to have motivated the Association of Black Workers and Allied Professionals in Britain to take a stance against transracial adoption as well. One of their main activists John Small claims that the black community

in the country is crucial in fighting racism and inequality (133). He is concerned that transracial adoption would deliberately put the culture of Black peoples in Britain at risk, because he believes that black adoptees in white families would be culturally and emotionally impoverished and moreover, that this would “inculcate the dominant attitudes and values of white society at large” (135). Furthermore, black adoptees are supposed to be incapable to deal with the racist society on their own, due to being brought up by white parents (ibid.). As a consequence, the 1989 “Children Act” in Britain “required local authorities to be much more mindful of religious, racial, cultural and linguistic background when organizing the provision of care” (McLeod 13). These ideas of John Small, and consequently of the Association of Black Workers and Allied Professionals and the “Children Act” in Britain are, however, somewhat conflictive with postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy’s argument (xii) that racial and cultural similarities of parents and children being indicators for better parenting is a myth. It is therefore interesting to consider that both the upbringing of a child of a *different* race, as Small suggests, as also the preference of raising a child of a *similar* race and culture can be deemed acculturation, as McLeod (15) claims. It seems that transcultural adoption can be viewed from different angles and is always looked at critically no matter the circumstances.

Historically, adoption practices have reflected the common Western idea that race, nationality and biogenetics would be connected to identity, as “abandoned” children have been tried to be matched with culturally and racially similar adoptive families in order to “mirror normative consanguineous families” and disguise the child’s biogenetic culture (ibid. 15). This also lies under the assumption that cultural and racial similarity between parents and child automatically leads to better parenting. Paul Gilroy (x) negates this idea,

and further challenges the notion that “race is culture and identity rather than profane politics and complex history” (xii). As previously mentioned, this is somewhat conflicting with the ideas of John Small (135), who does think that black parents are more suitable in teaching black children how to deal with the racism of society and interprets the upbringing of black children in white families as assimilation. Dorow claims that East-Asian children are more likely to be adopted in the United States in comparison to black children, because “black difference [is constructed] as less assimilable difference” (42). Moreover, Chinese children might be given up for adoption “only” because of a gendered prejudice (boys are of higher cultural value), but African children may come from criminal and poor contexts. These kinds of thoughts occur in the Western mind because of a much greater racism towards black people than other ethnicities, that is stemming from slavery. The fact that Asian children are preferred over black ones, hence, “play[s] off the construction of abject black America and failed black-white relations” (ibid.).

Continuing with the problematic history of transcultural adoption, in the last few decades of the twentieth century there have been unusually high rates of adoptions from Asia to the United States. The first reason is China’s one-child policy and the second is the big adoption event “Operation Babylift” in 1975. At the end of the Vietnam War, 2,000 children were taken from Saigon to the US, without any proof that they were orphans. According to Laura Briggs, this operation “was warmly embraced by liberals and conservatives alike as an opportunity to salvage something from the horror of the war” (156). This reflects the “white savior complex,” which is rooted in the belief that white people are superior and have the power to solve the problems of marginalized communities. Knowing about the cruel history of adoption events, and in particular of transcultural adoption, we must

recognize that they are “the intimate face of colonization, racism, militarism, imperialism and globalization” (Oparah, Shin and Trenka 7). Especially at the end of the twentieth century, transcultural adoption served “as a key political battleground” to fight, and exercise power over, minorities and “subaltern” peoples (McLeod 12).

Transcultural adoption is therefore a contributor in bringing about “neocolonial fortunes of national polycultures, and globalized international relations” (McLeod 6). It is complicit with cultural inequalities, matters of subjugations and imperialism. Transcultural adoption reminds us of the “deeply uneven terrain of transcultural contact that structures local and global relations, as well as of the stubbornly insoluble discourses of filial nativism” (ibid. 9). Additionally, racialization is the reason “why only some children are deemed adoptable” (ibid. 3). As we have discussed, culturally distinct children are less likely to be adopted, especially black children; and social stigmatization is why “particular mothers surrender them and certain families receive them” (ibid.). As I have mentioned in the beginning of the Chapter, birth mothers are often shamed for the circumstances of their pregnancies and most often come from lower social classes, while adoptive parents are usually “middle-class professionals” (ibid. 2).

According to McLeod: “wherever there has been intercultural subjugation in the world, [...] adoptable children have been produced” (6). They have been produced together with “narratives of rescue and utilitarian selflessness, of a child’s ‘best interests’ and the virtues of ‘colour-blindness’ pitted against the vices of race thinking” (ibid.), which is meant to legitimize transcultural adoption. These depict the “white-savior complex” that I have mentioned earlier, which portrays a “white savior” as a leader who rescues people of color from disease, poverty, or oppression (Vera and Gordon qtd. In Rodesiler and Garland).

The narratives are always set up from the white protagonist's perspective and a Western viewpoint. The protagonist usually develops into an "anti-racist hero," who is "battling white racists" (Rodesiler and Garland). McLeod (4) accurately explains the role of the complex in transcultural adoption:

Many popular and prevailing representations of transcultural adoption generally want to tell a pious story of the global North as involved in humanitarian acts of rescue, saving anguished children from a future of impoverishment overseas; or for facilitating transcultural families that offer a palatable, saccharine vision of post-racial human relations, intimate or otherwise, so that 'colour-blind' filiation or 'rainbow' families are applauded for challenging racism (rather than criticized for evading it).

Cynthia Callahan suggests that this "rescue narrative is magnified by the current prominence of transnational adoption among celebrities, as the move from abject 'orphan' to privileged child of celebrity parents enacts a kind of rags-to-riches narrative of salvation that obscures the more complex politics of adoption" (36). A similar example of a white savior complex narrative would be the popular movie *The Blind Side*, which "despite its feel-good trappings, only serves to reinforce racial stereotypes and existing societal power structures" (Rodesiler and Garland). The white main protagonist is Leigh Anne, a wealthy woman who adopts, and thereby 'saves', a homeless and illiterate black teenager called Michael. He then receives a football scholarship to attend college and even ends up playing professionally in an American football team. The problematic part of the movie is that it is depicted as though Leigh Anne's efforts of 'saving' him are the only reason for Michael's success. Luke Rodesiler and Kathy Garland claim that a white person saving, protecting or helping a black person is generally no rarity in American cinema. Of course, not only in cinema, but also in literature in Western locations, similar narrations of transcultural adoption can be found. McLeod (5) suggests that they often reveal "an

everyday condition of neocolonial agency and postcolonial betrayal, of racist profiling and misogynistic authoritarianism.” Western peoples often think of themselves as being more civilized than the rest of the world, which stems from the “intellectual model produced by the period of European intellectual history known as the Enlightenment” (Fay and Haydon 42). However, “modernity is haunted by its colonial past, because its progress and civility rely on often brutal colonization” (ibid.). Thus, the history of unjust colonial and racist adoption practices deeply influences how we perceive transcultural adoptive families.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot build new, hopeful, alternative narratives of adoption. Transcultural adoption can actually be seen “as an opportunity for dissident production not normative reproduction” (McLeod 6). It could possibly resist normative ways of prescribing cultural identities and belonging. According to McLeod, there have already been some outstanding narratives of transcultural adoption which critiqued “filial norms and opened up alternative ways of imagining families in transcultural, non-biocentric, post-racial and queer terms, amongst others” (5). Not only for adoptees, but also for all others, transcultural adoption offers an opportunity to contemplate the self and identity and to break free from prescribed protocols of behavior or ‘national’ cultures and from the idealization of consanguineous kinship (ibid. 32-33). Margaret Homans agrees that “adoption raises the most vital questions about human identity and the value and meaning of individual human lives” (1).

I will discuss in what ways the two chosen memoirs are compliant with, or critique, common Western notions of identity and bloodlines in Chapter 3.3.

3. Analysis of *The Language of Blood* and *A Long Way Home*

3.1. Truth and Narrative in Transcultural Adoptee Life Writing

As discussed in Chapter 1, the main expectations of autobiographical writing are that bio data of authors and narrators are in accordance, and that the narrators consequently make truth claims about their own life experiences. For transcultural adoptees, it is often impossible to meet those anticipations, as their names might be changed through adoption, and information about their birthplace and date might get lost. It is also more complicated for them to make truth claims about their lives, when the beginning part of it might be unknown, than it already is for other life writers, who may have to rely on their memories or sayings of family members. Trenka herself states in her second memoir *Fugitive Visions* that transcultural adoptees are “people with whole sections of their lives missing” (88). Wills claims that they “are faced with contradictions and prohibitions about themselves,” and that “they resort to fictionalizing their pasts in an effort to organize and control the various narratives that may otherwise deny them a comprehensible sense of identity” (57). Even though fictionalizations practically break the conventions of autobiographical texts, it seems probable to find such fictionalizations in life writing of adoptees, as it is sometimes the only ‘truth’ these writers know.

3.1.1. Truth and Narrative in *The Language of Blood*

Jane Jeong Trenka’s memoir *The Language of Blood* deviates from traditional autobiographical writing not only by including numerous fictional elements, but it also challenges further conventions. First of all, her narrative has a “non-linear and fragmented style” which Wills accurately describes as “scrapbook form” (45). Her memoir is

“strategically composed of a combination of fairy tales, dreams, stories, histories, intertexts, inventions, and confessions” (ibid. 59). Furthermore, Trenka applies “diverse tones, perspectives and literary voices” (ibid. 46). This is already apparent in the first few dozen pages of her writing. She starts her memoir with a letter from her biological mother, then tells the reader a short Korean tale before switching to her “narrative I” currently located on her “roots trip” (ibid. 47) in South Korea. Then she includes a section structured like a play script, starring Trenka, her adoptive parents and her sister Carol in the car ride right after the adoption, in which Trenka was still a six-month old baby. In the next scene, the narrative takes on a third-person perspective, focalizing on Trenka’s adoptive parents and describing their feelings of being unable to conceive and deciding to adopt. The shifts continue for the rest of the book and are mostly “without warning to the reader” (ibid.).

A strategy Trenka uses to explain her identity is sometimes directly taking on the perspective of various of her autobiographical ‘I’s in different ages and life situations, instead of continuously using the *‘I’-now* that is telling experiences in retrospective and sometimes even comments on them with the knowledge of the contemporary self, as would be expected of a life narrative (Smith and Watson 71). For instance, Trenka once takes on the perspective of her five-year-old self, using a “restricted narrative voice”, which means that she presents an experience with the “past information as a hero” and not with “the present information as narrator” (Genette 198-199). She wonders why her biological parents gave her and her sister away, contemplating whether they looked ugly. She then utters this question to her adoptive mother, who reacts by standing up and leaving. Trenka explains how she feels sorry for making her mother angry, and is

overcome with emotions of sadness and loneliness, using the restricted narrative voice of her five-year-old self (*Language of Blood* 24-25):

I know I've made my mommy angry. I want to run and say that I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I made you mad, I won't ask again. But the house is empty. Who will listen to my words? Who will forgive me? I'm left alone in the rocking chair, legs too short to touch the floor, legs too short to make the chair rock. Who could love such a stupid child who says such stupid things? There must be something wrong with me. I must be rotten, truly bad. [...] I must be very, very good so my mommy will keep me. I won't ask any more stupid questions. I won't do anything to make her mad.

Although it is usual for life writers to present “an objectified and remembered ‘I,’ the memory of a younger version of a self,” it is not common that this narrated ‘I’ “directly experienc[es] that past at the time of writing the narrative or its telling,” (Smith and Watson 73), as is the case in this and some other passages of *The Language of Blood*.

As another unconventional method of life writing, Trenka sometimes utilizes a third-person perspective for her narrative, for example when she presents her biogenetic mother's accident that brings her to the hospital and leads to the discovery of her cancer. Within this section, she switches focalization between different people; her biological mother, her sisters Myoung-Hee and Eun-Mi, and the doctor. The passage ends with Eun-Mi calling friends and family to inform them about her mother's severe sickness, which connects back cleverly to Trenka herself, who has most probably received one of those calls. This narrative style arguably helps Trenka establish her identity in the text, and especially her relationship with other characters. The same could be said for some passages towards the end of the memoir, in which Trenka directly speaks to her Korean mother, as if the book was written solely for her.

However, there are also larger passages in the memoir that have a more conventional autobiographical narrative style, in which Trenka uses the 'I' - now that is reading the 'I' - *then* (Smith and Watson 71). She does this increasingly more towards the end of her text, just as her narrative becomes increasingly more chronological, which could be a sign of the positive development of the security of her identity. When she boards the plane for her first trip to Korea, she adds flashbacks of experiences further in the past – how she had never travelled before because her adoptive parents did not like travelling, and how her college friends had seen so much more of the world. Nonetheless, on the same pages and the following ones thematizing her flight and arrival in Korea, she repeatedly interrupts her narrative with small passages from the International Social Service and the Child Welfare League of America, which describe the circumstances of the arrival of transcultural adoptees to America, for instance: *“By the time they arrive – even those who have been able to eat, drink and sleep – they are thoroughly fatigued. Some are dazed and apathetic, almost ignoring their new parents.”* (111). Hereby, Trenka establishes a connection between her trip from Korea to the United States as a baby, and her current 'return' trip, utilizing yet another extraordinary but effective way of presenting her thoughts and feelings.

Wills suggests that the use of different literary expressions in Trenka's memoir reflect the “multiple and conflicting narratives that shape real life adoptees' identities” (60). She further argues that the “non-linear structure mimics the way [Trenka] views transnational, transracial Asian adoption as something that brings past events into collision with the present in jarring and intrusive ways” (ibid. 47). Trenka even directly reflects on this in her own narrative: “On frequent mornings, during the three or four seconds between waking

and emerging from the residue of a dream, there is a moment of disorientation that collapses time and swirls the years together so that my present is indistinguishable from my past” (*Language of Blood* 80). Trenka hereby implies that her early childhood experiences of losing her consanguineous kin influence her identity constantly; her “past is difficult to restrict, control, and separate from the contemporary authorial moment” (Wills 51). Hence, she challenges the “normative notion of life narrative as a retrospective narrative about a separable and isolatable past that is fully past,” (Smith and Watson 71) and provides an alternative thereof.

The scrapbook form of *The Language of Blood* hints at Trenka’s dual identity in the text and points out the “incongruence between those different selves” (Wills 48). The literary expressions inserted in Trenka’s life narrative, such as letters, theatre plays, tales, or even a crossword puzzle are scraps that shape her identity as an adoptive being and need to be put together in order to make sense and allow her to explain who she is (ibid.). Especially the crossword puzzle “visually presents the feelings of confusion and incompatibility that shape her life in a more forceful manner than would have been possible through narrative alone” (Seethaler 94). Her aforementioned dual identity will be further discussed in Chapter 3.2.7.

In addition, Trenka’s unconventional literary choices reflect her “struggles against narrow ideas of what is ‘authentic’ and ‘the norm’” (ibid. 87) within the genre of life writing. Her text clearly cannot depict what would be considered a typically Western, retrospective autobiography in the first place, as she is not “racially white” and “male” (Whitlock 3) and “society marks her as the fragmented ‘Other’” (Seethaler 88). Trenka is aware that she represents a subaltern group and wants to mirror that through reinterpreting genre and

style. She deliberately breaks out of “the boundaries and frames in which the adoptee is placed” (Jerng 155) and therefore inevitably molds “autobiographical conventions to fit the extraordinary parameters of her life” (Seethaler 88). Thereby, Trenka manages to portray “how adoptees' identities do not fit into any neatly definable category” (ibid.).

Her narrative style clearly breaks the expectation of truth claims in life writing and challenges this convention, highlighting the fragility of truth, especially for transcultural adoptees. The theatre play in the beginning of the text in which Trenka is still a freshly adopted baby, for example, is clearly fictional, as she could not have any recollection of this moment, and further the title “A play for imagining” suggests the situation being an imagination. By integrating the unconventional format of a theatre play into life writing, Trenka emphasizes that she is not making a truth claim here nor is describing something from her own memory. The next few pages in which Trenka depicts her adoptive parents' thoughts before she was even born through a third-person perspective are also fictional, since it is impossible for her to know what her parents were thinking and feeling. A similar example would be the earlier described section of Trenka's consanguineous mother's discovery of her cancer; Trenka was not with her biological family in Korea but in the United States at the time, which means she could not possibly know what happened there in such great detail.

Wills claims that Trenka's memoir “*exceeds* the typical labours of life writing” (55, emphasis added) with her unconventional text. As mentioned before, transcultural adoptees typically are unaware about major aspects of their lives, and thus tend to fictionalize them. Wills explains: “These fictionalized memories become invented truths that shape adoptee protagonists' understandings of who they are and how they came into

being” (44). As we have learned from a passage quoted earlier, Trenka has already contemplated why her biogenetic parents gave her away as a small child. Some years later, she creates a story to provide herself with an answer:

I made up my own explanation, one that made sense to a child. I decided that my mother was a beautiful princess. Something terrible had happened to her [...], and her children were taken away. I drew pictures of her inside her tower, where she was trapped, so far away from me. Of course she missed me and thought about me constantly (44).

Thereby, Trenka creates memories based on false information, fabrications, and deceit, but these invented stories are crucial components of how she constructs her own life story (Wills 59).

After meeting her Korean family, Trenka is able to replace some of those fictionalizations with the stories she is being told by them. On the same page, she writes: “Later I discovered how close to the truth I was. My mother was not a princess, but she was born into a kind of aristocracy” (44). In fact, her biological mother feels the need to repeat her own story to her daughter again and again through different translators. Trenka realizes: “I think she hoped that this act of storytelling would redeem her, that through the telling people could see what she wanted to be and not what she had become” (115). Trenka clearly states that those stories become part of her identity: “I felt her [=Korean mother’s] bravery seeping [...] into my own stories, merging with them, transforming me into her daughter” (117). However, there are still things about her Korean family Trenka’s narrative ‘I’ never really gets to know, as her “sisters do not like to talk about the sad stories of the past” (49).

According to Wills, life stories can be intentionally made up when authors do not have accurate information about themselves, but they are still considered autobiographical

because authors believe them to be true (56). Stanley Fish also believes that autobiographers cannot lie because whatever they say is still a representation of their own truth, whether they are aware of it or not (qtd. In Smith and Watson 15). Thus, "Trenka continues to uphold what she believes is the significance of truth" throughout her memoir (Wills 57). Mark Jerng claims that Trenka "frames her life in terms of 'facts' and reality just as much as she frames it in terms of fairy tales or dreams and no framework is 'truer' than the other" (153). She thereby demonstrates that "life writing can arise from the untangling of false truths, desired truths, myths, and interpretations" (Wills 57).

It is apparent that truth as in the traditional sense in autobiographies is not Trenka's priority (Seethaler 88), as the authenticity of the letters she includes is never discussed. It is never really communicated by the autobiographical 'I' whether the letter from her Korean mother at the beginning of the text is the exact same one her real 'I' received. It does seem very probable, because there are several grammar mistakes. However, we also do not know whether the form of the letter was modified for the memoir, it could have been originally handwritten, for example. By looking at the spelling and grammar of the letter Jane wrote to her biological mother as a child, it can be said that it is even more likely for this text to have been modified, even beyond its format. Although it is also unclear what Trenka's age was at the time, we can guess she was in second grade, as the section before was set during that time, and it is unlikely that a child of that age would not commit a single spelling or grammatical error. Nevertheless, Wills states that it is "pointless to try to evaluate Trenka [...] on the basis of [her] reliability or the truthfulness of [her] descriptions of [herself] and [her] li[fe], since truth seems to slip through [her] fingers with each grasp [she] make[s] towards solving the mysteries of [her] pre-adoptive

past[...] and origin[...]” (57). Moreover, Trenka “specifically sets out to show how truth is constructed and can deceive, even in an autobiograph[ical inscription]” (Seethaler 94).

Trenka “begins to record her story as a gift to her biological mother and as a way of understanding the different narratives she has encountered during her roots quest in Korea” (Wills 55). She reflects on the process of writing her memoir within it:

I have made it my task to reconstruct the text of a family with context clues, and my intent is this: to trust in the mysterious; to juxtapose the known with the unknown; to collect the overlooked, the debris – stones, broken mirrors, and abandoned things. With these I will sew a new quilt of memory and imagination, each stitch a small transformation, each stitch my work of mourning. (150)

What Trenka “mourns” are what she perceives as her losses — a close connection with her birth family and her other self, Kyong-Ah, who has been abolished by her adoption (Wills 55).

At the close of *The Language of Blood*, Trenka writes that official documents are not necessarily more truthful than personal narratives. She questions the notion that these documents are the only means of identifying one's origins and suggests that they only provide partial truths (232). While it is important for life writing that official biological data of the real ‘I’ and the autobiographical ‘I’ match, this is not so easy to achieve for transcultural adoptees. In 2006, Trenka faced an issue while applying for a visa as her legal birth date did not match the documents provided by her orphanage which revealed that adoption agencies may alter personal histories, physical descriptions, and identities to facilitate international adoptions. Trenka discovered that her orphanage had falsified her birth date to increase her chances of adoption and had hidden the abuse she had suffered from her father and her thereby caused poor health. The agency had also made

false promises to Trenka's birth mother by promising her that her daughters would be sent to wealthy Dutch lawyers (Chan, n.p.).

3.1.2. Truth and Narrative in *A Long Way Home*

Saroo Brierley's life story as protagonist in *A Long Way Home* also shows how transcultural adoptees often lack personal background information. Brierley does not know the 'truth' about his own name, nor his age or his hometown in the text. At about five to six years of age when he gets lost, he has no idea about his last name or birthdate, and he calls his hometown "Ginestlay," a place which either no one seems to know of or no one understands. His only official data he *thinks* he is certain of is his first name Saroo. On the passport that he receives for his flight to Australia after the Brierleys chose to adopt him, it is stated that he was born in Kolkata, the city he was found in, although he knows this to be untrue. For his birthdate, the Indian authorities chose the day he arrived at the orphanage six years earlier, because six was his estimated age.

Although the truth is not tangible for Brierley in the first place, he does have the intention of making his narrative as truthful as possible. Unlike Trenka, he maintains a contemporary 'I' narrating in retrospective. Furthermore, he clarifies in the beginning of *A Long Way Home* that he relies on his memories as a child for large parts of his memoir and admits that he is not completely certain of them. He writes the following, referring specifically to his narrative about his time in India before being adopted:

Not surprisingly, there are gaps here and there. Sometimes I'm unsure of details, such as the order in which incidents occurred, or how many days passed between them. And it can be difficult for me to separate what I thought and felt then, as a child, from what I've come to think and feel over the course of the twenty-seven years that followed. Although repeated revisiting and searching the past for clues might have disturbed some of the evidence, much of my childhood experience remains vivid in my memory. (12-13)

Through his words, Brierley reveals how truth is generally fragile, even in life writing, as emotions can mix and merge between past and contemporary selves, hence we may never really have full access to our past emotions (Smith and Watson), especially regarding the ones so far away as our early childhood memories. Of course, remembering events must be even more difficult if we cannot talk to the people who experienced the situations with us to recall and complement them together.

Except the prologue which serves as a teaser to the moment of Brierley finding his birth mother again, and the first Chapter which constitutes an introduction, the rest of the text is chronological and homogenous in style and narrative perspective. Unlike Trenka, Brierley does not provide any fictionalizations for missing information of his past, which might be due to their distinct ages at the time of being separated from their consanguineous kinship. Brierley was around six years old when getting lost which is why he has memories about his family, while Trenka was only six months old when she arrived in the US. Brierley relies *solely* on his memories and forgoes third person narratives and restricted voices. He rather supports his truth claims by providing real pictures with explanations, such as family photographs or even pictures of documents. For instance, there are pictures of the lost notice of Saroo the Indian Society for Sponsorship and Adoption (ISSA) ran in local newspapers, the photo book his adoptive parents sent to him while he was still in the orphanage, his first passport, or the map he drew together with his mum of his hometown. While Trenka chose not to include pictures of the letters that form part of her memoir, but modified them to fit her format, Brierley chose original pictures, which suggests that he places more importance on truth claims. He also frequently makes comments within his narrative to clarify when he is uncertain of

something. For example, Brierley cannot remember exactly what happened the night he got lost, when he found himself alone in a moving train. Realizing that he had lost his brother and was now going to a foreign place by himself and that the doors were locked which meant that he had to stay in the train moving away farther and farther must have been such a traumatic experience for him that he seems to have repressed some of his feelings and thoughts he had experienced then. Explaining this story in his narrative, he writes “I’ve often wondered exactly what I was thinking right then,” (47) and “I don’t recall exactly what I did in that moment” (48). Moreover, when there is some information he does not remember himself but was told by someone else, he directly mentions this as well. For instance, he recounts his mother informing him that some individuals made racist comments towards him during his childhood, but due to his young age or limited English abilities at the time, he was unable to comprehend it. Thus, it seems very important for Brierley that his narrative is deemed sincere and believable.

Nonetheless, it is remarkable how he is even able to remember so much about his early childhood. In his memoir, Brierley states that he had a “determination not to forget” and “couldn’t let the[... memories] go” (9). Brierley deliberately made an effort to remember everything about his life in India right from soon after he was adopted. Although he initially kept all his memories to himself, he had memory flashes during the night, and there were several triggers that made his emotional memories reappear. Those triggers were watching sad Hindi movies, listening to sad music, seeing or hearing babies cry, which reminded him of his little sister Shekila, or generally seeing families with several children as this “reminded [him] of what [he]’d lost” (10). Luckily, Brierley’s adoptive mother was very helpful in preserving his memories. Brierley explains: “[s]he suggested that together

we draw a map of the place I was from[... w]e returned to the map and refined it as my English improved” (11). She also took notes of Brierley’s stories from India, as did his teacher, to make sure his memories were preserved.

Although Brierley kept a large number of memories about his early childhood in India, there are still so many ‘truths’ about his original identity and his biological family that are unknown to him. He does not know his real birthday, he does not know neither the real name nor location of his hometown, and he is unaware which train took him to Kolkata from which station. A question he asks himself is also what happened to his brother Guddu that night. As the family was poor, Brierley’s two older brothers, Guddu and Kallu, who were around fourteen and twelve when Saroo got lost, had to do everything they could to get food or a little bit of money. Most of the time they would stay around the nearby town Berampur, because they said “it was easier to find money and food there,” (43) and they got around by jumping on and off trains. One night, Brierley felt old and strong enough to join his brother Guddu on one of his trips to Berampur. Ultimately, however, he was too tired to work during the night and wanted to sleep on the train station, so his brother told him to wait for him there and that he would be back in a little while. Brierley woke up, still alone on the train station and decided to wait in the empty carriage standing still in the station, thinking his brother would come and find him soon. He fell asleep there again and upon waking up found himself in a traumatic situation of having lost his family as a little boy. Thus, Brierley often thinks about how terrible his brother Guddu must have felt realizing that his younger brother was gone and searching for him. Brierley’s search for his biological family therefore inevitably also becomes a quest of finally finding some answers to the unknown ‘truths’ and mysteries of his early life.

His well-preserved memories lead him to finding out these truths in the end. Brierley is able to remember some significant features of the train station that he remembers as “Berampur” where he was lost: an overpass and a water tower. Furthermore, he knows that in the surrounding area of “Berampur” (which is actually called Burhanpur) and his hometown (which he later found out to be Khandwa), there were “a range of hills nearby,” and the landscape seemed like “a patchwork of farmland around dusty towns” (150). He thus starts his search for his origins using Google Earth in the lookout for a similarly looking train station with some town similarly spelled to “Ginestlay” (which is how he remembers the name of his birthplace) and “Berampur” nearby. He knows from the beginning that his search would be a “mammoth task” (151) and feels insecure because “[s]tations might have been refurbished or rebuilt, roads changed nearby, towns grown” (150). After searching on and off for months, he ends up “let[ting] the whole thing slide,” (151) due to his fear of failure from not making much progress and feels like “perhaps [he] needed to accept that the past was past and move on” (152).

However, one day he decides to resume his search in a more strategic and methodical way; he does not look for names of towns anymore, but first checks all train lines that go out of Kolkata. He estimates to have been on the train for 12-15 hours and finds out that the train probably put back around 1000 kilometers in that time, which means that he is able to rule out places that are too far from and too close to Kolkata. Brierley writes that this intellectual challenge and emotional quest “quickly became compelling” (158) and that “[w]eeks and then months passed with [him] spending hours at a time every couple of nights on the laptop” (160). When he finally finds his hometown it has taken eight months of intense searching. It is actually pure luck that he stumbles upon Burhanpur on

Google Earth, because the place is much farther away from Kolkata than 1000 kilometers. Although he is able to find the train station where he was lost, he still cannot find his nearby hometown, which must sound somewhat like “Ginestlay” on Google Earth. When he follows the path from Burhanpur to the train station of his hometown that he distinctly remembers, he finds Khandwa Railway Station and later decides to ask for “Ginestlay” in a facebook group called “Khandwa: My Home Town” and consequently finally finds the place: it is “Ganesh Talai,” a part of Khandwa (183). When Brierley comes back to the place as a 30-year-old man, he writes “I found that being in Ganesh Talai brought back a lot of memories about my life there, and talking with my family brought back even more” and it “helped me to fill in some of the gaps in the picture of my early life” (217). Although he never mentions whether he finds out about his real birthdate, he does find out surprisingly by his mother that his name is not really Saroo but Sheru, and the devastating news that his brother Guddu never returned the night of Saroo’s getting lost either, but that his dead body was found. Hence, Brierley will never know the truth of what happened to Guddu that night – whether he died before even realizing that his brother was gone, or died searching for him.

One more unresolved ‘truth’ that keeps puzzling Brierley is which train it was that took him to Kolkata as a child. He remembers that he stayed on the same platform and did not change trains but one of those two memories must be false, as the trains going from Berampur to Kolkata depart from a different platform than the one he was sleeping at. At his first visit to his hometown in India, Brierley takes the same train ride again, which is in fact 1680 kilometers long and takes 29 hours, way more than anticipated.

Comparing truth claims in the two memoirs, we can see that it is possible to apply a conventional autobiographical narrative style, as in *A Long Way Home*, for transcultural adoptees, even though they might not be able to tell the truth about unknown parts of their lives in the first place.

3.2. Belonging and Identity Issues

As discussed in the Chapter on cultural identity, it is built through the belonging to groups. In order to investigate transcultural adoptee identities, we must therefore look at their sense of belonging to their adoptive families and the countries in which they live: Australia and the United States in the cases of *A Long Way Home* and *The Language of Blood*. While Saroo Brierley feels very welcomed and loved in his new household, Jane Jeong Trenka often feels like a shadow of the real white children her American parents could have had, unwanted, or like merely chosen from a shop. Furthermore, Trenka feels alienated and has to deal with racial marginalization, which influences her identity formation severely. In this Chapter I will start with examining how the life writers depict their connections with their adoptive families and the culture in which they grew up, along with the effects these have on shaping their identities. Additionally, I will describe their feelings towards their biological heritage and families.

Later in this Chapter, I would like to discuss the identity definitions and struggles of Jane Jeong Trenka and Saroo Brierley in their memoirs. We have already learned that Trenka creates fictionalizations about her biological family and therefore creates what Lifton calls the “Ghost Kingdom” – an alternate identity for herself as part of her consanguineous kin. Lifton says that this may cause a “doubled self” or “dual identity” and this holds true in

Trenka's case. Brierley, however, does not create any fictionalizations and does not feel as conflicted about his two families and his identity.

3.2.1. Belonging with the Adoptive Family in *A Long Way Home*

Brierley thoroughly explains how his adoptive parents, especially his mother, were very aware that they were not raising their own children, but children of a different ethnicity, culture and nation and with past life experiences. He writes: "Another adoptive parent might have made the decision that I was young enough to start my life in Australia with a clean slate and could be brought up without much reference to where I'd come from" (6). It is actually very common for adoptive parents to neglect the past lives of their children (Lifton). Brierley's new parents, however, put up a map of India on his bedroom wall "to help [him] feel at home" and "would point to Calcutta on [his] map and tell [him] that's where [he] came from" (7). The house was decorated with Indian objects, which at the time, Brierley was unaware were not typical items in an Australian home. Brierley further praises the efforts of his mother: "Rather than trying to rush me into [learning English], [Mum] thought it was far more important at the outset to comfort and care for me, and gain my trust" (7). When he was young, they would often meet up with an Indian couple in the neighborhood to give Saroo more familiarity – they would eat Indian food, and he could speak a little Hindi with them. Brierley claims: "being understood by someone was a huge help in becoming comfortable about my new surroundings" (8). Additionally, his adoptive parents took him to see Hindi films at the cinema, *slowly* introduced him to an Australian diet and his mum was active in the ASIAC (Australian Society for Intercountry Aid (Children)). They went to organized meetings with other adoptees from Kolkata in

Australia, through which he even got to meet his closest friend from the orphanage, Asra, again.

When Brierley first met his adoptive parents at the airport, he felt shy, cautious and reserved, however, it did not take long at all until he felt safe with them. He explains:

Mum and Dad were very affectionate, right from the start, always giving me lots of cuddles and making me feel safe, secure, loved, and, above all, *wanted*. That meant a lot to a child who'd been lost and had experienced what it was like for no one to care about him. I bonded with them readily, and very soon trusted them completely. Even at the age of six (I would always accept 1981 as the year of my birth), I understood that I had been awarded a rare second chance. I quickly became Saroo Brierley. (9, emphasis in original).

Furthermore, Brierley liked his new surroundings. Describing his feelings upon arriving in Tasmania for the first time, he calls his new hometown Hobart "empty and *clean*" (107, emphasis in original) and "city of gleaming palaces." He is also amazed by all of the things inside the house he did not have in India - a refrigerator, his own bedroom, etc. Hobart had a predominantly Anglo-Saxon population, with only a few students from different countries. Despite becoming accustomed to the diverse cultures around him, Brierley's white parents made him stand out to others. While he does not recall encountering any racism at school, his mother informed him that there were instances of derogatory remarks being made, such as "black bastard" and "I don't want my son on the same team as that black boy" (112). Although acknowledging the severity of these remarks, Brierley feels fortunate compared to the experiences of other non-white individuals and does not believe he suffered from any lasting effects of racism.

When he had settled down in his new home in Hobart, he felt it might be inappropriate to dwell on the past and thought that part of starting a new life was to suppress old memories. Therefore, he kept his thoughts to himself, especially at night, as he was

unable to articulate them. However, after some time, he began to open up about his experiences in India. A year later, he had an emotional conversation with his mother about it, and she comforted him throughout. Although his adoptive parents had always been so understanding of Brierley's background, he "was worried they might misunderstand [his] intentions" of starting his Google Earth search and therefore did not tell them about it until he actually found the Burhanpur train station. He explains: "I didn't want them to think that the intensity of my search revealed an unhappiness with the life they'd given me or the way they'd raised me" (166). When he finally told them about his accomplishment of having found his birth place, they had a celebratory dinner, although it was rather quiet, as everyone was wondering about the implications of this discovery. Brierley writes: "I wondered whether my parents had always thought this day would come, and feared their son would be reclaimed by India and perhaps lost to them forever, much as I was lost to my birth mother all those years ago" (179). However, they supported him in wanting to fly to India to find his hometown and maybe his biological family and even wanted to come with him, but Brierley felt like it "was something that [he] needed to do alone" (186). In the epilogue of *A Long Way Home*, Brierley describes how his adoptive mother flew to India to meet his birth mother and how they embraced each other with tears in their eyes and mutual admiration (268).

The emotions Brierley describes towards his adoptive family and his new surroundings are consistently positive, and he does not mention any negative feelings. At this point, we need to remember that Brierley's narrative is not a direct, 'true' reflection of his life, but includes only the parts he wants us to know. It seems almost as if we read a kind of sugarcoated version of Brierley's sentiments during his post-adoptive life in *A Long Way*

Home. A reason for this could be his intention of portraying a positive image of adoption through becomes apparent in the memoir that Brierley shares his mother's opinions in this respect, as will be discussed further in Chapter 3.3. I will now switch to analyzing the representation of Jane Jeong Trenka's upbringing in the United States.

3.2.2. Racial Marginalization in *The Language of Blood*

Whereas Brierley claims not really having suffered from racism, the opposite is the case for Trenka. She feels culturally insecure and alienated due to the racial marginalization she frequently encounters in her surroundings. She describes her hometown Harlow in Minnesota as conservative, LGBTQI+ intolerant, and explains how a refugee family was once "chased away" in the neighborhood. Somewhere in the narrative Trenka inserts, as she typically does, without explanation or context, what seem to be stereotypical descriptions of Asians: "ASIAN CHILDREN: China dolls, whiz kids, happy, cooperative, obedient. ASIAN WOMEN: extotic, petite, lotus blossoms, pale, fragile, docile, geishas" (65, emphasis in original). Similarly, she inserts something that seems to be an advertisement: "**SWM, 29, SEEKS ASIAN.** You: Submissive, petite, long hair. Your master is 6'3," brown/brown, 185 lbs. Looking for fun. Will respond to all that send pictures" (79, emphasis in original). According to Seethaler, "[t]his blurb resembles ads that can be found in newspapers and on the Internet, contributing to a billion-dollar pornography system that exploits women of Asian descent. Because of their race, they are Orientalized, othered, and considered inferior to white males, especially, who stereotype them as sexually serving" (90). Additional examples expressing Trenka's "frustrations with how Asian women can be exoticized and fetishized by certain 'single, white men,'" (Wills 50) are an advertisement for Asian girl pornography and Trenka's experience of being

asked for sex by a stranger in the grocery store, who specifically addresses sex practices in Asia.

During her freshman year at college and the summer thereof, Trenka experienced some extremely traumatic events from having a stalker who sent her creepy messages, videotaped her from outside her window and broke into her family house. Fortunately, the stalker was caught, because it was revealed that he had a pistol and had planned to kidnap, rape and kill Trenka. As all of the above-mentioned insertions appear close to Trenka's stalker narrative, she "clearly establishes [...] her experience of being stalked as [...] caused by the objectification of women [...] of Asian descent" (Seethaler 91). Furthermore, one of the two times Trenka actually saw her stalker, he called her a "gook" and a "chink." Because of her traumatic experiences with her stalker, Trenka struggles to overcome some mental health issues. Thus, racial stereotypes in the United States are directly responsible for creating disturbance of Trenka's emotional state.

Trenka often chooses non-autobiographical methods to present her personal experiences with racial marginalization, which emphasizes the severeness of those events. For instance, she creates a musical scene of her family in an American diner, when her sister Carol and her were still young. There is a "prejudice-filled atmosphere" (Seethaler 89) and the diners make "comments [that] vividly speak to the exoticization and objectification in American society that Asian adoptees [...] have to confront," (ibid): "Do they speak Chinese? How big will they get? [...] Feel their hair! It's so thick! [...] Rice-Picker! [...] How much did they cost? [...] Can they use chopsticks? [...] Where did you learn to speak English so well?" (*Language of Blood* 34). Another example of the "traumatic objectification of adoptees" (Seethaler 92) is Trenka's stand-up comedy routine with the

sarcastic title "Don't Worry, I Will Make You Feel Comfortable: A Monologue for Imagining" (*Language of Blood* 96). She lays this fictional part of her memoir out like a playscript, describing the scene from an extradiegetic perspective and indicating applause. The person leading the monologue is Trenka herself, who communicates with a noticeable Korean accent and occasionally lapses in grammar; she humorously criticizes and mocks prevailing Asian stereotypes, often using satire and self-deprecating humor that reveal an underlying tone of emotion and sadness. The stereotypes she refers to "mark Asian women as passive and docile beings, which enables their consumption as merely exotic objects" (Seethaler 92). The jokes make the reader highly uncomfortable, nonetheless, the audience at the stand-up comedy is applauding and laughing about the racist jokes, which makes the reader feel guilty because there is a sentiment of belonging to that audience. By deviating from standard autobiographical frameworks, Trenka has the ability to create a setting that feels emotionally repressive due to cultural constraints and convey racism in a way that has a strong impact on her readers. Trenka effectively immerses the audience within a racist and capitalist system that generates the demand for adoption, transforming the protagonist into an object of exotic fascination. The memoir seems to strive to raise awareness about the complicity in marginalizing transcultural adoptees. By positioning readers as members of the audience, the book endeavors to make them conscious of their Western, white, and privileged perspective, which often objectifies transnational adoptees and interracial families by emphasizing the perceived "unnaturalness" of their relationships (ibid. 89-90). More about the memoir's purpose of challenging adoption will be displayed in Chapter 3.3.2.

3.2.3. Belonging with the Adoptive Family in *The Language of Blood*

Unfortunately, Trenka's adoptive parents are unable to help her with the racism and stereotypes she faces; quite on the contrary, they seem to contribute to her feelings of exclusion. The musical scene set in a diner, for instance, is a "shocking example of their culturally instituted ignorance about raising children of color" (Seethaler 89). They "continue reading their menus, holding them over their faces, oblivious to the crowd of diners [alienating their daughters] at their table" (*Language of Blood* 34). In the theatre play describing the car ride home from the airport shortly after meeting Jane and Carol for the first time, Trenka's adoptive mother asks the four-and-a-half-year-old Carol if she's okay. As the child does not speak or understand any English yet, she cannot answer, whereupon her adoptive father loudly yells: "Your mother asked you a question" (17). This depicts how the Brauers completely neglect and ignore that their adopted children come from a different culture and country. Trenka writes: "At the end of the movie sequence, the Korean memories are completely erased [...] CAROL has willed herself to become a girl with no history and is now ready to start her new life" (18, emphasis in original). Carol thus undergoes a forceful process of brainwashing initiated by her adoptive parents, leading her to forget her origins and conform to the life they have planned for her (Seethaler 82).

The theatre play is one of several instances in *The Language of Blood* that portray Trenka's adoptive parents' avoidance of her and her sister's past lives, and their intention of raising them with a "clean break". The practice of adoptive parents to erase their children's immigrant identity to acculturate them was common practice in the first half of the twentieth century, when "birth certificates were legally doctored, with the birth parents'

names removed and replaced by those of the adoptive parents" (Jacobson qtd. in Seethaler 82). Although birth certificates are usually not anymore tampered with to that degree, the "clean break" ideology still exists today. According to Seethaler, "many US parents' desire [is] to make adoptees believe that their lives began in the US. It also connotes the idea that one's birth country, culture, and parents can be permanently erased from one's identity to create an 'unproblematic, unified identity'" (82). As we will see later, it does the exact opposite in Trenka's case.

She feels like her American parents were so "invested in being ignorant" (200) that she was urged to reach out to her biological mother in search for acceptance and love for who she was. She reflects herself on why she wrote the letters in the memoir: "These letters were my private way of grieving, of crying to my mythical mother, because my parents here would not listen, would not see" (38). In her first letter she writes: "My mommy says I can give them to you when I die" (ibid.), which implies that her adoptive mother does not want Trenka to send the letters to Korea so that her birth mother could receive them. When Trenka is a little older she finds a Korean address somewhere under her parents' documents and continues sending letters to this address. She does not know what happened to them because she never received return letters, but thinks it is possible that her adoptive mother actually read them and kept them, although she never said anything about it. Her adoptive parents' neglect for Jane's contact with her Korean family becomes most relevant when Trenka organizes a memorial service for her Korean mother's death in Minneapolis and her adoptive mother is uninterested and unaffected and does not want to come. Trenka writes: "In my mom's mind, I don't come from somewhere else, I don't have a birth mother, I don't, I don't" (192). Trenka thereby depicts the self-centered wishes

of her adoptive parents, who aim to mold her into a child entirely their own, eliminating any need to acknowledge her connection to another family or country (Seethaler 82). On the same page she includes a quote from “traditional spiritual”: “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long way from home” and a beauty tip: “If you put spoons in the freezer for a few minutes and then place them over your eyes, the swelling will go down and no one will be able to tell that you’ve been crying all last night.” Notably, her mother’s ignorance affects her deeply, and leads Trenka to stop talking to her for one and a half years.

But not only are her parents inactive against the alarming attitude against Asians in their culturally homogenous surroundings, but they even actively utter racist remarks. For example, Trenka describes how her father expressed his rejection of her first two boyfriends of Asian descent: He “mocked their faces, as if they were not human, but dark, stupid monkeys. He mutilated their long names, which he could not and did not want to pronounce correctly” (66). She further explains how this led her to hate her own face, her boyfriend’s face, and also somehow to hate her father. It lowered her self-esteem for looking Asian so much that she actively took measures to look more Western, such as lightening her hair or curling her eyelashes.

Trenka also argues that the Brauers would have preferred to adopt a white boy - adopting from abroad was suggested to them by the Lutheran Church. She and her sister feel haunted by the shadow of the birth children their adoptive parents could have had and also by the ghosts of their dead twins who were replaced by changing clothes: Kyong-Ah and Mi-Ja. Through their parents’ failure to acknowledge their biological heritage, the girls end up feeling like replacement children and “reminders of their [adoptive parents’]

infertility" (*Language of Blood* 206). In the memoir, Trenka once addresses her adoptive mother directly and questions whether their cultural difference could be the wedge between them: "Mom, I am not from you; I will never be fully yours. I will never have peachy skin or blonde hair; I will never see the world through blue eyes. Could we accept each other if we were blind?" (231).

Seethaler notices:

Her adoptive parents' frantic insistence on the absence of a Korean part of their daughters' identity keeps reminding Trenka of the fact that she is not the white, male, American child that her parents had hoped for, but that she is an imperfect version of who they wanted her to be. These feelings add to her perception of herself as a 'mail-order child' (97), not a full member of the family but property, a tool to make her parents feel better about themselves no matter at what cost for the child." (83).

The "mail-order child" perception Seethaler addresses refers to the part of the book in which Kindergarten Jane asks her adoptive mother why her biological one gave her away, and she stands up and leaves. She then reflects on how her mother always said: "We chose you" and how that felt to her like she was chosen from a store and could be returned or exchanged again, which displays an act of commodification. Seethaler suggests that "commodification through the adoption market leaves transnational adoptees uneasy about their acceptance in their adoptive families and culture and makes them vulnerable to physical and emotional violence" (91).

Trenka's struggle to unite her two nationalities and create a sense of self is complicated by the absence of cultural and racial awareness in her adoptive parents. The avoidance of the words "adoption" and "Korea" in the Brauer house "hindered Trenka's identity-formation and left her helpless against racist forces" (Seethaler 83). Her wish would be to have American parents that welcome her Korean heritage, travel to Korea with her to meet her birth family, exchange gifts with them and do a memorial service for her dead

Korean mother, to thank them for bringing their daughter to life. Trenka longs for adoptive parents like the Brierleys, who are arguably better equipped to raise a child of a distinct ethnicity. According to Samantha Wilson and Laura Sumerhil-Coleman, trips to the child's birth country together with their adoptive parents are presumed to help "integrate cultural/ethnic identities and, in some cases, facilitate birth family contact for youth adopted internationally [...] but scholarly research has been limited" (qtd. in Wilson 8).

3.2.4. Belonging with the Biogenetic Family in *A Long Way Home*

Brierley deliberately utters remembering to feel belonging and happiness on warm summer nights with his family and the neighborhood, even though they were only leading a "basic life." They were living in a small community house with a muddy floor and did not have any television, radio, books or newspapers. Additionally, they often went through extreme starvation, whereas often begging for food, stealing or eating rotten leftovers from the street was their only chance to survive. However, Brierley claims that he felt most unhappy about not being able to go to school: "The one thing I craved – other than a full stomach – was to attend school as the other kids did. [...] But in India school isn't free, and we couldn't afford to go" (34-35). Brierley explains his relationship to his siblings in his childhood but does not really comment on his connection to his birth mother. He only describes that she is often working and not at home. He adored his brothers and reports that the times he was working with them, hopping on and off trains and begging at stations, he felt freedom. Nevertheless, he spent most of his time taking care of his younger sister Shekila and hence had the strongest bond with her. In fact, he states sometimes feeling haunted by her after his adoption to Australia: "I worried that she might

be sick or hungry [...] I had been her guardian, and it was hard not to know what was happening to her now” (115).

Upon narrating the reunion with his family, he does focus more on the relationship with his mother and realizes how much she cares about him. She said to him, via a translator, that “she was ‘surprised with thunder’ that her boy had come back, and that the happiness in her heart was ‘as deep as the sea’” (203) and Brierley shares feeling the same way. He learned that his mother had used all her extra money, hired people, and travelled to different towns to search for him after he had gone missing. His brother Kallu mentioned they spoke with the police in Burhanpur and Khandwa and he worked extra hours to help with the search, but they never found anything. They did not even have any photos of him, however, his birth mother had always hoped for Saroo to come back one day and had therefore decided to stay in Ganesh Talai so that she could be found. It seems like maybe the messages he sent to her in his mind that he was well reached her in some way. Astonishingly, an image of Saroo had appeared in his mother’s dream exactly the night before he found her. She also expressed appreciation towards his Australian upbringing, highlighting that his adoptive parents were entitled to call him their son since they had raised him since childhood, molding him into the accomplished man he is today. She conveyed her sole concern for him being his ability to lead an exceptional life. Hearing her words was an overwhelmingly emotional experience for him, assuring him that accepting the adoption offer was the correct decision. Not only his birth mother, but also his biogenetic siblings were very accepting of his “other life.” As he began to understand more about the hard life of his biological mother, his admiration for her increased.

Brierley further argues how the meeting of his Indian family brings up negative emotions about losing them, from his side as well as from theirs, and that they would cry together. Of course, the hardest part was hearing that his brother Guddu had died the same day of his disappearance. Whether he died before coming back to the train station and realizing Saroo was lost or after is a mystery that will never be solved. Brierley thought frequently about what happened to Guddu even long after returning to Australia, hoping he did not die looking and worrying for him: “it was hard not to think that if I hadn’t boarded the train that night, Guddu might have returned as planned and he’d still be alive now” (211). He also describes the talks with his family as “bittersweet,” as they did not speak any English and his Hindi skills were very basic, which made him feel “cut off” from them in a “fundamental way” (206).

After returning to Australia, he stays in contact with his Indian family through videoconferences and declares: “Now that the family had finally been reunited, I wanted to play a proper part in it, building our connection and helping to look after my mother, sister, and brother, and my niece and nephews” (226). He wants to help his birth mother with her low income, and the restoration of her house, trying to do “everything [he] could to make her happy” (233). He is also eager to gain more knowledge about the traditions and principles of his Indian relatives. Additionally, he is pleased to have made the acquaintance of his niece and nephews and anticipates contributing to their growth by providing them with any opportunities he can.

3.2.5. Belonging with the Biogenetic Family in *The Language of Blood*

As we have heard, Trenka already asks herself as a small child why her biological parents gave her away and wants to reach out to her birth mother writing her letters. Trenka never

really expresses judgement or anger for being abandoned by her in any of them. Ultimately, it was her Korean mother who found Trenka, and she expresses great admiration for her mother for having achieved reaching her through sheer determination, despite living in poor conditions and not speaking any English.

But there are numerous further reasons why Trenka falls in love with her Korean mother. When she meets her on her first trip to Korea, she is startled by her frequent apologies, as can be observed, for instance, by the two following quotes: “Umma, Mama, I understand why you had to give us away. It was the right choice. You are a good mother. You do not need to ask forgiveness” (115) and “This woman – my mama, who made me and saved me, who loves me ferociously still – asks my forgiveness” (117). Trenka felt very loved and wanted by “Umma” (Korean word for mother) from the beginning, especially because she was so determined to spend time with her and felt guilty for not having raised her daughter herself. Her biogenetic mother brought fruits to her hotel every day, she told her the story of her life and why she had to give her away over and over. When she visits her Umma’s apartment, she insists on washing Trenka with a “scrubbie.” Trenka always remembers this experience very positively, being one of the first moments she feels closely connected to her birth mother and describes her feelings about it in the present tense, switching to a restricted narrative voice again: “The water is warm as birthwater. [...] I become a child again” (122).

Trenka feels belonging not only to her birth mother, but also to her Korean sisters. They discover similarities in their physical appearances and in their personalities and Trenka describes: “We were amazed at how I fit into the family” even after being brought up without any reference to Korean culture in America and explains: “We were still intact, still

genetically family” (128). On her first visit to Korea, they went shopping for a Korean dress together and the tailors were confused that Jane did not understand them, and people looked at her rudely. Trenka greatly appreciates the way her mother and sisters explained the situation and spoke up for her: “I love them for speaking for me, for defending me so that people will not assume that I am either Japanese or retarded. They do not shame me for who I am and how I cannot speak or understand [...] They take care of me and love me unconditionally, because I belong to them” (131). This also sounds like a direct comparison to Trenka’s childhood experiences of racial marginalization in the US in which her adoptive parents did *not* defend her but were rather ignorant and compliant. Furthermore, her Korean family wants to buy expensive jewelry for her American mother to show her gratitude for raising Trenka, but her American parents never show any gratitude to her Korean family in return.

When Trenka’s biological mother fell sick of cancer, she flew to Seoul for two months to look after her, and this experience made her ties with her biological family even stronger. Trenka’s birth mother was in the hospital and Trenka and her sisters had to cook for her, feed her, change and weigh her diapers, massage her and give her medicine, since nurses are apparently not responsible for these tasks in Korea. Trenka and her youngest sister even slept in their Umma’s hospital room most of the time. When her Umma was sick to death, she said “the only thing in English she [had] ever learned: ‘I love you, Kyong-Ah. I love you’” (*Language of Blood* 158). Moreover, she called her *ipun egggi* which translates to ‘pretty baby.’ Trenka reflects: “with her two words – *ipun egggi* – she has changed the rest of my story: I have never felt so wanted or loved, and this will be my deep well of strength, beginning at this moment – here, now, with her” (172-173). Her

birth mother calling her pretty baby made her realize that she has never been unwanted by her. Trenka's love for her biological now reaches so far that she says: "Umma, if I could have given my own life to save you, I would have" (162). In one of her various sections towards the end of the memoir addressing her Korean mother directly, she reports (when eating Korean food): "I am filled for a moment with a reminder of you and the things that were taken from me. I take you back, and I take back all the things that were stolen, back inside my body" (222).

It can be argued that the Western idealization of the consanguineous kinship might to some extent also enhance Trenka's love for and connection with her Korean family and especially her Umma. For instance, Trenka often talks about similarities in physical appearance quite affectionately: "To see her [Umma] dying was to see her first transform into me; to see her dying was a premonition of my own death. [...] her thin body, which looked so much like mine, filled me with a determination to live my own life well" (165). Trenka also seems to lie great importance on the similarities in personality; when she discovers that she has made a habit out of always trying to cook meals that are as inexpensive as possible, she reflects: "I think I absorbed things from you while in your womb, Umma. [...] You must have been filled with worry and sadness. I must have absorbed these things from you," (187) also referring to her mental health issues. Trenka even believes to have some kind of telepathic connection with her biological connection, a "language of blood." During a conversation with her now-husband when they were still only getting to know each other, Trenka heard her Umma's voice in her head saying *nampion*, the Korean word for husband. Trenka also explain that there is even an expression called *han* in the Korean language that means the "inescapable voice of

generational memory, of racial memory, of landscape” (237). Addressing her Korean mother directly, she writes: “I will carry you with me, in the language of blood” (160). At the close, Trenka also dedicates her memoir to her Umma.

In Chapter 3.2.7., I will analyze how the relations to both her adoptive and her biological family influence her identity.

3.2.6. Identity Issues in *A Long Way Home*

There are some parts of *A Long Way Home* that might be misinterpreted into thinking that Brierley had some kind of dual identity, as he feels a strong connection to both his biogenetic and adoptive family and sometimes feels conflicted between the two, especially right after his adoption. This becomes apparent, for instance, in the following narration: “I still wanted to find my other mother, but I was happy where I was – I wanted both things. It was confusing and increasingly upsetting” (121). Moreover, he states that he “was growing up Australian – a proud Tassie” (137) and has felt safe and welcome in Australia and with his new adoptive family from the start, but that he nonetheless never forgot about his Indian family or his past. When actively going through his memories trying not to forget anything and imagining the streets of his hometown, he would send a message to his mother in his mind that he was doing well and that she should not worry about him.

However, the memories of his biogenetic family were only a small part of his life and did not consume his entire being. In fact, he felt like he had internalized the Western culture already as a kid, as he explains with one incident where he fled from home after his adoptive brother Mantosh had arrived, because he then got less attention from his parents. He argues: “It was a measure of how much I’d changed [...] that I didn’t even

attempt to live on the streets again. [...] Much more typical of a Western kid testing his parents' commitment to him, I only made it to the local bus depot around the corner" (119). Like any other child, he focused on his present and dove into his teenage years. He loved and was loved by his teachers, did not feel like he experienced any racism and liked the Australian lifestyle. Due to his satisfaction with his life in the Brierley family and as an Australian, his Indian heritage moved to the background.

Brierley's interest in actively searching for his biogenetic origin arose upon meeting Indian students when he went to college in Canberra. There was a rather large number of students who had grown up in India and getting to know them made Saroo "consumed with aspects of ambiguous loss [...] and questions about identity" (Wilson 8). It was the first time he heard people speaking Hindi to each other in years and he realized he had almost completely forgotten the language. It was a "reverse culture shock" for him, and he felt like he "was the Australian among the Indians" (Brierley 141). He stated that through spending time with them, his "mind was unexpectedly turned again to India, and [he] began to think about how [he] might search for [his] childhood home" (140). He explains:

I was drawn to them for the basic reason that they were from the same place I was, some of them from the very city in which I'd been lost. They had trod the same streets and had been on the same trains. They responded to my interest in them and welcomed me into their social circles. It was with this group of people that, at the age of twenty-six, I began for the first time to genuinely explore being Indian. [...] I began to feel comfortable just living in my fellow Indian students' culture and company. (141)

He started eating Indian food and watching Hindi movies with his new group of friends, which "wasn't false or forced; it was just a natural way of being," (142) to him. This shift encouraged him to reacquaint himself with his native language and discover the

remarkable transformations that India had undergone in recent times. During his interactions with these new acquaintances, he shared his personal story of losing his biogenetic family, which had the effect of bringing his past back to the forefront of his thoughts. Speaking with people who were familiar with the places and experiences he referenced made his past more genuine and tangible for him, as opposed to it feeling as abstract as a fairy tale when discussing it with other Australians. Furthermore, as he shared more of his background with his Indian friends, they became inquisitive and eager to unravel the riddle of the whereabouts of his hometown, and their excitement infected Brierley, which lead him to start his Google Earth search.

Brierley directly explains the underlying reasons for his search: “I was looking for my home to provide closure and to understand my past and perhaps myself better as a result, in the hope that I might somehow reconnect with my Indian family so they would know what had happened to me” (167-168). Analyzing the revelation, we can see that he uses hedging for the goals of understanding himself better and reconnecting with his Indian family, implying that these aspirations are secondary to achieving closure and understanding his past. Brierley is striving more for open truths like the place he was from, than really his Indian identity or his family. Regarding his consanguineous kinship, he was mostly interested in letting them know he was still alive. He repeats these same reasons again in the epilogue of the memoir: “I wanted to know where I came from – to be able to look at a map and point to the place where I was born – and to throw light on some of the circumstances of my past. Most of all, [...] I tried to find my Indian family so they would know what had happened to me” (269-270). His narration of his feelings and doubts shortly before boarding the plane to India also depict the *place* as highest priority and his

wish to find out truths/confirm memories: “I had to find out where I was from, if I could, even if only to put it behind me. I wanted to at least see the place I had been dreaming about for decades” (190).

Although Brierley generally bases his identity on the life he has led as an Australian since he was adopted, and not on his bloodlines or his biological heritage, he did feel somewhat conflicted again when meeting his Indian family and questioned his belonging. Spending more time with his Indian family and reconnecting with the place he was born caused him to ponder on the term ‘home’ that everyone, including himself, kept using. He felt unsure whether his ‘home’ was Australia or India. He explains that his loving family in Australia made him consider himself an Australian and not just someone living in Australia, and that he felt loved and belonged there. However, when he found Khandwa and his Indian family, it felt like coming home. Being in that place felt right, and he felt deeply connected to it. He shares realizing that he had two homes, each with its own set of emotional connections and that the journey he embarked on to answer questions about his identity was far from over; he did not only have more answers, but also new questions. He reports: “One thing was obvious: the trip between India and Australia – between my homes – was one I was destined to make many times” (221).

Furthermore, he even implies that for a short time he took on the perspective of his younger self again: “I was still the same Saroo,” but “it took me a while to feel like my old self again, and to look at Hobart through my old eyes rather than those of a poor Indian.” (224). He also claims: “my life had completely changed that afternoon. I had found my family. I was no longer an orphan,” speaking at that moment as if his Australian identity would not exist. The trip was for him not “the end of the story, but it was truly more like a

new beginning. I now had two families, and I had to work out how I fit in with each of them – across the world and across cultures” (224). Here he suggests that he questions his position in his adoptive family through the meeting of his consanguineous kinship. It is normal that transcultural adoptees feel troubled after having met their birth parents (Lifton). Another thing that has been supported through research that we can see in *A Long Way Home* is that Brierley wants to find his biological father after having met the rest of his biogenetic family. Brierley writes that he understands that this may be incomprehensible, since his father has never cared for him or his siblings and has even almost killed his mother, but that he felt like his biological father would be part of his identity and the story of his life. Here we can see some influence of the idealization of the consanguineous kinship.

Brierley’s ultimate explanation of his identity, however, serves as a unique example of a transcultural adoptee identity that is not necessarily linked to broken lines of connection. He explains this well in a section of his book after he had reached a difficult mental stage in his life during which he took a break from the search for his hometown. Brierley then moved back to Hobart and started to work with his adoptive Dad in his family business and later moved in with his girlfriend Lisa. He explains how he then decided to resume his search, and gives us significant clues about his identity:

The move back to Hobart and all that followed reminded me that tracing my roots was not the most important thing in my life, overriding all else. I understand that this may sound strange to some people. Adoptees, whether or not they ever knew their birth parents, often describe the constant, gnawing feeling of there being something missing: without a connection, or at least the knowledge of where they are from, they feel incomplete. But I didn’t feel that. I never forgot my Indian mother and family – and I never will – but being separated from them didn’t create a block that somehow prevented me from pursuing a full and happy life. I’d learned quickly, as a matter of survival, that I needed to take opportunities as they came – if they came –

and to look forward to the future. Part of that was gratefully accepting the life I was granted through my adoption. (154)

Brierley thereby suggests that when you have lived through the rough times you learn to be more grateful for everything, so it could be said that he is more grateful because he remembers his tough time in India, as opposed to Trenka who does not. This section of *A Long Way Home* also reveals that he does not have a dual identity, and that he is generally a supporter of adoption. He presents the possibility of loving two families without feeling torn or broken and that transcultural adoption must not necessarily entail pathology. Although Brierley also questioned his identity at some points, it is evident not only in the above presented passage, but also in his epilogue that he does not feel torn about his identity:

Even as I poured all my efforts into tracking down my hometown and family, I was never searching in the hope of somehow getting back to the life I had missed. It wasn't a matter of needing to right a wrong nor one of wanting to return to where I 'belong'. I spent almost all of my life in Australia, and I have family bonds here that cannot be challenged or broken. [...] My bonds with them can never be broken, and I am deeply grateful that I now have the opportunity to renew our connection. But I am not conflicted about who I am or where to call home. I now have two families, not two identities. I am Saroo Brierley. (269-270)

Throughout the memoir, Brierley often establishes his sense of belonging to both of his families, however, we can see that he primarily identifies as Australian. He uses the word "home" for both Australia and India in the beginning of his text and in his commentary of family pictures he writes: "My two families, which make me feel doubly blessed" (n.p.). Similarly, when he is on his second train trip from Burhanpur to Kolkata, a little boy asks him: "Who are your family?", and Brierley's answer is: "My family lives in Tasmania, but I also have family here, in Khandwa, in Madhya Pradesh," (253) and adds that he has

begun to feel satisfied with this answer. However, we can see that his connection with his adoptive parents is deeper, for instance when he texts them on the same day he has found his birth mother: “I hope you know that you guys are first with me, which will never change” (212). The reunion with his consanguineous kinship has brought him closer to them again but has not had an influence on his relationship with his Australian family. His memoir seems like a promotion for adoption, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.3.1.

3.2.7. Identity Issues in *The Language of Blood*

While the signs of a dual identity are marginal in *A Long Way Home*, they are certainly strong in Jane Jeong Trenka’s first memoir *The Language of Blood*. At the beginning of the text, she describes both her Korean and American family ancestry and then introduces herself as both Jane Marie Brauer and Jeong Kyong-Ah, her two identities with different names.

She states that her Korean identity as Kyong-Ah died at 6 months when she was replaced by her American self. She includes a letter written by her Korean identity Kyong-Ah to her American identity Jane: “I exist only because you do. If you had not been born, I would have died.” Here she says that Jane is the only one of the two who is seen, however, unlike she has argued before, it is depicted here that her Korean self Kyong-Ah is not dead, but still exists in the background. If Jane had not taken over the body, the body would have died. She continues: “Take care of this body because, you know, it is really mine. [...] You are living a borrowed life” (139). This letter vividly portrays Trenka's feeling of being divided into two distinct personalities due to her upbringing through her adoptive parents in the US who wiped out all signs of her pre-adoptive self and the pain Trenka experiences because of this.

Trenka often felt like she did not want to be Korean and “was *culturally white*” (129, emphasis in original) in her school and college years. Of course, her appearance would always reveal her biogenetic differences to other Americans in her surroundings, including her adoptive parents, which was difficult for her, as she explains for example in the following sentence: “what I longed for was wholeness, for my body to be as white and northern Minnesotan as my mind” (237). Furthermore, Trenka’s imaginative answer to one of her classmate’s questions to her how it felt like to not know her real mum, describes her feelings about looking different: “It feels awful. Weird. It feels like I was never born. I want to know what you feel like, when you look at your family and people look like you. [...] What does it feel like to pass a mirror and *not be surprised?*” (38, emphasis in original). This hints at Trenka’s compliance with the idealization of consanguineous kinship.

When Trenka is in Korea the first time, she says that her American identity “is gone - only a memory in the minds of those who imagine her” (14-15). This makes it seem like only one of the two identities can be on the forefront at the same time – Kyong-Ah vanished when she was six months old, but now that she comes to the surface again, Jane Marie Brauer has to leave. Trenka specifically writes that she prefers “*kimchi* over sauerkraut these days” (21) and that Americans suddenly began to change negatively in her eyes in a country full of Koreans. When she is in Korea, she feels relieved for being able to blend in in a crowd; she reports it feels “good to be part of a people, the majority” (120), which again hints at the importance Trenka lays on ‘race.’ She does not speak any Korean at first, but by the end of her first one-week Korea trip, the language appears in her dream and as it dissolves and she feels like she was in a kind of heightened reality, a voice asks

her “What is your name?”, and Trenka answers: “My name is Kyong-Ah. It never used to be, but it is now” (135). She even takes on the sentiments of the Korean people, her new group of belonging of cultural identity; Trenka explains: “As I become my mother’s daughter – as I become Korean again – I feel the anger of my people” towards the Japanese who had colonized Korea, who took “away freedom of religion, speech, and thought, who offer[ed] two choices: assimilation or starvation” (45). However, she recognizes through her perspective as a pluralistic American, that it is not okay to think so maliciously about one certain entire nationality.

Thus, we can see that her American identity is not really gone; after Trenka’s first trip to Korea, she starts feeling even more conflicted between her two personalities than before. The journey has enhanced Trenka’s difficulties of finding a sense of identity and belonging (Wills 55). As mentioned in Chapter 3.1.1, Trenka “mourns the erasure of her pre-adoptive self and she mourns the irreversibility and irreconcilability of that event” (ibid.) in her memoir. She reports trying to bridge the differences in perspectives among her personal worldview, that of white Americans, and the worldview of Koreans and that she was trying together with her sister Carol to “begin the unravelling – of who [they] were in [their] American family, who [they] were in Korean family” (141).

An indication of her *puzzled* identity is the crossword puzzle in *The Language of Blood*. Like with most other “scraps” of her identity that the memoir is comprised of, Trenka does not explain the meaning of the crossword puzzle. The various words that intersect with each other appear to provide clues of her identity, for instance, “America” is spliced with “fraud” and “Korea” and “memory” are linked to “mother.” Other words that hint to her dual or conflicted identity are “metamorphosis,” “neither,” “both,” “seem,” “ambivalent,”

"paradox," "freaks" (*Language of Blood* 225). Wills notices: "Suspended in the middle of the crossword is Jane's Korean name, Kyong Ah, suggesting the centrality of her birth identity to the solving of her identity puzzle; directly beneath her Korean name, descending vertically, is the word 'loss,' hinting at the sadness of those labours" (49). Seethaler argues that the puzzle reflects Trenka's "struggle of being considered 'neither' American nor Korean, the seeming impossibility of being 'both,' the gap between what you 'seem' to be and who you actually are" (93). Furthermore, she claims that it is also representative of "how adoptees' identities do not fit into any neatly definable category" and that "[t]he inherently enigmatic and challenging nature of a puzzle underlines adoptees' efforts to make sense of their identities" (ibid.)

Trenka frequently articulates longing for a more hybrid, unified identity definition throughout the memoir, however, she is not able to achieve it. For instance, she expresses wishing that her adoptive parents had taught her about Korean culture and that they would come to Korea to meet her other family, which could have helped her in seeing herself as a person with several important cultural ties. In the end of the text, she decides for dual citizenship and upon being able to choose a name through her marriage certificate, she chooses one name from each family – Jane from her adoptive parents, Jeong from her Korean kin and Trenka, the last name of her husband, becoming Jane Jeong Trenka. Although this could be interpreted as Trenka finally finding a way to integrate both identities into one, she herself explains in the book that she is not really able to terminate her divided sense of self. She reflects that she had planned to bring a stone that she had picked up at the Haeinsa temple in Korea on her first trip there back to its place seven years later when she visited Korea together with her husband. She had imagined that

retrieving the stone to the temple would be “where all duality ceases” and would describe the ultimate finding of her true identity (243-244). However, there were some incidents that made it impossible to visit the Haeinsa temple and Trenka never got the closure she had imagined. It is arguable that a hybrid identity integrating belonging to both cultural identity groups of her biological and adoptive parents is impossible for Trenka because of her negative experience with being a racial “other” in the US. Seethaler suggests: “Trenka forcefully separates Korea and the US and insists that her readers see that hybridity is not a culturally accepted option” (94), which makes her feel that she cannot be both Korean and American but needs to be either one or the other.

Ultimately, Trenka selects the word “exile” to describe herself as she thinks it entails the anguish she underwent being separated from her biological mother and heritage better than the word “adoptee.” Although Trenka explains that in an “early twenties self-righteous kick” it was important to her to define herself “definitely *not* by the fact that [she] was *adopted*” (144, emphasis in original), her final description of her identity in the text is closely related to being an adoptee. Trenka dedicates her memoir to her Umma, and even apologizes for it: “I do not wish to bring shame to your family but only to honor you in the best way I can” (259). Notably, she apologizes to her Korean mother, even though she never lost a bad word about her in her text, and not to her adoptive mother, who she often criticized. Hence, it could be deduced that this shows that her feeling of belonging for her biological cultural ties is ultimately stronger in the text. There is another part in the memoir that depicts Trenka’s feeling of belonging to her post-adoptive life becoming weaker. After her Korean mother dies, she decides to organize a memorial service for her Umma and desperately wants her American parents to attend in order to honor her birth mother. Her

mother and father do not want to have anything to do with Jane's Korean family and are even so hurt by their daughter being in such close contact with them, that they do not want to talk to Trenka at all. Upon realizing this, Trenka describes feeling like she was "no longer their daughter" and "not wanted." Then there is a quote from Robert Lowry inserted into the narrative:

*My life goes on in endless song
Above earth's lamentations.
I hear the sweet though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation (202).*

This could mean that Trenka forms "a new creation" of her self upon feeling rejected by her adoptive family. This new self seems to be focused more on retrieving what was lost than on what was gained by the process of adoption. When Trenka got her Korean citizenship, she decided to stay in the United States instead of moving to her birth country. However, she moved to Korea one year after publishing *The Language of Blood*. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.3.2.

3.3. Opposing and Supporting Transcultural Adoption

3.3.1. Supporting Transcultural Adoption in *A Long Way Home*

Saroo Brierley was old enough to be asked if he wanted to be adopted to Australia, and it was not too hard for him to agree. He writes that his "initial disbelieving desperation to get home" faded relatively soon, and that when he was told at the orphanage that his family could not be found despite intense searching, he does not "remember being truly devastated by it" (96). When he got the news that an Australian family wanted to adopt him, he also received a little red photograph album made by the Brierleys. Saroo could

not believe that his new parents had a car and lived in a house that looked like a palace and was also surprised that they were white and everything in the pictures looked clean and shiny. His closest friend at the orphanage in Kolkata, Asra, received a similar album from her future parents and was extremely enthusiastic about it, and “her enthusiasm rubbed off on” him (98). Brierley never regrets his decision; in the epilogue of *A Long Way Home* he explains: “I feel strongly that from my being a little lost boy with no family to becoming a man with two, everything was meant to happen just the way it happened” (273). Upon meeting children from the same orphanage in Australia again, he writes: “Although it hadn’t been a terrible place, I don’t think any of us wished ourselves back there. We didn’t talk about our past lives in India, but it seemed to me that [they] were as happy in their new homes as I was.” (113). When Brierley arrived in Australia he had “external parasites, [...] an intestinal tapeworm, broken teeth, and a heart murmur” (106-107), signs of his tough life in India where he had to survive alone on the streets. If he had stayed on the streets of Kolkata for longer, it is likely that he would have died. Additionally, Brierley does not think that he could have ever attended school in India. Thus, he considers himself lucky for having been adopted by the Brierleys.

Brierley dedicates a chapter of his memoir to his adoptive mother’s story to show why she “had such a dedicated belief in adoption and the authentic family that adoption created” (178). She holds the belief that supporting children in challenging situations in foreign nations - either by sponsoring or adopting them - is an action that more Australians ought to consider taking. She is a proponent of substituting Australia's multiple state laws regarding intercountry adoption with a more straightforward federal law. She finds fault with governments making the adoption process overly complicated and thinks that if it

were made easier, more families would undertake it. Growing up, she had experienced enough to believe that families consisting of birth parents were not necessarily sacred. Despite being raised in a culture that expected women to give birth, she and her husband believed that the world already had an abundance of destitute children. They were convinced that there were alternative ways of creating a family beyond producing their own offspring. Moreover, Brierley's mother had an extraordinary experience when she was twelve years old where she envisioned a brown-skinned child by her side; this moment convinced her that adoption was her calling. Although they were capable of having biological children, his adoptive parents agreed to adopt children from impoverished backgrounds and provide them with a caring home and family. Once they had made up their minds, they remained committed to their decision, despite numerous reasons to reconsider. Due to the legislation of the time, they had to wait sixteen years until they could legally adopt because state law prohibited adoptive parents who could conceive to do so. Another constraint at the time was the age difference between the youngest adoptive parent and the child, which had a maximum of forty years to prevent children from being taken in by elderly individuals incapable of caring for them. This restriction, however, was unlikely to affect them since they did not specify a particular age for the child they wished to adopt. Brierley explains that many couples who want to adopt have a specific criteria they want their child to fit, like a maximum age or a particular gender. The Brierleys, however, believed that it was crucial to support any child in need rather than selecting based on personal preferences.

Although Brierley explains within the text that the reason for publishing the memoir was providing hope to never give up no matter how impossible something may seem, referring

to his Google Earth search, his numerous praises of transcultural adoption also make his text a promotion thereof. In addition to his depiction of his adoptive parents' proactive relation to adoption, he consistently praises them for it and explains why their acts are admirable. According to Brierley, the fact that his adoptive parents were willing to take in any two children that were assigned to them, which he considers to be uncommon for adoptive parents in the Western world, is an exceptional act of generosity and altruism. He remarks that adopting children, particularly from overseas, requires a great deal of courage as the children often have challenging pasts and may find it difficult to adapt to their new surroundings, which can be difficult to comprehend and provide support for. Brierley also chooses to include facts about the poor living conditions in India into his memoir, reinforcing the necessity for adoption. He writes that in 1987, approximately fourteen million children below the age of ten in India succumbed to disease or hunger. While adopting just one child may not be a significant contribution, he believes it is a helpful gesture. Similarly, the movie adaption *Lion*, which according to director Garth Davis was created in close contact with Saroo and Sue Brierley, "ends with a plea for viewers to learn more about the innumerable youth 'lost' (i.e., living on the streets) currently throughout India and engage in efforts to support vulnerable children" (Wilson 8), even though the plea does not directly suggest adoption as a means of supporting.

The memoir therefore depicts the prominence of the white savior complex in the transcultural adoption narrative – the need of white couples to 'save' helpless children from the 'Third World.' Like the Brierleys, many people with this complex may feel a sense of guilt or responsibility for the suffering of people of color, and they seek to help out of a genuine desire to do good. However, in doing so, they overlook their own privilege,

perpetuate stereotypes about people of color, and fail to acknowledge or address the systemic issues that contribute to their struggles. This “rescue mission” rhetoric surrounding adoption is detrimental as it feeds into the “Orientalist fantasy of an uncivilized and cruel East that is unable and unwilling to care for its own people” (Wills 2011).

In addition to expressing admiration for his adoptive parents as heroic figures, Brierley demonstrates further instances that indicate his endorsement of adoption. He expresses deep admiration and gratitude for Mrs. Sood, the head of the ISSA office, the adoption agency in Kolkata that placed him with the Brierleys. On his first trip to India, he visits her at the Nava Jeevan orphanage in which he lived for two months and donates to the orphanage to assist with repairs of the building. Moreover, Brierley suggests that not only did he have a better life in Australia and it made his adoptive parents happy, but there are even some positive gains of his adoption for his biological family as well. As the family shrank, his mother was finally able to afford to send the rest of the children to school. As a result, the occupations of the family progressed from carrying stones to becoming a teacher and manager. While this outcome is bittersweet because of the family's loss, it is a positive accomplishment that the remaining children were able to rise above poverty. Brierley does not criticize adoption, except for the strict laws surrounding it and the bureaucratic system. However, underlyingly *A Long Way Home* depicts how children are used as a commodity to make white couples happy, as we learn that Brierley and other children in Kolkata are taught manners and how to use cutlery before flying to Australia to meet the expectations of their adoptive parents.

Through praising the white savior complex, Brierley supports mainstream Western ideas about transcultural adoption, nevertheless, his memoir also provides alternative views. He does not seem influenced by the common idealization of biogenetic family relations in his identity definition and his sense of belonging. Additionally, he portrays a simple transcultural adoptee identity that integrates two cultures into a hybrid self and is not inevitably conflicted. Another conclusion we could draw from the analysis of Brierley's identity in *A Long Way Home* is that the openness and transparency in the handling of his pre-adoptive life his adoptive parents had, has helped him in the formation of his identity. In the following Chapter, we will see that Trenka portrays a completely different view on transcultural adoption.

3.3.2. Challenging Transcultural Adoption in *The Language of Blood*

Just like with Saroo Brierley, one could also argue that Trenka was rescued by adoption – she was malnourished and almost killed by her father as a baby and her own birth mother told her that if she had kept her, she would have either died or become a beggar. It can also be presumed that had she stayed in the orphanage in Seoul, she would not have had good life prospects, and certainly no college education or American citizenship. At first, Trenka always tells her Korean mother there is no need to apologize for putting her up for adoption, however, later she admits telling only “the official version of the truth” when saying to her Korean sister: “Umma did the right thing. I was happy growing up. It's no problem to be Korean in America” (130). Even further in the text, she contemplates whether she would have rather not been adopted: “*I don't know. [...]* How can I weigh the loss of my language and culture against the freedom that America has to offer, the opportunity to have the same rights as a man?” (229, emphasis in original). Hence, Trenka

feels conflicted about her adoption in *The Language of Blood*, nevertheless, in her follow-up memoir, *Fugitive Visions*, which was published in 2009, Trenka directly criticizes adoption: "Our adoptions would take our language, our culture, our families, our names, our birth dates, our citizenship, and our identities in a perfectly legal process. And the world would view it as charitable and ethical" (89). Seethaler argues that the notion that all adoptees are automatically rescued from a life of prostitution and death is far from realistic, as none of Trenka's sisters who remained in Korea are living in impoverished conditions (85). However, it is very likely that just as in Brierley's case, the siblings were only able to build such a life upon the shrinking living costs of losing two of them.

The memoir is not only used as a means of self-representation but also deliberately presents an alternative viewpoint of transcultural adoption that is frequently overlooked or excluded. Since adoption is quite commonly seen as an altruistic act, *The Language of Blood* "received harsh criticism for its negative stance against transnational adoption" (Seethaler 79). The memoir underlyingly discusses matters of subjugation within the topic of transcultural adoption. For instance, through her scrapbook-style approach Trenka contrasts her own perception of herself with how she is consumed and stereotyped by the white majority. This critique highlights the role of white privilege in perpetuating structural racism and enforcing assimilation. Even though Trenka struggles with the challenge of defining her identity, she vehemently opposes portrayals of herself as a "fraud" or a "grotesque hybrid," asserting her agency against such depictions. Trenka presents transcultural adoption as a product of globalized oppression and a reflection of the limits within American pluralism (ibid. 80). While Brierley ignores the signs of transcultural adoptees being viewed as a commodity that needs to be presented in a

bright light for white people, which are underlying in his own experiences, Trenka does not. She includes a quote from the International Social Service which she, nonetheless, leaves uncommented: “some effort should be made to help them [Asian adoptees] look as fresh as possible when they meet their new families” (105). She also shows that even as a small child, she has already had the feeling of being picked from a store by her adoptive parents, and that she could be returned or exchanged. According to Seethaler, “[t]he idea that adoptees are ‘mail-ordered,’ picked from a catalog and paid for like objects, of course, contrasts with the public opinion that adoption is a process of pure altruism, affording ‘poor’ children the opportunity for a fulfilled life” (92).

Furthermore, *The Language of Blood* fits well in the genre of postcolonial literary studies as it was not only written by Trenka as a ‘racial other’ in the Western world, but places great importance on the view of the even more subaltern person in the adoption triad: Trenka’s Korean birth mother. Her ‘Umma’ was marginalized as a woman in a patriarchal culture – she was powerless against her abusive husband who almost killed their baby and was not supported by her wealthier brothers due to being married. Trenka starts the memoir with her biological mother’s letter to her explaining the circumstances of her adoption, and hence provides a platform for her Umma’s views and feelings. According to Kim Nelson, this “represents a major shift from the dominant adoptive parent focused discourses of transracial adoption” (294), which would also include *A Long Way Home*. In Trenka’s second memoir *Fugitive Visions*, she discusses the importance of her Korean mother’s voice more directly: “If you could recognize a child's mother as a human being, would you still think of taking her child from her as a charitable act? [...] If you knew the true nature of desperation, would you still use the word 'choice' as a synonym for the

relinquishment or abandonment of a child?" (85). Trenka effectively challenges the stigmatization of impoverished Asian birth mothers that is perpetuated by the rhetoric of transcultural adoption, which often views them as inadequate mothers or even as prostitutes. Her writing successfully removes the pathologizing lens and presents a more compassionate perspective on these women (Seethaler 87). Trenka also addresses the cruel Japanese colonization of Korea in her memoir and thereby portrays another layer of subjugation in her biological mother's life. Consequently, we can understand transcultural adoption as a "system of oppression" and "the exploitation of poor women for the benefit of childless, Western, middle-class families, and the perpetuation of global, economic injustice" (Seethaler 81) on which it is based. Moreover, we can perceive transcultural adoption as direct suppression of women through her writing; the reason her biogenetic father wanted to give her away in the first place is because she was a girl instead of a boy. Thus, Seethaler claims that "patriarchal forces cause the exchange, as the man in power enforces the adoption, not to create kinship, but to profit from it nevertheless" (85).

Trenka argues strongly that transnational adoption must be abolished because the circumstances of poverty, war, imperialism, and patriarchy should not be allowed to separate families or compel mothers to relinquish their children. She firmly believes that transnational adoption fails to address the underlying issues in the countries from which children are sent, and it certainly does not benefit the birth mothers, a cause that Trenka deeply cares about. By employing elements of life-writing, Trenka effectively establishes links between the commodification of adoptees, cultural influences that contribute to identity crises, and the constrained choices made by disadvantaged women. She

advocates for individual agency, resistance, and emphasizes that hierarchical structures and privileges should not wield harmful control over children's sense of self (Seethaler 95). Moreover, through her writing "Trenka reclaims expertise about transnational adoption from researchers, social workers, and white adoptive parents" (ibid. 81).

Although Trenka speaks of having decided to stay in the United States instead of moving to Korea in *The Language of Blood*, she then moved to Seoul in 2004, one year after publishing the memoir and founded a social justice group named TRACK (Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea). The group members are transnational adoptees, unwed Korean mothers, and other advocates of the goal to actively pursue alternative options for birth mothers instead of adoption (Seethaler 95, 87). They fight the cultural stigma of unwed mothers in Korean society and understand how the rescue narratives around transcultural adoption "hide how power and privilege have influenced which mothers have been able to raise the children they bear and which have been able to adopt" (Jacobson 31). Trenka has reportedly said that "[t]he best option is always for a child to be parented by his or her birth parent. Then domestic adoption, and only then intercountry adoption" (Chan, n.p.). Seethaler claims that Trenka had a blog in which she expressed her hope "that [she] will live to see the day when adoption as it is practiced today is viewed as the archaic, primitive, and exploitative practice that it really is" (95).

Interestingly, Trenka and Brierley have completely different ideas about transcultural adoption systems and practices. While Brierley always supports his mother's stance that transnational adoption should be easier so that more Western people can 'save' poor ones, Trenka actively works on making adoption stricter. In 2012, other adoptee activists

and Trenka crafted a law that “explicitly discourages sending children abroad.” As per its regulations, birth mothers must breastfeed their infants for a period of seven days prior to contemplating adoption. In the event that a mother chooses adoption, her consent needs to be verified and her child's birth must be officially registered. Additionally, there is a provision that allows a mother to retract the adoption within six months after submitting her application. Trenka remarked that this would be a “paradigm shift” and that together with TRACK, she is now ensuring that things are conducted in an ethical and proper manner. In previous generations, actions were taken hastily, recklessly, and without regard for ethical considerations (Chan, n.p.). Furthermore, Trenka is actively working “against adoption agencies that prevent adoptees from accessing their personal files” (Wills 47). As I have argued, withholding adoption papers results in the withholding of identities, forcing adoptees to fictionalize their own birth and adoption narratives (ibid. 58). In *The Language of Blood*, Trenka explains how she has desperately tried to reach someone at the Lutheran Social Service, the American adoption agency which placed her with her adoptive parents, to find out about what kind of education her parents got about adopting transculturally but did not receive satisfactory answers. Thus, “Trenka uses her own life experiences to explore the shortcomings of transnational, transracial Asian adoption systems, legal policies, and the unbalanced social support practices offered to everyone involved” (ibid. 47). However, Trenka’s demand for an easier access to birth records supports the idea that they are fundamental to an adoptee’s ‘innate identity.’

While Trenka actively challenges and criticizes the prevalent positive Western perspectives on adoption, we can also detect numerous indications of the equally prevalent idealization of biological kinship in *The Language of Blood*. It is already visible

in the title and the beginning quote by Joyce Carol Oates before the narrative starts: “Because we are linked by blood, and blood is memory without language” – the common Western view that culture innately runs through someone’s blood. Trenka further calls the Korean culture her “birthright.” Another story Trenka includes in her narrative that is directly meant to show the connection to consanguineous kinship without knowing them is a middle school biology lesson about the migration of Monarch butterflies. They fly south to California or Mexico around 3000 miles and then back again but “It takes generations of butterflies to complete the migration cycle. The butterflies returning to Mexico or California every fall are the great-great-grandchildren of those who left the previous spring. No one knows how they can find their way” (37) This hints on Trenka’s immediate connection with her consanguineous kin being supposedly based on blood lines. The word ‘butterfly’ also appears in Trenka’s crossword puzzle, intersecting with the words ‘laugh’ and ‘dream.’ This can be interpreted as indicating Trenka’s positive sentiments towards her biological family and the significance she places on the bonds formed through shared bloodlines.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the memoirs *A Long Way Home* by Saroo Brierley and *The Language of Blood* by Jane Jeong Trenka reflect two fundamentally different adoptee identities. Although Saroo Brierley remembers his biological family and much of his pre-adoptive life, he somehow manages to mentally process accidentally losing it and easily adjusts to his new home and identity. He integrates both his cultural influences into one hybrid identity and sees bloodlines as only “one filament of [his] polyform personhood” (McLeod 26). Jane Jeong Trenka, however, has a fractured, dual identity – she thinks of herself as

having two different versions – Kyong-Ah Jeong, her birth identity, and Jane Marie Brauer, her adoptive identity. Since her adoptive parents have always negated Trenka's birth identity, she has deemed it necessary to bury it within her, and has never been able to form a hybrid, healthy adoptee self-image.

The major difference between the two life stories is their feeling of acceptance and belonging in the adoptive family. The Brierleys openly welcome Saroo's cultural background and help him preserve it as well as his memories of his pre-adoptive life. They do not deny them his 'reunion' with his biological family and support the publishing of his life story, and even visit his Indian kinship. Trenka's adoptive family, however, annihilate their daughters' birth heritage and Trenka's wish to form relations with her Korean family. The Brauers also do not tell her anything about her origins, thus she needs to create fictionalizations, and a kind of "Ghost Kingdom," which leads to her dual identity (Lifton 72). As a conclusion we could say that an open dialogue about transcultural adoptees' birth heritage and supporting adoptive parents who do not see their children as a second option can be great contributors in forming a hybrid identity. As we have seen in *The Language of Blood*, racial marginalization through surroundings is also a significant factor in hindering transcultural adoptees to define themselves, and parents should hence be equipped to help their children in dealing with this.

As discussed in the last Chapter, the two life writers take very different stances on transcultural adoption. Brierley's *A Long Way Home* provides a common rescue narrative take on transcultural adoption in the Western world, however, the text also includes alternative modes of identifying oneself as a transcultural adoptee; Brierley does not comply with the idea that cultural heritage forms some sort of innate identity and proves

that transcultural adoptee identities do not necessarily have to be conflicted or pathologized. *The Language of Blood* has been frequently studied by scholars and has been praised for its unconventional ways of challenging transcultural adoption. Trenka presents her opinion that it is *not* an altruistic act to bring up children from poor families of other countries but depicts the unequal power relations and matters of subjugation within transcultural adoption that underly this practice. Furthermore, Trenka is an activist to help provide opportunities for birth mothers in Korea to keep their babies if possible.

Nevertheless, Trenka's endorsement of the idealization of biological kinship has been neglected in the academic field. I have argued that Trenka perceives her cultural roots as "ever-present authentic origin of personhood" (McLeod 8). This thesis has thus underlined the paradox of looking at transcultural adoption with a postcolonial lense. In postcolonial studies, both the rescue narrative of 'white' people saving people of color, as well as the idealization of consanguineous kinship has been highly critiqued, which creates a paradox in the ethics of transcultural adoption. In my opinion, the analysis of *The Language of Blood* and *A Long Way Home* shows how the environment in which transcultural adoptees are brought up is the primal influence of their identity definition. I highly agree with Trenka's perspective that in order to balance power relations in the world, the cultural stigmatization of birth mothers in 'Third World' countries should be tackled first before children are hastily brought to Western countries, only to fulfil child wishes of wealthy white couples in a 'superior' social position. Nonetheless, I do not principally think that biological parents are generally better equipped to raise their children and that a differing ethnicity or 'race' of adoptive parents has a negative effect on a child's development. Brierley's life story illustrates that the development of identity in

transcultural adoptees can be successful when parents are honest and forthcoming about the children's roots and cultural heritage. Trenka often wishes for these qualities in her own adoptive parents in *The Language of Blood*.

In addition to offering significant insights into the ethical considerations of transcultural adoption, my thesis has also contributed to the discourse on the importance of truthfulness in life writing, specifically in Chapter 3.1. However, some conclusions that could potentially be drawn through my analysis could not be discussed within the scope of this thesis. For instance, a great difference between the two memoirs is the protagonists' differing age at the time of adoption. Brierley has memories of his earlier life as he was six years old when he came to Australia; Trenka, however, was only six months old upon being adopted and has no memories. It might therefore make sense for future analyses of transcultural adoption narratives to further consider the aspect of age when investigating identities of transcultural adoptees. Another interesting feature of my objects of analysis is that both narrators have siblings with the same cultural background, but do not discuss their relationship to them in detail. From the little we know about Mantosh in *A Long Way Home* and Carol in *The Language of Blood*, they both had entire different identity definitions than the protagonists. Hence, it might make sense to focus future research on the sibling relationship. Furthermore, I think that the role of birth fathers needs more attention and that the marginalized voices of birth mothers need to be analyzed to a much greater extent.

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Anhang

Abstract English

This thesis treats the topics of transcultural adoption, cultural identity and feeling of belonging as experienced and portrayed in the life narratives in the memoirs *A Long Way Home* by Saroo Brierley (first published in 2013) and *The Language of Blood* by Jane Jeong Trenka (first published in 2003). The memoirs make valuable contributions to the discussion of the ethics of transcultural adoption in very different ways. While Brierley proves that being raised far from and without contact to the biogenetic culture and family does not necessarily entail pathologization, Trenka reveals the downsides of transcultural adoption and discusses matters of subjugation. Both narratives suggest that supportive adoptive parents who prioritize their children's well-being and foster open discussions about the adoptees' cultural heritage could contribute to their development of a hybrid identity, as opposed to a divided cultural identity.

Abstract Deutsch

Diese Masterarbeit behandelt die Themen transkulturelle Adoption, kulturelle Identität und das Gefühl der Zugehörigkeit, wie sie in den Memoiren *A Long Way Home* von Saroo Brierley (Erstpublikation 2013) und *The Language of Blood* von Jane Jeong Trenka (Erstpublikation 2003) erlebt und dargestellt werden. Die Memoiren leisten wertvolle, aber unterschiedliche Beiträge zur Diskussion um die Ethik der transkulturellen Adoption. Während Brierley beweist, dass das Aufwachsen weit entfernt von der biogenetischen Kultur und Familie und ohne Kontakt zu diesen nicht zwangsläufig zu einer Pathologisierung führen muss, enthüllt Trenka die Nachteile der transkulturellen Adoption und diskutiert Fragen der Unterwerfung. Beide Beispiele legen nahe, dass unterstützende Adoptiveltern, die ihre Kinder nicht als zweite Wahl betrachten, sowie deren Etablierung eines offenen Dialogs über die biologische Herkunft der adoptierten Kinder, eine hybride Identitätsbildung begünstigen, und einer geteilten kulturellen Identität entgegenwirken könnten.