Deann Borshay Liem’s 2000 documentary on transnational adoption, *First Person Plural*, recounts the filmmaker’s 1966 adoption from a Korean orphanage by Alveen and Donald Borshay, a white American couple in Fremont, California, as well as Borshay Liem’s eventual discovery some twenty years later of her birth mother in Kusan, Korea.¹ With the hopes of alleviating the clinical depression from which she has suffered since college, Borshay Liem decides that she must see her two families together, in one room, in the same physical space. And so she orchestrates what can be described only as an excruciating “reunion” between her American parents and her Korean family, a journey of recuperation and return to origins compelled as much by fantasy as by fact. Midway through *First Person Plural*, however, Borshay Liem halts her narrative of reunion to offer this painful disclosure. Looking straight into the camera lens, she bluntly admits: “There wasn’t room in my mind for two mothers.”

I begin with this statement of a *psychic* predicament—the dearth of space in Borshay Liem’s psyche for two mothers—because I am struck by the complicated ways by which female subjectivity and maternal blame become the site for working out a host of material and psychic contradictions associated with the practice of transnational adoption. This practice, in which infants are entangled in transnational flows of human capital, is a post–World War II phenomenon closely associated with American liberalism, postwar prosperity, and Cold War politics. In the late twentieth century, transnational adoption has proliferated alongside global consumer markets, becoming a popular and viable option not only for heterosexual but also—and increasingly—for homosexual couples and singles seeking to (re)consolidate and (re)occupy conventional structures of family and kinship.

Through this contemporary emergence of new family and kinship relations, we come to recognize transnational adoption as one of the most privileged forms of diaspora and immigration in the late twentieth century. In turn, we are confronted with an interlocking set of gender, racial, national, political, economic, and cultural questions. Is the transnational adoptee an immigrant? Is she, as in those cases such as Borshay Liem’s,
an Asian American? Even more, is her adoptive family Asian American? How is the “otherness” of the transnational adoptee absorbed into the intimate space of the familial? And how are international and group histories of gender, race, poverty, and nation managed or erased within the “privatized” sphere of the domestic?

Attempts to answer these questions often result in significant confusion, and this difficulty suggests that transnational adoption must be analyzed not only in terms of “private” family and kinship dynamics but also in relation to larger “public” imperialist histories of race, gender, capitalism, and nation. Amy Kaplan, in the context of new Americanist studies of nineteenth-century practices of U.S. imperialism, argues that “imperialism as a political or economic process abroad is inseparable from the social relations and cultural discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, and class at home.”

The vexing issues invoked by transnational adoption suggest that this practice might be usefully considered in relation to Kaplan’s formulation. What would it mean to think about transnational adoption as a paradigmatic late-twentieth-century phenomenon situated at the intersection of imperialist processes “over there” and social relations “over here”? How might transnational adoption help us understand contemporary contradictions between processes of globalization and discourses of nationalism? For instance, how might late capitalist modes of flexible production and accumulation (in which the practice of transnational adoption must be situated) relate to the scaling back of civil rights and liberties in the U.S. nation-state, including access to the public sphere and participation in civil society, as well as claims to privacy, parenthood, and family?

It is crucial to investigate the material implications and effects of transnational adoption. However, it is equally important, as Borshay Liem’s maternal predicament insists, to explore the psychic dimensions of the practice. And while we have a growing body of scholarship analyzing the political economy of transnational adoption, we lack a sustained analysis of its psychic range and limits. This essay explores both the political and the psychic economies of transnational adoption. It brings historical, anthropological, and legal scholarship on transnational adoption together with psychoanalysis—a rather unorthodox but, I would contend, necessary theoretical combination.

The essay begins with a description of the evolving politics of family and kinship relations in the late twentieth century. It examines, through an analysis of a recent John Hancock commercial depicting American lesbians adopting a Chinese baby, the historical conditions and contradictions of transnational adoption that make new social formations of family and kinship thinkable. In the second part of this essay, I elaborate upon
the psychic structures that support these new social formations—that
make them inhabitable and reproducible or, perhaps more accurately in
Borshay Liem’s recounting, unlivable and barren. Offering a theory of
racial melancholia as well as a reading of Freud’s essays on femininity and
the negative Oedipus complex, I explore questions of origin and the psy-
chic genealogy of Borshay Liem’s maternal dilemma.

I recognize that Borshay Liem’s documentary represents a singular set
of experiences that may at first seem remote from the heterogeneous
experiences of different transnational adoptees and their families. Never-
theless, I hope that my particular analyses of *First Person Plural* will not
only resonate with the social and psychological issues of many of these
various groups but also provide some new critical approaches to reframe
and to broaden current discourses exploring this phenomenon. Ever
since the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) issued
a position paper in 1972 advocating the adoption of black children only by
black families, there has been a contentious and long-standing debate
concerning the politics of race in black/white transracial adoption and fos-
ter care. In comparison, little critical attention has been paid to the politics
of race (not to mention the psychic issues) regarding transnational adop-
tion of Asian children by white families. While transnational adoption
practices implicate some of our most deeply held beliefs about family and
identity and some of our most deeply held values about community and
nation, there remains a dearth of available vocabularies to investigate this
critical juncture of private and public.

The adoption of a child, domestically or from abroad, is a material
and an affective enterprise of great magnitude. In unpacking its implica-
tions and effects, I do not want to be construed as either an advocate or an
adversary of transnational adoption. Instead, the relentless moralizing that
characterizes much of our contemporary debate on the erosion of “family
values”—of traditional white, middle-class parenthood and the nuclear
family—must give way to a sustained discussion of the ethics of multi-
culturalism in relation to the current emergence of what I call the “new
global family.” It is in this spirit that I offer a sustained analysis of transna-
tional adoption’s material contours and affective crossings. For without
such examination, we will have few theoretical ways to understand and
few therapeutic resources to alleviate the psychic pain associated with
Borshay Liem’s striking—in fact, heartbreaking—confession. How might
the transnational adoptee come to have psychic space for two mothers?
And what, in turn, would such an expansion of the psyche mean for the
sociopolitical domain of contemporary family and kinship relations and
the politics of diaspora?
This essay is part of a book-length project, “Queer Diasporas/Psychic Diasporas,” exploring structures of family and kinship in the late twentieth century. “Queer Diasporas/Psychic Diasporas” investigates what might be gained politically by reconceptualizing diaspora not in conventional terms of ethnic dispersion, filiation, and biological traceability, but rather in terms of queerness, affiliation, and social contingency. By doing so, “queer diaspora” emerges as a concept providing new methods of contesting traditional family and kinship structures—of reorganizing national and transnational communities based not on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments.4

“Queer Diasporas/Psychic Diasporas” focuses upon this theoretical question: Why do we have numerous poststructuralist accounts of language but few poststructuralist accounts of kinship? In the 1970s, feminist anthropologists such as Gayle Rubin turned to structuralist accounts of kinship, most notably those of Claude Lévi-Strauss, to compare the exchange of women to the exchange of words.5 Judith Butler observes that, when the study of kinship was combined with the study of structural linguistics, the exchange of women was likened to the trafficking of a sign, the linguistic currency facilitating a symbolic and communicative bond among men. “To recast particular structures of kinship as ‘symbolic,’” Butler warns, “is precisely to posit them as preconditions of linguistic intelligibility and to suggest that these ‘positions’ bear an intractability that does not apply to contingent social norms.”6 In this manner, these structuralist accounts burdened us with traditional kinship relations underwritten by the Oedipal—a structuralist legacy establishing “certain forms of kinship as the only intelligible and livable ones.”7

We have moved beyond structuralist accounts of language, but have we moved beyond structuralist accounts of kinship? Collectively, feminists have done much to challenge the idea of kinship as the exchange of women tout court. But insofar as there continues to be a privileged relationship between the exchange of women and the exchange of words, it would be difficult to imagine a poststructuralist accounting of kinship not predicated on the subordination of women and normative forms of Oedipalization. What would such a poststructuralist project look like?

“Queer Diasporas/Psychic Diasporas” explores these questions through an investigation of Asian transnational as well as gay and lesbian/queer social movements. The late twentieth century has witnessed the emergence of a spectrum of new social formations and identities. While idealized notions of family and kinship have been under duress throughout history,
at this contemporary moment two of the most notable challenges to traditional orderings of family and kinship have come in the form of Asian transnational movements as well as queer reorganization of familial norms.

For instance, a distinct theoretical vocabulary has arisen in the fields of Asian and Asian American studies to describe transnational shifts, on the side of both capital and labor, in conventional orderings of family and kinship. The late twentieth century has witnessed not only the increasing proliferation of cheap and flexible Asian immigrant labor across the globe (in the form of free trade zones and global sweatshops) but also the concomitant expansion of Asian immigration into spheres of transnational and global capitalism. “Mail-order brides” and “domestic servants” are two of the more significant terms in a global age associated with the exploitation of Third World women in an ever increasing international gendered division of labor supporting First World middle-class family households. In contrast, “satellite people,” “parachute kids,” “reverse settlers,” and “flexible citizenship” are some of the more prevalent concepts connected to the rise of a distinct Asian transnational capitalist and managerial class. How do we situate another emerging term—transnational adoptee—in relation to these social constellations of exploitation and privilege? On which side—capital or labor—does the transnational adoptee fall?

At the same historical moment, U.S.-based gay and lesbian activist movements have culminated in demands for legal rights to same-sex marriage, adoption, custody, and inheritance, for antidiscrimination employment legislation, and for service in the military. Paradoxically, prior historical efforts to defy state oppression have, to a striking extent, given way to the desire for state legitimacy and inclusion, for the backing of mainstream gay and lesbian political and policy aims. It is in this climate of heightened assimilation and state sanction, as well as through the rhetorics of equal opportunity and multicultural inclusion, that contemporary permutations of family and kinship must be rethought.

We can approach this dynamic from another angle. In his well-known essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” John D’Emilio argues that gay identity first emerged at the turn of the last century through the ascent of wage labor in industrializing cities and the independent sexual lifestyle this wage labor afforded. The creation of urban zones of gay and lesbian life was facilitated by the movement of individuals away from agrarian-based familial units and actualized through the severing of family and kinship bonds—a severing later mirrored, even embraced, in the politics of gay liberation and “coming out.”

To come out of the closet today still places family and kinship bonds at risk. At the same time, however, gays and lesbians are reinhabiting
structures of family and kinship not only in growing numbers but also in increasingly public and visible ways (such as being included in the recently renamed “Weddings/Celebrations” announcements section of the Sunday New York Times). The continuing AIDS crisis, the lesbian baby boom of the 1980s, the emergence of same-sex partnership recognition on the corporate and municipal levels, and present-day legal claims to gay marriage, adoption, and custody have remade the politics of kinship into “Families We Choose,” to invoke anthropologist Kath Weston’s important study of queer kinship in 1980s San Francisco.

If gays and lesbians today are no longer eccentric to structures of family and kinship, we need to consider whether this reformulation of traditional social formations can be justifiably described as “poststructuralist” or whether it must be thought about in terms of a constrained (material and psychic) assimilation to dominant social customs and norms. What are the contemporary political, economic, and cultural conditions that allow for this queer reinhabitation of family and kinship? Significantly, in moving from the politics of the closet to the “privileges” of family, and from prewar industrialization to postwar globalization, gays and lesbians are also said to have moved from wage labor to particular modes of consumer capitalism. While it is clear that gays and lesbians have always come from varied class backgrounds, the historical development and public visibility of queer family and kinship demand a concerted analysis of the ways in which contemporary forms of capitalism, flexible accumulation, and exploitation might be the very conditions of possibility for this emergence.

Indeed, both this analysis and the status of the transnational adoptee as complicating the borders between exploitation and privilege can be elaborated remarkably in the present context of the transnational adoption of Chinese baby girls by Western couples and singles. A John Hancock commercial that aired nationally during the 2000 Olympics and World Series illustrates this crossing of queerness and diaspora—of contemporary sexual and racial formation—in the global system and domestic sphere of the nation-state. First broadcast during the U.S. women’s gymnastics championships, the commercial depicts a white American lesbian couple at a major U.S. metropolitan airport with their newly arrived Chinese baby girl. Interspersed between shots of busy white immigration officers, a close-up of the U.S. flag, and throngs of anonymous Asian faces restlessly waiting to gain entry into the country, we spy the couple with their nameless infant waiting patiently in line. The commercial then moves to a close-up of the trio.

“This is your new home,” coos the dark-haired lesbian as she rocks the sleeping infant. “Don’t tell her that; she’s going to want to go back,” jokes the other, a gangly blonde. “Hi, baby,” the blonde whispers, as her
partner asks, “Do you have her papers?” “Yeah, they’re in the diaper bag,” she responds. As the scene cuts away to a black screen, on which appears the list “Mutual Funds, Annuities, Life Insurance, Long Term Care Insurance,” the dark-haired lesbian is heard in a voice-over stating wondrously, “Can you believe this? We’re a family.” The commercial cuts to her placing a tender kiss on the baby girl’s head, as a second black screen appears with the words, “Insurance for the unexpected / Investments for the opportunities.” A third black screen with the John Hancock logo comes into view as we hear a final off-screen exchange between the couple: “You’re going to make a great mom.” “So are you.”

Given the long U.S. history of Chinese immigration exclusion and bars to naturalization and citizenship, and given the recent public outcry and legal repudiation of gay and lesbian parenting, we must pause to wonder exactly what John Hancock, one of the world’s largest financial services companies, is seeking to insure. How does this depiction of transnational adoption and circuits of (human) exchange not only resignify past and present histories of exploited Asian immigrant labor but also situate the adoption of Chinese baby girls by an emerging consumer niche group—white lesbians with capital—as one of the late twentieth century’s most privileged forms of immigration?

The commercial implies that, in crossing an invisible national boundary, a needy “object” left to wither in the dark corners of a Chinese orphanage is miraculously transformed into a treasured U.S. “subject” worthy of investment—economic protection (capital accumulation), political rights (citizenship), and social recognition (family). In this regard, we should note that, in the face of immediate right-wing outrage at the commercial, a John Hancock spokesman, waxing liberal-poetic about the company’s advertisement, announced, “However a child comes into a family, that child is entitled to financial protection, and John Hancock can help.”

How is the rhetoric of “financial protection” functioning here as moral justification for the ever greater accumulation and conflation of (economic) property and (legal) rights, including at this juncture child and family as property and rights for lesbians and gays? How is this respectable lesbian couple with money being positioned as the idealized inhabitants of an increasingly acceptable gay version of the nuclear family? How, in other words, is “financial protection” inextricably bound together with political citizenship and social belonging as the prerequisite for queer kinship?

Anthropologist Ann Anagnost suggests that, for white middle-class subjects in the era of late capitalism, the position of parent has become increasingly a measure of value, self-worth, and “completion.” Indeed, I would suggest that the possession of a child, whether biological or adopted, has today become the sign of guarantee not only for family but...
also for full and robust citizenship—for being a fully realized political, economic, and social subject in American life. (“Can you believe this? We’re a family.”) The desire for parenthood as economic entitlement and legal right (transnational adoption requiring immigration visas, along with the termination and transfer of parental rights for naturalization and citizenship) not only by heterosexuals but also, and increasingly, by homosexuals seems to stem in large part from an unexamined belief in the traditional ideals of the nuclear family as the primary contemporary measure of social respectability and value. This enjoyment of rights is, of course, ghosted by those queers and diasporic subjects—unacknowledged lovers, illegal immigrants, indentured laborers, infants left behind—consigned to outcast status and confined to the edges of globalization; they have attenuated, and often no, legal claims to “family,” “home,” or “nation.”

Legally, U.S. citizenship is granted on the basis of either birthplace (jus soli) or descent (jus sanguinis), deriving from parent to child. What does it mean that, in our present age, full and robust citizenship is socially effected from child to parent and, in many cases, through the position of the adoptee, its visible possession and spectacular display? In this regard, what does it mean consciously to ask that the transnational adoptee operate as a guarantee for her parents’ access to full social recognition and rights to participation in the public sphere and civil society? Indeed, given the history of Asian immigration exclusion, how is it possible that this Chinese baby could effect such a transformation? The John Hancock commercial illustrates how capitalism colonizes idealized notions of family and familial sentiment to sell its products and services to newly emergent transnational families. But we must wonder, along with Anagnost, how the figure of the child can function “so relentlessly in U.S. political rhetoric as emblematizing the current state of emergency, even as public support for the needs of children is rapidly eroding?” In this context, we need to ask again, is this version of queer family “poststructuralist”? On which side—capital or labor—does the transnational adoptee fall?

The baby’s tenuous transformation from object to subject and her need for citizenship papers (“Do you have her papers?” “Yeah, they’re in the diaper bag”) insist that we consider the transnational adoptee an immigrant, thus realigning her with the anonymous Asian crowd from which she is individuated (an individuation, we might note, that emerges from the dross of the diaper bag). At the same time, this transformation demands us to entertain the possibility that the transnational adoptee is a form of embodied value, a special type of property uneasily straddling both subjecthood and objecthood. Her movement across invisible national boundaries, east to west and south to north, thus places her on the threshold of a tenuous subjectivity continually threatening to undo itself, to
unmask the history of its commodification. If the adoptee’s miraculous political, economic, and social transformation obscures the commodification of infant girls as a gendered form of embodied value bought and sold, what cultural alibis about Chinese otherness and gender abuse must be produced so as to efface the history of this transaction in the global marketplace? How do generalized narratives of salvation—from poverty, disease, and the barbarism of the Third World—often attached to narratives of transnational adoption displace global and local histories of colonialism, military intervention, capitalist exploitation, racism, and gender discrimination? In this particular crossing of queerness and diaspora, what kind of global and local histories must be managed and erased?

The movement of the transnational adoptee from “over there” to “over here,” and from “orphanage” to “family,” not only individuates her ever so tenuously but also contracts imperialist histories and their domestic embodiments into the privatized space of the family. Through this process, the political is contracted into “private” life, and this contraction makes more collective forms of political activism seem untenable and extreme. This sphere is what Lauren Berlant, analyzing the conservative regulation and privatization of family, heterosexuality, and good citizenship during the Reagan/Thatcher era, has labeled the “intimate public sphere.”

Significantly, as Borshay Liem’s example indicates, global and domestic histories contracted into the intimate public sphere of the reconstructed white heterosexual nuclear family are often psychically displaced. They reemerge in symptomatic form within the dynamics of what I will call the “imperial psychic sphere.”

Before turning to a more detailed investigation of the imperial psychic sphere in First Person Plural, I consider what kind of histories and historical contradictions might be returned to the practice of transnational adoption in order to analyze more fully its global and domestic genealogies. I offer the following brief historical sketch, as it is crucial to link transnational adoption not just to humanitarian or religious narratives of love, altruism, salvation, and redemption but also to specific pre– and post–World War II histories of imperialism, immigration, racialized exploitation, and gendered commodification.

The history of transnational adoption is a recent one. Initiated in the aftermath of World War II as a humanitarian response by a prospering North America, transnational adoption to the United States first began with the emigration of European orphans from Germany and Poland. However, it was only after the Korean War (1950–53), and under the shadow of Cold War politics, that the largest wave of transnational adoptions was to take place. Since then, South Korea, with the help of Western religious and social service agencies, has expedited the adoption of over
200,000 South Korean children (150,000 of whom are now residing in the United States and 50,000 of whom are currently living in Western Europe, Canada, and Australia). Until 1991, South Korean children constituted the largest number of transnational adoptees to enter the United States on an annual basis. Transnational adoptions from South Korea have been followed by adoptions from other Asian countries (such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and China) in which the United States has had a notable military presence and/or strong political and economic interests. In 2000, China (5,053), Russia (4,269), and South Korea (1,794) ranked first, second, and third in U.S. transnational adoptions.18

Scholarship in postcolonial and transnational feminism links the historical emergence of war brides and mail-order brides to foundations of military prostitution and the commodification of Third World female bodies for First World male consumption and pleasure.19 From this perspective, we might say that the historical phenomena of war brides and mail-order brides make explicit what is often only implicit or absent in traditional analyses of transnational adoption (the majority of adoptees being baby girls). Parents adopting infants in China are expected to make a cash contribution of U.S.$3,000–$4,000 to the orphanage in which the child resides. These costs are now partially underwritten by many private corporations and by the U.S. government. In 1997, adoptive U.S. parents of foreign-born children began to qualify for a one-time tax credit of $5,000–$6,000.20

While feminist critics in general have been reluctant to associate the purchase of a wife with the “heroic” act of saving a (female) child, transnational adoptions occur predominantly in areas where not only women, but also nations themselves, cannot care for their own children. Numerous national as well as international declarations on the rights of children demand that poverty alone should not justify the loss of parental authority.21 Legal scholar Twila Perry asks us: “Could it be argued that, rather than transferring the children of the poor to economically better-off people in other countries, there should be a transfer of wealth from rich countries to poor ones to enable the mothers of poor children to continue to take care of their children themselves?”22 Dissociating transnational adoption from the historical and economic legacy of war brides and mail-order brides thus obscures an understanding of this practice as one of the more recent forms of gendered commodification—an enduring symptom of an increasing international gendered division of labor under the shadows of globalization.

From the perspective of Asian American studies and history, we might consider how transnational adoption from Asia fits not only within a gendered postwar pattern of privileged immigration (war brides, mail-
order brides, transnational adoptees) but also within nineteenth-century histories of anti-Asian immigration and bars to naturalization and citizenship. The period from 1882 to 1943 is often cited as the “official” years of Asian exclusion. However, legal scholar Leti Volpp has suggested that the Page Law of 1875, largely banning Chinese female immigration to the United States, might be a more appropriate historical date to mark the *gendered* form in which racialized exclusion of Asian immigrants from the U.S. nation-state took place. In this regard, the privileged migration of Chinese baby girls in our contemporary moment marks not only a striking gendered reversal of this history of racialized exclusion but also an emergent form of Asian American subjectivity of considerable consequence to Asian American politics, history, and community. Indeed, this reversal suggests not only that the transnational adoptee must be considered a “proper” subject of Asian American studies but also that the field has evolved to a point where a “subjectless” critique—a critique that does not rely upon an assumed and naturalized set of Asian American bodies—is indispensable.

What, we might ask, accounts for this gendered reversal of the Page Law? Further, how might we rethink time-honored paradigms relating to racial formation, gender subordination, and labor exploitation in Asian American studies in regard to the practice of transnational adoption? The historical period from the late nineteenth century to World War II—the era of the “Asian Alien” and “Yellow Peril”—is one during which a rapidly industrializing U.S. nation-state produced cheap and flexible labor through Asian exclusion laws and the creation of the “illegal (Asian) immigrant” outside the rights and privileges of citizenship. If the transnational adoptee is, in fact, an Asian American immigrant, what kind of labor is she performing for the family, and for the nation?

Here, we need to broaden yet again our historical perspective to consider the intersection of transnational and domestic histories of race and racial formation. Due to declining birth rates in the post–World War II West, greater access to abortion and reliable methods of contraception, and an easing of the stigma against women bearing children outside of marriage, fewer white children are now available for domestic adoption. As a result, white parents reluctant or unwilling to adopt black children in the United States (and/or fearful of domestic child custody battles with birth parents) have turned increasingly to transnational adoption as an alternative. In this way, the Asian transnational adoptee serves to triangulate the domestic landscape of black-white race relations. Indeed, she might be described as performing a type of crucial ideological labor: the shoring up of an idealized notion of kinship, the making good of the white heterosexual nuclear family.
Hence, transnational adoption need not be understood as historically disparate from the prewar period of Asian exclusion, with its bars to naturalization and citizenship. In the postwar period of the Asian American citizen the practice of transnational adoption expands wage labor into arenas of consumer capitalism meant to effect a different type of labor power. We might describe this form not as “productive labor,” in the traditional Marxian sense, but as “consumptive labor.” Miranda Joseph argues that “consumptive labor is productive, but it is organized very differently from productive labor: it is not organized, procured, or exploited as wage labor.”27 Instead, as Joseph observes, in the shift to globalization and modes of flexible production and accumulation, consumptive labor serves to produce and to organize social community as a supplement to capital.

In the context of transnational adoption, consumptive labor produces and shores up the social and psychic boundaries of the white heterosexual nuclear family, guaranteeing its integrity and the sanctity of its ideals. Under the shadows of this imperative, then, we need to consider how transnational parenting might underwrite powerful regimes of racial, sexual, and economic containment. In constructing a cultural “identity” for their adoptee, for instance, how do parents utilize discourses of multiculturalism to absorb difference into the intimate space of the familial? How are discourses of multiculturalism being invoked to manage, to aestheticize, to reinscribe, and finally to deracinate culture of all meaningful difference?

In the context of this analysis, the practice of transnational adoption suggests that Asian baby girls are more easily folded into the imagined community of the white, heterosexual, middle-class nuclear family than black children. All the more, then, we need to consider the multiple ways in which economic agency, political power, and social recognition are becoming increasingly privatized as a function of capital, while civil society continues to shrink and priorities are shifted from social services to capital maximization. Moreover, we need to explore how the racial management of gender and the gendered management of race assimilate the Asian adoptee into the intimate public sphere of the white nuclear family—into traditional, recognizable, and idealized family and kinship structures. How does the model minority myth help to facilitate this fit? How does the stereotype of the hard-working, agreeable, and passive Asian girl, ever eager to please, work to smooth over political problems, economic disparities, and cultural differences?28

These questions demand a deconstructive rereading of the Asian American model minority myth, whose genealogy is said to date from the Cold War necessity to produce “good” (anti-Communist) Asian subjects, as well as to the reformation of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act.
and its subsequent initiation of a professional “brain drain” from Asia. How do war brides, mail-order brides, and transnational adoptees collectively challenge, broaden, and reorient traditional accountings of the transformation of “Asian alien” into “Asian American citizen”?

Relating this gendered history of Asian immigration, as well as white/black/yellow race relations, to the model minority discourse suggests that global histories of gendered commodification do in fact effect and affect domestic genealogies of race, racialization, and citizenship. Indeed, the practice of transnational adoption marks a contemporary crossing of global processes of flexible specialization and the production of new racialized communities—new global families—that must be considered against a politics of weak multiculturalism. This is a politics focused not on issues of social justice, material redistribution, and substantive equality, but on economic entitlement and the privileges of family for an emergent class of multicultural elites. In this current state of emergency, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, what are the psychic costs and burdens that underwrite transnational adoption’s political, economic, and social contradictions? What is the psychic scaffolding that makes transnational adoption an inhabitable and livable, or an uninhabitable and barren, condition of existence? Let us return to the psychic dilemma—to the imperial psychic sphere—of “two mothers.”

**Psychic Diasporas**

For the transnational adoptee, where does history begin?

In the opening minutes of *First Person Plural*, we are given several conflicting answers to this question. The filmmaker presents a complex montage sequence that combines family photographs, her adoptive father’s home movies, including scenes of Borshay Liem’s arrival at the San Francisco airport on 3 March 1966, and her own interview footage of her American parents and siblings some thirty years later as they watch these home movies and recall their memories and feelings of that fateful day. The sequence begins with Denise, Borshay Liem’s sister, explaining the excitement of “getting” a sister, “someone to play with,” as she puts it. “I remember getting my hair done to go pick you up at the airport, and I was really jazzed about that,” Denise tells us. But despite her “excitement” about picking up Cha Jung Hee, her new little sister from Korea, Denise’s investment in (feminine) self-display belies a narcissistic logic that as a whole underwrites the entirety of the Borshay family’s initial encounter with the eight-year-old adoptee. “I think mother went up to the wrong person,” Denise admits. “Yeah. I think we didn’t know until we
checked your name tag or something who told us who you were. It didn’t matter. I mean, one of them was ours.”

Here, the language of ownership, as well as the assumed interchangeability of the variously “tagged” adoptees, constitutes a clear violation of the exclusive bond thought to exist between mother and child. This violation opens immediately upon the terrain of commodification—one of exchangeability and substitutability. Significantly, Borshay Liem’s “acquisition” is accompanied by the simultaneous erasure of Cha Jung Hee’s Korean identity through the dismissal of her prior history and family. “You know, to us an orphanage meant that you had no family,” Alveen Borshay explains. “This way you were going to have a family.” Suggesting that Borshay Liem’s history begins only with her entry into their particular family unit, Denise concludes: “From the moment you came here, you were my sister and we were your family and that was it. And even though we look different—different nationality or whatever—we were your family.”

Echoing Alveen’s and Denise’s sentiments, Donald Borshay’s account is notably similar. And although the father recalls a momentary wrinkle in Borshay Liem’s initial arrival, this problem is quickly smoothed out through its concerted willing away: “I remember very clearly your first meal,” Donald recalls. “Mother prepared something that was very nice. And we were sitting at the table and you just kind of dropped your head and the tears started to come down. No words were spoken. Mother could see what was happening, and she simply took you away from the table and you were excused and from then on it was perfect.”

“From then on it was perfect.” I have spent some time detailing the various recollections of the “from then on” moment of Borshay Liem’s arrival in the United States. I do so because these comments collectively illustrate the ways in which the transnational adoptee is commodified as an object to be enjoyed, while at the same time the particular histories of her past are denied, repressed, and effaced. In Denise’s, Alveen’s, and Donald’s recollections, history “proper” begins only at the moment of Borshay Liem’s arrival “over here,” the privatized language of family working to overwrite histories of Korea as well as the particularities of Cha Jung Hee’s Korean past. Alveen admits quite forthrightly that her initial desire to adopt stemmed from watching Gary Moore commercials on NBC television advertising Foster Parents Plan through the plight of Korean War orphans. However, this history cannot be easily reconciled with Borshay Liem’s past. Public histories of war, imperialism, domestic conflict, and poverty in Korea cannot be easily connected to the private sphere of the prosperous American family.

Moreover, while there is no such thing as a motherless child, the open-
ing sequence of *First Person Plural* highlights the management of Borshay Liem’s past history through the valence of the “proper” name. Sent to the United States at eight, Borshay Liem has a series of identities and proper names that are erased through her transnational exchange. “My Name is Kang Ok Jin,” Borshay Liem begins in the opening lines of *First Person Plural*. As her face flashes onto the screen and fades into an eerie solarized silhouette (fig. 1), she continues: “I was born on 14 June 1957. I feel like I’ve been several different people in one life. My name is Cha Jung Hee. I was born on 5 November 1956. I’ve had three names, three different sets of histories. My name is Deann Borshay. I was born 3 March 1966, the moment I stepped off the airplane in San Francisco. I’ve spoken different languages and I’ve had different families.” First “Kang Ok Jin” and then deliberately substituted for another child, “Cha Jung Hee,” by the Korean adoption agency, “Deann Borshay” is finally “born” on 3 March 1966, not by her Korean birth mother but by her arrival on the San Francisco jetway. Ultimately, through the animating desires and projections of her American family, she enters what they consider to be her “proper” history.

It is important to note that the repression of Borshay Liem’s past is carried out not only as a collective family project but also, and more
importantly, through the *strict management of the adoptee’s affect*. That is, the contraction of Korean history into the privatized boundaries of the white American family is finessed through the repression and erasure of Borshay Liem’s emotions. The silent tears that mark Borshay Liem’s arrival as well as the negation of her past cannot have linguistic expression and thus have no symbolic life. These tears must necessarily be refused, as Donald Borshay does indeed refuse and then “excuse” them, such that Borshay Liem has little psychic recourse to work through her considerable losses. (Attitudes toward open adoption have shifted considerably from thirty years ago. However, given the ways in which difference is often appropriated and reinscribed by a politics of weak multiculturalism, the current acknowledgement of the adoptee’s past may not have shifted this management of affect in any significant manner.)

How might we begin to analyze Borshay Liem’s affective losses? Several years ago, in response to a series of Asian American student suicides at a university where I had been teaching, I cowrote with Shinhee Han, a clinical psychotherapist, an essay entitled “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia.” In this article, we analyze Freud’s theories of mourning and melancholia as presenting a compelling framework to conceptualize registers of loss and depression attendant to the conflicts and struggles associated with immigration, assimilation, and racialization for Asian Americans. In contrast to “normal” mourning, where libido is eventually withdrawn from a lost object to be invested elsewhere, melancholia as described by Freud is a “pathological” mourning without end. As Freud’s privileged theory of unresolved grief, melancholia delineates a psychic condition whereby certain losses can never be avowed and, hence, can never be properly mourned. In our argument, racial melancholia describes both social and psychic structures of loss emerging from Asian immigrant experiences that can be worked through only with the greatest of considerable pain and difficulty.

Here it is important to emphasize that the experience of immigration is based on a structure of loss. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud describes the lost object as embodying a person, place, or ideal. When one leaves a country of origin, voluntarily or involuntarily (as in the case of transnational adoptees), a host of losses both concrete and abstract must be mourned. To the extent lost ideals of Asianness (including homeland, family, language, property, identity, custom, status) are irrecoverable, immigration, assimilation, and racialization are placed within a melancholic framework—a state of suspension between “over there” and “over here.” In Freud’s theory of mourning, one works through and finds closure to these losses by investing in new objects and ideals—in the American dream, for example.
To the extent, however, that Asian Americans are perpetually consigned to foreigner status and considered eccentric to the nation (as the recent Wen Ho Lee case illustrates), and to the extent that ideals of whiteness remain unattainable and thus lost for Asian Americans, it might be said that they are denied the capacity to invest in new people, places, and ideals. This inability to invest in new objects is a crucial part of Freud’s definition of melancholia. Racial melancholia thus describes a psychic process by which vexed identification and affiliations with lost objects, places, and ideals of both Asianness and whiteness remain estranged and unresolved.

In *First Person Plural*, we witness the numerous ways in which Borshay Liem’s past is repressed, the continuous ways in which her racial difference and past history are managed and denied, so that she cannot mourn what she has lost in Korea. Furthermore, the documentary portrays Borshay Liem’s frustrating and impossible identifications with ideals of whiteness that remain perpetually elusive. Speaking about her vain attempts to mimic the “American ways” of her siblings, Duncan and Denise, Borshay Liem presents us with numerous home movies documenting her torturous adolescent development: Deann sitting amid her white dolls; Deann dressed up like a Korean doll; Deann the prom queen; Deann with her towering white high school boyfriend; Deann as a perky college cheerleader (figs. 2–6).

Throughout the documentary, we witness in everyday acts, gestures, and offhand comments by her entire family the active production of Borshay Liem’s Korean difference, accompanied by a simultaneous reinscription—an effacing and a whitewashing—of this difference. In the very opening minutes of Borshay Liem’s documentary, her brother Duncan, in what can be described only as a smug tone of self-congratulation,
tells her: “You didn’t come from my mommy’s womb. You don’t have the family eyes, but you’ve got the family smile. Color and look doesn’t make any difference. It’s who you are. You’re my sister.” Duncan’s statement underwrites a philosophy of weak multiculturalism, what Homi Bhabha describes as the irreducible failure of mimicry: “Almost the same, but not quite . . . Almost the same but not white.”

In an especially disturbing episode recounted by her mother, a young Borshay Liem is shown in a home movie combing the very blond hair of a doll (fig. 7). In a voice-over commentary that could easily be described as an Asian version of The Bluest Eye, Alveen tells Borshay Liem, “You said, ‘Mother, my ears always stick out. I hate that.’ I said, ‘Honey, that can be fixed if you want,’ and you wanted.” At this point, Donald Borshay chimes in, “So we went to the plastic surgeon in San Jose . . . and when they went to take the bandages off, then you began to cry.” Again, the
family is faced with tears, an overflow of affect that is met with bafflement, without real understanding.

Freud maintains in “Mourning and Melancholia” that melancholia emerges from a “pathological” disposition and can be distinguished from regular mourning by its inability to end. In “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” Han and I contest Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia. If experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racial-ization in the United States are fundamentally determined through both the forced relinquishing of lost but unspeakable Asian ideals and foreclosed investments in whiteness, then we might justifiably describe racial melancholia as a “normal” everyday group experience for Asian Americans. This insight places Asian American subjectivity and racial melancholia on the terrain of conflict, not damage. In this respect, racial melancholia might be better described as a depathologized “structure of feeling,” to
cite Raymond Williams’s term for those unidentified affects marking emergent group formations and identities. Operating less as an individual than a group dynamic, racial melancholia for Asian Americans, we conclude, involves not just mourning or melancholia but a continual negotiation between mourning and melancholia. Significantly, this negotiation is often and even exclusively configured within Asian American cultural politics as an intergenerational and intersubjective negotiation. That is, problems and contradictions arising from Asian American immigration are often interpreted in terms of master narratives of intergenerational conflict between parents and children, between the older and younger generation. The tendency to reduce all social issues, including those resulting from institutional racism and economic exploitation, to first-generation versus second-generation struggles threatens to displace them within the privatized space of the family. At the same time, it denies what are necessarily public problems and absolves the state and mainstream community from proper address or redress.

While I flag this palpable danger, what I would like to emphasize in this analysis of transnational adoption is the elimination of this intergenerational and intersubjective process, the loss of the communal nature of racial melancholia. As a collective unit, the family cannot recognize Bor-
shay Liem’s racial melancholia. Borshay Liem’s losses remain unaffirmed and unacknowledged by those closest to her, by her own family, by those most affectively immediate to her. This is the striking difference between the ways in which racial melancholia is negotiated within Asian American immigrant families and the ways loss is negotiated by the Asian transnational adoptee. Earlier, I asked whether the transnational adoptee, as well as her adoptive family, was Asian American. To the extent that Borshay Liem’s adoptive family recognizes her as a racialized subject, while not recognizing themselves as such, we witness an emotional gap of significant consequence in the intimate space of the family. That is, this failure of recognition serves to redouble racial melancholia’s consequences, effectively severing Borshay Liem from the family unit, affectively segregating her, and ultimately forcing her to negotiate her losses in isolation. What should necessarily be an intergenerational and intersubjective negotiation of loss is thus reduced to intrasubjective isolation and silence.

“There was an unspoken contract between us, which we had all agreed upon—that I was an orphan with no family ties to Korea,” Borshay Liem explains, using the “public” language of contracts and exchange to pierce the “private” bubble of the nuclear family.

I belonged only to my American parents. It meant I didn’t have a Korean history or Korean identity. . . . I think being adopted into my family in some ways brought a lot of happiness for both me and for my parents, my American family. But there was also something that was—there was also a lot of sadness that we couldn’t deal with as a family. And a lot of that sadness had to do with loss.

“I was never able to mourn what I had lost [in Korea] with my American parents,” Borshay Liem adds, explaining the years of clinical depression that she suffered after leaving Fremont and her family to attend college at Berkeley.

What is especially disturbing here is not just the fact that the family cannot recognize Borshay Liem’s racial melancholia, cannot easily conceive of her adoption as involving loss, cannot easily imagine her arrival in the United States as anything but a gain. Equally distressing is the fact that Borshay Liem’s continual melancholy is a sadness that is read by many involved as ingratitude, serving to exacerbate Borshay Liem’s enduring feelings of disloyalty and shame. What, after all, could be less “grateful” on the part of an adoptee than depression?

Hence, what is justifiably felt to be a happy event from the point of view of the parents and siblings comes to overdetermine the adoptee’s affect. Deann’s melancholia is countered by an overpowering joy on the
part of the other family members, such that their collective will comes to overwrite her emotional states and experiences. In the end, Borshay Liem tells us, “I forgot everything. I forgot how to speak Korean. I forgot any memory of ever having had a family. And I even forgot my real name. . . . The only memories I have of my childhood are the images my father filmed while growing up. I relegated my real memories into the category of dreams.”

For Borshay Liem, racial melancholia involves the effacing and overwriting of her childhood memories and affective commitments. In this regard, transnational adoption’s psychic predicament radically reduces any sense of the adoptee’s agency. Indeed, though I earlier described the practice of transnational adoption as one of the most privileged forms of contemporary immigration, it is one largely devoid of emotional agency for the adoptee. In her attempts to mourn the unspeakable losses initiated by her (involuntary) exchange, the transnational adoptee might also be said to experience an affective curtailment that prevents her from transforming melancholy ever gradually into mourning. Here, I am delineating a profound form of racial melancholia, one that reduces memories to dreams, and agency to fantasy.

Importantly, it is only the mother who ultimately recognizes Borshay Liem’s affective discrepancy. Reviewing the family movie of Borshay Liem’s arrival, Alveen finally notices some thirty years later Borshay Liem’s stricken facial expression (fig. 8). In a voice-over, she admits to her daughter, “When you arrived—little stoic face and bundled up in all those clothes. We couldn’t talk to you. You couldn’t talk to us. I realize now that you were terrified. Because we were so happy, we just didn’t think about that.” As we witness in First Person Plural, the emotional clash between the Borshay family’s affective joy and the young adoptee’s obvious terror eventually becomes a “return of the repressed,” a repetition compulsion that is psychically displaced and negotiated between mother and daughter.

Here, let us remember that adoption is often bound up with questions of faltering maternity—of failed reproduction and proper mothering. To the extent that adoption (rather than having no children) is often viewed as the last alternative to biological reproduction, the maternal bond with the adoptee is already overdetermined. In the case of transnational adoption, these issues become especially problematic because of the child’s tenuous place within the biologized ideal of the nuclear family. Because the racialized link between the white mother and the Asian daughter elicits comment, because it becomes something that must be continually and repeatedly explained, the maternal bond appears as something not only unnatural but also in need of continual support. “Some people would ask and others would kind of look,” Alveen tells Borshay Liem, “and you
knew they were wondering, but we didn’t care.” Given the challenge to negotiate radical alterity and racism within the intimate public sphere of the white family, Alveen’s reaction is unfortunately less rather than more ideal, less rather than more caring, a wasted opportunity. In the final analysis, the mother is not just responsible for removing Borshay Liem from the dinner table—literally burdened with handling her daughter’s disjunctive affect. Indeed, the mother is ultimately blamed for the daughter’s psychic condition. “Emotionally,” Borshay Liem concludes, “there wasn’t room in my mind for two mothers.” Let us try to explore this mother/daughter predicament more carefully.

In psychoanalysis, of course, origin and history begin with the mother. It is important to recall that, in Freud’s traditional narrative of the little girl’s separation from the maternal, there is not only an account of two mothers, the phallic and the lacking, but also a genealogy of unremitting recrimination and blame. Summarizing his views on the “riddle” of female subjectivity, Freud writes in “Femininity”:

A woman’s identification with her mother allows us to distinguish two strata: the pre-Oedipus one which rests on her affectionate attachment to her mother and takes her as a model, and the latter one from the Oedipus complex which seeks to get rid of her mother and take her place with her father.
We are no doubt justified in saying that much of both of them is left over for the future and that neither of them is adequately surmounted in the course of development. But the phase of the affectionate pre-Oedipus attachment is the decisive one for a woman’s future: during it preparations are made for the acquisition of the characteristics with which she will later fulfill her role in the sexual function and perform her invaluable social tasks. It is in this identification too that she acquires her attractiveness to a man, whose Oedipus attachment to his mother it kindles into passion. How often it happens, however, that it is only his son who obtains what he himself aspired to! One gets the impression that a man’s love and a woman’s are a phase apart psychologically.35

Commentators typically gloss Freud’s famous lament—“that a man’s love and a woman’s are a phase apart psychologically”—as the notion that “women direct toward their children the love which their husbands desire for themselves.”36 What accounts for this cleaving and generational displacement of affect? What psychic mechanism forces the little girl to shift her desire for and pleasurable identifications with the pre-Oedipal mother to invest, ever so reluctantly, in the unforgiving figure and the name of the father?

According to Freud, the castration crisis and the subsequent penis envy it activates in the little girl work to alienate her from an affectionate attachment to the pre-Oedipal mother, or what Freud elsewhere labels the “negative Oedipus complex.” In surrendering the negative-Oedipal mother to identify with the symbolic mother of lack, the little girl is not just exiled from activity into passivity, but also forced into an impossible psychic trajectory of contempt. “The suppression of women’s aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially,” Freud observes, “favors the development of powerful masochistic impulses, which succeed . . . in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inward.”37 Here, Freud delineates the emergence of the normative female subject as not just profoundly masochistic but melancholic. She is a subject not only estranged from the loved phallic mother and the pleasurable passion she represents but also narcissistically wounded and, finally, alienated from her own self, the psychic life of her original erotic investments.

The legacy of the little girl’s severed history with the negative-Oedipal mother is one in which the affective bonds to the phallic nonlacking mother are melancholically transformed from intense love to magnified hate, such that it becomes, Freud observes, “very striking and [may] last all through life.”38 In covering up the passionate bonds of attachment between the little girl and her loved mother, the castration crisis inaugurates and makes way for the symbolic mother of lack, the positive-Oedipal
mother, whom the little girl blames for her “mutilated” condition. This is an endless cycle of vilification. For every daughter who comes to blame her mother for her subordinated position is also liable to censure should she become a mother and thus be forced to relive this psychic rejection from the receiving end. This process of maternal melancholy explains how it is that the little girl comes to have no psychic room in her mind for two mothers. That is, it explains how the little girl comes to have no psychic room for the nonlacking negative-Oedipal mother but only psychic space for the castrated positive-Oedipal mother and the diminished world she comes to signify.

How might this paradigm of the negative and positive Oedipus complex play out specifically in terms of Borshay Liem’s psychic predicament? How are the negative and positive Oedipus complex negotiated between the bodies of two mothers—Korean and white? What should be immediately clear in Borshay Liem’s psychic predicament is that the negative and positive Oedipus complexes necessarily map not only a sexual but also a racial divide. This racial divide creates distinctions between Asianness and whiteness that must also be traced back to a kind of castration crisis where whiteness emerges as a symbolic and governing trope. For the Asian transnational adoptee, whose racialization might be said to be produced and denied by her family at once, issues of blame and recrimination are remarkably complicated.

Melanie Klein’s notion of reinstatement of the mother to a world of loved internal objects is critical to understanding Borshay Liem’s psychic dilemma. Klein tells us that psychic stability and health depend upon a subject’s ability to align and to test continually the “real” mother against her phantasmatic images—both good and bad. In “The Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States,” Klein writes,

In some patients who had turned away from their mother in dislike or hate, or used other mechanisms to get away from her, I have found that there existed in their minds nevertheless a beautiful picture of the mother, but one which was felt to be a picture of her only, not her real self. The real object was felt to be unattractive—really an injured, incurable, and therefore dreaded person. The beautiful picture had been dissociated from the real object but had never been given up, and played a great part in the specific ways of their sublimations.39

What must be shorn away from the mother in order for reinstatement to occur, in order for Borshay Liem to create a beautiful picture of the mother? In “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” Han and I found that, in the case of biological Asian American immigrant children, race and sexuality must often cleave—that racial difference must often be dissociated...
from the figure of the “real” mother—for reinstatement to occur. But, for the transnational adoptee, who is the “real” mother? And what might her beautiful picture look like?

In the case of Borshay Liem, the negotiation of the good and the bad mother must be brokered across two maternal bodies, Korean and white. “I had a particular difficulty talking to my American mother about my Korean mother. . . . I didn’t know how to talk about my mother with my mother because she was my mother,” Borshay Liem states confusedly. For her, the question of who is the “real” mother oscillates wildly, so that recrimination and blame abound to the point that any creation of a beautiful picture is inevitably constrained. Borshay Liem admits that, even though “it was as if I had been born to them somehow,” she cannot, as an adult, accept Alveen and Donald Borshay as her parents (even though, as we must remember, it is Alveen who largely lives through and negotiates Borshay Liem’s recriminations and blame). Ultimately, Deann feels as if she must choose one family over the other, one mother over the other. Hoping to alleviate these feelings of “disloyalty,” Borshay Liem confesses, “I felt if I could actually see them come together in real life that somehow both families could then live within myself. So I asked my parents to go to Korea with me.”

However, Borshay Liem’s attempt to merge her two mothers through her long-anticipated “reunion” with both women illustrates the difficulty of her psychic dilemma of the maternal and the racial. Her attempts to achieve psychic integration are met on the part of her two families with confusion and resistance, as well as a dearth of understanding about the absolute need to move beyond the singularity of the “real” mother. In fact, much of Borshay Liem’s reunion in Korea is spent trying to determine who the “real” mother really is. As such, the initial trauma of Borshay Liem’s transnational adoption is not just reenacted but redoubled through her initial rejection of the (white) mother and, in turn, her own repeated rejection by both mothers.

“You look like your mother,” Alveen tells Borshay Liem upon their arrival at the birth mother’s residence in Kunsan, Korea. However, Alveen’s “gracious” relinquishing of Borshay Liem to her biological mother is met with equally “gracious” ambivalence and resistance. “She [the birth mother] says it’s natural because she’s her daughter,” the translator first relates. “Yes,” Alveen responds. But then the translator adds, turning to Borshay Liem: “She [the birth mother] says that although she is your mother, she only gave birth to you so you should really love and do everything you can for your adoptive parents . . . She wants you to be happy with your parents, your adopted parents.” At this imperative, we see Borshay Liem wince. Having rejected her white mother, Borshay Liem, in turn, is rejected.
According to her Korean brother, who speaks on behalf of the Kang family (the father having died), Borshay Liem was sent away for a “better life.” “It’s not that important anymore. We are not very proud of what happened. She really needs to consider the cultural differences between us. Only then will she understand us,” he rationalizes. “We have been apart for thirty years. It would be easier to close the gap between us if we spoke the same language. However, our cultural differences are difficult to overcome.” Configuring her adoption as both an alienation from her “native” Korean culture and a gain, a “better life” for Borshay Liem in the United States, the Korean brother’s attitude is remarkably similar to that of Donald Borshay insofar as neither man is capable of recognizing Borshay Liem’s emotional injuries or needs. They cannot acknowledge her inability to negotiate the affective losses of her transnational exchange. (Tellingly, Borshay Liem does not state that “there wasn’t room in my mind for two fathers.”)

In First Person Plural affective responsibility is highly gendered, a psychic dynamic of which the mothers are not only aware but also for which they are both finally held accountable. “She [Borshay Liem] is filled with heartache,” the Korean birth mother recognizes, “so I am very sad.” Though she is “unable to express” this sadness in adequate ways, having “no words to describe the agonizing years” after she relinquished Borshay Liem for adoption, the Korean birth mother, like Alveen Borshay, must tend to the affective dissonance of the event, assuming blame for the situation. The Korean birth mother thanks the white mother for raising Borshay Liem, and in this way her sorrow and gratitude become, in the words of Alveen Borshay, “our joy.” As such, Borshay Liem’s “reunion” and fantasy of return disturb the notion of completion and closure, revealing in the process the asymmetry separating women in Third World nations who relinquish their children and those in First World nations who receive them. This racialized asymmetry between First and Third World comes to underpin the gendered dilemma of maternal melancholy delineated by Freud. That is, the endless cycle of maternal vilification is compounded by racial disparities that ultimately force a rethinking of the category of the “real” as well as Klein’s notion of the good and the bad mother.

Psychically pushed and pulled away by both her Korean mother and her American mother, Borshay Liem is unable to create space in her mind for two mothers. While there is a proliferation of multiple sites of the “real” in this reunion, there is nevertheless absolute psychic fidelity on the part of everyone involved that the position of the “real” mother can be only singular and not multiple. Indeed, the predicament of Borshay Liem’s maternal melancholy, compounded by the dissonance of the “real” (Korean or white) mother, ultimately renders the question of the “real” impossible.
That is, Borshay Liem ultimately does not have space in her mind for any “real” mother at all. In Klein’s vocabulary, while she cannot have room in her mind for two good mothers, she does indeed have room in her mind for two bad mothers. One—the Korean mother—is blamed for abandoning her to her fate; the other—the white mother—is blamed for being unable to mirror her emotional (racial) predicaments. Hence, Borshay Liem cannot create a beautiful picture from either, rendering the question of reinstatement extraordinarily tenuous. Rejected by both mothers she, too, must reject them. (Here let me gesture to Gail Dolgin and Vincente Franco’s 2002 Daughter from Danang, another recent documentary exploring transnational adoption in the wake of the Vietnam War. The film is an elaborate disquisition on adoptee Heidi Bub’s successive rejection of two “bad” mothers—first her adoptive mother and then her birth mother.)

The singularity of the “real” mother, as well as the question of blame, continues to haunt Borshay Liem through the very end of First Person Plural. Confessing that, with her parents in the room, she felt more like a “temporary visitor” with her Korean family, Borshay Liem admits that “the only way I can actually be closer to my Korean mother is to admit that she’s not my mother anymore. The only way to be close to her is to acknowledge that she hasn’t been my mother for over thirty years, and that my other mother has been my mother for—in a way my real mother.” Borshay Liem’s speech expresses the will to move forward psychically, but it is riddled with ambivalence and continues to be marked by the notion of singularity, origin, and return—the need to choose between the two mothers. Responding to Alveen Borshay’s statement that “after all, that’s your real mother [the Korean mother],” Borshay Liem attempts to broker a truce, stating cautiously, “I think you’re my real mother.” “Well, I feel that way,” Alveen Borshay responds, “I really do.” Again, we witness a certain asymmetry between mother and daughter, between language and emotion. While Alveen can affectively feel like Borshay Liem’s mother, Borshay Liem can still only think this possibility.

The question of the singularity of the “real” mother is not only the kernel of the psychic dilemma of two mothers but also the key to imagining a poststructuralist theory of family and kinship predicated not on origin but on destination. However, this moving beyond fidelity to the singular, this moving forward from the fixity of the “real,” is complicated by two powerful and compelling fantasies of return that simultaneously underwrite the psychic dynamics of transnational adoption: the return to the birth mother and the return to the motherland. In transnational adoption’s crossing of sexuality and diaspora, we are presented with both the desire to return to the “real” mother and the desire to return to the place
of origins. These intersecting discourses of return underwrite a personal narrative of self-realization, completion, and closure that, as First Person Plural illustrates, is not only an impossible task to accomplish but also creates fragmentation and further displacement rather than wholeness. In returning to Korea for her “reunion,” Borshay Liem is forced to acknowledge the fact that confronting the past is always double-edged, challenging any sense of recoupable stability. On the social level, these discourses of return resist notions of authenticity and belonging that support conservative notions of diaspora. Configuring diaspora in terms of heterosexuality, filiation, and ethnic purity, discourses of return as “completion” and “recuperation” deny issues of queerness, affiliation, and social contingency that define contemporary formations of new global families and flexible kinship underwriting queer diasporas.

Following this family “reunion” Borshay Liem admits that she has given up “that childhood fantasy of returning to my family,” of “somehow being sent back to Korea.” Although Borshay Liem recognizes that she must “develop another relationship, a different relationship with my Korean family,” the conclusion of First Person Plural does not seem to endorse such a moving forward. Indeed, the documentary ends with Borshay Liem’s marriage ceremony and the birth of a son, Nick. The sentimental “resolution” to Borshay Liem’s social and psychic predicament is an entified Oedipal structure legislating only one privileged place for mother, father, and child. Hence, Borshay Liem’s “cure” to her dilemma of two mothers does not move beyond either notions of the singular or the traditional structures of family and kinship. Rather, this marriage allows her to create and to inhabit a conventional nuclear family structure of her own, to make good on what she believes she never had. While Borshay Liem’s marriage to her Asian husband, Paul Liem, significantly complicates questions of return to cultural origins, the final image Borshay Liem leaves us with in First Person Plural comes in the form of a family photo of this naturalized Oedipal trio (fig. 9). Ironically, this Oedipal trio subscribes to the very psychic and material structure at the heart of Borshay Liem’s maternal and diasporic predicament.

Here, let me conclude by way of my own return to the negative Oedipus complex. In “Girl Love,” Kaja Silverman reminds us of Freud’s insistence that it is only by accessing a woman at the level of her negative Oedipus complex that a man can love her. “It is in this identification,” Silverman quotes Freud, “that she acquires her attractiveness to man, whose Oedipus attachment to his mother it kindles into passion.” Silverman then observes that “so long as the negative Oedipus complex remains hidden from the female subject herself, she will not be able to respond to the
Hence, the melancholy to which the female subjectivity typically leads is based not just upon the impossibility of any reciprocal relationship between the sexes; it is equally based upon the loss of the loved mother, the forfeiting of a realm of extraordinary affective intensity, and the closing down of the possibility of any redemptive form of female love. The castration crisis inaugurates this form of pathological sexuality in the little girl who, like her lacking mother, finally becomes a subject who cannot love and a subject no one else could love.

What would it mean for the little girl to have access to the passionate psychic intensity of her negative Oedipus complex? What would it mean for the little girl, like the little boy, to have equal and reciprocal access to the affective realm of the loved mother, to refuse to devalue the negative-Oedipal mother, to repudiate the logic of maternal blame and recrimination? It would mean, of course, that she would have room in her psyche for two good mothers. Silverman proposes that the symbolic recovery of the affect associated with the negative Oedipal mother is indeed possible, not just for men but for women, too, in a signifying process she labels “girl love.”

In both *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Unconscious*, Freud
maintains that every signifying act in a given subject’s life refers back in some ultimate sense to a primally repressed term, which, as we witness in First Person Plural, is still primarily the mother. But, while she is configured as our ground of desire, the mother in fact provides the first signifier for a more primordial loss: the loss of what Jacques Lacan variously calls “presence,” “being,” or the “here and now.” Silverman writes,

Unlike the other signifiers of the hic et nunc, though, she has nothing to refer back to. What she stands in for psychically cannot provide this function, since it is precisely what escapes signification. Although serving as the support for libidinal symbolization, the mother is consequently devoid of semantic value. It is not she who gives all of the other signifiers of desire their meaning; it is, rather, they who determine what she can mean. To go “backward,” libidinally speaking, is also not finally to touch “ground”; it is, instead, to apprehend the groundlessness of all signification.42

“Girl love” represents a signifying process whereby one recuperates the loved and lost negative-Oedipal mother not by moving backward toward the recuperation of origins but by moving forward, “to symbolize lack in a way that is utterly our own.”43 It is a signifying process that is quickening of disparaged creatures and things, that endows devalued others, the bad Korean and the bad white mother, with new and alternate meaning. “There is nothing primordial about this relationship,” Silverman writes. “It does not represent a continuation of the female’s early love for the mother, but rather its symbolic recovery from a later moment in time, and there is no limit on when that can occur.”44 Like Silverman, what I am proposing here is not the recuperation of a lost origin in the recaptured figure of the negative-Oedipal mother, but the deployment of the affective intensity associated with this loved figure for a forgotten though crucial new form of symbolization.

Were it not for the castration crisis, Silverman concludes, we would all, men and women alike, have permanent access to the affective intensity of the negative Oedipus complex. “Girl love” thus recuperates a lost form of symbolization represented by the negative Oedipus complex, where libidinal “openness” rather than fixity reigns, and where words rather than binding affect come under the influence of their unconscious desire. By symbolizing lack in highly personalized and alternate forms we can create psychic space for two good mothers. While our words would still induce the “fading” of being, they would also induce a kind of “second coming.” They would not only open psychic space for but also lend symbolic sustenance to two good mothers—two good enough mothers—not just the mother of lack but the mother of love, not just the Korean mother or the white mother but, indeed, both. The maternal resignifica-
tion facilitated by “girl love” thus provides a crucial corrective to conservative (hetero)sexual and diasporic politics. We return to mother and motherland not by going back but by moving forward. We do not bring the present into the past. Rather, we bring the past into the present. In fact, we keep the past alive in the present by signifying and quickening through our desire those creatures and things that conventional culture would disavow or bury.

In the introduction to this essay, I stated that while we have numerous poststructuralist accounts of language, we have few poststructuralist accounts of kinship. Why is this so? I have spent some time analyzing the material and psychic contradictions of transnational adoption in First Person Plural, for I think the practice manifests the broader paradoxes of globalization and contemporary crossings of sexuality, racial formation, economic exploitation, and nation on both an international and a domestic level. As an instance of globalization and its discontents, transnational adoption also opens upon the difficult affective terrain of poststructuralist notions of family and kinship. While the age of late capitalism has given rise to numerous material reconfigurations of family, I fear that these new forms of kinship and social identity do not have any concomitant psychic support. To the extent that the transnational adoptee functions as guarantors to conventional ideals of the white nuclear family, and to the extent that she cannot in turn create space in her mind for two good mothers, the possibility of a poststructuralist kinship is dubious at best. To the extent, however, that transnational adoption allows us to denaturalize powerful myths of return animating (hetero)sexual and diasporic politics in a global age, we are left with several possible alternatives.

As a contemporary phenomenon, transnational adoption installs racial alterity and otherness squarely into the privatized space of the white American nuclear family, even as our national borders continue to be sealed in unprecedented ways. The contemporary formation of interracial First and Third World families represents a tremendous opportunity to question the conservative impulses of (hetero)sexuality and diaspora. In the context of First Person Plural, the disjunctive experiences of the transnational adoptee open upon a painful though potentially productive social and psychic terrain exceeding the privatized boundaries of the family unit. There is no smooth translatability, that is, between the ideological demands of the white nuclear family structure and the adoptee’s disjunctive affect, her psychic protest. By creating new global families and racial formations at once, the presence of the Asian child in the space of the white family necessarily erodes the boundaries between the public and private spheres, between public and private histories. If, as Berlant con-
tends, the political sphere has been largely contracted into private life, then the practice of transnational adoption provides one crucial site to reengage with questions of the political.

Under the shadows of globalization, this erosion of boundaries separating public from private, calls for a broader response to racism, gender subordination, and economic exploitation that goes beyond, in Anagnost’s words, “merely asserting one’s entitlement to be a [transnational] parent.”46 Parents of transnational adoptees should not be held any more accountable than the rest of us to the political, economic, and social vicissitudes of globalization. Nevertheless, the practice of transnational adoption presents an exemplary—perhaps radical—opportunity for white, middle-class subjects to confront and to negotiate difference ethically within the social configurations of the new global family.

Restoring collective history to the process of a transnational adoptee’s social and psychic development is crucial to the survival of the global family. It is also crucial to an ethical multiculturalism that rejects the model of the white heterobiological nuclear family as the standard against which all social orderings must be measured.Positing such an ethical multiculturalism may not just lead to powerful alliances for a progressive politics but could conceivably cut across historically constituted divisions of gender, race, and class to create important international and domestic political coalitions. In the process, it may also help us to create new material and psychic structures, a poststructuralist account and accounting of family and kinship, and of identity, community, and nation. Reimagining family and kinship, as well as recasting diaspora, in these terms offers a host of political opportunities, economic responsibilities, and cultural commitments.

Here, let me return to queer diasporas—to the John Hancock commercial and two dykes and a baby. We exist in a time when transnational adoption of Chinese baby girls by white lesbians can be aired on prime-time television during the Olympics. In this representation lies a nascent possibility, the possibility that this child might grow up to exist in a world where the psychic structure of two—indeed, three, four, five, or perhaps no—mothers of various races could be accommodated. Let us try to imagine—indeed, to live—these other possibilities, these other possible structures.
I would like to thank the following friends and colleagues for their insightful feedback and support: Shinhee Han, Fred Moten, Mae Ngai, Teemu Ruskola, Mari Ruti, Josie Saldaña, Kaja Silverman, and Leti Volpp. I have been fortunate to present this essay to various university audiences and seminars at Harvard University, Dartmouth College, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the University of California at San Diego. I would like to thank Brian Axel, Donald Pease, Robyn Wiegman, Martin Manalansan, Catherine Prendergast, Kent Ono, Lisa Lowe, Judith Halberstam, and Gayatri Gopinath for being ideal hosts as well as rigorous interlocutors. I would also like to thank the Social Text collective, especially Brent Edwards and Cindi Katz, for their helpful comments.


3. See Social Text, no. 74, a special issue on transnational parenting curated from the disciplinary angle of anthropology. My essay, in part, is a response to what I see as a necessary critical reframing of current approaches to analyzing transnational adoption ethnographies and memoirs, as well as the broadening of the political, economic, and cultural issues they raise.


12. See “Hancock Ad Raises Alarm in Adoption Communities,” Wall Street Journal, 14 September 2000. After protests from right-wing conservatives, the commercial was reedited without the final exchange about being great mothers. In addition, fearing reprisals from Chinese authorities that lesbians were snatching up Chinese infants, John Hancock added an audio track stating that a flight from Phnom Penh, Cambodia, had just arrived.

13. We need to dissociate the relationship between economic entitlement and political rights. That is, the current practice of transnational adoption suggests that family is available to those gays and lesbians with access to capital. However, the legal treatment of this group by courts has by and large excluded them from the sphere of noneconomic rights (adoption, marriage, inheritance, service in the military, consensual sex). As a legal matter, adoption is a privilege. Hence, the contemporary reconsolidation of family by gays and lesbians has become an economic privilege and entitlement for few rather than a political right for all.


15. Ibid., 395.


17. The practice of transnational adoption does have a longer history than its post–World War II and current globalized incarnations. See, for instance, Linda Gordon, The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). Gordon’s book chronicles the adoption of Irish orphans by Mexican mineworker families in Arizona at the turn of the last century, as well as their subsequent kidnapping by white vigilantes who were determined to “save” them from the darker races.

18. These figures are based on INS Statistics for IR3 and IR4 Immigrant Visas Issued to Orphans. See the Holt International Web site at www.holtintl.org/insstats.shtml.


From another angle, the economic profits from transnational adoption are central for understanding the political development and economic transformations marking the advent of Asian modernity. How, for instance, does transnational adoption relate to Korea’s official narratives of its postwar economic miracle as one of Asia’s “four tigers,” its prolonged struggles for democratic rule, and its more recent and visible debates on the plight of “comfort women”? 

Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas


28. In First Person Plural, Donald Borshay tells Deann: “You were so determined to learn. I guess to please us, whatever, I’m not sure. You actually made yourself ill and you became jaundiced. You got kind of yellow-looking. And the only thing we could think of was that you really tried too hard and were trying too hard.”


33. In another part of *First Person Plural*, Borshay Liem adds, “When I had learned enough English to talk to my parents, I decided that I should tell them who I really was. I remember going up to my mother and telling her ‘I’m not who you think I am, I’m not Cha Jung Hee. And I think I have a mother and brother and sisters in Korea still.’ And she turned to me and said, ‘Oh, honey, you’ve just been dreaming. You don’t have a mother. And you never had brothers and sisters. Look at these adoption documents. It says that you’re Cha Jung Hee and your mother died giving birth to you.’ And she said, ‘You know what, this is just a natural part of you getting used to living in a new country. Don’t worry about it. They’re just bad dreams. They’re going to go away soon.’”

34. Here, I draw on this argument from Anagnost, “Scenes of Misrecognition,” 395.


36. Kaja Silverman, “Girl Love,” in James Coleman (Munich: Lebhachhaus München), 159. I am indebted to Kaja Silverman for a series of conversations on the negative Oedipus complex and “girl love” that have influenced my arguments on *First Person Plural*.


38. Ibid.


40. It also complicates the notion of the “gift” that often attaches itself to (transnational) adoption—a notion that the infant is a “gift” from the birth mother to the adoptive mother, a gift that can never be repaid. See Barbara Yngvesson, “Placing the ‘Gift Child’ in Transnational Adoption,” *Law and Society Review* 36.2 (2002): 227–56.


42. Ibid., 156–57; Silverman’s emphasis.

43. Ibid., 166.

44. Ibid., 161.
