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Molecular Longing:
Adopted Koreans and the Navigation of Absence Through DNA

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Molecular Longing:
Adopted Koreans and the Navigation of Absence Through DNA

by

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Dr. Jodi Kim, Chairperson

Molecular Longing: Adopted Koreans and the Navigation of Absence Through DNA, is an interdisciplinary exploration of how transnational, transracial Korean adoptees utilize paperwork, popular science, and genetic technologies to navigate material and affective absences produced by the violence of U.S. empire. While Korean transnational adoption importantly brings new families together, institutional practice often hinders the recovery of knowledge in personal adoption histories. That is, reliable information is difficult or impossible to find since "official" adoption records are frequently erroneous, falsified, or missing altogether. To contend with the affective losses produced by these absences, adult Korean adoptees increasingly turn to "scientific" options such as commercial genetic testing kits—themselves compromised forms of knowledge—to augment these otherwise unreliable paper trails. Utilizing ethnographic and discursive analysis, *Molecular Longing* applies a multi-scalar investigation of knowledge projects of/about Korean transnational, transracial adoption, including "state-based," private corporate, collective digital, and personal archives. Chapter One, "The

Presence of Absence: Gaps, Silences, and the Archive," considers how absence, silence, and error not only overwhelmingly structure how kinship ties are created and managed in the formal adoption agency archive but are also indicative of its successful functioning. Chapter Two, "Creative (Un)Certainty and the Private Commercial DNA Database," explores how consumer-based genetic testing company *23andMe* situates itself to provide fast, reliable, and accessible knowledge that promises to reveal and expand personal histories while also presenting mutable networks of genetic-based relations. Lastly, Chapter Three, "The Limits of Relation: Contingent Connections and the KAD Cousin," examines how genetic test results are then mobilized by individual Korean adoptees to reconfigure absence and unknowns in their personal histories. It analyzes two related phenomena: the emergence of a distinct Korean adoptee (KAD) DNA relation, termed the "KAD cousin," and the growth of an informal, collective digital network of transnational, transracial Korean adoptees that forms through shared experience, genetic knowledge, and kinship desire. Across ethnic studies, critical adoption studies, and feminist science and technology studies, *Molecular Longing* ultimately argues that the scientific, biotechnological, and archival become sites where the affective and material losses produced by U.S. transpacific violence are mediated in complex and unsettling ways.

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INTRODUCTION

As a Korean adoptee, I have had three different mothers. The mother who gave birth to me, quickly succeeded by the mother who fostered my premature life and prepared me for the mother who would eventually keep me. My movements between them were decided within hours of my birth, regardless of whether or not each wanted to parent me in the long-term. This uni-directional chain of care had been predetermined by layered, yet interconnected access to power and privilege.[1] As my physical body moved across national lines, my legal and social body was rewritten. Orphan. U.S. citizen. Adoptee. Throughout my childhood, I was forced to cull information about my first mother, my foster mother, and my pre-adoption existence from a thin packet of paperwork compiled by my Korean adoption agency, Eastern Child Welfare Society. This collection of formal documentation includes an Initial Social History, Hospital Summary, and Child's Pre-Flight Report. For over 20 years, I not only believed that my first mother was a poor Korean woman without the means to care for me, but also that she had fully consented to my adoption abroad. When I was 24 years old, I met my birth mother for the first time. Through this meeting I made two significant discoveries: the narrative on my Social History was falsified, and my birth mother believed I had died. Like many birth parents, she was unable to afford my care. And like many birth parents, she was deceived by a Korean doctor and signed adoption documents without fully understanding what they were. She not only fully believed I died shortly after birth, but

[1] Colen, Shellee. "'Like a Mother to Them': Stratified Reproduction and West Indian Childcare Workers and Employers in New York." *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*. Edited by Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, U of California P, 1995, 78-102.

she also mourned my death every year. In her eyes, I had lived, died, and been brought back to life. The irony is that I might have died were it not for the transnational adoption system and the care provided for me by an agency looking to profit off of me. My literal life was conditioned by my figurative death. Thus, my existence has always been one structured by complex and conflicting "truths" framed by multiple lives unlived.

My narrative, however, is not unique. The erasures written into my institutional history are intimately linked to the deceptions that produced my first mother's belief in my death. These gaps and absences are not just the accidental effects of bureaucratic practice but are instead integral to the successful functioning of the Korean transnational, transracial adoption system. The Korean War manufactured the infrastructures of modern transnational, transracial adoption, transiting roughly 200,000 Korean children abroad since the mid-1950s. Although this systemic movement of bodies/babies to primarily Western, white, middle-class families has been dominantly understood as a necessary war relief effort to aid large numbers of mixed race "orphans," its persistence into the present day complicates this humanitarian justification and, in turn, reveals complex legacies of U.S. militarism. As transnational Korean adoption shifted toward formalized practice, the messiness of institutionalization has not only led to thousands of Korean adoptees with ambiguous and contingent personal information, but also a limited ability to ever fully recover it.

Thus, the knowledge of/about Korean transnational adoption and kinship has always been one of managing the silences, erasures, and gaps produced from war, violence, and institutionalization. As contingents of Korean adoptees increasingly seek

answers to questions about birth family, birth country, relinquishment, and personal history, they are often challenged by epistemological, institutional, and interpersonal barriers, and a desire to reconstruct a narrative that, by nature, can never be recreated. That is, the conditions of possibility that necessitate the transnational, transracial Korean adoption system simultaneously foreclose recuperation of the affective ruptures it creates. The absence is not only one that can never be fully filled, but is also one accentuated, emphasized, and recalled through larger frameworks of race/racism and heteronormative family form.[2] To contend with the unknown and unknowable produced by these absences, adult Korean adoptees increasingly turn to "scientific" options such as commercial genetic testing kits—themselves compromised forms of knowledge—to augment these otherwise unreliable paper trails.

Rather than attempting to find a singular "truth," this dissertation instead looks to the promises and proliferation of consumer-based genetic testing as one method out of many that is employed to repair ruptures wrought from the transnational Korean adoption system. It considers how desires to reconfigure absence through these particular technologies relate to, and depart from, past methods such as paperwork and adoption files. Even as these new technologies have shifted the relations of knowledge production, conceptions of self and family become (re)defined in biological terms, legitimated through the "science" of DNA. This normalization of both a theoretical and a material (blood, saliva, and hair) understanding of kinship informs how biology and affect are

[2] On multiple inflections of "loss," and (dis)connection, Kim, Eleana J. "Transnational Adoption and (Im)possible Lives." *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium*. Edited by Veena Das and Clara Han, U of California P, 2016, 114-129. 118.

again becoming tied to narratives around nation-state, family, return, and reunion. Alongside the usage of DNA to confirm biological relation to birth family, adoptees are also forging connections amongst themselves through self-proclaimed relationships with DNA "cousins." That is, they are utilizing genetic-based tests like *23andMe* to forge kinship connections, often extending their definition of family to include third and fifth cousins, again consolidating the imaginable space of kinship, family, and reconciliation within biological terms.

From these foundations, this dissertation, *Molecular Longing: Adopted Koreans and the Navigation of Absence Through DNA,* turns to gaps, silences, and absences themselves as productive opportunities to explore shifting conceptions of, and investments in, kinship, family, and the biological. Using an interdisciplinary and multi-scalar investigation of formal and informal knowledge projects of/about Korean transnational, transracial adoption, I ultimately explore how transnational, transracial Korean adoptees utilize paperwork, popular science, and genetic technologies to navigate the material and affective absences that comprise their adoption histories (and futures). That is, I engage ethnic studies, critical adoption studies, and feminist science and technology studies to frame an ethnographic and discursive analysis of "state-based," private corporate, collective digital, and personal archives. I argue that the scientific, biotechnological, and archival become sites where the affective and material losses produced by U.S. transpacific violence are mediated in complex and unsettling ways. I place these discourses into sharp relation not as an ideological gesture toward simple restoration or recovery. Rather, I argue that it is a productive opportunity to explore

shifting conceptions of kinship, knowledge, narrative, and the biological throughout enduring expressions of U.S. imperial violence and militarism across linear time (from past to present to future), *and* parallel time and geographic space (from one possible life to another). My dissertation asks: how does the desire to reconfigure the unknown and unknowable through genetic technologies relate to, and depart from, antecedent technologies of reconciliation such as adoption paperwork? How are mass market genetic tests (re)defining kinship and facilitating individual and national reunions? What does it mean to address affective loss through scientific "truths"?

Engaging with Lisa Lowe's theorization of the past conditional temporality of the "what could have been,"[3] Korean transnational, transracial adoption is another occasion to consider "a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science, and also the matters absent, entangled, and unavailable by its methods."[4] How do the methods of reconciliation allowed by the official adoption record and normative kinship that are manifested, for example, through paperwork, adoption files, and photographs, relate to alternative methods toward knowledge and kinship that may become automatically obscured or foreclosed? *Molecular Longing* examines these histories of absence and erasure within Korean adoptee space-time that give rise to the performance of, and investment in, particular kin formations. Rather than simply reading

[3] Lowe in conversation with Stephanie Smallwood. Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham, Duke UP, 2015. 40.

[4] Lowe, 41-41.

these acts as attempts to recuperate and reconcile absence (through connection, creation, and discovery), what might they say about the conditions that produced the loss in the first place? How is the "what could have been" related to "planar time," or "multidirectional movements, not simply from present to past or future, but sometimes from one present to another," what Eleana Kim has also noted as "(im)possible lives" and "prior presences?"[5] As Kim theorizes, "(im)possible lives… describes the simultaneous and dialectical relationship between the parallel lives and abject deaths of adoptees, where phantom lives and imagined autobiographies converge."[6] From this, what emerges from critically apprehending the space of loss not as already-existing, but as actively created? How do the multiple potentialities of subjecthood and kinship offered by transnational Korean adoption at once exceed the biological, only to enfold and consolidate it once again? In addressing these questions, this dissertation enters into conversations in critical ethnic studies, Asian American studies, critical adoption studies, and feminist science and technology studies. I will now briefly outline how this project will engage these fields.

Critical Adoption Studies and Asian American Studies

The content and concerns of scholarship of/about the adopted Korean, the adoptive family, and the larger social, historical, and geopolitical contexts that created these new subject positions and family formations have shifted over the past sixty years. Early

[5] Kim draws "planar time" from Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Coutin. Kim, Eleana. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham, Duke UP, 2010. 185.

[6] Kim, "(Im)possible Lives," 117.

research from the 1950s until the late 1990s was primarily conducted through social work and psychology studies that oftentimes positioned adoptive families, and especially adopted children, as research subjects. This is made particularly apparent through studies endorsed and initiated by the Child Welfare League of America and a collection of unpublished Masters theses and dissertations from social work students.[7] Predominantly interested in understanding identity formation and successful placement of the adopted child within the transracially formed family, this scholarship emerged out of practical and professional objectives to support best practice and healthy adjustment. Although such work was primarily interested in the lives and experiences of adopted children, it was often filtered through the conceptions and descriptions of adoptive parents, social workers, and other professionals. These "experts" dominated scholarship with a directive pedagogy by speaking for and about adoptees. Their assertions reinforced prevailing ideologies that privileged a nuclear family formation, founded on discourses of multiculturalism, colorblindness, and altruistic humanitarianism that "saved" unwanted and needy children (of color). It was also primarily based on Western ideals of mental health and assimilation that typically focused solely on the U.S. (or other receiving country) and framed the adoption process as a one-way movement. By erasing ties to those entities that the institution relies on—such as birth country, Korean adoption

[7] Bergquist, Kathleen Ja Sook, M. Elizabeth Vonk, Dong Soo Kim, and Marvin D. Feit, editors. *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice*. New York, Haworth P, 2007. This detailed resource chronicles genealogies of knowledge production (1950s – early 2000s) and trends in scholarship, policy, and practice. It has been especially useful in thinking about how transnational, transracial adoption has been studied, the major themes that have arisen, who has conducted the studies, and the ways in which the discourse has shifted over the years.

agencies, orphanages, and the reproductive labors of foster mother and birth family—this work severed the adoptee and the adoptive family from the geopolitical and legal processes through which they were created. This restricted conceptions of the transnational and transracial adoptee within policy, practice, and legislation, reinforcing larger national projects of American exceptionalism and reframing U.S. militarism and imperialism in Korea. Ultimately, this early work fails to critically address how such complex adoptee identities are both produced and maintained and tends to lack an intersectional analysis that also considers how analytics like gender, class, and nationality reveal inconsistencies of power and privilege in the Korean adoption system.

In the last thirty years, there has been a substantial shift in knowledge paradigms of transnational, transracial Korean adoption, both in terms of who conducts the research and what constitutes an intellectual concern. This broadening allows for critical attention to the complex origins of Korean transnational adoption, and its multiple conditions of possibility, perhaps most directly apparent in the cohesion of a critical adoption studies field. An interdisciplinary formation forged out of interconnected bodies of work that align to interrogate the roots of Korean transnational, transracial adoption by engaging U.S. empire, capitalism, and militarism, it is also necessitated by the limitations and gaps of the earlier research outlined above. There are several important ways in which this early research has been addressed.

First, there is a growing body of work created by self-identified Korean adoptee artists, filmmakers, poets, activists, and scholars, who came of age en masse beginning in the mid- to late-1990s, a correlation to the "peak" of the transnational Korean adoption

system in the 1980s.[8] This work is important not only because it critically responds to the singular, prescriptive, and paternalistic forms of prior research, but also because it represents an important epistemological challenge. As personal and political acts of self-definition and self-expression, these works not only push back against what types of knowledge/knowledge producers are deemed significant and valuable, but also what counts as knowledge itself. The most well-known of this time period is Deann Borshay Liem's documentary, *First Person Plural*, but it is also enriched by important work by Tammy Chu, Nathan Adolfson, Jennifer Ardnt, and Jane Jeong Trenka.[9] *Outsiders Within*, edited by Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, is another important example. As one of the first anthologies to finally bring adoptee scholars, artists, and activists together in one place, it foregrounds the adoptee experience as a political identity to mobilize efforts to gain rights, information, and visibility.[10] These works have been foundational in reframing discourse around transnational, transracial adoption, building alternative understandings of transracial adoptee identity, and crucially linking the practice to issues like reproductive justice, colonialism, racism,

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[8] SooJin Pate has been especially helpful in situating some of these genealogies. Pate, SooJin. *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption*. Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 2014. 12-15.

[9] For example, see *First Person Plural*. Directed by Deann Borshay Liem, Mu Films, 2000., *Searching for Go-hyang*. Directed by Tammy Chu Tolle, 1998., *Passing Through*. Directed by Nathan Adolfson, 1998., *Crossing Chasms*. Directed by Jennifer Ardnt, 1998., and Trenka, Jane Jeong. *In the Language of Blood*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2005. as examples of early documentary and memoir work that first complicated narratives of Korean transnational, transracial adoption.

[10] Trenka, Jane Jeong., Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, editors, *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*. Cambridge, South End Press, 2006. 1.

militarism, and systemic inequality. As SooJin Pate establishes, against singular and prescriptive concerns of past research, "the literary and cinematic narratives by Korean adoptees present a much more complicated, fraught, painful, and melancholic picture of adoption and identity formation."[11] Against celebratory or positivist accounts, these counternarratives detail how cultural productions and community formations can be utilized as an optic to study larger structures of power, especially to distinguish U.S. hegemony.

Second, recent shifts in academic scholarship now reflect the labor of interdisciplinary humanities scholars, who bring visibility to the creation of the adopted Korean as a project of U.S. empire. Such intellectual concerns incorporate postcolonial, transnational, and feminist analytics, and queer of color critique in fields like history, anthropology, sociology, english, ethnic studies, Asian American studies, American studies, and gender and sexuality studies. Attentive to the structures of power and knowledge, these have been important spaces to shift away from practice-based concerns around identity, adjustment, and assimilation to critique transnational, transracial Korean adoption as an institution. This is not to separate lived experience from research and scholarship, but to more firmly link them together through an enriched analysis. I want to very briefly turn to some of the primary intellectual concerns and nodes of interest that this work engages, to then later situate how my project will contribute and intervene.[12]

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[11] Pate, Soojin. *Genealogies of Korean Adoption: American Empire, Militarization, and Yellow Desire*. PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2010. 20.

[12] By outlining past research in this way, I do not mean to suggest discreteness, as oftentimes there are overlapping and interlocking concerns and frameworks of analysis.

First, there has been a deep epistemological shift in knowledge about Korean transnational, transracial adoption that broadens an understanding of its origins and foregrounds its multiple, intersecting conditions of possibility. By delineating, for example, geopolitical relations between the United States and Korea, the difficult process of institutionalization, the dependence on legal-juridical categories of personhood (i.e. "orphan") as related to social categories (i.e. "adoptee"), and an equal reliance on ideological/affective structures of feeling (i.e. humanitarianism, colorblindness), this work complicates past dominant and celebratory narratives and demonstrates the inability to separate power from the bodies upon which it is enacted. In particular, Jodi Kim and Grace Cho critically engage how knowledge is created, rather than determining any one "truth" of knowledge itself. Disrupting a static, simplistic understanding of what it means to know and narrate historical moments like the Cold War and its aftermath, they instead interrogate the very structures that allow/produce official forms of knowledge to also include cultural productions, traces, transmissions, absences, gaps, and silences as a critical reading practices. Along similar lines, SooJin Pate and Arissa Oh consider the structures and the ideologies that facilitated the growth of transnational, transracial adoption from Korea. Thinking beyond discourses of "love," "colorblindness," and "humanitarianism," they reframe moments of emergence of the system, explore ideological transitions between the figure of the orphan and the figure of the adoptee, and examine vexed processes of institutionalization. Collectively, this transformative work reframes the origins of Korean transnational, transracial adoption by considering the constitutive roles of U.S. and Korean actors across different sites.

Another primary node of analysis considers intersections between race, class, gender, kinship, and family-building, highlighting the complex and inherent power dynamics arising from, and within, such transnational and transracial family formations. Catherine Ceniza Choy, Sara Dorow, Christine Ward Gailey, Hosu Kim, and Kim Park Nelson are all concerned with expanding the discussion beyond heteronormative and/or nuclear family formations between adoptive parent and child to "move toward a nuanced, complex understanding of [transnational adoption's] history as a history of race, foreign relations, immigration, and labor as well as intimacy."[13] By foregrounding these multiple pieces, this work demonstrates how desire is structured, bringing attention to the bodies that have been obscured or erased, such as Korean birth mothers, and complicate how this method of family-building is never free from the social, historical, and political contexts from which it emerges.

Eleana Kim and David Eng turn toward discussions of kinship, highlighting how desires for family are encompassed by larger structures of power. Through her book, *Adopted Territory*, Kim explores the construction of adoptee kinship, which she succinctly defines as "not a preexisting truth that is discovered or found, but rather a set of relationships actively created out of social practice and cultural representation."[14] Kim theorizes "adoptee counterpublics" and "contingent essentialism" to understand the uneasy transcendence and consolidation of biological ideologies of kinship. David Eng

[13] Choy, Catherine Ceniza. *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America*. New York, New York UP, 2013. 6.

[14] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 87.

also considers collective kinship as contingent on larger political, legal, and social contexts. Although he does not focus on transnational, transracial adoption exclusively, he connects this ongoing practice to queer liberalism, structures of feeling, and kinship, in order to comment on the place of the adoptee and intimacies of kinship within public spheres of economics, neoliberalism, state initiatives, and the law.

Lastly, I want to briefly consider how the concerns of scholarship under a rubric of critical adoption studies has been importantly linked to interdisciplinary fields like ethnic studies and Asian American studies, though not always easily or smoothly. As Kim Park Nelson argues, "until recently, the discipline of Asian American Studies was largely silent on the existence of Korean or other Asian adoptees," a result, perhaps, of intersections between complex processes of adoption and racialization in the United States and the proximity of adopted Koreans to whiteness.[15] Yet, supported by the foundational scholarship of theorists like Lisa Lowe, Laura Kang, and Lisa Yoneyama in critically rethinking the political and ideological potential of Asian American subjecthood and in pushing the boundaries of Asian American studies and ethnic studies scholarship, there has been recent growth and development in thinking about Korean adoption, and adoptee subjecthood, as knowledge projects. Considering the potential of enfiguring Korean adoptee as Asian American subject and of situating an analytic like Asian American critique for work on Korean adoption, SooJin Pate notes the ability of these frameworks to "unsettle dominant narrative[s]" and make apparent "the contradictions,

[15] Park Nelson, Kim. *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism*. New Brunswick, Rutgers UP, 2016. 10.

tensions, and violence—both physical and epistemic—that have been ignored and disavowed by the nation-state and by adoption practitioners."[16] Thus, there is political and epistemological significance in locating creative and academic work on Korean adoption within longer legacies that have been important to the intellectual projects of Asian American studies and Asian American political formations, a connection this project continues.

Feminist Science and Technology Studies

I engage feminist science and technology studies scholarship that critically considers power and knowledge production at the intersections of the life sciences, scientific discourse, genetics, DNA, biology/the biological body, and race. I will focus here on briefly outlining some of the foundational concerns of science and technology studies before engaging a particular subset of scholars who privilege an examination of larger historical and social contexts through feminist analytics to include questions of identity, rights, consent, knowledge, and "truth." This includes Kim Tallbear, Michelle Murphy, Donna Haraway, Dorothy Roberts, Kalindi Vora, Catherine Nash, and Alondra Nelson, scholars who are not only interested in an intersectional analysis of scientific knowledge production and discursive field formation, but also (and perhaps more critically) an attempt "*to do* feminist technoscience" as a critical epistemological and material practice. I will then turn to a discussion of the way DNA is engaged within this work to consider how this dissertation contributes to these conversations.

[16] Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*. 13.

Feminist science and technology studies builds on the work of science studies scholars like Bruno Latour, Nikolas Rose, Eugene Thacker, and Troy Duster. This early work was interested in a poststructuralist critique of the way scientific knowledge is constructed and inherently influenced by those who produce the knowledge. One of the key goals of this work is to disrupt notions of "truth" and "knowledge" that cohere through the belief in the universality and "objectivity" (and also therefore reliability) of Western scientific practice and Enlightenment ideologies by framing such claims as always already entangled with the social. This concept is commonly referenced as "co-production" in science and technology studies literature, a "key STS analytical tool," used to describe how "'science' and 'society' are mutually constitutive—meaning one loops back in to reinforce, shape, or disrupt the actions of the other."[17] This work began in disciplinary spaces like history and sociology, however, similar to the developmental trajectories of other field formations, it grew toward interdisciplinary approaches by scholars interested in investigating "science" from multiple methodological and theoretical directions.

One of the structuring, and arguably also most influential, shifts in the direction, priorities, and practice of scientific research began in the 1980s. Karen-Sue Taussig describes this move as one away from a Cold War science interested in defense-based research (that manifested through the "hard" sciences like physics) and toward an investment in the life sciences, with particular attention on biology, public health, and

[17] TallBear, Kim. *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 2013. 11.

medicine. Melinda Cooper frames this as an "era of intense conceptual, institutional, and technological creativity in the life sciences" within the context of neoliberalism, arguing that the merging of "biological (re)production" with "capital accumulation" has been essential to U.S. "strategies of economic and imperialist self-reinvention."[18] This is perhaps most overtly visible through the government funding of the Human Genome Project in 1988, and the subsequent "race" to finish mapping the human genome, alongside intellectual and material support for emergent technoscientific fields like genomics, biomedicine, and bioinformatics. What is important to emphasize here is the relationship between the expanding initiatives to study and "know" the body (on increasingly individualized, quantitative, and "scientific" levels) and the administration of power on/over these same bodies. DNA, as both source of "new" information and as cultural object, has been deeply embedded in these knowledge projects and in the production, circulation, and consumption of scientific knowledge in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The scope of feminist STS scholarship includes an interest in critiquing both the content of knowledge produced and, perhaps most importantly, its relation to the populations such research is meant to study. This is especially important because of the ways science has been used as a legitimizing framework to perpetuate racism, imperialism, and oppression with long-lasting material consequences for marginalized populations. Kim Tallbear draws upon indigenous feminist methodologies to guide her

[18] Cooper, Melinda. *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*. Seattle:. U of Washington P, 2008. 3-4.

work. Her decision to focus on researchers, scientists, and commercial enterprises as the subjects of study, shifts the gaze of the researcher and attempts to subvert inherent power structures. While this choice also speaks to larger feminist critiques of research practices in fields like anthropology, Tallbear's particular interdisciplinary focus on genetics, race, and epistemological control are an especially rich model for feminist STS work. Kalindi Vora and Michelle Murphy focus on reproduction and reproductive labor, not just in a simple effort to "uncover" or "retell" alternative histories of feminism, science, and gendered labor(s), but also to demonstrate how such labor has materially structured sociopolitical and economic contexts in which these narratives and technologies surface. These concerns, therefore, are not simply additive. With crucial attention to scientific fields, technologies, and narratives, this important work interrogates the relationship between knowledge and power. There are significant reverberations between some of these larger concerns of feminist technology studies and the previously outlined work being produced in critical adoption studies. For example, broadly, an attention to power and the politics of knowledge production, with a specific emphasis on how continually shifting constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality structure (and are structured by) it, a critique of Western research paradigms and the narratives produced within them, an understanding of the complicated relationship between U.S. imperialism, rights, and subjecthood, and a crucial foregrounding of the relationship between epistemology, theory, and praxis.

Emerging from these histories of science and the (inter)disciplinary functions of studying science, it is within a very specific social and historical moment that knowledge

about DNA and genetics materializes, and also within a very specific intellectual moment that scholarship on direct-to-consumer testing, reconciliation narratives, and kinship is produced. Since the discovery, by James Watson and Francis Crick, of DNA's double helix structure in 1953, DNA, genes, and genetics became entangled with a number of the issues central to STS, including logics of profit, systems and institutions of power, marginalized and minoritized communities, and social constructivism. Ultimately, the completion of the sequencing of the human genome catalyzed the understanding and usage of genetics in popular culture and mass media, issuing a host of questions around patents, law, economics, military science, and the subsequent effects on research and individual rights.

Some of the earliest work to caution against the promises of genetic science is Troy Duster's *Backdoor to Eugenics*. His critique engages central tensions regarding the discursive power of DNA. That is, facile investments in its "truth" can invisibilize social and structural factors. The damaging effects of institutionalized racism are further compounded on deeply material levels as marginalized bodies not only receive unequal access to quality medical care, but have also historically been unethically exploited by biomedical and biotechnology research.[19] Duster's attention to the representation and

[19] Henrietta Lacks is perhaps one of the most egregious examples of this intersection between institutionalized racism, biomedical research, and genetic science. In 1951, George and Margaret Gey, medical researchers at Johns Hopkins, cultured cells from Lacks without her consent. Lacks died from cervical cancer that year, but the Geys went on to create the HeLa cell line, named after Lacks, which has "revolutionalized cell biology" and led to "a wealth of medical advances from the polio vaccine to chemotherapy and in vitro fertilization." The Lacks family, however, were not informed about the use of the cells for decades and struggled to receive adequate healthcare. See Roberts, Dorothy. *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Create Race in the Twenty-First Century*. New York, The New Press, 2011. 103. and Wald, Priscilla. "Cells, Genes, and Stories: HeLa's Journey from Labs to Literature." *Genetics and the Unsettled Past*.

meaning embedded in DNA provides an early foundation to consider its circulation as a cultural object inherently linked to the social, geopolitical, and historical contexts in which it arises. *The Poetics of DNA* by Judith Roof further explores cultural meaning, comprehensively delineating DNA as "the symbolic repository of epistemological, ideological, and conceptual change."[20] Building on the work of Richard Lewontin, Ruth Hubbard, Elijah Wald, Michel Morange, and Evelyn Fox Keller, Roof critically analyzes the representative role of DNA in society, its enduring epistemological power, and the way discourse has shaped, and been shaped, by it. Roof contends that thinking of DNA in terms of nucleic acid letters (A,C,T,G) instead of through other visual-conceptual models like a "landscape" or "gear," not only presupposes other textual metaphors, such that the gene can be read, translated, or changed, but also that these particular conceptions have played an important role in the cultural system in which science becomes positioned as "truth," reason, rationality, and objectivity.[21] Alondra Nelson contributes to this understanding of the variant social meanings inhabited by DNA by examining its use in collective efforts for reparations. She specifically focuses on African American genealogists who utilize DNA technology to reconcile the "social ruptures" wrought from transatlantic slavery. Through a theorization of the simultaneous "social power" and "social life" of DNA, her work is resonant with Roof and Duster in considering both the

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Edited by Keith Wailoo, Alondra Nelson, and Catherine Lee. New Brunswick, Rutgers UP, 2012. 247-265.

[20] Roof, Judith. *The Poetics of DNA*. Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 2007. 2.

[21] Roof, 15-16. This is similarly theorized by Donna Haraway, and referenced by Kim Tallbear, as "gene fetishism." Tallbear, 70-71.

discourse around DNA (its social power), and the cultural circuits it travels (its social life). "DNA has become an agent in the politics of repair and reconciliation; it is sought after as communal balm and social glue, as a burden of proof and a bridge across time. Though even a molecule as elegantly complex as DNA cannot possibly fulfill all these expectations."[22] Simultaneously promising to fulfill desire, yet also bounded by material and ideological limitations, DNA inhabits spaces of tension and reflects larger ideas surrounding its social purpose.

This dissertation contributes to a larger conversation around the social, political, and affective impact of scientific technologies, especially when used in moments where repair and performance are necessary to address previously denied (or inaccessible, unattainable, tenuous, fluid) histories and/or identities. More specifically, it considers the role of DNA, as tool/technology and as knowledge project, in addressing legacies of social rupture, historical trauma, loss, and movement. It is here, again, where *Molecular Longing* will also contribute a sustained effort in thinking temporality—that is, how do these technologies begin to trouble a static relationship between (collective) past, present, and imagined future(s)? Use of tests, and belief in their results, opens relationships between/to past and future. That is, they not only allow users to newly apprehend their personal and communal histories, but they also have the potential to substantively reconceptuailize, rethink, and rewrite definitions of it altogether—oftentimes with significant material, political, personal and/or affective consequences.[23] As Keith Wailoo,

[22] Nelson, Alondra. *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2016. 27.

Alondra Nelson, and Catherine Lee suggest, "in relying upon genetic analysis to resolve historical mysteries or clear the way for restitution and healing, we are at the same time manipulating and transforming already politicized notions of race and the past, and implicitly making claims about the social, political, and personal significance of biological human difference."[24] This dissertation will continue such lines of analysis through the specific case of transnational adoption from Korea, with a critical eye toward the multiple levels on which such tensions manifest and intersect.[25]

Drawing on a feminist STS analytic, this project foregrounds consumer-based genetic technology as already implicated in longer histories of racism and imperialism while simultaneously giving space for adopted Koreans to speak their own truths. I will explore the decision to utilize consumer genetic technologies not through a reductive critique of this desire, but rather to investigate how these technologies may allow for alternative conceptions of knowledge and kinship, and may be limited by, exceed, or challenge the parameters defined by the companies. Thus, the question is not about the existence of desire and projects of reconciliation, reclamation, and redress, but rather what may be indicated by examining *science* as recourse to address the desire. What kind

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[23] Such potential material effects are most apparent, for example, in Nelson's work with African American root-seekers attempts to trace specific geographic and/or ethnic origins, and in Kim TallBear's work on the commercialization of genetic technologies and indigenous governance. Nelson has been helpful in thinking about this tension as one between "historical reckoning and future orientation… driven by the desire to effect change in the present and to shape a different future." Nelson, 41.

[24] Wailoo, Keith, Alondra Nelson, and Catherine Lee, eds. *Genetics and the Unsettled Past: The Collision of DNA, Race, and History*. New Jersey, Rutgers UP, 2012. 4.

[25] For example, DNA as tool to confirm/define "ancestry," or particular ethno-national affiliation, and to determine or legitimate various kinship connections.

of truth are these test-takers seeking? What kind of truth do these genetic technologies tell?

Molecular Longing hinges around conflicting projects of knowledge production, kinship, and scientific discourse as they are produced and necessitated by the systemic origins of Korean adoption. There is currently little research that explores this rise in adoptee use of DNA technology and scientific discourse as a mediated method toward self- and kinship-making, and individual and national reconciliation. This dissertation first investigates why kinship becomes the imaginary adopted Koreans choose to navigate the absences produced from war, empire, and institutionalization. It then asks, how does genetic testing inform Korean adoptee definitions of, and longings for, kinship in response to the way it has been traditionally defined in formal adoption processes.

Considering the political importance of adoptee engagement and the exciting intellectual interventions of recent interdisciplinary projects, there are two primary contributions I see this dissertation making. First, it builds upon the scholarship emerging in critical adoption studies with attention toward the role of genetic testing in self, familial, and national reconciliatory efforts. In a moment when science is located as an answer to the ills, silences, gaps, and absences of the past—as promise to bypass or fill what has been lost, forgotten, or erased—it is important to position these scientific modes of knowing as part of longer histories rooted in racism and imperialism and not as free, objective truth. Putting science, scientific discourse, and scientific ends at productive intersection with critical adoption studies and Asian American studies highlights connections between knowledge and power in past and present kin-making and kin-desire

efforts. This has practical and theoretical importance. How might these tests, and the relationships that emerge from them, affect the everyday experiences of adopted Koreans? How does this change the affective "ends" of post-adoption experiences? Is this a way to circumvent institutional limitations, or are these new acts beholden to new ones?

Second, the long-standing practice of Korean transnational, transracial adoption is an important example to consider larger ideologies that organize family, race, and biology in the United States. As this process has been positioned as method toward creating non-normative family forms and inherently challenging the belief in a necessary or preferred biological basis for family, it is also complicated by its deep imbrication in legacies of U.S. imperialism and militarism and an adherence to the normative family form (i.e., the often-mandated adherence to a heteronormative, nuclear family model by social workers). As adopted Koreans navigate the loss and absence that emerges from these conditions of their production, their desires are also filtered through a normative biological framework. This is apparent, for example, through continued focus on origins, birth/original families and countries, and the belief that successful search and reunion relies on an ability to connect with biologically-based relatives. It echoes now with current desires to connect with cousins, no matter how distant. Foregrounding a biological and genetic framework allows this project to engage ongoing conversations regarding kinship, relatedness, and biology/choice.

By specifically exploring the emergence of the Korean adoptee (KAD) "cousin," as kin-term and relationship, this dissertation enters conversations considering the limits

of relatedness and new reproductive technologies.[26] While companies like *23andMe*, and the test kits they sell, promise truth and knowledge as a broadening and opening up, they simultaneously impose limits of how their users relate. That is, the mechanics of the technology structure which people will connect, defining who becomes "cousin" and who remains stranger. Yet, there is also importance in the choice and performance of relation, an indication of the way kinship desire is at once produced through consumer-based technologies, yet also generated out of the particularities of adoption as its own reproductive technology. As Jeanette Edwards and Marilyn Strathern theorize bonds created between sperm donor siblings, they posit that "while genetic relatedness acts as the impetus for making a connection (that is, genetics matters, not least as the idiom in which relatedness is apprehended), donor siblings are not merely biologically filiated. They are known, prior to any contact between them, to be familiar and to understand one another: they partake in each others' experience."[27] Apprehending this tension between choice and biological obligation, Korean adoptees demonstrate the flexibility of these technologies and the fluidity of such relationships that arise out of their particular social, political, and personal histories. The "cousin" term, therefore, is open enough to

[26] For example, there are parallel phenomena occurring for those seeking relationships with sperm donor siblings (diblings) or for Chinese transnational adoptees seeking biological sisters because of the greater difficulty (or complete inability) to trace closer biological relation.
Edwards, Jeanette. "Donor Siblings: Participating in Each Other's Conception." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory,* vol. 3, no. 2, 2013, pp. 285-292., and Volkman, Toby Alice. "Seeking Sisters: Twinship and Kinship in an Age of Internet Miracles and DNA Technologies." *International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children*. Edited by Diana Marre and Laura Briggs. New York, New York UP, 2009. 283-301.

[27] Edwards, 289.

encompass a broad and loose network of relations, yet is simultaneously a marker of deliberate choice and direct biological connection.

Methods & Methodology

I want to frame my methodology by first thinking about my own position—the circumstances that have brought me here, the place from which I intellectually, personally, and professionally approach the work, and the conditions under which I produce knowledge. This is not just a compulsory self-reflexive gesture, but more importantly an effort to think about larger circuits of knowledge production. In particular, I am thinking about what it means to be produced from, to produce for, and to survive through, institutions that were not created for me, despite claims otherwise. Can moments of loss be connected, especially when they are tied to institutional "failures"? Is surviving through an institution contingent on reproducing erasure? These questions have been front of mind throughout my process of research and writing. It feels necessary to foreground my own role as knowledge producer, researcher, writer, and as someone who also identifies as a Korean adoptee, to consider how my multiple intersections influence how and what I write. Grace Cho and Saidiya Hartman have been helpful in thinking through the productivity of loss and the relationship between author/subject/topic.[28] I follow from their decisions to foreground themselves in their work to consider my own

[28] I find myself continually returning to *Lose Your Mother* and *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* to ground my thinking and approach to this work. These two books, in particular, have been significant models for me to consider how to keep a personal connection to the work, without sacrificing intellectual "rigor." Cho, Grace. *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War.* Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 2008. and Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007.

role, and how it manifests through different instances of creation (as Korean adoptee, as academic). Throughout this dissertation, I choose to write myself into intellectual, affective, and analytical spaces that make sense. This is a decision to find the resonances between the absences in my own history and those I have explored through this project. It is also an effort to not only make explicit the power dynamics between researcher and researched, but to also bring forward the intimacies of writing and grieving in the process of this work.

As discussed above, this dissertation has been conceptualized both in response, and in consistent relation, to the gaps and silences that the transnational Korean adoption system is built upon. Turning to these absences as vital sources of information, I am interested in approaching, tracing, and highlighting what has been lost or erased without filling or retelling. This project is not about restoration. Rather, it is an attempt to understand how the successful functioning of institutional and structural practices produce particular affective cultures. How have silences and absences influenced, and perhaps also determined, the imaginaries, worldviews, and desires of adopted Koreans, especially as they relate to kinship and family? What weight and promise does genetic technology and scientific narrative hold within this context? Thus, in attempt to approach absence without trying to fill it, I will draw on an interdisciplinary framework that incorporates two primary methods: ethnographic interviews and discursive analysis. I choose these methods because of their ability to think about formal (i.e. legal production of kinship ties, forging/severing of bonds through adoption agencies, genetic technologies and company algorithms structuring levels of relation) and informal (i.e. memory, desire,

experience) machineries through which kinship has been defined and legitimated, and their relationship to each other. This acknowledges the larger ideological frameworks and power structures that influence the creation/erasure of kin bonds, while also allowing discussion about methods that exceed or challenge them. It also allows Korean adoptees to speak to their own experiences as in tension, or concert, with these past forms.

I have been fortunate to participate in, and engage with, disparate Korean adoption communities in Minneapolis, Seoul, and Los Angeles over the last twelve years. The time spent building with/in these spaces preceded my formal training in graduate school. Indeed, they have deeply informed my interest in pursuing doctoral work, while also supporting my own navigation of the questions that have emerged through my own adoption journey. Thus, this dissertation, and the interviews I conducted as part of it, reflect years of work within and beyond the academy. These commitments have not only led me to the questions raised in this project, but they have also deeply sustained its growth. I find the most tangible stakes of my work in this commitment to the community and to those I have interviewed. Yet, in choosing this particular methodological approach, I have also grappled with my position as academic researcher and the inherent, unequal power dynamic with those I interviewed. Kim TallBear has expressed her own misgivings with this process as a potentially extractive and individualistic endeavor that is in danger of "speak[ing] *for* versus speaking *with*."[29] TallBear is in conversation with Indigenous scholars Pakki Chips and Audra Simpson, who directly engage the anthropological relationship to empire through their work, practicing what they term a

[29] TallBear, 15.

politics of ethnographic refusal. This is both a methodological approach and a theoretical commitment that considers the tenuous boundary between "what you need to know and what I refuse to write in."[30] Simpson not only writes against exploitative and harmful requirements of academic and anthropological knowledge production, but also how these practices of naming, knowing, and differentiating have historically served and sustained colonial relations of power. The act of refusal, however, develops a "theoretically generative" response that is committed to Indigenous nationhood and citizenship, "account[ing] for history" by expanding what we can know from "what [the limits] do not tell us."[31] In my own process of research, analysis, and writing, I have considered the limits and refusals that guide my own work. What are the stories I want to help tell, and what am I yet unwilling to speak? How do I design and develop an academic project that contributes to the autonomy of individual Korean adoptees? I draw from the framework of refusal as an attempt to navigate these complex dynamics that are part of knowledge production and to support the autonomy of Korean adoptees in sharing their own narratives. As TallBear asserts, "the concept of refusal helps frame the silences… as not only against the ethnographic grain but as productive and supportive of indigenous self-determination."[32] As I have already written, part of my interest in entering into the absences inherent to Korean adoption histories is not to fill in the gaps, but rather to

[30] Simpson, Audra. "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship." *Junctures*, no. 9, 2007, pp. 67-80. 72.

[31] Simpson, 78.

[32] TallBear, 17.

understand what can be learned from exploring their shapes and understanding how to engage on multiple, intersecting temporal, physical, spatial, cultural, and affective levels.

From July through December 2018, I conducted 38 semi-structured interviews with adult Korean adoptees who had been adopted to the U.S. All participants had already used, or were considering using, DNA tests. This includes commercial kits produced through companies like *23andMe*, *Ancestry*, or *FamilyTreeDNA*, as well as paternal DNA tests used in direct relation to the birth family search process. Our conversations not only allowed me to better understand why some Korean adoptees decide to use consumer-based DNA tests, but to also trace the development of DNA-based relationships that emerge from them. In particular, I explore the multiple, complex, and creative ways that DNA technologies are being utilized to address absences and gaps in personal adoption histories and to define and embody new kinships. I will go into greater detail about these discussions in Chapters 1 and 3, but for now I want to briefly outline the parameters by which I have collected and organized interviews for this dissertation. I posted an open call for interviews in existent digital networks via Facebook groups such as "KAD 23andme Results Group" and "AKA-SoCal."[33] This method allowed me to reach a group of Korean adoptees who had already taken at least one commercial DNA test and were interested, on some level, in engaging in a larger discussion about their results. I also solicited interviews from my own connections with organizations and organizers in Southern California and Minnesota, including *Adoptee Solidarity Korea- Los Angeles* and *325Kamra*. Once interviews began, word of mouth

[33] KAD is commonly abbreviated to mean Korean Adoptee.

referrals continued to connect me with interested interviewees. The majority of interviews were conducted over the phone or through video call. While this method limited my ability to read some social and physical cues during the interview, it ultimately enabled me to widen my scope and connect with Korean adoptees living across the country. In turn I was able to better understand the tangential way such DNA-based relationships cohere and the diversity of those who choose to utilize and embrace the practice.

In addition to interviews, I apply a discursive analysis of commercial genetic testing company *23andMe*, including a discussion of their marketing language, blog posts, help articles, and user interface. I choose to specifically focus on *23andMe* because of its popularity with those I interviewed, its reputation in popular discourse, and its accessible and user-friendly interface.[34] I not only aim to understand the role of the company in facilitating the open creation of genetic-based kinship networks and its private institutional DNA database, but also how this function and form engage the individual. To understand how these encounters work, I submitted my own saliva sample using a *23andMe* test kit in July 2018. When my reports were ready two months later, I navigated the internal site, including personal reports and DNA Relative list. This informed interview discussions and allowed me to assess how *23andMe* designs its

[34] When I first started working on this research in 2014, Thomas Park Clement, Korean adoptee, entrepreneur, and philanthropist, pledged $1 million to fund any Korean adoptee who wanted a DNA test. Initially, the donated tests were sent by *23andMe*, which increased the reputation and use of the company amongst some Korean adoptees. "Helping Other Korean Adoptees Find Their Story." *23andMe*, 25 September 2020. https://blog.23andme.com/23andme-customer-stories/korean-adoptee-helps-others/. Accessed 1 May 2022.

interface to connect with its users. Though I decided not to directly reach out to anyone on the site first, I was unexpectedly contacted by another Korean adoptee via the *23andMe* messaging interface in February 2019. I will discuss the particularities of this experience in the Conclusion. Ultimately, these methods allow me to explore how some Korean adoptees make sense of absences and unknowns in their personal histories across different knowledge projects and archives.

Chapter Summaries

Molecular Longing is organized across three chapters that focus on differing social scales ranging from the state, private institutional, collective, and individual. Chapter One, "The Presence of Absence: Gaps, Silences, and the Archive," considers how absence, silence, and error have overwhelmingly structured the way kinship ties have been formally (paperwork fabrication, legal categories, sanctioned family formations) and informally (memory, affect) created, managed, and imagined in the past through the formal adoption agency archive. It situates this discussion in critical adoption studies and Asian American studies to explore how these structural components may continue to frame present-day (re)imaginings by considering the question: why does kinship become the imaginary that some Korean adoptees choose to navigate the absences produced from war, U.S. militarism, and institutionalization? The formalized practice of transnational Korean adoption—expressed through material structures, official records, and adoption paperwork—facilitates the aims of U.S. empire by bolstering an idealized adoptee figure as a proper member of a heteronormative, multicultural nuclear family. At the same time, these records, as a product and process of the administrative

violence of the Cold War, have been revealed to contain gaps and forged information about the adoption process, leading to unknown and unknowable personal histories. To consider the potential and constraints of DNA technologies when used as tools of uncovering/recovery, this chapter begins with a historical overview of the Korean transnational, transracial adoption system. It then examines the archive regulated by Korean adoption agencies through an analysis of the experiences of one Korean adoptee, Robyn, to explore how silences and gaps in adoption documents and paperwork may be connected to current efforts to find or make kinship connections through consumer DNA technologies and databases.

Chapter Two, "Creative (Un)Certainty and the Private Commercial DNA Database," examines DNA as a cultural object alongside the rise of commercial genetics companies like *23andMe* to understand how new genetic technologies, and their underlying assumptions, create alternative paths to establish personal histories. It first traces the growth of commercial DNA testing companies, before then undertaking a focused analysis of *23andMe* test mechanics, user platform, and company discourse. It examines how *23andMe* structures their technology to offer both an array of reports to pick and choose from, and an immediately accessible network of relatives "to find," many of which are positioned as cousins.[35] In constructing DNA relatives as cousins, *23andMe* plays an important part in (re)framing who can and cannot be considered kin,

[35] *23andme* itself has estimated that each person may have around 4,700 fifth cousins. "The Method Behind the Relative Finder Tool." *23andme*, 19 April 2012. https://blog.23andme.com/news/announcements/how-many-relatives-do-you-have/. Accessed 2 May 2022.

which allows individuals to directly play, engage, and manage their connections to meet their own needs and desires. Through this analysis, the chapter argues the private institutional database is a limiting, yet limitless, archive that allows users to (re)determine personal identities through selective and deliberate interpretation of genetic reports.

Building on my analysis of the ideological frameworks underlying *23andMe*, I explore how genetic test results are then mobilized by individual Korean adoptees to reconfigure absence and uncertainty in their personal histories. In Chapter Three, "The Limits of Relation: Contingent Connections and the KAD Cousin," I analyze 38 semi-structured interviews conducted from July to December 2018, to trace the development of a collective digital adoptee archive through the emergence of the Korean adoptee (KAD) cousin – a kin-term and genetic relationship that emerges with DNA technology algorithms at the same time it requires deliberate choice. In particular, I explore how and why some Korean adoptees choose to foster relationships with DNA cousins who are listed as third, fourth, or fifth relatives, while others decide against pursuing such connections. I then consider how the expansiveness and fluidity of the informal, collective digital network amplifies, indexes, and facilitates relationships, genetically situated and not, to newly navigate the unknowns in personal and community histories. Commercial DNA tests and the reports they generate are not, however, used by all in the same ways. In putting forth an analysis of Korean adoption, DNA, and kinship, this chapter also explores the fraught and complex motives that drive these processes.

Throughout the research and writing of this dissertation, I have continually been reminded of the importance of reliable access to medical histories, biological and genetic

relations, and biographical information for autonomy and holistic sense of self. Name. Birth date. Birth location. These types of basic personal details are not guaranteed for many of the Korean adoptees I interviewed for this project. The ruptures wrought from the transnational, transracial Korean adoption system are not just part the past but instead continue to reverberate into the present and into the future. By examining how Korean adoptees navigate and manage these (inter)personal absences across scientific, biotechnological, and archival sites, this dissertation interrogates critical tensions between the social and biological, choice and obligation, and knowledge and power within larger ideologies of race, gender, and family in the U.S.

CHAPTER 1: The Presence of Absence: Gaps, Silences, and the Archive

"The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history… but I want to say more than this. I want to do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. I want to tell a story about two girls capable of retrieving what remains dormant—the purchase or claim of their lives on the present—without committing further violence in my own act of narration. It is a story predicated upon impossibility— listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives— and intent on achieving an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved"

Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"[1]

"But this telling is also a failure to tell these stories in their entirety, because there are too many uncertainties, and the very act of telling them in a way that makes sense would involve smoothing over the gaps. Rather than filling in these gaps, I am compelled to enter these empty spaces to find out what emerges, what one can learn from listening to silence."

Grace Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*[2]

Introduction

"Kim Min Sook. Case Number: 89C-166. She is mild and cheerful."

The institutional narrative written under the "History of Birth and Admission" on my *Initial Social History* adoption paperwork is a short two paragraphs that outlines the basic biographical information about my Korean birth parents alongside the circumstances that led to my eventual relinquishment. For the first twenty-three years of my life, this document was the only framework I could access to make sense of my pre-

[1] Hartman, Sadiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, Vol. 12.2, 2008. pp. 1-14. 2-3.

[2] Cho, Grace. *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008. 17.

adoption existence. According to this written history, my birth parents were unmarried and living together, but eventually decided to separate after continual fights caused by my birth father's sudden loss of work. It was only after this parting that my birth mother discovered she was pregnant with me. This neat and tidy story characterizes my mother as unmarried and impoverished, ultimately situating her decision as an individual and selfless act of care. Poverty and social stigma, marked as an "unstable financial and social situation," are positioned as the moral foundation for her relinquishment so that I could be "brought up well with sufficient love and educational supports in a secure family."[3] For nearly twenty-three years, I took this narrative to be truth.

When I was living in Korea in 2011, I half-heartedly chose to do a file review— a meeting with my post-adoption social worker where we would go through the contents of my Korean adoption file together— at my Korean adoption agency, Eastern Child Welfare Society. I was encouraged by the experiences of friends who expressed that this process renewed their sense of agency over their personal information. Not only did it help them piece together their pre-adoption histories, but the file review also acted as the required first step to start the birth search process. Although I had not yet determined whether or not I would go through with a search, the review felt like low enough stakes that I could easily change my mind afterwards. I did, after all, already have access to my American adoption paperwork. Rather than actively seeking new information, the review was a way for me to engage the bureaucratic processes of the agency.

[3] *Initial Social History.* Translated by S.Y. Baek. 3 Mar. 1989.

On the day of my file review, I arrived at Eastern's offices and was quickly ushered into a meeting room where I was instructed to wait for my social worker to arrive. The meeting room was small and worn— the art on the wall faded from the sun and the edges of the furniture softened from years of hosting adoptees, birth family, and prospective parents who sought information, hope, and connection. I felt the weight of these absent figures as I imagined how my own body must have moved through the literal and figurative pathways of this institution. In a rush, my social worker entered and sat across from me at the rectangular glass table in one corner of the room. As she opened my file, I realized my complete dependence upon her to translate, interpret, and explain my small stack of Korean documents. Together, these papers formed a bureaucratic narrative of my earliest moments of life, and the decisions, policies, and practices that structured them. I was unprepared for her blunt revelations.

> Birth mother, 33. Birth father, 37.
> Birth father injured, which forced him to stay home and led to financial difficulties.
> *Birth parents married since 1981, with two daughters aged 5 and 6 at the time of my birth*.

My heart rate quickened as I tried to process what she had just said. I had never been informed that my birth parents were married, nor that I had two older sisters. With feigned bravado, I questioned how this substantial gap between my American and Korean adoption paperwork could occur, only to be met with my social worker's impersonal assertion that omitting this information was a necessary step to complete the adoption process and successfully place me with a family in the United States.

I left my review more confused than when I walked into it. In the following weeks, I struggled to make sense of my muddled history and the new context that led to my

adoption. I ultimately connected with Korean adoptee social circles in Seoul, hungry to learn more about the conditions of possibility that necessitated error, erasure, and absence as the normalized components of institutional practice in transnational Korean adoption. Through this process, I began to more deeply recognize how formal adoption biographies can be positioned as unreliable and/or arbitrary narratives constructed to facilitate the institutionalized adoption process.

Of course, my adoption file is not the only case of unanticipated or erroneous information upon close examination. Nor is my experience the only example of an encounter with the institution and institutional actors that leads to a critical rereading of bureaucratic practice, what Jessica, one of the Korean adoptees that I spoke with, expressed to me as "finding the wizard behind the curtain."[4] Indeed, a number of the Korean adoptees I interviewed for this dissertation conveyed skepticism, frustration, and confusion when asked about how they make sense of their personal adoption histories, especially in regard to their paperwork and files.[5] Another Korean adoptee, Suzanne, openly states that Korean adoption agencies "lie through their teeth. They falsify documents. They don't translate them truthfully."[6] This illegibility, both in an inability to read original documents and in a difficulty trusting relationships with social workers, is a common source of exasperation and mistrust. In fact, documentation often reveals

[4] Jessica. Personal Interview. 3 December 2018.

[5] I conducted 38 semi-structured interviews with adult Korean adoptees for this dissertation. I will go into greater detail about these conversations in Chapter 3.

[6] Suzanne. Personal Interview. 1 August 2018.

ambiguities and contingencies. One Korean adoptee, Janet, relates that she received an unsolicited envelope from Holt Adoption Agency in high school. Inside were naturalization papers that listed her name with another adoptive family. She has no idea why Holt sent these documents. In processing what it meant to receive them, she recognizes how her adoption agency could have easily placed her in another family where she would have had "a totally different life."[7] As Korean adoptees learn to read their files "against the grain," they are not only able "interpret [them] as material evidence of the biopolitical management" of their own bodies, but they also piece together ways that "agency corruption" continues to impact their lives.[8]

Thus, through my own experience and my conversations with others, I began to understand the unreliability of formalized documentation as a framework to recognize the role of bureaucracy and power in the management of the system of transnational adoption. By exploring these collections of documents as an institutional archive built and maintained by Korean adoption agencies, I recognize the initial purpose of these materials as biopolitical tools of population management, what Eleana Kim describes as a transnational biopolitics. That is, "agencies function as agents of biopower," and in the process apply "hegemonic familist ideologies combined with Eurocentric notions of the child's best interests" to manage and control the population.[9] This chapter considers how

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[7] Janet. Personal Interview. 20 August 2018.

[8] Kim, Eleana. "My Folder is Not a Person: Kinship, Knowledge, Biopolitics, and the Adoption File." *The Cambridge Handbook of Kinship*, edited by Sandra Bamford, Cambridge UP, 2019, pp. 451-479. 464.

absence, silence, and error have overwhelmingly structured the way kinship ties have been formally (paperwork fabrication, legal categories, sanctioned family formations) and informally (memory, affect) created and imagined in the past through the "state-based" archive. While Korean adoption agency records are not managed by the Korean government, I choose to articulate them as part of a "state-based" knowledge project because their successful application requires coordination and cooperation from multiple offices, legal bodies, and officials of both Korea and the United States. Further, agency activities, and the records that emerge from them, function in concert with Korean state decisions to hinder the growth of its own social welfare services by shifting the burden of care toward U.S. sponsorship, orphanages, and other transnational adoption infrastructure.[10] I situate this discussion in critical adoption studies and Asian American studies to explore how these structural components may continue to frame present-day (re)imaginings by considering the question: why does kinship become the imaginary that some Korean adoptees choose to navigate the absences produced from war, U.S. militarism, and institutionalization? The chapter begins with a historical overview of Korean transnational, transracial adoption, including a discussion of the development and institutionalization of the system. It will then examine the archive regulated by Korean adoption agencies through an analysis of the experiences of one Korean adoptee, Robyn, to explore how silences and gaps in adoption documents and paperwork may be

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[9] Kim, Eleana. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham, Duke UP, 2010. 33.

[10] Pate, Soojin. *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2014. 107-109.

connected to current efforts to find or make kinship connections through consumer DNA technologies and databases.

I choose to focus on Robyn because she is forced to continually read, challenge, and make sense of the unknowns that emerge from multiple adoption files. Her long-term endeavor navigating adoption systems not only includes attempts to parse out accurate knowledge from adoption paperwork and DNA, but also multiple iterations of search for her absent orphan-figure, Park Joo Young. Specifically, the case of Robyn and/as Park Joo Young offers two modes of analysis. First, it at once represents the contingencies, gaps, and possibilities created out of the successful functioning of the institution. It makes blatantly apparent her easy interchangeability and thus highlights her construction. This is an opportunity to engage tangible representations of multiple lives, what Lisa Lowe theorizes as the past conditional temporality of the "what could have been," or what Eleana Kim has also noted as "(im)possible lives," "planar time," and "prior presences?"[11] Second, it provides an opportunity to consider both the possibilities and limitations of DNA technologies when used as a tool of uncovering/recovery, to confront and address the absences and gaps produced from institutional violence and U.S. militarism.

I end this introduction by bringing our attention back to the words of Saidiya Hartman that open this chapter. While transnational, transracial Korean adoption cannot

[11] Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham, Duke UP, 2015. 40.; Kim draws "planar time" from Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Coutin. Kim, Eleana. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 185.

be directly compared to the violence of transatlantic slavery and its ongoing legacies, I find resonance with Hartman's desire to do more than "recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive" by "listening for the unsaid."[12] Is it possible to read both the absence of my two biological sisters in my Social History, and the loss of Park Joo Young, in another way? If we do not read adoption paperwork expecting to find fact, what else can we discover? I highlight these unknowns as opportunities to reframe our understanding of gaps and absences as a product and a process of the administrative violence of the Cold War. In this way, I also draw from the theoretical work of both Jodi Kim and Eleana Kim. That is, I do not seek to "recuperate" absent and erased adoption histories, but instead "investigate such histories and cultures as a point of entry into… the conditions of possibility and impossibility for such a telling, querying, and knowing."[13] I look to make sense of the adoption file as a window to understand knowledge-making, rather than focusing on its accuracies or inaccuracies.[14] I thus explore erasures not as gaps— not just negative spaces— but also opportunities to make sense of transnational adoption bureaucracy, the limitations of paperwork, and the way that Korean adoptees navigate it.

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[12] Hartman, 2-3.

[13] Kim, Jodi. *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War.* Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 2010. 8.

[14] Eleana Kim, "My Folder is Not a Person," 463.

Institutionalizing Korean Transnational, Transracial Adoption

Given my own frustrations navigating the formal structures of the Korean adoption agency and uncertainties surrounding both its records and its record-keeping practices, I will now turn to the social, historical, and political contexts that contributed to its initial implementation in order to make broader sense of such institutional violence. Rather than excavating some sort of truth or delineating a singular narrative—an impossible and ineffective task— I will instead consider the connections between formal record-keeping, kinship, institutional archives, and power. In particular, I will briefly highlight the efforts to institutionalize Korean adoption that began in the 1950s, including the creation of material adoption structures, bureaucratic processes, legal-juridical categories of personhood (i.e. "orphan"), social categories of identity (i.e. "adoptee"), and the reliance on ideological structures of feeling (i.e. humanitarianism, colorblindness) to situate an affective and ideological landscape that actively facilitates and validates the placement of Korean children abroad. In so doing, I will consider how formalized bureaucratic processes—intertwined with U.S. pedagogies of 'best' social work practice— managed the bodies of Korean children (specifically those deemed 'unwanted' or 'disposable') and, in the process, constructed "state-based" institutional archives of biographical information built on erasure, silence, and the unknowable.[15] As a byproduct of U.S. militarism, imperialism, and Western ideals of kinship, how do we read the institutional

[15] Eleana Kim describes this management of babies/bodies as transnational biopolitics, in which adoption functions as a "mechanism of population control," "secure[s] national loyalty through state racism," and acts as a "source of foreign capital early during the postwar reconstruction." Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 32.

archive and its bureaucratic processes built on gaps and erasures? How do Korean adoptees currently navigate these archival spaces amidst uncertainties and unknowns?

The beginnings of formalized international adoption, as a practice, can be traced to the aftermath of World War II.[16] In particular, Arissa Oh locates the adoptions of mixed-race GI babies, or the "legacies of occupation," as the result of intimacies that developed between American servicemen and local women in Germany and Japan during the "prolonged presence of US occupation troops."[17] The earliest international adoptions from Korea arose in response to similar geopolitical conditions following the Korean War. Mixed-race children, often the product of relationships between American GIs and Korean women, became objects of humanitarian concern and anti-communist effort to hopeful adoptive parents in America.[18]

While most scholarship on transnational, transracial Korean adoption locates its origins in the Korean War and its aftermath, I draw on SooJin Pate's reframing of this dominant narrative within longer histories of U.S. militarism, white heteronormative kinship formation, and empire building projects in the Cold War era. Pate argues that the origins of Korean transnational adoption cannot be situated solely as a consequence of the Korean War, but rather that they "emerge from the neocolonial relations between the United States and South Korea."[19] By instead retelling the origin of Korean transnational

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[16] Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 46.

[17] Oh, Arissa H. *To Save The Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption*. Stanford, Stanford UP, 2015. 5-6.

[18] Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 46.

adoption as complex "emergences," or "numberless beginnings," Pate explores the conditions of possibility that led to the linked figures of the orphan and the adoptee.[20]

Thus, while the Korean War transformed political and social relations between the U.S. and Korea, the institutionalized practice of international adoption arises from complex beginnings. Eleana Kim delineates the shifting conditions underlying Korean transnational, transracial adoption to include "control over population and management of bodies… gendered practices of moral persuasion and coercion… and the unevenness of Korea's fitful modernization."[21] A literal manifestation of legacies of U.S. imperialism and militarism, this systematic movement of bodies/babies to wealthy Western nations facilitated the creation of non-normative families, expanding notions of kinship in the U.S. by effectively creating conditions where primarily white, middle-class families could imagine "orphaned" children of color as one of their own. As the transnational, transracial Korean adoptee became both normalized and included in the American imaginary, the material, structural, and affective foundations of the Korean transnational, transracial adoption system were built.[22]

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[19] Pate, 3.

[20] Pate draws on Foucault's concept of emergence to think through "conflict, tension, and contradiction" in the complex makings of the Korean adoption system. Pate, 10.

[21] Kim draws on Foucault, Ann Anagnost, and Ginsburg and Rapp. Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 24.

[22] Arissa Oh asserts that while the practice of adoption has been longstanding, international adoption only became significant in the U.S. following the Korean War. In fact, Korea was the top sending-country to the U.S. until 1995. Oh, 2.

The early growth and development of the formalized Korean transnational adoption system was dependent on the material structures that supported it. This includes the construction, maintenance, and operation of spaces like orphanages and adoption agencies, which acted as physical points to process and facilitate movement. A significant number of these structures bore the literal traces of U.S. influence, including both Western ideals of child welfare and U.S. military influence. For example, SooJin Pate delineates how American missionary activity at the end of the 19th century set a foundation that "modernized the system of child welfare" in Korea by establishing "congregate care (that is, orphanages)" as the primary approach to manage and care for orphaned children.[23] This infrastructure and ideology worked to naturalize the orphanage as the leading solution to child welfare in the aftermath of the Korean War. Pate goes on to discuss the intimate connections between the U.S. military and the orphanage. "Not only did the military help build orphanages, but almost every U.S. military unit 'adopted' an orphanage, allotting large portions of their pay to support the maintenance of orphanages and the care of orphans."[24] It is important to emphasize these direct connections between U.S. militarism and Korean child welfare structures because they demonstrate how U.S. presence established some of the integral preconditions to Korean adoption, and also later positioned itself as a solution to the circumstances it helped create.

[23] Pate, 30-31.

[24] Pate, 32.

In addition to the material structures that supported the Korean transnational adoption system, legislative, administrative, and affective pathways were developed to facilitate the movement and placement of Korean children abroad. Importantly, these earliest adoptions occurred at a time when immigration from Asia to the U.S. was still heavily restricted. The legal and social inclusion of the Korean adoptee during this time contributed to the "trope of the Korean adoptee as exceptional (in terms of cultural assimilation, psychological adjustment, and social success)," a belief in their ability to successfully "assimilate" that also worked to support the ongoing transnational adoption system.[25] In order to address the immediate needs of the 1950s, members of Congress often passed special legislation, setting the ideological and legal groundwork for the creation of "permanent orphan legislation throughout the 1950s."[26] In this drive toward formalization there were conflicting motives and beliefs about best practice, which were often reflected in different approaches toward institutionalization. For example, Arissa Oh discusses this messiness through the figure of Harry Holt, the so-called father of international Korean adoption. Beginning with his own adoption of eight Korean GI children in 1955, Holt became a catalyst for formalizing the system. He organized the adoption process through Holt Adoption Program and implemented "practical innovations" such as proxy adoptions and charter flights, which made the process of adoption "faster, cheaper, and more readily available to ordinary Americans, at least those

[25] Nelson, Kim Park. *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism.* New Brunswick, Rutgers UP, 2016. 42.

[26] Oh, 46.

who conformed to his idea of Christianity."[27] While Holt worked to set the material foundations to quickly process, transport, and place Korean children, he and his methods were not free from criticism.

In particular, organizations like International Social Service (ISS) "emphasized the need to develop local solutions" rather than actively working to establish a sustained transnational adoption system.[28] Distinct from the singular role of a figure like Holt, the ISS "embodied the self-conscious professionalization of social workers in the early twentieth century," ultimately replicating the "time-consuming domestic adoption process" on a transnational scale.[29] Together with Korean officials and adoption agency directors, social workers in Korea and the U.S. "scrambled to facilitate an unprecedented procedure. They improvised almost everything as they went along: from identifying and collecting 'adoptable' children to processing and preparing them for adoption abroad," ultimately establishing the "procedural groundwork for the systematization of intercountry adoption from Korea."[30] Thus, while ISS and professional social workers may have been more attentive to the complexities of transnational adoption by critiquing the process and pace put forth by Holt and advocating to keep Korean children in Korea, they still played an integral role in formalizing and standardizing the practice. How does this "improvisation" translate into the way adoption paperwork was written and organized

[27] Oh, 14, 80-81.

[28] Oh, 115.

[29] Oh, 115.

[30] Oh, 113, 46.

as a formal, institutional archive of the state? How does this not only influence the types of information that were stored at the time, but how such knowledge affects contemporary efforts to navigate and understand the bureaucratic process?

Positioning individuals and organizations like Harry Holt, Holt Adoption Program, and ISS together provides an important opportunity to consider how the emergent system of Korean international adoption encapsulates layered meanings—not only in the traces of U.S. militarism and in the neocolonial relations between the U.S. and Korea, but also in the ways that information about, and bodies of, Korean children have been managed through frameworks of Western social work practice, white heteronormative kinship norms, and humanitarianism. Both individuals and institutional practice facilitated the creation of the adoptee out of the capacious figure of the "orphan," which not only required the severing of social and legal ties, but also an incredible amount of labor, time, and resources. As SooJin Pate succinctly writes, "just because a child is an orphan does not mean that he or she will become an adoptee… It takes innumerable resources and institutional support to make an orphan adoptable."[31] Indeed, the bureaucratic process to create an orphan in Korea was dependent on the production of paperwork that erased the prior existence of biological parents. To do so, Korean "city or district officials created a new *hojuk* for the child that listed her as the head of her household, with parents listed as unknown."[32] Thus, while some children had known

[31] Pate, 4.

[32] According to Arissa Oh, "a hojuk listed the male head of the house, his wife, and dependents… A child's inclusion in the hojuk thus signaled her social and legal Korean citizenship in the fullest sense—membership in a patriarchal family lineage, and membership in her nation." Oh, 118.

biological parent(s) and may not be considered an orphan in the common understanding of the term, they were legally and socially transformed into orphans through bureaucratic practice. This is what Jodi Kim names as "visa" or "social" orphans, who are only made possible by the "conjoined 'social death' of the adoptee and the birth mother."[33] In the particular context of transnational adoption, the adoptee's hojuk becomes "a literal representation of the child, stripped of her family, history, and nation. It ***produce[s]*** an orphan, ostensibly free of family ties, who [i]s available for overseas adoption."[34] The impact of this production is not just the creation of the adoptee, but also the loss and/or erasure of histories, narratives, knowledge, and relations.

There has been a vast transformation in the technologies supporting Korean transnational, transracial adoption over the past 60 years. Its shift from relief effort to systematized practice not only emerged from historical contexts of U.S. imperialism and militarism, but also through the institutionalization of its methods, both material and ideological, including structures (social workers, processes of adoption, paperwork, "orphan" designation) and ideologies. How does this history impact Korean adoptees in the present day? Paperwork and the institutional archive, in particular, have been crucial components in the successful functioning of the adoption system, and continue to profoundly shape what information is accessible and knowable about it. My own experience demonstrates how error and erasure are not just accidental or singular

[33] Kim, Jodi. "An Orphan with Two Mothers: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Cultural Politics." *American Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 4, 2009, pp. 855-880. 856-857.

[34] Emphasis mine. Oh, 118.

occurrences, but are in fact built into practices of documentation, required components for both my transformation into adoptee and my subsequent immigration. "Bureaucratic records must always be considered in terms of the ways in which they are central to the exercise of power and agency as well as how they are aligned with the interests of certain kinds of bodies and exclusive notions of evidence, nation states and citizenry."[35] Absences and errors in adoption paperwork may then be read as the literal traces of formalized transnational adoption procedure, supporting the exertion of power and maintenance of the institution. In considering this tension between "truth" and record in Korean adoption histories, Eleana Kim articulates that "rather than pointing back to the pre-adoption real, [paperwork] serves as the materialized traces of mundane acts of bureaucratic proceduralism."[36] The purpose of adoption paperwork is not to accurately and scrupulously detail information. Rather, this form of documentation is a "technology that renders abandoned and relinquished children legally cognizable to the sending and receiving states as 'orphans' eligible for transnational adoption emigration."[37]

Who is Park Joo Young?

As individual Korean adoptees examine their personal adoption paperwork, they must not only work to make sense of limited information, but also determine which pieces matter in their own narrative. Adoption files can be understood as "artifact[s] of

[35] Gilliand, Anne. "A Matter of Life and Death: A Critical Examination of the Role of Official Records and Archives in Supporting the Agency of the Forcibly Displaced." *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* (forthcoming). 2.

[36] Eleana Kim, "My Folder is Not a Person," 457.

[37] Eleana Kim, "My Folder is Not a Person," 458.

transnational governmentality in Korean adoption practice" as well as "technolog[ies] that render abandoned and relinquished children legally cognizable to the sending and receiving states as 'orphans' eligible."[38] The successful functioning of the transnational adoption system is dependent on both adoption paperwork and the bureaucratic processes necessary to produce it. Thus, the files held within the institutional adoption archive capture a specific moment, meant to serve a particular purpose—rendering the adoptee as a legible and exchangeable person. Taken out of that time, these bureaucratic remains provide the opportunity to not only explore the failures of the state in its population management, but to also in turn expose the "(im)possible lives" of those who have been (dis)placed through the system. I now turn to the experiences of Robyn to consider how contingencies and absences are created as a function of the institution, highlight her construction, and thus make possible her easy interchangeability. I then consider both the possibilities and limitations of DNA technologies when used as a tool of uncovering/recovery, to confront and address the absences and gaps produced from institutional violence and U.S. militarism. Through this, I explore how formal record-keeping, adoption agency archives, and bureaucratic practice produce ongoing institutional violence for Robyn. That is, in the process of navigating the adoption agency archives for reliable information and kinship connections, she not only encounters the unknown/unknowable, but she also confronts enduring expressions of institutional violence that reverberate across linear time (from past to present to future), *and* parallel time and geographic space (from one possible life to another).

[38] Eleana Kim, "My Folder is Not a Person," 458.

Robyn arrived in the United States in the early 1980s to St. Louis Park, Minnesota, a suburb just outside of the Twin Cities. She grew up with her sister Jessica and parents Tom and Mary amidst a mix of Korean adoptee, Hmong and Somali refugee, and white communities. Growing up in the "land of gazillion adoptees," Robyn tells me that she has "always known adoptees" whether it be within her family, "like my sister and my cousins, through Korean culture camps… or Children's Home Society and Family Services mentorship programs and teen groups."[39] Yet, despite participating in Korean adoption cultural events and feeling a sense of belonging growing up, she also articulates that it took her move to Korea to highlight her own internalized racism from growing up around and within whiteness. Robyn lived in Korea from 2007 until 2009, which she describes as a meaningful, formative, and challenging period of homecoming. Soon after she arrived in Seoul, she worked with her Korean adoption agency, Eastern Social Welfare Society, to initiate the birth family search process using the information listed on her adoption paperwork. Within months of starting the process, Robyn was notified by her Korean social worker that they had successfully located her birth mother and she was interested in meeting. In the spring of 2008, the two reunited. From this point on, Robyn and/as Park Joo Young, was in the ongoing process of reunion, building a relationship with her birth mother and working through challenges brought by loss, difference, and miscommunication.

In 2012, Robyn decided to take a DowGene DNA test with her birth mother, supported by Korean Support and Services and G.O.A.'L.'s first trip home program, in

[39] Robyn. Personal Interview. 29 July 2018.

attempt to uncover any information she could gather about her absent birth father.[40] Unexpectedly, this test revealed devastating new information. The birth mother with whom Robyn reunited was *not*, in fact, biologically related to her—a previously unknown error made decades ago by Eastern Social Welfare Services. Re-traumatized, Robyn expresses how such unanticipated news affected her. "I think that emotionally it has taught me to understand truly what being broken—when we talk about that— feels like… [At that time] I finally felt like, 'oh wow, I've pieced a lot together.' And then it just crumbled. I guess that would be the best way to symbolically represent what that did emotionally for me. It broke… it broke me."[41] There is a lot that can be unpacked from this moment and those that followed, including notions of truth and infallibility as related to material documentation, power and knowledge in transnational adoption practice, and nodes of contingency. While Robyn's experiences are not necessarily unique, they perhaps most tangibly demonstrate institutional failures and their aftermath, and the easy slippage between multiple lives in the space of "what could have been."[42] It is likely that

[40] G.O.A.'L., or Global Overseas Adoptee's Link, is an adoptee-led non-profit and NGO in Korea. They offer a range of support services for adoptees, including language scholarships, birth family search assistance, and translation services.; Different from commercial DNA testing services like 23andMe and Ancestry, DowGene DNA Testing Company has been "Korea's leading DNA testing organization certified by the Ministry of Health and Welfare." According to its website, its services "include DNA profile tests for paternity verification, kinship verification, individual identification, DNA profile tests for prevention of missing children, food foreign substance detection, DNA analysis services and DNA storage cards." See "About Us." *DowGene*. http://dowgene.koreasme.com/about-us.html. Accessed 22 Mar. 2022.

[41] Robyn. Personal Interview. 29 July 2018.

[42] For example, Deann Borshay Liem shares her experience encountering erroneous adoption information when she discovers that her agency sent her in place of another child, without notifying her family or changing the name on her adoption paperwork. See *First Person Plural*. Directed by Deann Borshay Liem, Mu Films, 2000

Park Joo Young is the child of the woman with whom Robyn reunited, but Robyn is not Park Joo Young. In her attempts to figure out what happened and piece together her own narrative, Robyn has often been met with bureaucratic barriers, grief, frustration, and ultimately more questions.

Contingent Paperwork and "Swap Mates"

I want to reiterate that I am less interested in parsing out a singular truth here and instead more interested in thinking through what Robyn's experience can tell us about institutional violence and the formal adoption archive. Robyn discusses her experiences with multiple of her own adoption files, both before and after the reveal brought forward by the DNA test. Robyn as Park Joo Young has at least three separate sets of documentation: one file compiled and kept by her mother, Mary, a second file held by her American adoption agency, and a third file managed by Eastern in Korea. Growing up, Robyn's access to the file kept by her mother allowed her to create an "integrated narrative" of herself and her story as she continually revisited the information at different points throughout her life.[43] However, this thorough record-keeping was first challenged when Robyn did her file review in 2007, discovering new information about her Korean family. As she articulates to me, "I think it was more specific details surrounding the extended family that I was able to learn. I don't know why it [didn't come with my American file]… It really just made me curious and wonder… what kind of ownership [do] the agencies in Korea have, and filter, you know?"[44] For Robyn, the discovery of

[43] Robyn. Personal Interview. 29 July 2018.

[44] Robyn. Personal Interview. 29 July 2018.

additional information in her Korean agency file highlights uneven power dynamics within the bureaucratic practice of transnational adoption. It is a moment that both emphasizes the system and her role within it.

Yet, as I have already outlined, Robyn's narrative becomes even more complex when she realizes the birth mother listed on her paperwork is not her biological mother. As she confronts the complete loss of her information (and thus also the unknown/unknowable), she must learn how to navigate the three linked, yet separate, files of Park Joo Young's paper trail alongside the search for her own.[45] As Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Bibler Coutin articulate, "paper trails (records of birth, adoption, citizenship, etc.) do not merely document prior moments and movements but also have the potential to redefine persons, compel movement, alter moments, and make ties ambiguous. Instead of only trailing the past, papers jut out into the future, requiring the selves who are authenticated by these documents to chart new and sometimes unanticipated courses."[46] In Robyn's case, the already-complicated paper trail becomes capacious. Her multiple adoption files are woven in and out of her search for knowledge and kinship connection. They not only document the bureaucratic practices that precipitated her transnational movements in the past and present, but they also inform what is possible or knowable in her (imagined) future(s). If the purpose of the adoption file is as biopolitical tool to facilitate successful movement, then its inherent errors

[45] Eleana Kim, "My Folder is Not a Person," 460.

[46] Yngvesson, Barbara and Susan Bibler Coutin. "Backed by Papers: Undoing Persons, Histories, and Return." *American Ethnologist*. vol. 33, no. 2, 2006, pp. 177-190. 184.

emphasize how contingencies are a natural consequence of the system. The introduction of new loss brought by the DNA test results only further demonstrates the ongoing institutional violence of the adoption agency as Robyn's relationships to birth mother, to birth family, to adoption agency, and to Park Joo Young are challenged and redefined. Her paper trail further expands toward the unknown.

The administrative error may have been brought to the surface through the DNA test, but Robyn is forced to return to the formal adoption archive to try to make sense of what happened. She repeatedly attempts to locate reliable information within formal adoption agency archives, but has thus far been fruitless, exacerbated by the inability of Children's Home Society or Eastern to provide any real help. That is, Robyn's post-adoption social workers refuse to work to work with Robyn to find Park Joo Young and offer no other alternative means for Robyn to find her birth family.

> "[Children's Home Society in Minnesota] didn't want to make a big ruckus so they kept it pretty low profile and didn't know what to say or do. They gave me some support services to reach out to if I needed to talk to somebody, but it was kind of just like a big 'F U.' … Then I went to the Korean agency side of things, obviously, and met with them to have those conversations about what is going on… Similar to Children's Home Society, [they said] 'we gotta kind of keep this low key because we don't want this to blow up,' or 'We don't have any responsibility in this.' [They] didn't take accountability or know what to do. Or they blamed other things in the system. I get it, but that's kind of the response I've gotten when I've gone to the agencies. Especially in Korea they don't know what to do with it. They think that *this* happened or they could hypothesize that *that* happened, but they're not really willing to do much to help."[47]

Although Robyn's American and Korean agencies have each played different roles in her adoption, they both eschew accountability and instead emplace institutional barriers.

[47] Robyn. Personal Interview. 29 July 2018.

Robyn is forced to navigate the unknown alone—whether that be through evaluating "support services," being compelled into silence, or working to piece together her history with disparate pieces of paperwork. Her own sleuthing has led her to identify what she terms as potential "swap mates"—other Korean children/adoptees-to-be who were directly or indirectly connected to her during moments of ambiguity throughout her adoption process. For example, Robyn details at least two other swap mates during the time between her birth and adoption to the U.S.: (1) a Korean child/adoptee who was transported with Robyn from Busan to the same adoption agency in Seoul, and (2) a Korean child/adoptee who was under the care of the same foster mother as Robyn. Although she identified these possible swap mates, the confidentiality practices of the Korean adoption agency restrict her ability to directly connect with them. Through her attempts to recover information, Robyn must also confront the multiple bureaucratic processes that transformed Park Joo Young from "orphan" into adoptee. In turn, she encounters other possible Park Joo Youngs (still yet unknown) who were made to be interchangeable as a result of the successful working of the transnational adoption system.

Robyn's search for Park Joo Young directly displays the "what could have been," "(im)possible lives," and "multidirectional movements" in the most immediate and tangible sense. As she follows institutional leads, Robyn travels back and forth between the U.S. and Korea—physically and temporally across geographic space and bureaucratic record. Yet the figure of Park Joo Young unfurls and grows unwieldy. "The seeming path that ought to connect these persons and places is unclear, has gaps, and may not really be

a path at all… Traveling such a temporal path entails multidirectional movements, not simply from present to past or future, but sometimes from one present to another."[48] Robyn may learn "tidbits" and "pieces" from her Korean agency, but ultimately encounters institutional and interpersonal barriers that let her "know certain things," but not others.[49] These "certain things" are always fragmented—the existence of the other Korean children/adoptees in transit and in foster care, for instance—and ultimately point back to the very structure of the institutional archive as one that necessitates the unknown and unknowability to function. In Robyn's repeated process of search, discovery, and reconstruction within/ through her adoption agency, she encounters ongoing institutional violence via loss, trauma, and indifference.

DNA Technologies as Tools of Uncovering/Recovery

In her search for biological family, it makes sense that Robyn would turn back to the institutional archives of her adoption agencies. After all, these bureaucratic and social practices were responsible for her own adoption and erroneous paperwork. They could feasibly be expected to hold the information necessary to resolve her questions. Yet, as I have discussed above, the unknowability of the formal adoption archive forces Robyn to incorporate additional tools, methods, and avenues toward discovery. Moving outside of institutional constraints, she has connected with two additional, potential matches. The first, a Korean adoptee who had the same experience of discovering mis-matched birth family after use of a DNA test, was found via word of mouth. The second, a Korean birth

[48] Yngvesson and Coutin, 183-184.

[49] Robyn. Personal Interview. 29 July 2018.

family member, was found after seeing Robyn on a Korean news segment that aired her story.[50] In both cases, Robyn depends on DNA technologies to be able to tell a particular kind of truth—the likelihood of whether or not shared DNA can determine close biological relation. Just as DNA testing initially revealed the absence of relation to her first birth mother, Robyn uses it again as a tool of authority to determine the legitimacy of these new relationships. Against the ambiguity and uncertainty of adoption agency files, DNA technology and scientific discourse are positioned as solutions.

Yet, the ability for DNA tests to address the absences of the institutional archive is still dependent on how they are being used. For example, as a one-to-one paternal test, Robyn is able to directly uncover the errors and gaps in her adoption record. However, when DNA tests are used as part of a larger process, she becomes frustrated again. In testing with a possible Korean uncle, the person who found her through a news segment, Robyn must work through a non-profit to help facilitate the process. This organization opts to bring in commercial DNA tests, rather than DowGene, as tools to assess matches because of their ability to identify extended family. Robyn remarks, "while they're great—23andMe, Family Tree DNA, MyHeritage—their system works slowly. So, I'm kind of at the mercy of just waiting… And this is where I'm learning in systems where things can work faster, things can work slower. There's loopholes in systems."[51] Her displeasure at pace, at passively waiting, reflects some of her earlier irritation brought by her adoption agency and its institutional barriers. For Robyn, it is not just be that the

[50] In 2019, YTN Korea filmed and aired a short segment on Robyn's story.

[51] Robyn. Personal Interview. 29 July 2018.

system works slowly, but also that she is at the *mercy* of waiting, of experiencing powerlessness within the system. She goes on, "These DNA testing sites are becoming [like] the agencies and have the power and control and the information that we're kind of just at the mercy to just submit to. Like, oh, now I have to wait two months? And sure, could I have gone another route?… Yes. I think I just… went with it in the moment. But I'm realizing now [that I'm] in the system that these [companies] are also presenting their own unique challenges and barriers."[52] While these commercial DNA tests have the capacity to establish and forge new connections—with potential birth family and between Korean adoptees—they are also limited by the singularity of the private institutional archive where results are kept. I will continue to explore this in Chapter 3.

Finding Park Joo Young

The unknowability of Robyn's pre-adoption history is intimately tied up with formal record-keeping, management of the institutional archive, and adoption agency bureaucracy in both the past and the present. Her ongoing endeavor to make sense of these gaps involves multiple, sometimes conflicting, sources of knowledge: three separate adoption files attached to Park Joo Young, correspondence with adoption agency social workers, emergent, yet partial, information of other Korean children/adoptees who have been linked to her movements through the transnational adoption system, media pieces, two different types of DNA tests, and four iterations of testing. Yet through it all, absence persists and reverberates. As Robyn has yet to find her birth mother, she is now pivoting to search for Park Joo Young with greater attention. "I want to find—I need to find—Park

[52] Robyn. Personal Interview. 29 July 2018.

Joo Young… We know there's about 200,000 of us, right? So out of that, there is that one that we're going to match. It's like trying to match between our community… [and] zeroing in on the adoptees that either flew with me to the States on the same plane, were in foster care together, at the adoption agency, the hospital."[53] While this renewed focus on the identity of Park Joo Young highlights Robyn's intimate knowledge on the system that produced her, it also perhaps further confirms the depth of institutional violence that she and others experience from bureaucracy, record-keeping, and paperwork. The figure of Park Joo Young exists because the transnational adoption system necessitated her creation. Robyn's search for her confronts this history and in the process works to forge connections between individuals in the Korean adoptee community through advocacy.

Conclusion

Through this chapter, I explore how absences emerge as part of the institutional adoption archive via erroneous, mismatched, and missing paperwork. These gaps are not simply incidental, but rather exist as both direct consequence and successful bureaucratic function of the transnational Korean adoption system. As both biopolitical tool and outcome of institutionalization, the adoption file works to enfigure the adoptee as legally legible, a subject who can then be managed and moved across borders. To trace the effects of this framework of absence, I examine the linked figures of Robyn and/as Park Joo Young, a Korean adoptee whose use of a DNA test led her to discover errors that not only reverberate across past, present, and future, but also between multiple possible presents. As Robyn learns that the paperwork attached to her pre-adoption body (once

[53] Robyn. Personal Interview. 29 July 2018.

known as Park Joo Young) is not her own, she is additionally forced to contend with a new awareness that the birth mother with whom she reunited is not her biological mother.

Robyn's experience demonstrates complex possibilities and limitations of DNA technologies when they are used as tools for the uncovering and recovery of absences in personal adoption information. Multiple types of DNA test allow her access to new, albeit unexpected, information: to find already-existing errors in her paperwork, to evaluate possible biological kinship relations, and to view company-based ethnic profile breakdowns. As exciting as these new avenues of knowledge production may be, however, Robyn is simultaneously constrained by the systems of power in which the tests exist. While her initial experience with DowGene was simple and direct, subsequent engagement with commercial DNA testing kits have left her feeling powerless and passive. Through this ongoing process, Robyn is able to make the connection between the Korean adoption agency and the commercial DNA company as institutions. In this way, she emphasizes how interconnected systems of power and knowledge continue to restrict her ability to make greater sense of the absences in her information and, ultimately, to find her birth family. Despite her individual critiques and frustrations, Robyn articulates a sense of hope for DNA technologies to help build a new archive of information that can facilitate connection and reunification. Robyn articulates:

> "I've gone through this so many times is that… the likelihood that [they are not my biological family] is there. Right? And so if that's the case, the blessing in this is that this family we now have… came forward, they also very bravely came forward and are taking a risk to see [if we are a match]. That now we at least know of another family out there that's searching. And we have access to their DNA because they've willingly submitted that to be able to be matched with other adoptees out there in a system. As adoptees are submitting their DNA, then that opens up the pool. And that's why I'm at the point now where I want to take this

> [endeavor] toward advocacy and awareness because we need families like this to be coming forward to really be able to have these reunifications happen. We can have a bunch of DNA from adoptees, but if we don't have it from the birth family, then what does it matter, you know?"[54]

As I shift into the next part of this dissertation, I will consider the steps that some individual Korean adoptees and some Korean adoption-based community organizations are taking to address the gaps and absences in personal adoption histories. In particular, I explore the increasing popularity of commercial DNA tests, which are wielded as accessible and trusted tools of knowledge-making against the rigidity, ambiguity, and unreliability of formal paperwork. Chapter 2 will consider how commercial DNA testing companies like *23andMe* establish and position their private institutional archive. I will then explore how individual Korean adoptees use such technology in Chapter 3—both in the ways intended by the company and in the novel ways that allow for creativity and connection.

[54] Robyn. Personal Interview. 29 July 2018.

CHAPTER 2: Creative (Un)certainty and the Private Commercial DNA Database

Introduction

I first learned about the existence of the affordable mass market DNA test, *23andMe*, when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In 2011, I helped coordinate the Illinois Chinese Adopted Siblings Program (ICASP), an annual student-run mentorship event that brings together Asian American undergraduate students, Chinese transnational, transracial adoptee youth, and their families. The daylong event was structured as a split program. The Chinese adoptees, ranging in age from young child to pre-teen, were paired with undergraduate "big siblings" who participated in games and art activities together. Meanwhile their parents attended workshops on the practice of adoption, discussed intersections between race and gender, and participated in hands-on activities and cooking demonstrations. For this event, I organized a panel for the parent-track that brought together adult Korean adoptees to speak about their experiences with adoption, race, gender, and family to a room of white adoptive parents.

Importantly, this event demonstrated complex new directions of transnational, transracial adoption community dynamics. It gathered a diverse and intergenerational collection of participants who were assembled by shared experiences of racialization in the United States. Though most of the undergraduate volunteers were not adopted, their presence at the event was significant. Their relatability and mentorship created community with the little siblings, offering them a healthy way to begin (or continue) to develop their own racial identities. At the same time, the adult Korean adoptee

participants complicated such racial dynamics and subtly exemplified the ongoing effects of processes of transnational, transracial adoption from Asia to the United States. The inclusion of their panel also demonstrated part of a larger shift in power and narrative that highlights adoptees as the creators of their own stories.

ICASP did not explicitly address newly emergent consumer DNA testing through its program that year. However, as informal conversations unfolded after the Korean adoption panel, one of the panelists excitedly told me about her recent experience with *23andMe*. She was particularly delighted to learn what she deemed as new information about herself and her family. This included quick and easy access to reports the company describes as "health," "ancestry," and "traits." Although this panelist knew she would never directly share significant amounts of DNA with her family, the *process* of test-taking became a meaningful, collective experience of connection and affirmation.

This was the first time I heard about *23andMe*, but it was certainly not the last time it came up in conversation related to Korean adoption. In fact, this brief exchange became my anecdotal entry point into the newly developing trend of DNA as information and as viable path toward Korean adoptee community and kinship that has grown over the last decade. While the ICASP panelist recreationally used *23andMe* to create shared experiences with her family, the wide application of these tests work to address a number of desires. For example, DNA tests have been progressively incorporated into both formal and informal strategies applied by adult Korean adoptees to seek or confirm information about identities, medical predispositions, and emergent or existing relationships. This occurs in multiple, overlapping ways. First, tests are becoming part of

an institutionalized response offered by Korean adoption agencies and community organizations to confirm biological relation following birth family search and reunion. Simultaneously, in the absence of successful birth family search efforts, tests like *23andMe* are becoming popular tools to both dictate personal information and to open the door to genetically-based relationships.[1] In these cases, DNA results may not replace the desire to find biological family. However, they do demonstrate how these technologies not just authenticate, but more importantly actively *produce* new connections through the language of the molecular.

This chapter ultimately addresses two primary questions: How does the desire to reconfigure the unknown and unknowable through genetic technologies relate to and depart from similar technologies of reconciliation employed in the past? What does DNA open up that was previously closed, inaccessible, and unknown, and what does it mean for Korean adoptees to now access such information? To address these questions, it will explore the uneasy relation between the desire for truth, kinship, and connection and the "solutions" offered by companies like *23andMe* through a discursive analysis of company website, marketing language, and database. Building on discussions from Chapter 1, it holds gaps, silences, and errors steady in order to understand both the potential and the limitation of DNA and "scientific" discourse when structured by and within the private institutional database. The chapter will first trace the rise of commercial DNA test technologies before then undertaking a focused analysis of

[1] By successful, I mean the completion of a birth family search that ends in the searching party (usually an individual Korean adoptee) connecting with biological family via letter, email, or in-person meeting.

23andMe test mechanics, user platform, and company discourse. Through this analysis, I argue that the private institutional database is a limiting, yet limitless, archive that allows users to (re)determine personal identities through selective and deliberate interpretation of genetic reports. It is important to emphasize that these reports are presented in a way that encourages users to engage and apply their own reading of the results. Although test kits are processed by a CLIA-certified lab that utilizes a "robust process" of genotyping based on "well-established scientific and medical research," the user platform itself is designed to inspire exploration, discovery, and play.[2] The scientific and genetic analysis presented becomes less an articulation of absolute fact and more a blank canvas by which users can project their own hopes and desires.

Thus, while formal adoption agency archives have been an integral apparatus in establishing the "what could have been," the private institutional database instead builds toward the "what can be" as it continually unfolds and transforms through individual user engagement. The company's public positing of fast, reliable, and accessible knowledge not only promises to reveal and expand personal histories, but it also presents open and mutable networks of genetic-based relations. In doing so, *23andMe* introduces new ways to engage absence, partiality, and choice as individuals decide how to understand the results presented to them. The success of these companies relies on the tension between

[2] "Genetic Science." *23andMe*. https://www.23andme.com/genetic-science/. Accessed 13 July 2021. CLIA is an acronym that stands for the Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendment, which regulates laboratory testing in the United States. See "Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA)." *U.S. Food and Drug Administration*. https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/ivd-regulatory-assistance/clinical-laboratory-improvement-amendments-clia. Accessed 13 July 2021.

past and present as they simultaneously sell the promise to know personal histories and the framework to understand them. These "facts" are positioned as always already there within us, yet also open to our own unique interpretation. The future is one to choose and create. With crucial attention to scientific fields, technologies, and narratives, this chapter is attentive to power and the politics of knowledge production structuring commercial genetic technologies, with a specific emphasis on the continually shifting constructions of health predispositions, traits and ancestry reports, and DNA relatives.

Rise of DNA Technologies

Dorothy Nelson and Susan Lindee posit the completion of the Human Genome Project as both a "scientific and economic breakthrough" and a significant political event due to the ensuing commodification of DNA and its growing presence as cultural icon.[3] It is the development of this "highly publicized research in the science of genetics" alongside scientists' own "rhetorical strategies" to communicate the impact and meaning of their work that has partially led to the "popular appropriation" of genetic explanations for social and cultural phenomena.[4] DNA, as both source of "new" information and as cultural object have since been entangled with a number of shifting social and political issues, including ideas around kinship, identity, reproductive choice, and personal health.

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[3] Nelson, Dorothy and Susan Lindee. *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as Cultural Icon.* Ann Arbor, U of Michigan P, 2004. xii.

[4] Nelson and Lindee, 3, 5-6. Nelson and Lindee argue that the "values and assumptions expressed in popular representations of genes and DNA" emerge from these rhetorical strategies, or the "promises" scientists generate and the "language they use to enhance their public image." This ultimately works to increase popular support and understanding of genetics while also securing ongoing funding.

The growth, weight, and power of DNA as cultural icon is linked to an understanding of its "plasticity" and "openness to interpretation."[5] For example, Nelson and Lindee argue, "though [the gene] refers to a biological construct and derives its cultural power from science, its symbolic meaning is independent of biological definitions. The gene is, rather, a symbol, a metaphor, a convenient way to define personhood, identity, and relationships in socially meaningful ways."[6] Thus, although science may be used as foundation to legitimize the promise of a genetic ability to tell "truth," the gene ultimately exceeds itself and becomes a blank canvas that reflects multiple, intersecting, and sometimes conflicting, truths. The plasticity of DNA is also evident in material ways. Transgenic life forms, for instance, are built through recombinant DNA, or a process of genetic engineering that "allows biologists to move sequences of genetic information across the barriers of species and genus."[7] While Cooper highlights this manipulation to exemplify the destandardization of reproductive processes, it also overtly demonstrates how material flexibility of genes builds on the ideological and the cultural. This chapter continues to explore the complicated relationship between DNA, mutability, knowledge, and openness through the specific example of *23andMe* and the Korean adoptee community.

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[5] Nelson and Lindee, xii.

[6] Nelson and Lindee, 16.

[7] Cooper, Melinda. *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*. Seattle, U of Washington P, 2008 33.

The expansive meaning and cultural importance of DNA and its organizing role as tool/technology directly affects the social, political, and affective impact of scientific genetic technologies and the structure of the private institutional archive. This broadness influences the individual perceptions and imaginaries of DNA, which then in turn influences the functional ways DNA can be wielded to answer questions or address unknowns. It is in this tension that private genetic companies and their direct, accessible, and affordable recreational DNA analysis emerge. In the case of Korean adoption, these technologies are connected to larger narrative arcs, ongoing questions, and lingering desires. More specifically, they are utilized to explore the gaps and inconsistencies that emerge from uncertain histories, inherently connected to the formal archives of information that were explored in the previous chapter. It is through these DNA technologies that social and familial rupture, historical trauma, and loss become mediated by the performative adaptability of DNA.

How has at-home, recreational genetic testing gained popularity in the public sphere, and how does this relate to the cultural representation of DNA previously outlined? Further, how do these technologies grow as trusted avenues of knowledge production for Korean adoptees? To explore these questions, I will first briefly discuss contributing factors in the rise of commercial genetic technologies and the subsequent creation of the genetics consumer. Next, I will explore Sandra Soo-Jin Lee's distinction between recreation and re-creation as a way to conceptualize play as a theoretical framework engaged by the casual genetics user. I will use this understanding of play to consider the appeal personal genetic technologies may hold for the individual Korean

adoptee genetics user. Lastly, I will explore the specific intersection between consumer-based genetic tests and the Korean adoptee community by materially examining how these technologies have been broadly taken up in these spaces. This discussion aims to act as a foundation for a close examination of *23andMe*, a well-known genetic testing company popularly utilized within the Korean adoptee community.

Direct-to-consumer (DTC) genetic testing arrived on the consumer market in the years following the decoding of the human genome in 2002, an attempt to commodify DNA analysis and capitalize on the wishes and imaginaries of the wider public.[8] This particular process of test and analysis creates a direct relationship between the company and the customer, generating personalized reports and addressing desires to both "know" the past and anticipate the future.[9] Although genetic testing for "disease, ancestry, drug response, and behavioral traits… had been available for years," the specific rise of DTC genetic testing in the early 2000s emerged as a separate entity based on clear, affordable, and accessible avenues to engage personalized genetic information.[10] Its distinct success

[8] Alondra Nelson and Joan H. Robinson outline the early growth of DTC genetic testing companies starting with Family Tree DNA in 2000. There has been steady growth with various companies offering "health information," "'identity' testing," "ancestry" services, or a combination of all three. Nelson and Robinson note that in 2003 there were "seven DTC testing companies that broadly provided health information and close to sixty that offered some form of 'identity' testing." From there, in 2008, another report noted "more than two dozen websites… offer more than 50 health-related tests to consumers." And then, by 2010, "there were 38 companies selling a wide variety of DNA ancestry products, packages, and services." Nelson, Alondra and Joan H. Robinson. "The Social Life of DTC Genetics: The Case of 23andMe." *Routledge Handbook of Science, Technology, and Society*, edited by Daniel Lee Kleinman and Kelly Moore, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014, pp. 108-123. 112.

[9] DTC genetics companies propose to provide a number of services, including ancestry predictions, health predispositions, and genetic relationship connections. Yet, it is up to the individual to decide how to engage.

and popularity can be best understood by placing its growth in a larger social context that includes factors such as the democratization of scientific knowledge, the importance of ancestry in American culture, the development of molecular biology, and the open process of institutionalization and industry formation.

Materially, DTC DNA tests work by direct analysis of an individual's biological sample. That is, consumers choose a genetic testing company that will best serve their needs, submit DNA, and receive results. The sample is then analyzed by identifying genetic markers and determining that individual's "likelihood of originating from specific geographic locations and/or populations."[11] The two primary analytical methodologies are the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) test and the Y-chromosome test.[12] However, it is important to note that the utilization of either mtDNA and/or Y-chromosome methodologies across different companies does not necessarily warrant the same results. Each company applies its own algorithm to ground its analysis, establish its reports, and ultimately present its findings as a singular determination to its customers. The differences between results are what propel prospective customers to choose one

[10] Lee, Sandra Soo-Jin. "Race, Risk, and Recreation in Personal Genomics: The Limits of Play," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, vol. 27, no.4, 2013, pp. 550-569. 550.

[11] Lee, 551.

[12] Bolnick et. al. note that the mtDNA test "sequence[s] the hyper variable region of the maternally inherited mitochondrial genome," the Y-chromosome test instead "analyze[s] short tandem repeats and/or single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in the paternally inherited Y chromosome." Bolnick, D. A., D. Fullwiley, T. Duster, R. S. Cooper, J. H. Fujimura, J. Kahn, J. S. Kaufman et al. "The Science and Business of Genetic Ancestry Testing." *Science*, vol. 318, 2007, pp. 399–400. 399.

company over another, an attempt to address desires that Alondra Nelson describes as "genealogical aspirations."[13]

Yet, deciding between multiple DTC DNA test options is not always an easy task. The breadth of available commercial tests and their associated array of offerings is continually shifting. Therefore, the most useful way to categorize these differences may be "according to the type of information each imparts and thus, the social meaning or action it enables on the part of the consumer."[14] This analytical framework shifts the focus onto the practice and applicability of each DTC DNA test rather than attempting to parse out dense or fluctuating analytical details. For example, Nelson and Robinson propose that ancestry-based testing can be placed into three main categories: ethnic lineage, spatio-temporal, and ratio-ethnic composite testing. Each of these forms determines its results by inference, positioning the user's submitted sample against a company's reference database.[15] Importantly, this point highlights one of the prominent limitations of DTC DNA testing— the consumer is constrained by the database(s) to which they submit. More specifically, "the test-taker's haplotype (set of linked alleles) is determined and compared with haplotypes from other sampled individuals. These comparisons can identify related individuals who share a common maternal or paternal ancestor, as well as locations where the test-taker's haplotype is found today… but it is

[13] Nelson and Robinson, 112-113.

[14] Nelson and Robinson, 112.

[15] Nelson and Robinson go into greater detail about the technical processes of these three categories of DTC genetic ancestry testing, including what type of meaning the results may offer for consumers. 113.

unlikely to identify all of them. Such inferences depend on the samples in a company's database."[16] The limitations engendered by DTC genetic testing, therefore, result from both the methodological choices that determine the analytical process and the structural constraints of the proprietary database. The categorization framework offered above by Nelson and Robinson is pertinent beyond just ancestry results. Suggestions regarding medical predispositions and genetic relatives are similarly constrained by boundaries made relevant and meaningful by the company.

To broaden an understanding of the particular emergence of DTC genetic technologies, and their relationship with/in the public, I will briefly situate their growth in the context of larger processes of institutionalization and deregulation.[17] Foregrounding these systems not only allows for a clearer understanding of how commercial genetic tests have gained popularity, but also greater insight into how they can be understood as organized through frameworks of flexibility, openness, and mutability. Nelson and Robinson discuss this relevant context by examining the growth of DTC genetic testing in relation to the development of the pharmaceutical market, in particular, by suggesting the influence of the latter on the growth of the former. Yet more importantly, this comparison works to differentiate the institutional specificities that contribute to the success of commercial DNA testing, including its shifting boundaries and limited regulation.[18] These components crucially characterize the broad development of the

[16] Bolnick et al., 399.

[17] Nelson and Robinson, 108.

[18] Nelson and Robinson utilize this comparison to not only help understand the institutionalization

commercial genetics industry and the consequent structure it builds in order to direct user understanding and engagement.

The DTC DNA industry was first introduced and directed by "businesspersons, investors, and scientists" who "went mostly uninterrogated by outside reviewers or other types of checks and balances and received scant governmental regulation and ethical oversight."[19] Thus, commercial DNA tests were made widely available to the public before any large-scale efforts to normalize, monitor, or regulate the process. There are two significant outcomes that follow from this course of events: the classification of DTC DNA testing is one that "remains in formation" and the set of regulatory boundaries that dictate the process continue to be "actively under negotiation."[20] I draw attention to these points in attempt to introduce a discussion of the material impact that this industry has on the genetics consumer, a conversation that will continue into the next chapter. On the first point, the shifting classificatory schemes that loosely outline DTC DNA testing challenge a stable or consistent understanding of what the test and its subsequent services mean. For instance, various commercial genetics entities maintain that they offer valid and reliable information regarding ancestry, medical predispositions, and genetic relative

process, but to also demonstrate how the practice of advertising over-the-counter and prescription pharmaceuticals "both anticipated and precipitated the rise of DTC genetics." Nelson and Robinson, 108-109.

[19] Nelson and Robinson, 109.

[20] Nelson and Robinson propose that the specific case of DTC DNA testing is a prime opportunity to study the shifting process between institutionalization and test evolution. This "regulatory lag" may have multiple effects, including: industry insiders directing the process and/or outcome regulation, resistance against institutionalization by DTC companies who instead seek to set their own boundaries, or opposition against regulations and surveillance altogether. 109.

connections. Yet, each operates through its own analytic process and proprietary database, which can lead to confusing or outright conflicting information if multiple DTC DNA companies are utilized. In most cases, customers are also left to interpret results on their own. This flexibility may be constructed as a primary draw, but it also leaves open the possibility for ambiguity, uncertainty, and inaccuracy. On the second point, fluctuating regulatory boundaries highlight the reality of an equally fluctuating user experience. As requirements are adjusted or reorganized to fit new guidelines, there is an opportunity for these actors— individuals or DTC DNA companies themselves— to "set the terms of their own surveillance" by creating their own "boundaries and norms."[21] I foreground this ongoing process of DTC genetics institutionalization not just as an attempt to understand the rise of these DNA technologies, but to also focus on the unique intersection with transnational, transracial Korean adoption. For Korean adoptees, the concept of a process of institutionalization actively "in formation" is not new. The earliest cases of these transnational movements occurred prior to institutionalization, and the messy process that followed is partly responsible for the current state of unreliable, erroneous, or missing personal information. Thus, what does it mean for Korean adoptees to seek to rectify the messiness of one process of institutionalization with another? This is a question I will further explore in the next chapter.

The last important contextual point is to situate DNA technologies within a larger movement toward the democratization of science and scientific knowledge and the increased accessibility and affordability of personal genetic information. More

[21] For more information, see Nelson and Robinson, 109, 112.

specifically, Sandra Soo-Jin Lee discusses the growth of commercial genetics companies as a particular "capitalization on a cultural shift in attitudes on who can own and access genetic information."[22] This cultural shift is also one of power, away from the specialized training of the medical professional and toward the open experience of the individual user. By "rejecting professional gatekeeping, direct-to-consumer (DTC) personal genetic testing does away from treating individuals as patients to cultivating them as a new brand of *genomics consumer*."[23] This new type of consumer creates a sort of circular, self-perpetuating system. Genetics services are constructed to meet customer interests. Consumer expectations are influenced by existent structures and ideologies. Genetics services are then adjusted or reimagined to be competitively appealing, affordable, accessible, reliable, and engaging. Although companies may outwardly position themselves as neutral parties, it is important to name them for what they are—businesses that prioritize profit. While "it is unlikely that companies (and the associated scientists) deliberately choose to mislead consumers or misrepresent science… market pressures can lead to conflicts of interest, and data may be interpreted differently when financial incentives exist."[24] By clearly foregrounding the private genomics company as a business, there is an opportunity to critically explore the potential benefits and limitations of its ongoing service.

[22] Lee, 550.

[23] Lee, 550.

[24] Bolnick et. al., 400.

Before this chapter moves into a focused analysis of *23andMe*, it will discuss how play is a function and foundation of DTC DNA tests that works to direct and manage the user experience. This theoretical framework suggests that choice, exploration, and enjoyment are linked components of company and customer engagement. Sandra Soo-Jin Lee writes, "the double entendre of *recreation* and *re-creation* paradoxically suggest the potentiality for both passive revelation and the power to re-act, and re-create oneself in light of a different, more enlightened future."[25] These commercial genetic technologies position self-knowledge as a terrain to be both discovered and created, already a part of us, yet also open to selective interpretation. The selective nature occurs on both the structural level and on the individual level. Implicitly, DTC DNA companies decide how to analyze and present raw data, managing the way individual consumers understand their information. The self that can be known and created is one already pre-determined by what the company has deemed important. Individually, then, consumers selectively act and decide which of these services to use and how to place meaning in them. Such flexibility becomes an opportunity to play with different factors of identity and kinship. At the far end of this "user-directed" selectivity is the option to participate in research initiatives, and thus give the company access to personal genetic data. The *23andMe* Research branch invites each customer to "make a difference" by consenting to include their genetic data in research studies that will "help drive scientific discoveries" on ancestry, traits, and disease.[26] Individuals are called to directly engage in scientific study

[25] Lee, 551.

[26] "Becoming Part of Something Bigger." *23andMe*. www.23andme.com/research/. Accessed 27

right from their own homes. Yet, while this similarly bridges knowledge gaps and allows users to decide if, and how, they want to share their information, it also highlights how such "self-knowledge" is selectively filtered. Although *23andMe* seems to promise equal and free community data-sharing with the benevolent goal of scientific progress, it does not openly advertise how its research is linked to its own partnerships with large pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies.[27] While the full effects of this remain to be seen, such power relations echo the instability and unreliability of access to information that some adoptees have already been a part.

Although the path toward self-knowledge becomes one of deliberate choosing and active building, it is also one in which the role of the company is often overlooked. Lee elaborates, "companies must deliver on both the expectation of specificity and precision that fractional identity offers but also be sufficiently flexible to allow individuals to play with their facts and 'recreate' in new knowledge."[28] This flexibility is both confirmative *and* open to interpretation. It verifies beliefs about identity while simultaneously leaving room for new or alternative identities to emerge. The onus is placed on each individual consumer to decide how to interpret the results they receive. The move toward self-knowledge is also inherently an indication of the fluidity of self-definition. As Judith Roof argues, what these DTC companies are really selling is "knowledge, or at least an

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Sept. 2018.

[27] See Molteni, Megan. "23andme's Pharma Deals Have Been the Plan All Along." *Wired*, www.wired.com/story/23andme-glaxosmithkline-pharma-deal/. Accessed 19 May 2022.

[28] Lee, 564.

estimation that contributes to an evolving notion of identity as itself genetic."[29] This is not to say that the identity and community formations forged from DTC DNA tests are insignificant or inherently inaccurate. Rather, it is to call attention to the limitations of these results and the subtle tension between the performative fluidity of kin term and relationship and its ultimate reliance on biology-based notions of relationality.

In practice, Korean adoptees utilize a variety of the DTC genetic tests available to them on the market. Depending on personal goals, desired information, and financial restrictions, they may either choose to purchase just one test or may instead elect to take multiple. This chapter will focus solely on *23andMe*, however, it is prudent to note that other popular tests in the Korean adoption community include Family Tree DNA, Ancestry, WeGene, and MyHeritage.[30] Each of these companies maintains its own proprietary database, offers its own slate of services, and cultivates a particular presence through marketing strategies.[31] Significantly, Koreans adoptees are not the only individuals utilizing DNA to explore and make claims about identity and kinship. Alondra Nelson and Kim Tallbear examine similar concerns in African American and

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[29] Roof, 199.

[30] The companies in this list have been identified by 325Kamra, a non-profit organization that provides DNA testing services to the Korean adoption community and aims to help reunite Korean adoptees with birth families when possible. "Current DNA companies and resources." *325Kamra*. PDF.

[31] As of October 2020, the comparative size of each database are as follows, 23andMe: over 12 million customers; Ancestry: over 18 million customers; FT DNA: over 1 million customers (noted as of July 2019); MyHeritage: database size is unclear. "About Us." *23andMe*. https://mediacenter.23andme.com/company-2/about-us/. Accessed 1 Oct. 2020.; "About AncestryDNA." *Ancestry*. https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/About-AncestryDNA. Accessed 1 Oct. 2020.; "Why Choose FamilyTreeDNA." *FamilyTreeDNA*. https://www.familytreedna.com/why-ftdna. Accessed 1 Oct. 2020.

indigenous communities, respectively, in the United States. Nelson focuses on the variety of social meanings inhabited by DNA by examining its use in collective efforts for reparations from the ruptures wrought from transatlantic slavery.[32] Tallbear similarly considers the presence and power of DNA in relation to indigenous sovereignty and identity.[33] She explores the way Native American DNA has been positioned in multiple ways—as scientific object and as racial or panethnic category—to serve purposes of genetics researchers, consumers, and for-profit companies.[34] This chapter engages these conversations around the social, political, and affective impact of DNA and scientific technologies as a foundation to investigate the function of DNA in repairing or addressing previously denied (or inaccessible, unattainable, tenuous, fluid) histories and/or identities.

23andMe

This chapter primarily focuses on *23andMe* because of its wide use in the Korean adoption community, its intuitive user-friendly interface, and clear definitions of technology, structure, and terms. A private company founded in 2006 by Anne Wojcicki, Linda Avey, and Paul Cusenza, *23andMe* narrates itself as a company that aims to "help individuals understand their own genetic information using recent advances in DNA analysis technologies and web-based interactive tools."[35] The name of the company is a

[32] Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2016.

[33] TallBear, 11.

[34] TallBear, 2-7.

reference to the unique set of 23 chromosomes that comprise each individual's genome; a playful construction that succinctly demonstrates how the company strives to make the science of the human genome a personal experience. In fact, *23andMe*'s registered trademark slogan reads, "Welcome to you."[36] Boldly situated on the front of each test kit, this phrase functions as an invitation, a promise, and an ideological framework. As each consumer is called to reevaluate personal identity through the forthcoming DNA analysis, they are effectively prompted to embrace the results as a set of new truths. The "you" offered up by *23andMe* already exists—has always already existed— yet is positioned as inaccessible and unknowable until now. This bid is central to commercial efforts to sell test kits as tools to increase knowledge, genetic translations that promise truth and connection.

23andMe has been at the forefront of the personal genetics industry, practicing a direct-to-consumer (DTC) DNA test model that has worked to democratize and personalize genetic information.[37] Together, the test mechanics, user platform, and company discourse of *23andMe* work toward building a private institutional database that is established through user-submitted DNA samples. The company currently boasts service to 12 million customers and includes three billion phenotypic datapoints. Through this growing collection of information, consumers are led to learn about themselves and

[35] "About Us." *23andMe*. https:www.mediacenter.23andme.com/. Accessed 15 March 2016.

[36] "About Us." *23andMe*. https://www.23andme.com/about. Accessed 16 Dec. 2020.

[37] Lee, 550-551.

forge new connections with other users.[38] This is an archive that is at once limiting, yet limitless. Bound, but malleable. Complete, yet always ready to change and be changed. Driven by the desire to increase profit and maintain company success, it necessitates continual growth by wielding individual desires to draw interest and direct consumer profiles. To serve these ends, I contend that *23andMe* builds its private database to be(come) open, mutable, and future-oriented, ultimately offering ongoing "solutions" for Korean adoptees seeking reliable personal information. This approach is framed by the company's general marketing messaging on its website and further supported through the targeted blog posts and promotional materials that detail adoptee success stories and the suggested affective or informational benefits. The user platform then functions to deepen these investments through the structured opportunities they provide to explore new knowledge and connections. This discussion of *23andMe* is neither an endorsement nor a defense of the company and its DNA analysis. Rather, it is an attempt to critically examine the possibilities and limitations that *23andMe* creates for Korean adoptees to engage absences and unknowns related to their personal histories and the simultaneous ability to decisively drive their own interpretation of results. In contrast to formal adoption paperwork, this is a significant shift in the dynamics between Korean adoptees and their personal histories because of the ability to decide what information to explore, emphasize, and enjoy.

[38] "Company: About Us." *23andMe*. https://mediacenter.23andme.com/company/about-us/. Accessed 16 Dec. 2020.

What does *23andMe*, its genetic analysis, and its personalized reports seem to open up for Korean adoptees that was previously closed, inaccessible, and unknown? How does it then articulate these services both to potential and to current consumers? I will explore these questions by first conducting a discursive analysis of the *23andMe* company website. This includes a discussion of the marketing language utilized on the front page, official, adoption-specific company approved blog posts, and a selection of frequently asked questions and help articles. I will then explore the tangible functioning of *23andMe* through user analysis of its test kit, reports, and customer platform to better understand how openness, possibility, and play are integrated into the experience.

Promoting itself as an established DNA analysis company, *23andMe* highlights the evolving and expansive way that genetics have been communicated to mass society. Marketed as both scientific technology and social networking platform, it attempts to "link you to your genetic data," and to "help you connect to and create communities around existing common interests and newfound affinities."[39] The company highlights its multiple offerings through a prominent quote from CEO Anne Wojcicki on the 'About Us' page. "We're not just a genetics company. We're not just a health company; we're not just ancestry; we're all of these things. **We want to tell you about you."**[40] Here, *23andMe* not only establishes itself as the provider of credible health and ancestry information, but it also positions itself as an authority through its singular role in deciphering how and why this information constitutes you. Clearly, the company knows

[39] "About Us." *23andMe*. https://www.23andme.com/about. Accessed 15 March 2016.

[40] "About Us." *23andMe*. https://www.23andme.com/about. Accessed 6 Jan. 2021.

you better than yourself and will deem to share such integral information if you will only choose to pay for it.

This authority is further maintained when scrolling through the front page of the *23andMe* website as brief, descriptive snapshots highlight the company's services. Individual sections outline the features related to health, ancestry, and traits, filling up the entirety of the screen and outlining the information you can access if you purchase the test. Each headline underscores the company's commitment to its own power as expert and its simultaneous promise of openness. This includes phrases such as, "Health Features: Know your genes. Own your health.," "Ancestry Features: Know your personal story, in a whole new way.," and "Traits Features: Know what makes you, you. Explore your traits."[41] As each title juxtaposes knowledge and exploration, *23andMe* positions itself as a reliable source that invites the consumer to first learn presumably new information and then determine what that information will mean for them. Customers reflect on these calls by directly comparing services in order to choose the tier that best suits their needs. At the time of writing, the three tiers include: Ancestry + Traits, Health + Ancestry, and VIP Health + Ancestry. Although the test itself and its subsequent analysis remains consistent across all three, the provided reports differ as the price increases. The baseline $99 ancestry service strictly provides information on ancestry and "DNA relatives," while the upgraded $199 ancestry and health service includes additional reports on genetic factors related to health and wellness. The most expensive $499 VIP kit promises faster shipping and processing times along with additional customer support.

[41] *23andme*. https://www.23andme.com/. Accessed 6 Jan. 2021.

The framing of these three tiers reiterates the entire DNA analysis process as an exploratory journey as its messaging states, "Three paths. One destination. You."[42] However, this difference is, in fact, manufactured. The effect of such language creates the illusion of openness, flexibility, and choice, factors that are pointedly produced by the company.

As the user scrolls down past the tier comparisons on the front page of the *23andMe* website, there are two final sections on Privacy and Research. These are not presented as primary features of taking the test, yet they are an essential component of the company's directives and inherently linked both to its role as knowledge producer and to its role in creating a participatory culture of exchange.[43] That is, *23andMe* facilitates relationships based in mutuality, both between its customers and also between customers and itself. Harris, Wyatt, and Kelly describe this as "new forms of network sociality… between known and previously unknown individuals."[44] I will explore tangible examples of this further in Chapter 3 through a discussion on the community archive, but for now it is important to acknowledge that this framework supports consumer participation in building the private company archive. In part, *23andMe* accomplishes this by promoting its DNA Relative feature and associating the new connections made possible through its

[42] *23andme*. https://www.23andme.com/. Accessed 28 Dec. 2020.

[43] Harris, Wyatt, and Kelly discuss 23andMe research participation as a form of gift exchange that ultimately grants the greatest financial benefit on the company. Harris, Anna, Sally Wyatt, and Susan E. Kelly. "The Gift of Spit (And the Obligation to Return It)." *Information, Communication & Society*. Vol. 16, No. 2, March 2013, pp. 236-257. 243.

[44] Harris, Wyatt, and Kelly, 243.

technology with a theoretical framework of possibility. For example, the detailed description of this feature states "Find your people. Open your World. Discover people who share your DNA. From close family members to distant ones, you'll be amazed by the way your DNA Relatives connect you to the world."[45] This relational framework offered by *23andMe* constructs the idea that shared DNA between two people is synonymous with family. The act of finding these new relations is an exploratory quest, but with certain potential for a wider experience of the world. The open dynamic of this social structure is an important component of facilitating connections through the service.

The *23andMe* blog exists in conversation with the larger social aspect of the company and provides another clear view of the language used to frame openness, exploration, and certainty. It contains a number of categories that correspond to thematic areas of interest, including Ancestry, Health and Traits, News, Research, and Consumer Stories. It is in the last of these categories that *23andMe* utilizes to highlight the most interesting or meaningful impact of its reports for some of its customers. Importantly, the blog includes specific tags for stories related to adoption and adoptees, a collection that currently totals 57 posts. The first of these went up in April 2008, with the general title, "Adoption and 23andMe: Filling Gaps in Your Family Tree." Though the post does not promise certainty or an ability to locate family, it does suggest that it will give adoptees a "glimpse into [their] genetic legacy" and "a few hints at some of [their biological parent's] traits."[46] Thus, we see *23andMe* acknowledge the gaps in knowledge that may

[45] "Ancestry + Traits Service." *23andMe*. https://www.23andme.com/dna-ancestry. Accessed 26 Jan. 2021.

exist for adoptees and then simultaneously offer to address them using DNA analysis, offering glimpses and hints of what was lost. This post remained the sole adoption-tagged entry in the blog until 2012, when another post titled, "Finding Family Redux," went up. From here, the number of adoption-related posts increased and included titles such as, "Solving Ancestry Mystery," "Connecting with the Past," "An Unexpected Discovery," "Searching for Her Roots," and "Putting It Together."[47] The emphasis on exploration and revelation suggest the potential, tangible emotional rewards offered by genetic analysis. It is through this language that DNA, and by affiliation *23andMe*, becomes the "missing link" that allows adoptees to find new connections and learn new information.

The majority of these stories, however, focus on individuals impacted by domestic adoption in the United States. It was not until 2015 that a blog post mentions Korean adoption. Yet, from this point forward there are a number of focused entries that highlight transnational adoption, including titles like "Connecting with Family Across Borders" and "Adopted Separately in China, Cousins Wind Up Almost Next Door."[48] These posts directly acknowledge the diverse communities of people using *23andMe,* and simultaneously work to demonstrate the company's success at forging new connections. On July 31, 2019, a post titled "Seoul Sisters and Brothers" was published on the site, revealing a particular self-awareness of the Korean adoptee community and the ways it

[46] "Adoption and 23andme: Filling Gaps in Your Family Tree." *23andMe*. https://blog.23andme.com/ancestry-reports/adoption-and-23andme-filling-gaps-in-your-family-tree/. Accessed 14 Jan. 2021.

[47] "Adoption." *23andMe*. https://blog.23andme.com/tag/adoption/. Accessed 14 Jan. 2021.

[48] "Adoption," *23andMe*. https://blog.23andme.com/tag/adoption/. Accessed 14 Jan. 2021.

has incorporated *23andMe* reports as tools of knowledge production. The piece begins by highlighting the reunion between two Korean adoptee half-sisters, Leslie and Tamara, who unexpectedly connected through the results of the test. Their relationship forms the heart of the post, exhibiting the normalization of Korean adoption and its cruel effects. For Leslie and Tamara, transnational adoption is framed as a necessary act due to the poverty of their Korean family and the social stigma of being mixed race children following the Korean War. The post goes on to outline a brief history of Korean transnational adoption and Holt International in order to connect to the present, noting how "a wave of orphaned and mixed-race Korean children adopted after the Korean War by American families… have turned to DNA testing… to learn more about their cultural roots, and in some cases connect with biological family."[49] The piece acknowledges the importance of "cultural and family connections" for Korean transnational adoptees by referencing the limitations of adoption agencies in understanding the post-adoption experience and the relatively recent efforts by Korean adoption agencies and community organizations to increase available cultural, language, and travel resources.[50] This discourse exists in conversation with the current moment and it is reflective of the Korean adoptee art, literature, and organizing efforts that have emerged in the last 25 years to complicate and critique the system of transnational and transracial adoption. *23andMe* benefits from these frameworks because it highlights its own ancestry, health, and DNA

[49] "Seoul Sisters and Brothers." *23andMe*. https://blog.23andme.com/23andme-customer-stories/seoul-sisters-and-brothers/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

[50] "Seoul Sisters and Brothers." *23andMe*. https://blog.23andme.com/23andme-customer-stories/seoul-sisters-and-brothers/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

relative reports as direct counters to the limitations of other information gathering methods like official adoption files and paperwork. The company makes sure its customers know of its essential service. “Frequently because of the nature of some of these early adoptions or the lack of clear paper record, DNA is the only option for learning more.”[51] Here, DNA analysis is positioned as the last resort to find “truth” and the sole method that can rectify the absences of the past. Following this assertion, the piece goes on to highlight four more Korean adoptee success stories. It lists out three pairs of siblings who used the company to discover their connection, and one pair who used the company to confirm their biological relation.

Overall, “Seoul Sisters and Brothers” offers a framework to understand the specific relationship between company discourse and transnational Korean adoption as *23andMe* places itself into a position to offer direct answers to missing information and the possibility of more in the future. That is, the company presents its consumers with the potential to gain knowledge and connection through DNA analysis and its continual unfolding of new information. The blog post displays the language and tangible evidence of several success stories, an approach that provides evidence of *23andMe*’s work and the significant affective impact of such new connections. Leslie and Tamara remark that their exchanges have been important salves in developing healthy relationships to their identities as mixed-race adoptees. Two direct quotes, one from Leslie and one from Tamara, are placed one after another. Leslie explains, “I looked at Tamara and felt like I

[51] “Seoul Sisters and Brothers.” *23andMe*. https://blog.23andme.com/23andme-customer-stories/seoul-sisters-and-brothers/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

was staring at my mother."[52] And then, "Leslie has given me a sense of identity… as an orphan you don't always know why you are the way you are, why you think the way you do. Now I understand myself better."[53] Although Leslie and Tamara clearly must put in the work to build their relationship, there is also an implication that their biological and genetic connection provides comfort and relief not found elsewhere. They give each other a better sense of self, but it is *23andMe* that provides this opportunity in the first place. Tamara summarizes, "Generations of people have been brought together as a result of these DNA tests, and all of our lives have been enriched."[54] This generational healing is only available through the DNA analysis offered by *23andMe*, and the open structure it offers its users to direct their own journey.

This blog post exists in relation to a broader company discourse that specifically addresses its adoptee customers. For example, in the Customer Support page of the 23andMe website, there is a section titled "Before You Buy," which includes lists of articles and frequently asked questions that users can explore and read to learn more information before purchasing a kit.[55] One of the lists is named "What You Can Learn," and includes a series of pages with descriptions of the types of information consumers

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[52] "Seoul Sisters and Brothers." *23andMe*. https://blog.23andme.com/23andme-customer-stories/seoul-sisters-and-brothers/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

[53] "Seoul Sisters and Brothers." *23andMe*. https://blog.23andme.com/23andme-customer-stories/seoul-sisters-and-brothers/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

[54] "Seoul Sisters and Brothers." *23andMe*. https://blog.23andme.com/23andme-customer-stories/seoul-sisters-and-brothers/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

[55] "Before You Buy." *23andMe*. https://customercare.23andme.com/hc/en-us/categories/201639628-Before-You-Buy. Accessed 19 Jan. 2021.

can expect to find in their DNA analysis reports. Along with articles that expand on the contents of the health and ancestry reports, this information section also seems to include questions from specific individuals that may be more likely or interested to seek DNA analysis. For example, articles such as "Can 23andMe Identify Native American Ancestry?" and "Can 23andMe Identify Jewish Ancestry?" are both directed toward particular identity categories.[56] Here there is also a page titled "What Can 23andMe Do For Me If I'm Adopted?," which offers details on what the company may offer for adoptees.[57] This includes three specific sections that discuss whether or not adoptees may be able to find biological family, and how they might use information from available ancestry, health, and traits reports. Importantly, this article directly states that *23andMe* is not a service created to find biological family. However, it does include information about their DNA Relatives feature, a resource that customers can decide to opt-in to in order to compare their DNA to other participating *23andMe* users. The company notes, "these shared segments indicate that two people are related through a common ancestry… You can be confident that the matches listed in DNA Relatives are your relatives, even though they may be quite distantly related to you."[58] It makes sense that *23andMe* would set realistic expectations by clearly indicating that their test service is not designed as a

[56] "What You Can Learn." *23andMe*. https://customercare.23andme.com/hc/en-us/sections/200565460-What-You-Can-Learn. Accessed 19 Jan. 2021.

[57] "What Can 23andme Do For Me If I'm Adopted?" *23andMe*. https://customercare.23andme.com/hc/en-us/articles/202908010-What-Can-23andMe-Do-for-Me-if-I-Am-Adopted-. Accessed 19 Jan. 2021.

[58] "What Can 23andme Do For Me If I'm Adopted?" *23andMe*. https://customercare.23andme.com/hc/en-us/articles/202908010-What-Can-23andMe-Do-for-Me-if-I-Am-Adopted-. Accessed 20 Jan. 2021.

primary tool of birth family search. These close types of DNA matches are dependent on the users contained within its database, which is restricted by both those who choose to take the test and those must also be open to connecting with others through the service. This framing suggests that the "Seoul Sisters and Brothers" reunion stories may be the exception, but not the rule.

In tempering expectations for discovering close kin relationships through DNA analysis, *23andMe* instead offers its DNA Relatives feature as a more reliable method for connecting with others. The "What Can 23andMe Do For Me If I'm Adopted?" article works to assure their customers that the potential matches they make through their DNA analysis are, in fact, relatives even if there is considerable distance between the relationships. The piece does not, however, specify what such distance means. The text does not include a direct link or detailed explanation of how *23andMe* thinks about the term relative, so readers are either left to their own frameworks and assumptions, or they must take the initiative to seek out the company definition by navigating a confusing network of informational pages. I found greater explanation in another section of the Customer Support page, a sub article titled "DNA Relatives: Detecting Relatives And Predicting Relationships," placed under the Tools: DNA Relatives list. Here, *23andMe* describes their definition of relative as, "strictly speaking, two individuals are relatives if they have a common ancestor. Therefore, all humans are relatives by definition. However, in practice, the word *relative* is restricted to individuals who share recent ancestors… When we say *relative*, we are referring to individuals who have recent ancestors, and when we say that two individuals are unrelated in this help article, we

mean that their common ancestor is 9 or more generations back."[59] *23andMe*'s determination that relatives are those who share recent, common ancestors that are eight or less generations back indicates an expansive and sweeping definition. Although this creates opportunities for its users to connect with a wide array of people, it is likely also broader than commonly held definitions.

In effect, *23andMe* demonstrates its commitment to ideological and relational frameworks that are based in openness and mutability. By its own definition, it keeps the threshold of "relative" fairly open, which in practice allows the company to connect people who may only share small segments of DNA. In fact, the DNA Relative feature links users as relatives all the way up to the "fifth cousin."[60] It is up to the individual consumer to seek out and decode the meanings of these distant DNA relatives, and then decide how to engage them as the capaciousness between relative and stranger is left open. In another help article, *23andMe* summarizes that "for more distant cousin matches, the predicted relationship should be treated as a best guess… Matches are labeled as 'distant cousins' when the degree of relationship is difficult to estimate, due to the small amount of DNA shared."[61] Thus, the consumer is advised to "be confident" that

[59] "DNA Relatives: Detecting Relatives And Predicting Relationships." *23andMe*. https://customercare.23andme.com/hc/en-us/articles/212170958-DNA-Relatives-Detecting-Relatives-and-Predicting-Relationships. Accessed 20 Jan. 2021.

[60] "DNA Relatives: Detecting Relatives And Predicting Relationships." *23andMe*. https://customercare.23andme.com/hc/en-us/articles/212170958-DNA-Relatives-Detecting-Relatives-and-Predicting-Relationships. Accessed 20 Jan. 2021.

[61] "Relationship Ranges And The Predicted Relationship." *23andMe*. https://customercare.23andme.com/hc/en-us/articles/212861177-Relationship-Ranges-and-the-Predicted-Relationship. Accessed 20 Jan. 2021.

listed DNA Relatives are actually relatives, while simultaneously understanding that the company definition may be so wide that the term is meaningless. It is easy to understand how this confusing framework structures and encourages new, broad, and open connections. This is especially true for some Korean adoptees who have not had reliable access to personal information or biological family relationships. For them, even distant cousins can hold significance and promise. In the next chapter, I will further explore how these defined "distant cousin" relationships are practically taken up by Korean adoptee users. These significant, open, and future-oriented connections are supported by the growing private database. As an intended goal of the company, this database exists in a state of continual possibility because new connections always loom on the horizon. Yet, for now, it is helpful to establish that *23andMe* sets itself up as a tool that can provide relations and solutions through its analysis.

I will now shift into a discussion of the *23andMe* test mechanics and user platform to explore how the company establishes its opportunities for new knowledge and connection, and how these connections are framed through the ways that customers engage with their own results and information. I will then consider what *23andMe* and its genetic analysis may open for Korean adoptees that was once closed or inaccessible. This discussion aims to situate the user experience with *23andMe*'s platform in relation to its discursive framework in order to understand how openness and mutability are structurally encouraged through the website interface. This discussion also attempts to complicate the practical use of *23andMe* to explore the possibilities and limitations it offers to the Korean adoptee community.

As mentioned above, *23andMe* practices a direct-to-consumer (DTC) model that allows customers to buy tests online and complete them within the privacy of their own home. After receiving the *23andMe* kit in the mail, customers unpack the box to access their saliva collection tube with unique barcode, specimen bag, and detailed instructions to complete their test. Customers are then prompted to register their kit online, fill the small vial with saliva, seal it, release the chemical stabilizer, and send their sample back utilizing the included prepaid postage and original box. After six to eight weeks, users receive notice that their results are ready at which point they can log on to the website to view their reports. As summarized on the *23andMe* website, this three-step process is narrated as "order," "spit," and "discover," a description that stresses an ease and simplicity that is meant to give consumers a more intimate and personal relationship to their information.[62] By directly collecting their own samples, customers become active participants in their own process, setting an emotional and practical tone for how to engage with the company. They are then prompted to "decode" the meaning of their DNA through the provided genetic analysis reports by determining what information is important and how they want to engage it. As much as cultural understandings of DNA attempt to define the individual, *23andMe* reports endeavor to remain open enough to allow participants to playfully engage with the results. The flexibility of categories like "Ancestry," "Health," and "DNA Relatives" give individual adopted Koreans more freedom to decide how to use their reports to address and engage personal adoption

[62] "How It Works." *23andMe*. www.23andme.com/howitworks/. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

histories. Furthermore, the contents of each of these areas invites choice, playfulness, and exploration through structured engagement with the user platform.

Although there is certainly important work and necessary analysis of the "Ancestry" and "Health" report sections that needs to be done, I will instead focus here on the "DNA Relatives" feature because of its central importance in understanding Korean adoptee cousin relationships and the "KAD cousin." Customers can access this section after logging into their personal account and finding the "Family & Friends" list on the menu bar at the top of the page. Here, individuals see a personalized list of genetic connections, including options to view their Family Tree and DNA Relative List. In addition, there are several available analytical tools such as the ability to compare DNA with relatives connected through the site and a "Grandtree" that allows users to trace DNA shared between grandparents and grandchildren.[63] The DNA Relative List allows customers to see all connections that the company deems as relative, and subsequently directs individuals to "get started with your predicted relationships, then connect and message to learn more."[64] Yet, this list can be confusing and unwieldy. At the time of writing, I have over 500 DNA Relatives, an overwhelming number that feels difficult to navigate due to its breadth and complexity. The vastness of this list directly demonstrates the multiplicity of "truth" offered by commercial genetic companies. Distant genetic relatives are contingent, only made to have meaning through play and individual choice,

[63] "Family & Friends." *23andMe*. https://you.23andme.com/tools/. Accessed 22 Jan. 2021.

[64] This phrase is an instruction on my personal DNA Relative page. *23andMe*. https://you.23andme.com/family/relatives/ Accessed 27 Jan. 2021.

rather than a pre-determined or prescriptive fact. The organizing practice used to structure the DNA Relative feature further brings *23andMe*'s openness, mutability, and orientation toward the future into clear view. With little direction, individuals are prompted to explore their connections and self-determine who and how to engage. The website interface does also allow for various forms of filtering, including a sort feature that organizes the relative list based on strength of relationship, percent related, number of segments shared, or newest relatives. The first three filters are based on factors related to genetic closeness or distance, suggesting that primary importance is placed on facilitating connections between "close" genetic relations. The last option gestures toward the future-oriented nature of the database as it is continually grows and changes. The perpetual opportunity for new connections exists as an open-ended activity.

From the list of DNA Relatives, customers can then choose to explore any of their connections in greater depth by clicking on the specific relative's name. This opens a new page with an array of personal details such as name, location, age, sex, and date of last activity on the site. The information available here is limited based on the consent given by each individual. Following these particulars, users can then examine a shared profile that outlines that specific genetic relationship by comparing key information. For example, a breakdown of the predicted relationship between the two individuals is situated most prominently at the top of the page, followed by colorful and simple visual aids, such as suggested placement on your family tree and a figure that displays shared DNA segments. These images support *23andMe*'s effort to communicate complex and confusing information in a clear, concise, and engaging way while simultaneously

working to visualize and concretize the connection. Importantly, users are cautioned that only close relatives up to the third cousin are automatically added to their own Family Tree on the site. In *23andMe*'s words, any relationship that is believed to be more distant than that cannot be added with "high enough confidence yet."[65] However, it is possible to manually add more distantly listed DNA Relatives at any point, ultimately highlighting the primary authority and decision-making ability of the individual in crafting their own experience.

From this, *23andMe* generates a unique Family Tree, placing together those DNA Relatives regarded close enough to count. Accompanying this interactive feature is a short descriptive statement that uses the amount of shared DNA to hypothesize the relationship. For example, two people connected as third cousins "may share a set of great-great-grandparents… [or] could also be from different generations (removed cousins) or share only one ancestor (half cousins)."[66] This blurb works to ground the relationship as a tangible connection while also providing a foundational framework to help *23andMe* customers make sense of their information. Beyond these data pieces, the DNA Relative profile allows users to directly play, engage, and manage their connections to meet their own needs and desires. Specifically, each individual shapes and drives their own experience by choosing whether or not to place DNA Relatives on their personal family tree, compare ancestry, add details about family history, or send direct messages.

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[65] This informational note is a feature on my personal DNA Relative page. *23andMe*. https://you.23andme.com/family/relatives/ Accessed 27 Jan. 2021.

[66] This informational note is a feature on my personal DNA Relative page. *23andMe*. https://you.23andme.com/family/relatives/ Accessed 27 Jan. 2021.

Thus, *23andMe* situates itself as a flexible tool and mediary platform, instead of a singular determination of truth. Individuals, rather than medical professionals, actively participate in and have control over their relationship to their genetic information.

Bringing the broader theoretical and practical offerings of *23andMe* back to the specific case of the Korean adoption community, I will now consider what this form of genetic analysis may open that was once closed or inaccessible. Importantly, the company constructs an ideological framework of discovery and possibility grounded both in its characterization of the inherent, immutable truths of DNA and in its fundamental role to make sense of those truths. The appeal of this field of exploration is not necessarily based in the breadth of information (though that is certainly part of it), but rather in the pointed ability for users to engage exactly in the ways they wish. They choose which test tier best suits their needs, when to access their reports, and how they would like to manage their information. At any point, individuals can delve deeper or pull back. They also decide if they would like to reach out to DNA Relatives, and if so, who to contact, when to connect, and what to share. For Korean adoptees, this framework is an opportunity both to shift the relationship with their personal histories toward one of self-determination and to gain greater agency over their narrative.[67] Further, the seemingly reliable information categories offered by *23andMe* can be applied to address a number of old, but important, questions. Race, ethnicity, kinship—and a larger sense of belonging— all become within reach.

[67] Lee, 550.

By using science to newly forge these identities, kinships, and narratives, DNA analysis through companies like *23andMe* also becomes part of a larger movement to redefine what reconciliation or reunion means for Korean adoptees. In relation to past efforts to reconnect with birth country or birth family through adoption records and paperwork, this genetic methodology resituates reconciliation as a process of exploration. The Korean adoptee as individual becomes responsible for perceiving the gaps in their personal history, finding new information and determining the meaning attached to it, and building relational networks to serve their particular desires and needs. *23andMe* cannot necessarily promise or deliver reconnection with biological parents or close genetic relatives because it is constrained by its own database.[68] Yet, it can open up different avenues to enter into the spaces of loss and absence in order to reestablish a relationship to it.

For the Korean adoption community, the appeal of genetic technologies like *23andMe* attests not only to their increased accessibility and affordability, but also to the belief that they can provide a sense of truth or promise that previous methods lack. As we've seen through Robyn's experience in Chapter 1, this speaks both to the instability of information found in adoption files and also to the epistemological weight of scientific discourse. That is, the inherent unreliability of personal histories told through adoption

[68] The DNA Relative list is completely dependent both on those who choose to buy a 23andMe test kit and also those who consent to be publicly listed and found by other users. There have been some instances of Korean adoptees finding closer biological family members, however, this is more likely the case for mixed race adoptees who were adopted in the 50s and 60s. This is because they are more likely to have one American parent, and subsequently possible siblings, aunts, uncles, or other close relatives in the U.S.

records are presumed to be reparable through the indisputable, objective fact of science and DNA. *23andMe* works with these larger narratives around DNA, genes, and genetics to offer its customers an ideological framework based in openness, possibility, and personalized play. At the same time, it is important to be cautious when approaching the reports presented by *23andMe* because of the tendency to simplify identity into palatable and quick bites of information. Further, genes and DNA are often dominantly positioned as fixed and objective without a complex or critical analysis of the relations that make them so.[69] This generality elides important historical, social, and structural factors, some of which have produced and perpetuated the system of Korean adoption.

Private Institutional Archive

To end this discussion on DTC DNA technologies, I want to briefly touch on inherent tensions of the private institutional database. To drive corporate growth, this expanding collection of consumer-submitted data is framed by a future-oriented temporality of the "what can be." It deliberately engages the creativity of its users in order to cultivate an experience characterized by openness, mutability, and ongoing possibility. New information like health reports and genetic relative connections perpetually exist just on the horizon. The private database is an archive that continually unfolds and transforms through individuals' engagement, troubling a static relationship between (collective) past, present, and imagined future(s). As DTC DNA test results allow users to newly apprehend their personal and communal histories, they also have the potential to substantively reconceptuailize, rethink, and rewrite definitions of it

[69] TallBear, 70-71.

altogether—oftentimes with significant material, political, personal, and/or affective consequences.[70]

Yet, the private database is simultaneously contained and constrained by its capitalist origins. It requires a continual stream of new users to feed company growth and profit and then needs to maintain their participation within itself. This can impede collaborative work that seeks to address and liberate individual histories and desires. Thus, while there are very real benefits to the imaginative frameworks the database relies on to sell tests and guide consumer engagement, these frameworks are also ultimately limited by the boundaries of the company. As a proprietary entity, the database is *"*not subject to verification or refutation from other researchers or genetic testing companies who use different statistical assumptions, algorithms, or reference databases."[71] It survives by self-perpetuation and building trust, authority, and reputation with the wider public.

I introduce this tension as a way to foreground how engaging the private institutional archive can be complicated, limited, and disappointing. In the case of the Korean adoption community, this can be significant. For example, if a Korean adoptee attempts to use the DTC DNA test to connect with biological or genetic relatives, it is

[70] Such potential material effects are most apparent, for example, in Nelson's work with African American root-seekers attempts to trace specific geographic and/or ethnic origins, and in Kim TallBear's work on the commercialization of genetic technologies and indigenous governance. Nelson has been helpful in thinking about this tension as one between "historical reckoning and future orientation… driven by the desire to effect change in the present and to shape a different future." Nelson, 41.

[71] Nelson and Robinson, 111.

very possible they can "miss" someone if the other person does not submit to the same database, or if one or both individuals establish higher and more restrictive privacy settings. A wide search using these commercial technologies, therefore, requires individuals to find, purchase, and take as many tests as they can afford. How might a collective archive shift these dynamics of knowledge production and interpersonal connection? The next chapter will explore the creative methods and tangible relations that emerge through Korean adoptee digital community archive spaces.

Conclusion

On February 4, 2021, *23andMe* issued a press release announcing its decision to merge with Virgin Group's VG Acquisition Corp and become a publicly-traded company. In an email titled "23andMe Announcement," CEO and Co-Founder Anne Wojcicki shared the news with current *23andMe* customers, framing it as the next step in "transform[ing] the world of healthcare, research and therapeutic discovery by empowering individuals with genetic information."[72] The language utilized throughout the email focuses on the accomplishments that have led the company toward these goals, emphasizing its innovation and impact over the last fifteen years. Specifically, the email celebrates both the ideas and the material effects of possibility, agency, and openness made available to its individual customers through its DTC genetic test. Through this framing, Wojcicki again minimizes the company and its DNA test from active agents into passive, objective, and intermediary tools. *23andMe* is situated as a company that primarily works to benefit and serve its customers. In fact, the email goes so far as to

[72] Wojcicki, Anne. "23andMe Announcement." Received by Elizabeth Kopacz, 6 Feb. 2021.

directly address the company's concern by stating: "The most important core value at our company is 'Behind Every Data Point is a Human Being.' We make our decisions based on what is best for our customers, and we are committed to always making that our top priority."[73] *23andMe*, however, is not an impartial entity. There are concrete financial stakes in obtaining and retaining customers. These interests begin to emerge between the lines as Wojcicki gestures toward the decision to go public along with the larger goals directing prospective company growth. She writes, "we believe the future of our company is in helping customers like you, and the world, benefit from a new, more personalized and proactive approach to healthcare."[74] This statement is telling in its suggestion that *23andMe*'s vision for the future is one that moves beyond a simple, one-time genetic analysis toward an extended relationship with its customers. This broad shift is proposed as a way to reshape the entire experience of healthcare itself with ongoing, tailored health-based services. In particular, the next stage of the so-called DTC (or D2C) journey is presented as 23andMe+, a subscription-based service that will provide continuous, "personalized," and "proactive" healthcare.[75] *23andMe* joins companies like Amazon, Netflix, and Spotify, which apply subscription models to cultivate ongoing relationship with their customers and thus establish uninterrupted streams of revenue. Of

[73] Wojcicki, Anne. "23andMe Announcement." Received by Elizabeth Kopacz, 6 Feb. 2021.

[74] Wojcicki, Anne. "23andMe Announcement." Received by Elizabeth Kopacz, 6 Feb. 2021.

[75] *23andMe* is already piloting the 23andMe+ subscription service. According to their website, the introductory offer provides an additional 10+ exclusive reports for the annual price of $29. The Investor Presentation notes the soft launch of this service began in October 2020, and as of January 2021 there are already 75K+ subscribers. 23andMe. https://www.23andme.com/. Accessed 26 Feb. 2021.; "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slides 18-19.

course, one of the most dangerous and destructive sides of such an approach is the near unlimited access that consumers grant to their data, which these companies are then able to cull and collect to inform their own products and services.[76] What will this shift mean for current and potential *23andMe* users? How will this proposed corporate direction impact the Korean adoptee community and their experience with DTC genetics companies?

Through specific focus on the intersection between *23andMe* and the transnational, transracial Korean adoption community, this chapter has explored the development of DNA as a cultural object to understand the subsequent emergence and popularity of consumer-based genetic technologies. In establishing the imaginative frameworks of flexibility and openness that inform these DTC DNA tests, the chapter investigates the work these structures do to precipitate new opportunities for individuals to engage previously foreclosed, erroneous, or unreliable personal histories. Most importantly, this chapter situates the private institutional database, created and helmed by companies like *23andMe*, as a limiting, yet limitless, future-based archive whose ongoing success depends both on continual growth and on the ideological frameworks of certainty, credibility, and mutability that uphold it. It would be remiss to disregard the tangible and significant benefits that can result from individual or group engagement of

[76] For example, Amazon's subscription service, Amazon Prime, offers "free" 2-day shipping, access to streaming media, discounts, and other benefits. By "incentiviz[ing] doing as many activities and purchases as possible under the Amazon umbrella," Amazon "not only drives increased sales but also creates a fuller picture of individual consumers," which feeds back again into its own system to make itself even more competitive. See West, Emily. Amazon: Surveillance as a Service. *Surveillance & Society*. vol. 17½, 2019, pp. 27-33. 28.

DTC DNA companies and their related technologies. Information and interpretive frameworks do become relatively affordable and accessible, which can allow greater agency in creating community and/or in (re)determining personal identities. Yet, the form and function of this personal, exploratory process often obscures the role of the genetics company— both in how information is presented and in the continuing financial stakes underlying the relationship. That is, as a company with a current aggregate enterprise value of $3.5 billion, *23andMe* has substantive monetary interests in constructing, maintaining, and advancing their own proprietary database and their relationships to their customers.[77] I end this chapter by posing Wojcicki's email announcement alongside *23andMe*'s 2021 Investor Presentation in order to directly consider possible future directions, including the connections between the private database, corporate financial investments, and impact on communities and individuals who choose to use the test.

The February 4th press release by *23andMe* and Virgin Group includes an Investor Presentation that identifies six points to ground their investment thesis, a prospectus that gives greater insight into the way the company currently frames its value to potential investors and the broad areas it identifies for its imagined growth. I will briefly highlight two of these points to consider projected growth and its possible impact. The presentation

[77] This is a point directly acknowledged by *23andMe* in the Investor Presentation it created with Virgin Group, stating, "Strong Engagement and Trust Drive Longitudinal Data Collection." The results of such long-term data collection manifests, for example, in the concrete valuation of $3.5 billion. "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slide 15.; "23andMe to Merge with Virgin Group's VG Acquisition Corp. to Become Publicly-Traded Company Set to Revolutionize Personalized Healthcare and Therapeutic Development through Human Genetics." *23andMe*. https://mediacenter.23andme.com/press-releases/23andme-merges-with-vgac/. Accessed 3 March 2021.

asserts its first objective as the desire to "disrupt the healthcare experience… [by] building a personalized health and wellness experience that caters uniquely to the individual by harnessing the power of their DNA."[78] The use of descriptive words like personalized, cater, unique, and individual suggests that this proposed healthcare disruption will be further based on a model of care where disease and risk are individually tailored, predicted, mediated, and addressed directly through the company. This is further established throughout the presentation, most notably on a slide titled "Genetics-Based Approach Will Transform the Continuum of Care."[79] Here, *23andMe* and Virgin Group identify several areas that comprise their healthcare transformation, emphasizing "genetics-based primary care," "wellness reports," and "wearables" as three significant components of the shift.[80] In addition, telehealth, pharmacy/e-prescribing, hospital connections, and diagnostics testing are named as closely related and integral elements. While the presentation argues that these technological advancements will usher in an integrated focus on the individual and more effective preventative care, there are also underlying implications of an increasingly privatized healthcare structure with unknown consequence. The second point made in the investment thesis addresses the expansive potential of *23andMe*'s private database, stating that it is "the world's premier re-contactable genetic database," and "a vast proprietary dataset rich with both genotypic

[78] "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slide 2.

[79] "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slide 20.

[80] The emphasis on these three is likely to draw attention to the services that *23andMe* already offers and/or is planning to expand and is linked to their proposed areas of profit.

and phenotypic information [that] allows insights that unlock revenue streams across digital health, therapeutics, and much more."[81] This private database is established as one of the great strengths of the company, framed as a "revolutionary" foundation for a "consumer powered" and "crowdsourced" approach to healthcare transformation.[82] In this way, ongoing consumer investment and motivation, and the subsequent collection of vast amounts of personal genetic data, is integral to success, growth, and development. It has been an affective framework that *23andMe* has been cultivating for years through its services, user-friendly platform, and ideological foundation.

The direct connection between the effort to transform the experience of healthcare and the investment in the private institutional database is both fundamental and deliberate. There can be no "revolution" without the participation of millions of *23andMe* customers, a point of which the company is well aware.[83] This large mass of consenting participants explicitly "enables rapid, novel discoveries" and "therapeutic development" through 30 company-led programs, while implicitly fueling corporate growth and profit.[84]

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[81] "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slide 2.

[82] "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slides 8-11.

[83] *23andMe* estimates that 8.5 million, or 80%, of its current 10.7 million customers consent to participate in their research initiatives. This size of active research participants is ten times larger than the next largest database (Regeneron, 1 million participants), based on *23andMe*'s own comparison with "databases that collect genetic information (genotypes, exomes, or genomes) on research participants and have disclosed or published their consented research participant numbers." Its presence and brand recognition in the wider public sphere are not only supported by its growing size and vibrant, user-friendly interface, but also further compounded through investments by, and partnerships with, academic institutions, non-profits, and biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies like GlaxoSmithKline, Alnyam Pharmaceuticals, Inc., Biogen, Genentech, Pfizer, and P&G Beauty. See "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slide 10.; "Research" *23andMe*. https://www.23andme.com/research/. Accessed 16 July 2021.

The presentation describes this as the "Consumer Powered Healthcare Flywheel," a continuous cycle of: user-submitted genetic data that fuels research, which then provides insights to create drug discoveries and new therapeutics, that is then "returned" in value back to the consumer.[85] In this depiction, consumer participation is presented as a proportionate piece of the process. However, it is unclear how customers actually receive and understand benefits in practice. In addition, *23andMe* positions research participation itself as a gift. Anne Wojcicki states, "What I have learned after 11 years is that people want to participate in research… They don't want to be a human subject. They want to be respected as an equal and as a partner in the process."[86] Facilitating conditions that encourage customers to feel like equal partners is an important element in a larger and targeted effort to create a consumer experience characterized by empowerment, agency, and positive engagement. This brings into question how corporate decisions around the presentation of knowledge may be either implicitly or explicitly guided by efforts to build rapport and trust with consumers. After all, *23andMe*'s ultimate goal is the transformation of healthcare through long-term customer engagement and "longitudinal data collection."[87] It is difficult to predict how this shift from personal genetics test to

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[84] "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slides 3, 10.

[85] For example, the presentation asserts how *23andMe* "pioneered" digital D2C healthcare through these "key, actionable insights," such as identification of genetic variants or disease risk assessments. However, it is clear that any value provided to the customer is far surpassed by the importance *23andMe* places in providing financial value back to the shareholder, as evidenced by situating this discussion in their Investor Presentation in the first place. "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slides 6-7, 11.

[86] "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slides 8-9.

[87] The full title of this slide in the Investor Presentation reads "A Meaningful, Engaging (and Fun)

personalized healthcare may specifically impact Korean adoptees who have already taken, or will take, the test. However, I will argue that the largely unknown or unreliable documentation of personal histories has also led to desires for detailed and dependable information about medical histories and health predispositions.[88] In its bid to fix a "dysfunctional" healthcare system by providing its own branded personalized healthcare experience, *23andMe* plays on the vulnerabilities of individuals who otherwise have limited options by situating their services as an indispensable and reliable solution.[89] While there may indeed be tangible benefits to this use, it also comes at the cost of unrestricted access to private data that will ultimately work to enrich corporate shareholders. Thus, as *23andMe* works to reimagine and redefine healthcare with itself at the center, it also creates new processes of institutionalization that lead to new absences and losses, which I will further explore in the next chapter. If the growth of the proprietary database is one, if not the most, important factor in future company

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Experience: Strong Engagement and Trust Drive Longitudinal Data Collection." It is meant to demonstrate the company's success at long-term data collection and sustained customer engagement through offered services, reports, and platform usage. "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slide 15.

[88] I will go into greater discussion about how individual Korean adoptees understand and use these commercial genetic tests in the next chapter, but for now I want to note that there are a number of participants I interviewed who shared that their primary reason for taking a DNA test was to learn more about their health histories. Some of the reasons they expressed are that there is not enough health information recorded on their adoption documents, or that they now have their own children and are concerned what this lack of medical history will mean for their children's futures. See Erin. Personal Interview. 9 August 2018.; Stacy. Personal Interview. 11 July 2018.; Bella. Personal Interview. 10 July 2018.; Jill. Personal Interview. 17 October 2018.; Rebecca. Personal Interview. 26 November 2018.

[89] "*23andMe* Investor Presentation." 2021. PDF file. Slide 4.

development, then it is important to be vigilant about how it tangibly, idealistically, or theoretically offers answers to questions regarding fraught histories and absences.

CHAPTER 3 | The Limits of Relation: Contingent Connections and the KAD Cousin

Introduction

"I haven't really gotten a close match, but I'm still kind of astounded by all these people. I have a list of people who are blood related to me. It's a very new feeling. You're growing up with all these people you're not blood related to, and then all of a sudden you have a list in front of you of people who are your cousins."[1]

Upon taking a commercial DNA test, TJ, a 45-year-old Korean adoptee from the East Coast, explains her mix of confusion, uncertainty, and delight at the sudden appearance of "blood relations." Growing up, TJ tells me she had difficulty connecting with any Asian American, Korean, or Korean adoptee communities because she did not know how to relate to them. After traveling to Korea in 2007 to attend the IKAA Gathering, she attempted, but failed, to learn any information about her birth family.[2] When she saw the opportunity to receive a free DNA test online, she decided to take the risk and try it out. TJ had seen other Korean adoptees find siblings or other birth family using these technologies. She was anxious to see what might come from her own results. TJ uses the language of obligation to describe her imagined relationship to her genetic relatives, purposely naming them as cousins as part of her decision to invest time and energy in building a connection with them. As she articulates, "I can't choose them. I really feel that even though they're a third cousin, I feel this genetic kinship. I want to

[1] TJ. Personal Interview. 24 August 2018.

[2] IKAA, the International Korean Adoptee Association, hosts large scale events for Korean adoptees to come together for social activities, workshops, panels, and break out sessions. An International Gathering is held in Seoul about every 2-3 years. "IKAA International Gatherings." *IKAA*. https://www.ikaa.org/what-we-do/ikaa-gatherings/. Accessed 4 May 2022.

make initiative to try to start a rapport with them."[3] She cannot choose them, yet she chooses them. Conflating genetic cousins as blood relations, TJ highlights the significance of these matches as unequivocal and enduring parts of herself, her history, and her future. Ultimately, TJ's new discoveries lead to a budding relationship with a third cousin who identifies as a mixed-race Korean adoptee. Through their conversations, the two determine that they must be connected via TJ's Korean mother, despite the fact that they have not conducted additional research to support this claim. An act of explicit naming, TJ and her cousin decide to forge a more concrete interconnectedness. Not only does TJ feel a sense of kinship with her third cousin, but she also begins to feel a deeper sense of kinship to her cousin's biological family as well.

The advent and proliferation of direct-to-consumer (DTC) DNA companies have transformed how the broader public can access, afford, and engage with personal genetic information. Vibrant, manicured platforms provide quick, clickable answers to big questions around ancestry and health information. Genetically-based social networks are made and remade as new customers continuously choose to add their information to the corporate database. Maps, graphs, and reports become tools customers can wield to make easy sense of personal data, while simultaneously ushering in novel and ongoing opportunities to shape, shift, and (re)define kinship networks. Underneath it all is the enduring allure of scientific certainty, bolstered by the cultural ethos of DNA and neatly packaged to deliver a personalized past, present, and future. For various individuals in the transnational, transracial Korean adoption community, like TJ, these services have far-

[3] TJ. Personal Interview. 24 August 2018.

reaching appeal. They not only offer a sense of control and an expanding collection of seemingly reliable information, but they also provide the consistent hum of possibility—for connection, completion, and knowability. For those Korean adoptees who navigate uncertainties or absences in their adoption histories, the turn toward commercial DNA and genetics companies can become a crucial pursuit of recreation, reclamation, and empowerment. That is, the application of DTC genetic testing functions as an important counterpoint to the way knowledge and biographical data has traditionally been delineated. It provides new frameworks of information that have the ability to confirm, or complicate, existing beliefs. Most importantly, it grants individuals the power of choice. For some Korean adoptees, this can be a crucial act of self-making in response to the often-limited way social workers, politicians, researchers, academics, and adoptive parents have dominated and directed knowledge of, and about, Korean adoption and Korean adoptees. With the popular expansion of these tests, DNA is another site that normalizes a biological and material (blood, saliva, and hair) understanding of kinship, albeit in complicated and complex ways. Such investments inform how biology continues to be tied to narratives around nation-state, self, family, return, and reunion.

Building on the discussion from Chapter 2, this chapter explores the multiple experiences of those who decide to engage DTC DNA technologies, platforms, and reports through an analysis of interviews with U.S.-based Korean adoptees who have taken one or more test.[4] While the last chapter investigated frameworks of certainty,

[4] I conducted in-person and phone interviews with 38 self-identified adult Korean adoptees from June-December 2018.

credibility, and mutability as structures that both uphold and drive the private institutional archive, this chapter builds on this foundation to explore how individuals materially participate in, understand, and mobilize these ideologies and technologies to reconfigure absence and uncertainty in their personal histories. More specifically, it examines two related phenomena: the emergence of a distinct Korean adoptee (KAD) DNA relation, termed the "KAD cousin," and the growth of an informal, collective digital network of transnational, transracial Korean adoptees that forms through shared experience, genetic knowledge, and kinship desire.[5] The "KAD cousin" emerges out of the particular blend of accessible genetic technologies, circumstances created by corporate algorithms, shared affinities and personal histories, individual desires, and oftentimes the inability to find biological family in Korea.[6] The private institutional database is limited by capitalist frameworks of ownership, profit, and extraction (of data and money), but this community-based online network has the ability to challenge and exceed such

[5] I put "KAD cousin" in quotes to draw attention to the arbitrary and contingent nature of these connections.

[6] Further work needs to be done to understand the broader landscape of commercial DNA tests and transnational, transracial adoption communities. In my own cursory research, I have seen mention of distant relatives emerge as a result of genetic technology use in South Asian adoptee birth search processes. For example, see Dore, Bhavya. "Despite Mixed Results, South Asian Adoptees Turn To DNA Tests To Find Relatives." *Undark*, 19 Oct. 2020, https://undark.org/2020/10/19/south-asian-adoptees-dna-tests/. Accessed 11 March 2022. Yet, there seems to be greater emphasis on the ability of these tests to connect with closer genetic relations, such as biological parents or biological siblings who were adopted by different families. For example, see Chen, Dalton. "Windsor teen discovers biological sister in Missouri through 23andme." *Windsor Star*, 14 Sept. 2021, https://windsorstar.com/news/local-news/windsor-teen-discovers-biological-sister-in-missouri-through-23andme. Accessed 11 March 2022.; Dunne, Susan. "Surreal similarities: Connecticut woman adopted from China discovers a sister." *Hartford Courant*, 14 Sept. 2020, https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-news-connecticut-west-hartford-china-sisters-dna-23-and-me-20200914-bwv2a7ogyvfqzbx2gzk3djgx5e-story.html. Accessed 11 March 2022.

boundaries. Its inventiveness, expansiveness, and fluidity amplifies, indexes, and facilitates relationships, genetically situated and not, to newly navigate the unknowns in personal and community histories. By considering these together, this chapter argues that histories of loss and erasure give rise to a creative and performative renegotiation of kinship that simultaneously unfolds through DNA and deliberate choice. DTC DNA tests, reports, and networks are not, however, used in the same way by all. In putting forth an analysis of Korean adoption, DNA, and kinship, this chapter will also explore the fraught, complicated, and sometimes conflicting motives that drive these processes. In doing so, it will examine some of the structures that organize biological and genetic kinship desire, including U.S. bilateral kinship norms, ideologies of distance and closeness, and shared experiences of racialization. This chapter ultimately seeks to address three primary questions: How are some Korean adoptees utilizing mass market genetic tests to (re)define kinship and facilitate individual and national reunions? How do these efforts engage and reconfigure absence and distance that results from Korean transnational, transracial adoption, especially as these notions are simultaneously temporal, physical, spatial, cultural, and affective? Lastly, how is the desire for kinship produced by commercial genetic technologies and also generated out of the particularities of adoption as its own reproductive technology?

Performativity, Kinship, and the KAD Cousin

This chapter contributes to long-standing, nuanced discussions at the intersection between genealogies of knowledge, family, and Korean adoption by foregrounding the way absence, uncertainty, and personal history figure into the definitions and desires that

structure practices of kinship. As larger numbers of transnational, transracial Korean adoptees have entered adulthood since the early 2000s, there has been a deeper recognition of the complexity of the adoption process, directly supported by the voices, art, literature, film, and activism of those who choose to share their own perspectives.[7] These experiences have been part of a shift to incorporate Korea—as a spatial, temporal, and affective location—as an integral part of the larger transnational, transracial adoption "lifecycle." More specifically, there is heightened attention on movement, across both space and time, as a framework to complicate notions of origins, home, family, self, and truth. Return is "now considered to be an expected stage," rather than an anomaly or pathology, which ultimately turns the "one-way journey from 'sending' to 'receiving' country into a two-way transit."[8] This has a broadening effect. As it creates new conversations around what reconciliation can mean for individuals and the larger community, it also expands an understanding of the longterm lived effects of transnational, transracial Korean adoption. With this, reconnection and reconciliation can take shape through short and long-term return trips to Korea, adoption file reviews, birth family search and reunion, and Korean adoption community organizations and conferences.

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[7] As mentioned earlier, the most well-known of this time period is Deann Borshay Liem's documentary, *First Person Plural*, but it is also enriched by important work by Tammy Chu, Nathan Adolfson, Jennifer Ardnt, and Jane Jeong Trenka.

[8] Kim discusses the prior tendency of social workers to view interest in origins as a sign of an adoptee's 'maladjustment' in their adoptive home. See Kim, Eleana J. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2010. 13.; Kim, Eleana J. "My Folder Is Not a Person: Kinship, Knowledge, Biopolitics, and the Adoption File." *Cambridge Handbook of Kinship*. Edited. by Sandra Bamford. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2019. 451-479. 459.

It is only in the last decade or so, however, that DNA and genetic testing has figured prominently into such efforts.[9] In many ways, these tests are being utilized to address old questions. Information about ancestry, health predispositions, and biological relations becomes newly accessible, offering the opportunity to reencounter details about personal histories that may have previously been missing or unreliable. The growth in use of these DTC DNA technologies attests not only to their convenience and affordability, but also to the belief that they can provide a sense of truth or certainty that other methods lack. Eleana Kim has explored the limitations of adoption files to provide desirable and reliable knowledge, asserting that these collective documents ultimately "serve as the materialized traces of mundane acts of bureaucratic proceduralism," rather than indicating or representing a "pre-adoption real."[10] As a result, adoption paperwork is always already constrained by its past functional purpose. In practice, this means that these files can "unfold a host of other possibilities and contingencies," such as "gap[s] in knowledge" and an innate "inability to yield more than its contents."[11] Though oftentimes understood as barriers to "truth," in reality these possibilities, contingencies, gaps, and inabilities offer integral glimpses into the foundation of adoption bureaucracy, while tracing the simultaneous creation of the adoptee and the orphan as legal entities. If the

[9] There are multiple ways DNA tests are utilized by Korean adoptees, including in both formal and informal settings. First, they can be part of the larger, formal process of birth family search and reunion offered by adoption agencies or community-based organizations such as G.O.A.'L., Koroot, and 325Kamra. At the same time, there has been growth in the causal use of DTC DNA testing to explore ancestry, health, and DNA relative reports.

[10] Kim, "My Folder Is Not a Person." 457.

[11] Kim, "My Folder Is Not a Person." 453.

absences inherent to adoption files direct us to consider their purpose as tools of biopolitical management of Korean children, then it makes sense that these documents may lack the right kind of truths to fulfill individual desires for narrative wholeness. After all, their primary purpose is not necessarily to preserve accurate detail, but rather to use particular details purposefully. DTC DNA companies are now utilized by some Korean adoptees to address the gaps created in/through formal paperwork, yet the information they offer mirrors a similar relationship to the "real." That is, DNA reports are often backed by the analytical certainty of science, and thus presented as if they reveal already-existent, innate, and immoveable truths. However, as explored in Chapter 2, they are also created through corporate frameworks that deliberately operate through ideas of open interpretation and possibility. As sites of active knowledge making, there are many ways to utilize and integrate the information provided in these reports.[12] This chapter continues to explore the tenuous relationship to, and desire for, pre-adoption truth. In particular, it privileges the experiences, interpretations, and beliefs of Korean adoptees who choose to engage both the structure and the content of commercial DNA knowledge by examining how they navigate the information provided to them. In this analysis, the chapter considers how frameworks of openness and mutability work to reify contingent relationships and build a communal digital archive. In particular, it turns to the importance of performativity in instantiating and actualizing kinship results offered by DTC DNA tests and the tensions between choice and obligation in addressing kinship

[12] Rather than a collection of static information, these reports establish an archive and set of relations. Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

desire. I use the term performativity here to explore how Korean adoptees curate bonds through intentional and repeated acts of naming and self-disclosure, a connection that shifts and develops between digital public spaces and in-person encounters.

Transnational, transracial adoption from Korea exists as a non-normative means toward heteronormative family formation. As a mode of family-making initially established from the particular historical and political contexts of the Korean War, it works by severing the social, legal, and affective bonds of Korean children and remaking those bonds with families abroad. With the rise of other nontraditional mechanisms of kinship-formation, such as new reproductive technologies, surrogacy, egg and sperm donors, and the often-accompanying stratification of various reproductive labors (that also usually emerge along larger global hierarchies), transnational, transracial adoption offers a significant opportunity to interrogate some of the most pertinent and important questions regarding kinship, biology, and relatedness.[13] This chapter again engages with, and beyond, the concepts of "biology" and "culture" to consider how the introduction and privileging of DNA-based knowledge complicates the understanding of kinship for some Korean adoptees. DNA is utilized both to legitimate reconnection with biological kin at the site of original loss (parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents), and to also substantiate new claims to genetically-based distant cousins. Oftentimes there is a tendency to conflate genetics with biology as a way to organize and describe relation,

[13] For example, see Colen, Shellee. "'Like a Mother to Them': Stratified Reproduction and West Indian Childcare Workers and Employers in New York." *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*. Ed. Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995. 78-102. to think about stratified reproduction, hierarchies of care, and global economies.

pointing toward the subsequent and distinct way that biology is folded back into kinship and identity. The trust in this information as "truth" and the subsequent performance of the new kinship relations it suggests, intertwines genetic, biological, and social. That is, the naturalizing rhetoric of scientific genetic technologies actuate and expand new forms of kinship through the introduction of genetic-based relatives. In turn, these connections become naturalized through active and intentional social practice and performance. Even as transnational, transracial Korean adoption promises to redefine, broaden, and open what relations can mean/be by forging non-biological family relationships, there is also a simultaneous return to biological frameworks of kinship with the use of DTC DNA testing.

"Adoptee kinship" emerges in connection, but external, to the non-normative formation of heteronormative families. These are relations that exist outside of biological or adoptive family ties and are instead based in a type of "public intimacy" that forms from the particularities of transnational adoption as its own form of reproduction.[14] That is, the processes that comprise transnational Korean adoption have subsequently created a mass of individual Korean adoptees who build rapport and intimacy with each other because of their collective history, and the cultural and affective specificities of being adopted. The KAD cousin arises as part of these histories. I first noticed mention of this term in digital spaces, in particular, in a closed Facebook group created by Korean adoptees who share an interest in using and understanding commercial genetic

[14] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 87. Kim also draws from Rayna Rapp. See Rapp, Rayna. "Gender, Body, Biomedicine: How Some Feminist Concerns Dragged Reproduction to the Center of Social Theory." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. vol. 15, no.4, 2001, pp. 466-477.

technologies as part of their adoption journey. This, of course, is not a new method to create connections based on the experience of being transnationally and transracially adopted. Eleana Kim outlines the emergence and growth of organized adoptee social groups, noting that while regional factions started meeting in person as early as 1986, it was the development of at-home computing systems during the 1990s that helped increase collective activity through the proliferation of online message boards, websites, and forums.[15] These spaces acted as important hubs of adoptee-led activity; generative and exciting especially because they could surmount some of the geographical obstacles that prohibited traditional forms of organizing.[16] Thus, the digital medium has been a crucial space to facilitate connection and collaboration of ideas, experiences, and political goals. Kim has theorized both the cohesion of adoptee personhood and the types of kinship furthered in collective spaces through her conceptualizations of "adoptee kinship" and "contingent essentialism," the latter a concept that describes how "adoptee identity is at once essentialized as something natural and also construed as something cultural or socially constructed… thus tak[ing] on biological associations despite the inherently nonbiogenetic basis of adoption."[17] Contingent essentialism is useful for thinking through the contradictions that emerge in biological and social conceptions of kinship and

[15] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 106.

[16] The conditions of Korean transnational adoption oftentimes force adoptees to live in varied and diverse geographic locations. Not only are children placed in rural and urban homes scattered around the United
States, but also in diverse transnational sites across a host of Western countries.

[17] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 86.

addresses an important and generative dialectic that delineates the tension that develops between the two. Further, by placing Kim's concept of contingent essentialism in conversation with Gayatri Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism as political subjectivities enacted by marginalized or oppressed individuals or groups, we can thus understand the framework of adoptee kinship as both a social and a political connection built on the "arbitrariness and contingency of adoption histories… a peculiar mix of inalienability and substitutability that recalls the ambivalent origins of adoptees."[18] This contingent kinship emerges and coheres in new ways through the use of commercial genetic technologies and social media platforms. The DTC DNA Facebook group exists within this digital history, yet it adds a new layer to the collective social function by bringing into view the genetic-as-biological as another organizing frame.

In thinking about the KAD cousin, the factors regarding kinship and identity become further complicated. I am defining the KAD cousin as two (or more) transnational Korean adoptees who are initially matched as distantly related third to fifth cousins through the use of DTC DNA tests and/or social media. Oftentimes KAD cousins are at times positioned and upheld as "natural" relationships because their initial path toward connection is based in science. However, the inception, establishment, and maintenance of these relationships requires a deliberate and delicate balance of reciprocity and choice. All Korean adoptees who use commercial DNA tests have the potential to connect as DNA relatives, but not all available connections will become

[18] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 95.; For further discussion of Spivak's thoughts on strategic essentialism, see Grosz, Elizabeth. "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution." *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, edited by Sarah Harasym, Routledge, 1990, 1-16.

KAD cousins. In part, these relations gain strength because of the specificities of adoptee personhood, which "converge around expressions of non-normative, unnatural, and alien origins and is based on shared histories of displacement, rather than on naturalized solidarities of blood, ethnicity, or territorial belonging."[19] This is a point that also emerges through my interviews with participants who share how histories of displacement and racialization in the US have not only profoundly shaped their upbringing, but also inform their contemporary desires to find and foster connections with biological family members. This search for connection is uniquely personal and precise, as will be evidenced in my discussion of who and what some adoptees look for when they decide to connect or not.

With the production of scientific and genetic technologies as/alongside reproductive technologies, there is the simultaneous development of new intimacies, both an outcome of intended technological purpose and not. Catherine Nash discusses "genetic accounts of human relatedness" as a "culturally embedded knowledge-making practice" that can have profound significance on how we envision and enact family, race, and nation.[20] On an individual level, genetic technologies allow for the creation of "genealogical identities," a melding of genetic knowledge, belief, and practice that is situated within its own social and historical context, dependent on both the "empirical evidence" provided by genetic analysis and the subsequent "social practice of genealogy

[19] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 85-86.

[20] Nash, Catherine. *Genetic Geographies: The Trouble with Ancestry*. Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 2015. 11-12.

in action."[21] Through and beyond these personal identities, genetic kinship can then play out between individuals as connections that are uniquely facilitated through the interpretive methods of the technology and actively determined and performed by the user. Nash does not juxtapose genetic kinship and social kinship as oppositional. Rather, she explores the connective tissue between them, drawing on Marilyn Strathern's discussions of relationality and relations, which may be "commonly understood in terms of connection and disconnection and as categorical or conceptional (and thus given and preexisting in practice) or interpersonal (and thus made)."[22] The active tensions between closeness and distance, already-existent and yet-to-be-discovered, and choice and obligation that are held within the concept of relationality emerge in complex instances through the social and biological hybrid of the KAD cousin relationship. This foundation is one that I will continue to explore through this chapter. Jeanette Edwards similarly discusses the tension between choice and obligation in her discussion of sperm donor siblings who choose how and who to develop relationships with out of those who share the same donor. She notes that "only some donor siblings choose to find each other, make contact, and forge, in some cases, amicable and mutually enjoyable relationships; many do not. This is a kinship link that is both involuntary (given through the circumstances of one's conception) and entirely voluntary and which may or may not stand the test of time."[23] In this case, the connection between any two donor siblings, also named diblings,

[21] Nash, 12-13.

[22] Nash, 13.

[23] Edwards, Jeanette. "Donor Siblings Participating in each other's conception." *HAU: Journal of*

is not only one that is intentionally chosen, but is also one that must be continually practiced and performed over time.

Performativity plays an important role in reifying particular genetic relationships over others. Daniel Fisher discusses the role of performativity in naming and authenticating kinship multiple ways—both in the utilizing and reinforcing of particular kin names as "cultural reproduction," and also in the way "one airs a relationship, performing it in a heightened, public context, emplacing kinship in a social, institutional, and geographic landscape."[24] In the first instance, the deliberate and repetitive nature of choosing and naming kin (within or beyond close biological relation) becomes a "metacultural icon," and is a strategy used by some Korean adoptees who choose to name particular relations as KAD cousins. Despite the sometimes distant genetic base to these connections, the naming of the relation becomes a deeply symbolic, dual act that both establishes the importance of such relations to adoptee kin-network formation and recalls the conditions that produce these relationships in the first place. This role of performativity in genetic identity and kinship-building is also related to Alondra Nelson's concept of "affiliative self-fashioning," or the "the constitution of individual identity, through and toward the goal of association with others, including ancestors and DNA 'kin.'"[25] An important aspect of the constitution of identity is in the agency of individuals

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Ethnographic Theory. 3.2 (2013): 285-292. Print. 289.

[24] Fisher, Daniel. "Mediating Kinship: Country, Family, and Radio in Northern Australia." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2009, pp. 280-312. 295, 286.

[25] Nelson expands from Dumit's concept of "objective self-fashioning," which discusses the "ongoing process of social accounting" through information received from scientific process and

to “exercise some control over the interpretation of their test results.”[26] Commercial DNA tests thus amplify the possibilities/potentialities for subject or identity formation, rather than concretely prescribing such identities through the results of the test. These outcomes are important insofar as they are able to help construct or create a "*useable* past,” a term Nelson uses to describe how black genealogists approach these technologies as consumers with particular assumptions, desires, and expectations of what they will find and how they will then apply such information.[27] Importantly, transatlantic slavery and the affective, social, and historical ruptures wrought in its aftermath are both distinct and asymmetrical from transnational, transracial adoption and its institutional violence. However, I find resonance with Nelson’s work because she explores the complex ways that DNA analysis is exercised both to address unknowable histories and to exert agency in constructing new narratives.[28] I will continue to explore these ideas to consider how some Korean adoptees utilize the material and ideological frameworks of commercial DNA companies in order to directly address the gaps and questions of their past.

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given weight because of the “objective authority of science.” See Dumit, Joseph. “Is it Me or My Brain: Depression and Neuroscientific Facts.” *Journal of Medical Humanities*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2003, pp. 35–47.; Nelson, Alondra and Jeong Won Hwang. “Roots and Revelation: Genetic Ancestry Testing and the YouTube Generation.” *Race After the Internet*. Edited by Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White. New York, Routledge, 2012. 271-290. 273.

[26] Nelson, Alondra. “BioScience: Genetic Genealogy Testing and the Pursuit of African Ancestry.” *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2008, pp. 759-783. 763.

[27] Nelson, “Bioscience,” 767.

[28] Nelson, Alondra. *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2016.

The context of commercial genetic ancestry tests and the construction of scientifically based personal data offers a public platform that can be used to repeatedly and deliberately construct biologically-based bonds. These relations are reinforced through a performance that is both public and virtual; a crucial intersection that not only influences how the relations are embodied and developed, but also how their boundaries of inclusion and exclusion become fluid. Although these relations are built upon a biological (or genetic) basis, they are also crucially and significantly public (in fact, are dependent upon their public nature), exemplifying how such performances demonstrate that "kinship is not a preexisting truth that is discovered or found, but rather a set of relationships actively created out of social practice and cultural representation."[29] In some cases, these affirmations of, and relations to, the social network become more important than the biological material itself. With this framework in mind, what purpose does the performance of the KAD cousin relationship serve? How does it fit within (or beyond) the frameworks of "adoptee kinship" and "genetic kinship"? Is it helpful to think of these connections as a sort of "adoptee genetic kinship," a combination of the biological and social, of choice and obligation? An adoptee genetic kinship recognizes that the KAD cousin relationship coheres around the shared experience of transnational, transracial adoption—and by extension histories of displacement and racialization—and the particularities of genetic truth(s) put into deliberate, strategic action. How/do these relations exist within a larger collective digital network?

[29] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 87.

I have spent a lot of space outlining a context to make sense of those who embrace DTC DNA knowledge and the KAD cousin through the frameworks of adoptee and genetic kinship, choice, and performativity. Yet, it is necessary to note that there are also a number of Korean adoptees that I interviewed who have little, limited, or no interest in forming or performing close relationships with genetic relatives. For some, the DTC DNA test may offer novel knowledge and connections, but this information may be unable to address the most desirable or important pre-adoption truths. For example, some of those I interview express skepticism and uncertainty about the veracity of their test results. In particular, they question the level of meaning they should place on their distant cousin relationships, finding recreational value but ultimately believing that these connections are too distant to hold deeper significance. This oftentimes blends with stronger or more pressing desires to find close biological relations. Thus, the discovery of DNA relatives does not necessary replace the longing for biological Korean parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, or cousins, even if these new relations are genuinely accepted. There also needs to be a separate discussion about the circumstances of mixed race Korean adoptees who utilize commercial DNA tests and find family members in the US. The majority of Korean adoptees have not been able to use DTC DNA tests as a more direct form of birth family search—that is, as a method to find immediate matches through the platform itself—because this form of search requires all individuals to be in the same database. However, some mixed race Korean adoptees who were fathered by American men have been able to use commercial genetic technologies as more direct lines of access to find family members in the US because there is a higher likelihood that

at least one person in the family (extended or not) has taken the test due to its prevalence in America. These brief examples demonstrate the complex set of factors that not only inform the desires and expectations behind an individuals' decision to take a DTC DNA test in the first place, but that also inform how, when, and where this "new" DNA knowledge is then put into action. I will continue to explore these multiple, complex orientations to genetic knowledge later in this chapter.

Building a Digital Community Archive

Alongside individual endeavors for knowledge through genetic means, there is also the development of collective engagement with genetic information in both digital and in-person spaces. In Chapter 2, I argued that the private institutional database, created and helmed by companies like *23andMe*, is a limiting, yet limitless, future-based archive whose ongoing success depends both on continual growth and on the ideological frameworks of certainty, credibility, and mutability. The results of these tests may allow opportunities for greater agency in (re)creating personal identities, narratives, and networks, but they also structurally limit who and what can be discovered and designed based on the analytical boundaries of the company. In response, both individuals and organizations have been working to productively utilize genetic information to serve emergent and fluctuating needs. Part of this work is ideological, such as deciphering the meaning of raw data, translating terminology and genealogy concepts for mass understanding, and sharing stories and experiences to build community and normalize the process and rhetoric of DNA analysis. Yet another essential aspect of this work is tangible and practical. For example, distribution of test kits, language translation services,

collection of DNA samples for eventual analysis, and the creation of a community-based framework for genealogical research. The growth of these informal networks use research methods and raw genetic data to not only address the gaps created by the system of Korean adoption, but also rework the contingencies and limitations of commercial genetic technologies.

325Kamra is a transnational non-profit organization at the forefront of this community-based work. It originated from conversations between five mixed race Korean adoptees that attended the 2015 *Koreans and Camptowns* conference in Berkeley, California. Its emergence, however, is linked to long-existing endeavors to seek reliable information about birth family and personal histories. *325Kamra*'s focus on DNA technology marks an important shift in the tools and dynamics utilized in processes of knowledge making and narrative creation. At its inception, KAMRA originally stood for *Korean American Mixed Race Adoptees*, but in February 2020 the board changed the acronym to mean *Korean Adoptees Making Reunions Attainable*. The original name establishes the founders' self-identification as mixed race Korean adoptees, while also gesturing toward how their specific experiences led them to DNA as a useful birth search tool. As they explain on their website, "several of us who are of mixed heritage had had success using DNA to find our biological fathers' families. We knew that if we could get DNA to Korea and get birth families there to test, that we could help other adopted Koreans find their biological families too."[30] In this statement, the founders of *325Kamra* directly name DNA testing as producing higher success rates of finding biological

[30] "About Us." *325Kamra*. https://www.325kamra.org/about. Accessed 20 May 2021.

fathers' families, but not biological mothers, implicitly naming the legacy of U.S. militarism in Korea as a continuing force in their personal lives. Given the history of transnational, transracial Korean adoption, this makes sense as mixed race adoptees were often fathered by American men who were stationed in Korea during the Korean War.[31] This shared history is now one that allows for partial success in biological search and reunion efforts through DNA.

The founders' statement also tangibly demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations of commercial DNA databases, entities that are constrained by who and what are contained within them. This can be read from the acknowledgement of success in finding biological fathers' families, and also in the recognition that wielding DNA as an effective birth search tool requires the inclusion of DNA samples from as many people as possible, including Korean family members. *325Kamra* thus outlines three primary goals: "to DNA-test birth searching families in Korea and collect medical and family history data from them; to distribute DNA kits to Koreans and Korean adoptees worldwide, and to help families reunite when possible."[32] Importantly, *325Kamra* operates across national lines, employing a team in Korea to manage DNA collection from birth searching families. Since companies like *23andMe* currently do not ship to Korea, this informal distribution does critical logistical work to bring test kits directly to individuals in Korea and back again to be tested.[33] It would be impossible to build a singular,

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[31] Oh, Arissa H. *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. 2-9.

[32] "About Us." *325Kamra*. www.325kamra.org/about. Accessed 10 Feb. 2020.

collective database without this connective labor. This is the primary driving work of *325Kamra*— an interconnected endeavor to bring DNA technology to the people and forge a singular location for information.

To achieve this goal, *325Kamra* cultivates resources to help educate Korean adoptees and other community members about how to manage personal genetic information and navigate multiple DNA companies in order to increase the chance of a desired outcome. Their website contains frequently asked questions and a "Korean Adoptee DNA Toolbox," which together include key questions and guiding information about the pre- and post-DNA test process, along with what can be expected after receiving the results. There are two points here that I want to highlight. First, *325Kamra* understands the necessity for individuals to test widely. Not only do they directly state to test "everywhere you can," but they have also curated a list of current DNA companies and resources that provides practical information about the type of test each company offers, current database size, and what they believe are the pros and cons of each.[34] By comparatively highlighting the pertinent information offered by a wide array of commercial DNA choices, *325Kamra* thereby prioritizes and strategizes the specific needs and desires raised by Korean adoptees. Rather than remaining constrained by the limitations of the private database, individuals are advised to creatively navigate between and across companies. This creativity is echoed in my second point, namely that

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[33] "What Countries Do You Ship To?" *23andMe*. https://int.customercare.23andme.com/hc/en-us/articles/214806628-What-Countries-Do-You-Ship-To-. Accessed 19 May 2021.

[34] "Korean Adoptee DNA Toolbox." *325Kamra*. https://www.325kamra.org/korean-adoptee-dna-toolbox. Accessed 8 June 2021.; "Current DNA companies and resources." *325Kamra*. PDF.

325Kamra builds a community DNA archive by providing tangible direction on how to utilize raw data to increase possible genetic matches. This is most directly emphasized through the question "I DNA tested, NOW WHAT?" on the "Korean Adoptee DNA Toolbox" page. As individuals are advised to first "download your DNA Raw Data from the providers' site to your computer," and then "upload the Raw Data to the 3rd party companies that will accept it" they are able to maneuver around having personal DNA information in only one location.[35] *325Kamra* suggests four companies, Genesis GEDMatch, DNA.Land, Promethease, and Codegen.Eu, as repositories to access additional information. They note that Genesis GEDMatch, in particular, is "used primarily to see if you match people who tested at different companies than you."[36] This important, connective work facilitates desired connections between a greater number of individuals, demonstrating how the communal process of archiving data works against the partiality of private DNA databases. Thus, *325Kamra*'s growth in the larger transnational, transracial Korean adoptee community in its first five years speaks both to a DIY spirit of adoptee-led birth search efforts and to an acknowledgement of the expanding population it serves. According to their website, *325Kamra* has DNA tested over 6,000 Korean adoptees, which has currently resulted in over 300 automatic DNA matches and 103 reunions facilitated by the organization.[37] This collective database is an

[35] "Korean Adoptee DNA Toolbox." *325Kamra*. https://www.325kamra.org/korean-adoptee-dna-toolbox. Accessed 8 June 2021.

[36] "Current DNA companies and resources." *325Kamra*. PDF. Other services noted are an "ethnic breakdown" and a "health report based on your genetic markers."

[37] "About Us." 325Kamra. https://www.325kamra.org/about. Accessed 21 May 2021.

important act that works against the capitalist frameworks of commercial DNA companies that maintain disconnected, propriety databases that are structured to increase their own profit.

Beyond these efforts to build educational resources and practical toolkits, *325Kamra* also intricately works with other organizations and entities in collective effort toward its mission. This includes, for example, community organizations such as KUMFA, KoRoot, and InterCountry Adoptee Voices, digital community groups including the sizable "Korean American Adoptees" Facebook Group, and sponsors like Thomas Park Clement and his T&W Foundation. It is worth mentioning that Clement is a well-known Korean adoptee within community spaces, in particular, because he donated one million dollars to help provide a genetic test kit for any Korean adoptee who wants one. This work was initially spurred by Clement's own experience taking a commercial DNA test and discovering a match with the Korean adoptee who had given him the test in the first place. In a *23andMe* blog post titled "Helping Other Korean Adoptees Find Their Story," Clement remarks that he had given up hope that he would find even one blood relative, until he took a DTC DNA test, "and then he had 1,000."[38] Similar to the blog posts examined in Chapter 2, this piece also demonstrates how *23andMe*'s corporate framing of possibility and openness works to shape notions of genetic relationality for some Korean adoptees. It is the author of the blog after all, and not Clement himself, who denotes his sudden accessibility to 1,000 "blood relatives." Yet, it is Clement's own

[38] "Helping Other Korean Adoptees Find Their Story." *23andMe*. https://blog.23andme.com/23andme-customer-stories/korean-adoptee-helps-others/. Accessed 7 June 2021.

experience of connection that compels his partnership with *325Kamra* to distribute kits to Korean adoptees in need, explaining, "everyone on the planet has a right to know who their relatives are."[39] Parallel work is also being conducted by Korean government agencies like the Korean National Police Agency, which manages a DNA database for missing persons that specifically serves Korean families and overseas adopted Koreans who are searching for each other.[40] Incorporating the figure of the Korean adoptee as a "missing person" is part of a longer Korean state-sponsored globalization project that has promoted return and recuperation to the nation, an effort to "boost the nation's competitiveness in light of new global economic pressures."[41] This database managed by the Korean government is not in direct communication with that of *325Kamra*, and therefore must be separately navigated by individuals. This combination of adoptee-led organizational effort, government archiving, financial support, and widespread communication through popular social platforms forge the collaborative effort toward renewed knowledge and new connections.

Lastly, social media offers another platform for these collective conversations and networks. Although *325Kamra* currently utilizes the private Facebook group, "DNA tested Korean Adoptee's and Korean War Veterans and their children," as a forum for

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[39] Clement now supports funding for Family Tree DNA test kits. However, he originally provided *23andMe* tests for adoptees in need. See Kaomi Goeta. "Korean adoptees are using DNA kits to get a glimpse of their ancestry." *PRI*. 15 July 2015. Accessed 13 March 2016.

[40] "Family Search Applications for Overseas Korean Adoptee." *SAFETY Dream: National Police Agency's Center for Missing Persons*. http://www.safe182.go.kr/cont/homeContents.do?contentsNm=report_tab02. Accessed 16 June 2021.

[41] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 178.

Q&A and connectivity, there are a number of groups specifically themed around DNA and Korean adoption that are separately situated. This includes "KAD 23andme Results Group," "DNA Tested Korean Adoptee's and Korean War Veterans and their children," and "Asia Adoption DNA," in addition to the general adoption interest groups that may include posts about DNA technologies. At the time of writing, the three groups I listed are closed. This means their existence is visible to the public, but their content is not. "KAD 23andme Results Group*"* restricts its membership to Korean adoptees who have taken *23andMe* in order to provide a safe space to share personal information. This strict adoptee-only composition has allowed the group to grow into a larger interlocking forum of adoptees who are not only connecting socially, but also sometimes genetically. It is this meshing of kinship mode and model that is the most interesting point of analysis in understanding how adoptees are forming networks amongst each other. I will continue this exploration of how individual Korean adoptees understand and navigate their genetic results below in order to link kinship and performativity with building a collective database.

Cousin Relations in Practice: Distance, Choice, Obligation and Desire

As a Korean adoptee, it is important to situate myself and my own position as a researcher and interviewer as part of the larger fabric of this work, especially in relation to the research and interviews I conducted for this project. As I discussed in the introduction, I have been fortunate to engage with disparate Korean adoption communities in Minneapolis, Seoul, and Los Angeles over the last twelve years. The time spent building with/in these spaces has deeply informed my interest in pursuing this

research, while also supporting my own navigation of the questions that have emerged through my own adoption journey. These commitments have not only led me to the questions raised in this project, but they have also deeply sustained its growth. I draw from the methodological and theoretical approaches of Indigenous feminist scholars like Kim TallBear, Pakki Chips, and Audra Simpson, who practice what they term a politics of ethnographic refusal. This commitment to research and writing considers the tenuous boundary between "what you need to know and what I refuse to write in."[42] In my own process of research, analysis, and writing, I have considered the limits and refusals that guide my own work. What are the stories I want to help tell, and what am I yet unwilling to speak? I draw from the framework of refusal to navigate the complex dynamics that are part of knowledge production and to support the autonomy of Korean adoptees in sharing their own narratives. As TallBear asserts, "the concept of refusal helps frame the silences… as not only against the ethnographic grain but as productive and supportive of indigenous self-determination."[43] As I have already written, part of my interest in entering into the absences inherent to Korean adoption histories is not to fill in the gaps, but rather to understand what can be learned from exploring their shapes and understanding how to engage on multiple, intersecting temporal, physical, spatial, cultural, and affective levels.

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[42] Simpson, Audra. "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship." *Junctures*, no. 9, 2007, pp. 67-80. 72.

[43] TallBear, 17.

Before entering into an analysis of Korean adoption, kinship, DNA relatives, and the collective digital archive, I want to first outline the context and boundaries by which I conducted interviews. I collected 38 semi-structured interviews with self-identified adult transnational, transracial Korean adoptees who have used, or considered using, commercial DTC DNA tests like *23andMe*, *Ancestry*, or *FamilyTreeDNA*. I made an initial, open call for interviews by posting in online community spaces such as the Facebook groups "KAD 23andme Results Group" and "AKA-SoCal." This method allowed me to cultivate and utilize existent digital networks in order to reach a group of Korean adoptees who already chose to take a commercial DNA test and were interested, on some level, in engaging in a larger discussion about their results. In addition, I solicited interviews through my own connections with organizations and organizers in Southern California and Minnesota, including *Adoptee Solidarity Korea- Los Angeles* and *325Kamra*. Once interviews began, word of mouth referrals continued to support these efforts. I did not specify an existing connection to DNA or KAD cousins as a requisite for participation, however, this was an area of interest at the onset of my research.

In considering the composition and boundaries of the participant group, I want to directly note two factors—age and location—because they provide a textured overview of my participant group and augment the broader discussion to follow. Regarding age, I define adult to mean above the age of 18, but in practice the majority of the participants ranged from 30 to 60 years old. This may be the result of a couple of factors, such as the correlation of current age to the historical peak of transnational adoption from Korea that occurred in the 1980s and the trends of those who choose to actively participate in

specific social media platforms like Facebook. In some cases, age becomes an incredibly important factor, in particular for those who were adopted in the 1950s and 1960s and identify as mixed-race Korean adoptees. The geographic locations, or the place(s) where participants describe their primary upbringing, are restricted to the United States, but outside of this requirement there are no spatial limitations. I chose this relatively open geographic framework in order to account for the elements that affect particular identity and kinship formation, such as U.S. racial frameworks, the relationship between the U.S. and Korea, and U.S. kinship norms. Yet, its relative openness also leaves space to understand the relationship between digital networks and the material use of commercial DNA tests, which are not bound to a specific location. Thus, although participants are linked through national identity and transnational adoption, they also draw from a wide regional spread, including the south, midwest, east coast, and west coast. Due to the deliberate openness regarding location, the majority of interviews were conducted via phone or video conferencing software. This decision allowed for greater accessibility and flexibility because I could interview anyone who was interested and had a phone or internet connectivity. In some instances the inherent distance of the phone call created a sense of anonymity and thus led to feelings of openness and ease of discussion. At the same time, this methodological decision was limiting because I could not as easily pick up on facial cues or body language. This made it more difficult to know when to continue on a subject or to redirect. In these cases, there were also less opportunities for informal rapport building.

Through the collection of interviews, I gained a much better understanding of beliefs surrounding emergent genetic cousin matches, including why and how some choose to build these relations. Ultimately, the self-selection of those who responded to my call for interviews led to a group of participants that represent a wide and complex scope of experiences, relationships, and beliefs. The following discussion will explore this range with particular focus on how individuals materially mobilize genetic ideologies and technologies to reconfigure absence and uncertainty in their personal histories. In an effort to approach the questions set out at the beginning of this chapter, I have chosen to organize this discussion based around broad trends that emerge in how interview participants express their views on kinship, commercial genetic testing, and DNA cousins. In particular, I will explore three primary themes: Korean adoptees who foster close cousin relationships, Korean adoptees who have no interest in cousin relationships, and Korean adoptees who have not yet taken a commercial DNA test and have no interest in doing so. I am organizing the analysis in this way to highlight how mass-market genetic tests are utilized by some to engage absence and (re)define kinship and personal histories. However, I do not mean to imply these to be discrete categories. In addition to these three groups, there is another subset of participants who mobilize commercial DNA technologies as a direct birth search tool to find immediate family living in the United States. As a final point, I choose to follow the lead of my participants regarding the kin terms and naming techniques they utilize to discuss the relationships that emerge from commercial genetic tests. When possible, I will specifically indicate the level of genetic relation at first mention (e.g. third to fifth cousin, fourth cousin, half-sibling), but will

then drop the modifier when apt to more accurately describe how individuals view and understand these relationships.

Performing a Close Cousin Relationship

Of all those I interviewed, there were only five people who expressed enthusiasm about connecting with DNA relatives to the point where they have actively built these relationships and ideologically incorporated them into existing familial frameworks. These individuals illustrate a delicate balance of reciprocity and choice in their kin-making endeavors, in particular highlighting the importance of shared values and experiences as part of making that choice. For example, Stacy is a 44-year-old woman from the Midwest who describes the difference in affinity between two different genetic relatives. She has connected with a variety of people through *23andMe*, but directly distinguishes one fourth or fifth genetic cousin, a Korean adoptee in her 50s named Sharon, as her closest emotional connection. They have messaged extensively and met on at least three separate occasions, encounters that have oftentimes been more like getaways or reunions that last entire weekends. On one of these trips, Stacy notes that a third person, also named Sharon, joined their time together. She notes, "Sharon connected with a cousin on the West Coast, also named Sharon. So we call her S2. The three of us decided to meet up. I'm not cousins with that cousin, but we say we are. I'm cousin by proximity, by association. She's great. The three of us had a weekend together… [where] we cried over lunch talking about [our] stories."[44] In this instance, Stacy not only feels a connection to her own genetic cousin, but also the genetic cousin of her genetic cousin.

[44] Stacy. Personal Interview. 11 July 2018.

She deliberately names both Sharons as "cousin," despite there being no recorded genetic link with the second. This naming of their relationship, even if "by proximity, by association," becomes part of their shared performance, an act that is further supported by consistent communication and in-person meetings. The trio find connection in their experiences of being adopted from Korea, as indicated by Stacy's declaration that they cried during a meal together while sharing stories. Yet, this adoptee cousin connection is also particular. In comparison, Stacy matched with a different Korean adoptee and genetic relative who she determines must either be her half-sister or her niece. Yet, despite the fact that they share a closer genetic link, Stacy describes an aversion to growing this relationship. "I think what happened is that I saw her Facebook and I saw some stuff on there and I realized that she's a very different person than I am. There's nothing wrong with that. She's just not my style of person… whereas Sharon was so warm and just so wanting to connect and so much like me. Her and I just clicked. If we had met at a party, we'd be friends without even knowing we're cousins."[45] Here, Stacy describes the notion of clicking as an inherent affinity, one that seems to move beyond the shared histories of displacement and Korean adoptee identification. Although Stacy does not specify what she means by "not my style of person," her description of Sharon as "so much like me" suggests factors such as age, class, and religious or political beliefs may contribute to these feelings.

The idea that biological or genetic family should be accompanied by an easy or natural affinity are sentiments that are echoed by Lauren, a 35-year-old woman from the

[45] Stacy. Personal Interview. 11 July 2018.

Midwest, who recently connected with a Korean adoptee who is listed as her fourth cousin on *23andMe*. Although Lauren shares that they are distantly matched at 0.46% shared segments, she tells me she feels like they are "blood relatives."[46] This decision to distinguish her cousin as blood is also a deliberate designation of Lauren's particular conceptualization of closeness. In her discussion of her family, Lauren views herself as outside of the "blood-based" obligation that defines the relationship between her adoptive parents and their biological son. In her understanding, their obligation to each other is one that is enduring and unbreakable. Lauren, conversely, feels that her sense of obligation to her family is more like a debt she owes them due to the opportunities they provided. In this case, Lauren uses the concept of blood to describe what she believes to be an inherent connection that is not chosen, but rather created through a direct biological or genetic link. Lauren, however, is not only drawn to her cousin because their shared genetics legitimate their relationship, but also because she has more control in determining what the connection will be. Its innate *distance* provides an opportunity for flexibility where Lauren's sense of obligation is not a debt to repay but a chance for reciprocal and informal exploration. Lauren expresses, "to have a stranger that's not a stranger who has been through the same things I have… it feels like a more natural thing. I don't feel like I have to be anything to her. I don't feel like I have to present myself in a certain manner or put on some sort of [persona]. I can just be myself." [47]Similar to

[46] Lauren. Personal Interview. 30 August 2018. As a comparison, a full sibling will share 32-54% DNA, a half sibling, aunt, uncle, niece or nephew will share 18-32% DNA, and a first cousin, half-aunt, half-uncle, or great grandparent will share 8-18.5% DNA. "How To." *325Kamra*. https://www.325kamra.org/dna-kits. Accessed 27 May 2021.

Stacy's assertion of feeling a connection to her cousin based on similar style, temperament, experience, and belief, Lauren establishes the foundation of her cousin relationship in her ability to share in the particularities of transnational, transracial adoption and to be herself. It becomes "a more natural thing" not only because of the meaning she attaches to genetic, or blood-based, bonds but also the affinity of relatable origins. Lisan, a 35 year old woman from the Midwest, also describes the appeal of a perceived relational or emotional distance from DNA cousins as a specific draw. She has not yet taken a DNA test because she was initially put off by the idea of connecting with "blood relatives" through them. Yet when our conversation highlighted the potential to find third, fourth, or fifth DNA cousins, she changed her mind. "[It] made me think 'huh, I could handle that.' That's the sort of intimacy I'm talking about. [laughs] I would actually be more interested in a connection like that because it's an easy introduction and if there is interest on both ends it would be a potential gateway."[48] Lisan finds distance itself as the appealing factor in discovering genetic relatives. In joking about the "sort of intimacy" she imagines her third to fifth cousins will provide, she implicitly suggests that greater genetic distance from her would also mean greater emotional distance, lowered expectations, or a larger sense of control of the outcome. Stacy and Lauren are both encouraged by the flexibility that distance provides and the unique relationality of an adoptee experience, however their desire and ability to develop relationships based on an adoptee kinship is also limited. Interestingly, Lauren has another Korean adoptee cousin,

[47] Lauren. Personal Interview. 30 August 2018.

[48] Lisan. Personal Interview. 25 January 2019.

the daughter of her aunt. In this case the two are related by social and legal bonds, but not genetics. Yet, despite the potential to develop a deeper bond based on shared aspects of their adoptee histories, non-normative origins, and upbringing as relatives in the same family, she notes that they are not very close. This relationship not only falls outside of Lauren's framework for blood-based connection, but also a social or cultural one. Ultimately Lauren demonstrates the tension between closeness and distance, choice and obligation in her own kinship networks.

Stacy and Lauren share the unique experience of finding and connecting with their DNA cousins, but it is clear that they are also in the process of learning how to make sense of these new relationships— in name, in closeness, and in deciding how they want the relationship to develop. Both have similarly matched with cousins who also self-identify as Korean adoptees. This is a crucial point of connection that facilitates rapport building. Lauren expresses the importance of connecting with someone who has "been through the same things I have," while Stacy notes the emotional importance of sharing stories together. This is similarly echoed by Rebecca, a 30-year-old woman from the Midwest, who recounts the importance of the shared adoptee experience in a budding relationship with her distant DNA cousin. She articulates, "[My cousin has] had her own adoptee experience and that's so much more relatable for me to get to know someone who's potentially blood-level relatable and we've gone through this similar experience of adoption… I know cousins are a bit more extended, but it's funny how some of these things come together."[49] In this way, Eleana Kim's theorization of adoptee kinship and

[49] Rebecca. Personal Interview. 26 November 2018.

contingent essentialism partially guide an understanding and analysis of these cousin relationships. The new connections are broadly accepted as natural in the biological sense— observed through their distinct naming as "blood-based" relations—while also dependent on a mutually felt social or cultural connection. In embracing these DNA cousins, participants also delineate the tension they feel between choice and obligation. That is, the connection is always already existent and beyond individual decision, yet also determinedly cultivated through individual choice. This is observed in the way that individuals navigate their long lists of DNA relative matches, not only curating which to initially contact, but also if and how they will continue to develop these relationships.

In all cases, a shared Korean adoptee identity alone is not always enough to facilitate and maintain an ongoing relationship. Stacy, for example, loosely articulates this as finding her "style of person," while other participants are more explicit in their description of difference or desire. Lulu, a 49-year-old woman from the Midwest, has over 500 cousins on *23andMe*, several of which are Korean adoptees and a few that she has met in person. However, she does not consider her closest genetic match as a significant relationship. "I just can't relate to her. I can't. I don't know if she's just blue collar or she just has this nice, but big, fat, greasy baboon of a husband. Just, none of it. None of it resonates for me."[50] Here Lulu explicitly articulates class difference as one reason for her inability to relate to her genetic cousin, which she contrasts to her longtime best friends. These are close relationships that she views as family, built on shared interest and commonalities. Katherine, a 57-year-old woman from the East Coast, is

[50] Lulu. Personal Interview. 8 July 2018.

similarly discerning in choosing which genetic relationships to pursue. However, she is also particular in expressing the type of shared worldview or experience that is important to her. "I was looking for people who are older, in their fifties. Not that the people younger, under 30, don't have any validity. I was just looking for people who are older because we share similar experiences of being adopted in the 1960s… I'm looking for what their experience was then… [because] I want to know if they felt isolated and if they felt alone in their towns. Were they the token Asian?"[51] Katherine's own experiences of isolation and emotional neglect cultivated a deep sense of racialized and gendered inferiority that she has carried throughout her life. Part of her interest in finding and building genetic-based relationships with other Korean adoptees is to validate her own feelings through particular types of shared experience. Katherine has been able to find this connection with one fifth cousin. Although they have only messaged a handful of times, she relays a profound understanding of their relationship. "There's something in knowing there's someone else out there who I'm connected to is nice. Nice isn't a great word. Sweet. Like I'm valid. Like I exist. Like I'm not hanging out there with nobody, even though she and I only share 0.21%. Yeah, it's pretty low… It strikes me that we're so far apart and share so little DNA and still do resemble each other."[52] Katherine directly acknowledges the low percentage of shared DNA with her cousin. Yet rather than being discouraged by this, she instead focuses on their connective tissue and physical

[51] Katherine. Personal Interview. 14 October 2018.

[52] Katherine. Personal Interview. 14 October 2018.

resemblance. She emphasizes this in how she describes their connection— a deeply felt validation of self, of existence, and of experience.

The cousin relationships that these participants describe are built upon a foundation of adoptee kinship, yet also move beyond it through the integration of biological and genetic frameworks of relationality. Commercial DNA tests are applied as tools for connection, providing loose structure for genetic matches that materialize as long lists of genetic relatives. Discovery and connection become an almost limitless endeavor that only takes shape based on personal desire and boundary making. That is, navigating such a vast database necessitates certain individually defined criteria, such as level of genetic relation, shared histories of adoption and racialization, alienation within their family or community, and mutual affinity based on personality and political or cultural belief. In this way, the Korean adoptees I interviewed apply Alondra Nelson's concept of affiliative self-fashioning as a way to interpret and navigate test results and genetic relative lists in decisive, creative, and autonomous ways. This enactment is sustained through selective and ongoing performance, emerging in both private and public acts of naming, storytelling, gathering, and declaring. As some genetic connections become naturalized through the language of "blood," they assume an inherent sense of inevitability and responsibility that mirror the traditional norms of biological kin. At the same time, these relations are also literally and determinedly chosen, cultivated as the select few out of many. Thus, Korean adoptee participants navigate tension between choice and obligation that arises from their interpretation of genetic technologies and common ideas of genetic kinship that merge with unique instances of adoptee kinship. In this way, we can

conceptualize these relations through a framework of adoptee genetic kinship, a form of relationality that builds on the concepts of both adoptee kinship and genetic kinship to consider how technology, circumstance, desire, and personal history direct the development of new relationships. Those who embrace the connections they find through genetic means and build significant and meaningful relationships demonstrate the composite of choice and obligation, biological material and social connection, and closeness and distance. Yet, how can we understand, and put into relation, the experiences, beliefs, and desires of those who have little to no interest in pursuing these distant genetic cousin connections?

Limits of Relation: Navigating Distance and Ambivalence

In contrast to those who embrace the genetic cousin, the vast majority of interview participants describe their orientation toward these relationships through a range of language that includes skepticism, confusion, uncertainty, and distance. Rather than seeking a deep or enduring commitment, they instead approach their genetic matches with ambivalence and caution. Biological Korean family— whether already known or still yet imagined— may hold a prominent place of interest, but genetic cousins are instead construed as conditional and tangential. I will now explore how participants productively navigate forms of absence and distance to make sense of these genetic connections. This is not only an attempt to investigate how individuals engage the distance that emerges within their personal adoption histories, but also the newly created distance that comes with the ongoing act of DNA test-taking. In establishing the analysis in this way, I do not mean to construct a shallow or simple read of these acts. That is, I

am not arguing that the loss and absence inherent to adoption histories automatically leads toward productive fulfillment or replacement. In fact, a number of participants complexly articulate their description of disinterest, reflecting multiple facets of absence that include temporal, physical, spatial, cultural, and affective.

The uncertainty over how to interpret relational distance can also be identified as a simultaneous articulation of individual boundaries that differentiate kin from stranger, and feelings of obligation from those of choice. Nikki, a 47-year-old woman from the Midwest, exemplifies this tension in her quest to find biological or genetic kin. She took a DTC DNA test to address her deep desire to cultivate these relations, the results of which matched her with 66 genetic relatives. Yet, most of these new connections are listed as fourth or fifth cousins, a relational distance that highlights Nikki's uncertainty over how to incorporate them into her existing framework, explaining that these cousins exist in a "fuzzy area" because they "really wouldn't feel like family."[53] This apprehension highlights how Nikki navigates the given distance of new relations, exploring the tension between automatic acceptance based on external or "scientific" authentication and her own resistance based on existent affective framework for what family should feel like. This belief is also reflected by Suzanne, a 34-year-old woman from the Midwest, who determines family based on their level of genetic closeness. She accepts that DNA has the ability to definitively confirm relation as she shares, "DNA doesn't lie. Either you're family or you're not."[54] Yet, when we move to the topic of

[53] Nikki. Personal Interview. 21 August 2018.

[54] Suzanne. Personal Interview. 1 August 2018.

distant relatives, she moves away from a strict binary of family/not family by complicating her articulation of family and challenging the relational framework provided by the commercial genetics company. That is, Suzanne decides not to pursue fourth and fifth DNA cousin matches because of their greater genetic distance. "A fourth cousin is a pretty distant relationship… If it's like a first or second cousin, yes, definitely I'd be after it. If it's fourth— that's pretty far down the line and we'd have to figure out which set of great grandparents [connect us]. That's too time consuming for me. I'm not a genealogist. I don't even understand relationships today beyond first or second cousin."[55] Suzanne distinguishes between those she does and does not consider a relation, not only based on her belief in genetic science as a truth-teller, but also based on her ability to make sense of the relationship in material terms. In order for her to be able to accept the relationship, she needs to be able to place it. Both Nikki and Suzanne express the particular shape of meaningful relationality, utilizing distance as a factor to diminish or foreclose relationships offered to them through the DTC DNA platform.

However, despite her initial expressions of ambivalence, Nikki later tells me that she decided to reach out to the closest of her DNA cousin matches, a person she describes as her second to fourth cousin. When the message bounced back as undeliverable, it sparked unexpected feelings of rejection. Nikki goes on to articulate a nuanced description of her experience navigating these emotions and her hope for new information and genetic relative relationships. She explains:

"I'd love to correspond with somebody [and] at least become Facebook friends or email a few times to get to know each other. Where they lived would depend on whether or not I

[55] Suzanne. Personal Interview. 1 August 2018.

could meet them, if they wanted to meet. If they wanted to have that 'meeting in person' kind of event. If we hit if off in person that would be awesome, but you don't hit it off with everybody. Everybody doesn't like everybody. That's okay too. It would be like going home to Korea and expecting it to feel like home. Just because they're also Korean and related to me from five generations ago doesn't mean that we're going to feel like best friends and like we grew up together because we didn't. But it would be nice to meet somebody who I could say we have genetics in common. I won't lie. I've always wanted to feel like there's somebody I'm connected to in some way. I just felt like I was never ever going to have that. I guess if I keep trying I could possibly have that happen someday, but that fear of rejection feels like I don't know if I want to keep trying."[56]

Nikki is not the only participant to share concern about rejection from genetic relatives, mirroring feelings that can similarly arise with other forms of birth family search. These genetic matches can therefore elicit both the fear and the encounter with rejection, suggesting that even if there is little interest in pursuing relationships in the long or short term, the connections may still hold some emotional weight. Nikki does not expect instant, easy, or profound relation. Yet, we can read her longing to find *someone* to be connected with as a specific plea to access biological or genetic connection over other types of social relationships. Ostensibly, she is already significantly connected to many different somebodies because she describes her upbringing in a "loving family" as one that was "meant to be."[57] However, her hope to find "genetics in common" signifies that DNA offers a particular form of meaning, even with those far removed, and can address her desire in new and expanded ways. This is a longing echoed by others as well. Kate, a 30-year-old woman from the South, has not yet taken a DNA test but is curious about what such results could bring. She is cautious about hidden or unforeseen consequences

[56] Nikki. Personal Interview. 21 August 2018.

[57] Nikki. Personal Interview. 21 August 2018.

of giving up her DNA data, yet teeters between interest, excitement, and ambivalence when our conversation turns to the topic of distant DNA relatives. "I definitely would be interested in [distant cousins]. Going back to ideas about family, I said family has never been about blood, but there would also be a very visceral part of me— if I did a DNA test and it would reveal some kind of results, even if those results would be very, very distant cousins— that would excite me. It would be like, 'Oh my god. That's someone I'm connected to through blood.' That would be the way I'm connected to them. I'd be very curious about that."[58] Similar to Lauren and Rebecca above, Kate utilizes the language of blood to describe her imagined genetic relatives and convey a particular level of significance. She ties it to her description of viscerality, a deeply biological desire to be linked to others.

Language is a highly important tool that individuals use to navigate their uncertainty and make sense of distance, including the use of "blood-based" connection, the pointed designation of modifiers like fourth or fifth cousin, and the rejection of social titles like parent, mother, or father. I already began to explore how the language of blood and blood-based connection is a meaningful signifier for some who embrace their genetic cousins above. These terms are also utilized by some participants who are ambivalent about their genetic cousin matches, highlighting how this language of materiality is widely utilized to frame new genetic relationships. For example, Janet, a 59-year-old woman from the West Coast, explains that while DNA has "opened up possibilities of blood having significance," this importance is also limited because "a stranger with

[58] Kate. Personal Interview. 1 March 2019.

similar blood, [is] still a stranger."[59] Although Janet may designate genetic relatives as blood, she still maintains an emotional and social distance. These beliefs reflect both the tension between choice and obligation, and the importance of shared experience or worldview explored above. Melissa, a woman from the West Coast in her mid-thirties, also uses particular terminology to deftly navigate social relationships and their significance. She describes her relationship to Korea as one that is largely practical. She visited Korea once, but only because it was a layover stop on her way home from another destination. Melissa does express brief moments of interest when she describes her experience sitting on the subway in Seoul, looking at all the older Korean women, and wondering if any might be her mother or serve as a "genetic mirror."[60] However, this is actually the only point in the interview when she uses the term 'mother' to describe the Korean woman who gave birth to her. In its place, Melissa refers to her 'birth mother' and 'birth father' as her bio egg donor and bio sperm donor. She reasons that the terms mother and father are social identities and thus "titles that are earned by being part of someone's life."[61] By reducing them to their biological functionality, Melissa both conveys and creates an emotional and social distance. She later echoes this again in her thoughts on DNA testing and her primarily practical desire to use the technology to acquire medical health information rather than social connection. Despite this, Melissa tells me that she matched with another Korean adoptee, a second cousin, and the two

[59] Janet. Personal Interview. 20 August 2018.

[60] Melissa. Personal Interview. 30 November 2018.

[61] Melissa. Personal Interview. 30 November 2018.

have messaged each other and discovered numerous similarities and shared interests. Reaching out to this cousin was a pointed decision made by Melissa, partially based in their shared adoptee identity and partially based on their listed relation as second cousins. While her ultimate goal may not be deep affiliation, Melissa's actions demonstrate how she makes meaning from a mix of social and biological connection that is filtered through both the company's algorithms and her own criteria. She articulates, "I think it's neat that we happen to share a genetic ancestor and I'd like to be friends, but I don't feel a deep yearning or sense of need. It's more like, I've never met anyone with whom I'm genetically connected. She's the first person on the planet."[62] Similar to Nikki, who seeks "genetics in common," and Kate, who describes the idea of genetic cousins as addressing a visceral need, Melissa's comments illustrate the complex role that distant genetic relatives embody. They are defined by their distance yet are able to fulfill a type of biological desire for connection, whether it be through ideologies of blood or genetics.

In contrast to those who are ambivalent and uncertain, there are a small number of participants who are disinterested in developing relationships with distant genetic matches because they already reunited with Korean birth family before our interview. For example, Erin is a 34-year-old woman from the East Coast who reunited with her birth mother in 2008. She describes the reunion experience as one of immediate connection. Through explorations of physiological similarities in facial structure and body odor alongside storytelling about their past and present lives, Erin and her birth mother cultivated acts of meaning-making together during their time in Seoul. Erin has not taken

[62] Melissa. Personal Interview. 30 November 2018.

a DNA test to confirm their biological relation, and instead utilizes these and other criteria to authenticate and substantiate their relational claims. Incidentally, Erin also took a *23andMe* DNA test in 2008, and initially messaged with a handful of genetic cousin matches. However, she has not maintained communication with any of them and explains that while she may be open to these relationships, they also exist as more of a novel interest rather than a significant or ongoing pursuit.[63] Despite the "evidence" of their connection in the genetic analysis report provided by *23andMe*, Erin's genetic relative matches hold little interest or significance compared to the reunion and relationship with her birth mother. While she does not directly link the feelings from these two experiences in this way, Erin is not the only participant who expresses less interest in genetic relatives after meeting closer biological family. Mali, a 28-year-old woman from the West Coast, believes that distant DNA cousins may offer a beneficial relationship for other Korean adoptees who are "looking for people to connect with more than just a regular friendship," however she does not find this true for herself.[64] Mali understands the bureaucratic and financial processes of adoption, a recognition she developed through open discussions with her parents growing up. This approach to knowledge and personal history has been further advanced through her experiences of traveling to Korea, meeting her birth mother, and actively cultivating community with other Korean adoptees on the West Coast. Coincidentally, Mali matched with two of her Korean adoptee friends as distant DNA cousins, however, she frames this as an interesting fact rather than the

[63] Erin. Personal Interview. 9 August 2018.

[64] Mali. Personal Interview. 30 July 2018.

beginning of an impactful shift in their relationship. Erin and Mali each navigate absences in their personal histories through their varied and dynamic relationships to Korea, biological family, and other Korean adoptees. In both of these cases, the combination of these factors more directly address feelings of loss and absence in personal histories and the subsequent desire for deeper connection.

As Korean adoptee participants indicate skepticism and doubt about genetic relatives, they also delineate their personal boundaries of relationality. Similar to those who enthusiastically pursue genetic-based relationships, these individuals navigate contingencies in ways that make sense for their own interests and desires. Nikki and Melissa, for example, both hesitate to name and accept their DNA cousins as cousins. At the same time, they both also decide to reach out to specific individuals on their relative match lists who meet their criteria for relational significance. Determining the meaning of genetic relationships also emerges through the language of materiality— blood, genetics in common, genetic mirror, and viscerality are all terminology participants utilize to signify biological importance. Although the DTC DNA test and its genetic matches may not completely fulfill the desire for individual reunion or reconciliation, participants engage the *distance* between distant cousin and direct biological relation to determine connection through one of the few avenues available.

Navigating Absence without DNA Technologies

The existing presence of close biological family also influences the decisions of those who have not yet taken a DNA test as a small number of participants disclose that they are not likely to do so in the future. In addition to the disinterest caused by existing

relationships with biological family, participants acknowledge various other reasons that include doubts about submitting personal genetic information into a company database, fear of surveillance, and apprehension about opening the door to new distant connections. Jessica, a 34-year-old woman from the West Coast, has only taken one non-commercial DNA test as a way to confirm biological relationship to her birth father. At the time of our interview, she expressed that her reunion was an important factor in her decision not to utilize commercial DNA technologies because this relationship satisfied her deeper desires for biological and social connection. Subsequently, she characterizes the DNA relative matches that come from/with companies like *23andMe* as "tertiary relationships" instead.[65] Jessica reflects, "I think if I had not reunited with my birth father, it would be different. I would be more inclined to [take a commercial DNA test] and I would be more willing to overlook some of the reasons I don't do it now… I really think that desire is coming from wanting to see someone that looks like me to know that I just didn't appear out of nowhere [and] to have some genetic connection with the world. As much as I say blood doesn't mean family, it still did to me for some extent."[66] Similar to Nikki, Kate, Lauren, Katherine, and Rebecca above, Jessica discusses her desire as an innate longing for connection with others in deeply material ways, adding the language of genetics to frameworks of blood and ethnicity in order to convey a particular type of biological significance.

[65] Jessica. Personal Interview. 3 December 2018.

[66] Jessica. Personal Interview. 3 December 2018.

The longing for relationality described by these participants also works to reveal the belief that they can better know themselves by finding and feeling material connection with others. Jessica wants to find biological or genetic family in order to feel like she did not "appear out of nowhere," while Katherine expresses that finding a genetic cousin validates her existence.[67] These sentiments are similarly voiced by Emily, a 31-year-old woman from the East Coast who not only reunited with her birth family in 2012, but also spent time getting to know them over a long-term stay in Korea. Cultivating these relationships has been part of her search for a "place to be," though she did not necessarily seek out biological family in particular to fill this role.[68] Emily chooses not to take a DNA test primarily because she does not want to insult her birth family, but she is also discouraged by the idea of distant DNA cousins, stating, "I have heard these stories about people who get matched to somebody who is a distant cousin or something. Then you have to start this relationship with another person who you might hate in real life. It's the same issue as everybody getting along just because we're all adopted. That's not reality."[69] Here Emily reflects the beliefs of other participants like Lauren, Stacy, Rebecca, and Katherine, who express that the shared experience of adoption, or the designation of genetic cousin, are alone not enough to indicate affinity or meaningful connection.

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[67] Jessica. Personal Interview. 3 December 2018.; Katherine. Personal Interview. 14 October 2018.

[68] Emily. Personal Interview. 6 August 2018.

[69] Emily. Personal Interview. 6 August 2018.

Conclusion

As Korean adoptees utilize commercial DNA tests as tools to find new information and connections, they must learn how to navigate results that are structured by corporate frameworks of certainty, creativity, and mutability. This chapter has explored the various and complex ways that Korean adoptees have approached this task— simultaneously engaging feelings of hope, skepticism, disappointment, and frustration. Although the results offered by commercial genetics companies have the potential to provide meaningful and useful knowledge, the actualization of this possibility is also constrained by the personal histories, relational frameworks, and desires of the individual. I have broadly articulated how interview participants situate themselves in relation to the distant genetic cousin by exploring a range of responses that include deep significance, novel curiosity, and complete lack of interest. The distant DNA cousin holds a flexibility through its hybridity as biological and social connection to address multiple desires and provide the opportunity of choice. Through strategic acts, affiliative self-fashioning, and kinship performance, Korean adoptees apply the information provided by DNA companies to facilitate individual connection and communal network building.

I want to end by considering the particularity and potential of these community-based connections and the digital DNA database. Emily cogently articulates the self-selection of DTC DNA users, noting that "a lot of the people who are putting their DNA into the pool of potential matches are other adoptees," and thus "are not really finding [their] family," but rather "just another person looking for their family."[70] Although

[70] Emily. Personal Interview. 8 August 2018.

Emily may conclude that these matches are "not really family," the interviews I have conducted with other Korean adoptees suggest that this is not a definitive nor ubiquitous belief. Ideas about family and relationality are both fluid and dynamic. Not only do some find great personal significance in their genetic cousin connections and go on to cultivate familial relationships together, but the act of looking for family itself is a point of connection that can facilitate deeper connection. Yet, Emily's notion that these company databases are just a "pool of potential matches" made up of other Korean adoptees can also be understood as the beginnings of a digital community DNA archive. In fact, her belief that Korean adoptees "are all kind of cousins because [they] come from the same ancestors," is materially performed by Stacy, who chooses to build a cousin relationship "by proxy, by association" with a Korean adoptee named Sharon.[71] In this case, the accuracy or knowability of their relation is less important the feeling of adoptee kinship that is produced by their shared experience and affinity.

[71] Emily. Personal Interview. 8 August 2018.; Stacy. Personal Interview. 11 July 2018.

CONCLUSION

First Cousin, Found

In July 2018, I decided to take my own *23andMe* DNA test as an effort to better understand how the process works, including submission of a sample, user interface, results format, and DNA relative list. I had my own hesitations about using this service because I did not like the idea of putting my genetic information into a large corporate database. Ultimately, however, I wanted firsthand experience with the technology that most of my participants were using so that I could make sense of their excitement and apprehension while also accessing the form and content of the internal parts of the site. When it came to actual test results, I had little interest or expectation. The "Ancestry Composition," for example, may be an important part of the way some people engage the site, but I was already skeptical about the meaning of the results. To me, those generated reports would not substantially shift my ethnic or racial identity. In addition, I did not expect to find any "close" relatives—those directly related to me one or two levels away. I had already reunited with my birth family in Korea in 2014, a short trip where I met my parents, sisters, grandmother, aunt, and cousins. I knew of their existence and they knew of mine. If anything, I hoped that a third or fifth cousin might reach out to me and be interested in participating in an interview. It was therefore a shock when I received this message from a person named Moriah in February 2019:

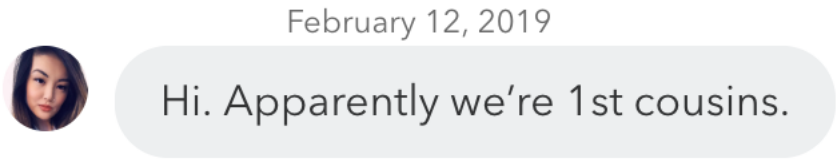

Figure 1. Screen capture of initial message sent by Moriah on the *23andMe* messaging service.

I had met first cousins in Korea, but this message did not seem like it was sent by someone living in Korea. In part because *23andMe* still does not ship to Korea and in part because the name of the person sending the message was not a Korean name.[1] After a brief text conversation through the *23andMe* message interface, we discovered that her birth mother and my birth father are siblings. Not only had Moriah and I both been adopted from Korea to the U.S. within three years of each other, but we had also each traveled to Korea and reunited with our birth family within a four-year timespan. In fact, Moriah met my birth parents on her trip in 2010, and I had met her birth mother and sister when I was there in 2014—they even gave me a ride to the airport! The incredible piece of this story is not necessarily that we are both Korean adoptees. Rather, it is the fact that each of us had gone to Korea, reunited with shared birth family members, and yet still had no idea about the other's existence until *23andMe* brought us together nearly five years later. It may make sense that Moriah did not know about me immediately upon meeting her birth family. Not only was that visit focused around reuniting with her

[1] "What Countries Do You Ship To?" *23andMe*. https://eu.customercare.23andme.com/hc/en-us/articles/204712980-What-countries-do-you-ship-to-. Accessed 3 May 2022.

mother and sisters, but our family still did not know I was alive. It is, however, difficult to understand why I was not informed about Moriah when I met them all in 2014.

In the years since our initial messages, Moriah and I have worked to piece together our own narrative through a mixture of paperwork, recollections, photos, and conversations. I learned that Moriah was born with a "physical limb difference" caused by her birth mother taking thalidomide during pregnancy.[2] Further, she told me there are two conflicting narratives about the decision of her relinquishment: Moriah's mother claims that doctors told her that she was unhealthy and unlikely to live while Moriah's father says he gave her up for the "image of the family," and to give her the best chance at a good life.[3] It is less important which is of these is "true" because it may, in fact, be both. Instead, I understand these narratives as traces of the intimate connections between us. We are both the youngest of three daughters whose poor health at birth (and perhaps also poverty) led to doctors insinuating that we may not survive.

I feel like I can only describe this experience as an odd awakening. Moments—strung together—where I can actually, fully glimpse the larger practice of Korean transnational adoption and see myself as a tiny, insignificant piece. One part of a larger system that has been operating for decades, a system that has not only been built upon the movements of our bodies across borders but has wildly profited from our placements. First families who were misled and deceived, who did not necessarily have a choice in whether or not they could parent us. These are all notions I already knew. And yet,

[2] Moriah. Personal Interview. 14 March 2019.

[3] Moriah. Personal Interview. 14 March 2019.

meeting Moriah made them feel that much closer. I can more clearly see the ways in which our lives could have been swapped. The ways in which they are already traces of each other. I can better understand the importance of framing my adoption not as a singular event, but as an ongoing state of being. There are only movements, memories, and meanings that continually unfurl and fold in on themselves.

Through this dissertation, I have explored how transnational, transracial Korean adoptees utilize paperwork, popular science, and genetic technologies to navigate material and affective absences produced by the violence of U.S. empire. By applying ethnographic and discursive analysis, I trace absences across knowledge projects on four social scales: "state-based," private institutional, collective digital, and personal archives. I ultimately argue that the scientific, biotechnological, and archival become sites where affective and material losses not only emerge as enduring expressions of U.S. transpacific violence but are also mediated across both linear time (from past to present to future) *and* parallel time and geographic space (from one possible life to another). That is, as some Korean adoptees attempt to make sense of the unknown and unknowable in personal adoption histories and birth family relationships, they examine existing and emergent knowledge projects across the U.S. and Korea. In the process, they encounter "(im)possible lives" and develop new kinships across linear and parallel space and time.[4]

[4] Kim, Eleana J. "Transnational Adoption and (Im)possible Lives." *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium*. Edited by Veena Das and Clara Han. Oakland, U of California P, 2016. 117.

Moving Forward

I began this dissertation with questions born out of the gaps and absences in my own adoption paperwork, an endeavor to understand erasure as part of the successful functioning of the transnational Korean adoption system. I end it now by not only considering how DNA technologies further revealed unexpected absences in my own ongoing adoption narrative, but how they may be further applied in collaborative and communal ways to address enduring questions about biological family, personal histories, and the unknown. This is not to say that genetic technologies are the sole or best approach. As I have already discussed in Chapter 2, DTC DNA companies create private institutional archives to serve their own motives and corporate agendas. However, how might community organizations creatively manage DNA knowledge to benefit their own goals through what I am calling the *counterhegemonic transnational community archive,* or a network of Korean adoptee-led community organizations that are working to produce an informal DNA database?

This dissertation primarily focuses on how transnational, transracial Korean adoptees navigate the power dynamics of institutionally-produced databases from above ("state-based" and private corporations). However, I now want to turn to three important questions that materialized throughout the course of research to consider the next directions of this work. First, throughout the course of interviews, I noted a particular subset of mixed-race Korean adoptees who use DNA tests to connect with paternal relatives in the U.S. The majority of these individuals were adopted to the U.S. in the 50s and 60s, many the descendants of U.S. soldiers who were stationed in Korea during the

Korean War. Rather than using commercial genetic testing to connect with distant DNA cousins, some of those in this group apply genetic testing as a genealogical tool to find biological family living in the U.S. through DNA "search angels," social media, and public documents. I want to continue to explore how these Korean adoptees connect with paternal relatives in order to confront the ruptures wrought by institutional and militarized violence.

Second, I am interested in exploring how Korean adoptee-led community organizations produce databases from below, what I am calling the *counterhegemonic transnational community archive*. While I briefly touched on this work in Chapter 3, I want to continue to explore the creation of this collaborative resource by conducting interviews with leaders from community-based organizations across the U.S. and Korea to understand how these groups forge DNA analysis as a collective tool to address absence. 325Kamra, for example, has expanded its scope by building collective transnational networks to support "Korean connectivity" through DNA testing, targeted database building, and critical inquiry.[5] Korea-based multilingual organizations G.O.A.'L. and Koroot, two community-led groups that organize birth family reconciliation and post-adoption resources in Korea, similarly incorporate DNA testing as tool and service in the birth family search process. These creative efforts to incorporate genetic technology into the search process, along with the publicity around recent "success" stories chronicling DNA-based reunions between adoptees and birth family

[5] "Our Goals." *325Kamra*. https://www.325kamra.org/mission. Accessed 31 Oct. 2021.

with no other recourse to find each other, contribute to the growing investment in DNA to mend the social ruptures wrought by Korean transnational adoption.

The *counterhegemonic transnational community archive* thus builds material (DNA kit distribution, research assistance, archive building), affective (support groups), and communal pathways to mediate the losses born through absent and erroneous paperwork and the unknowable in adoption histories. To compare these communal efforts to my existent analysis on the collective digital archive produced via individually led social media spaces, I want to interrogate the evolving intimacies between biological Korean family, Korean adoptees, adoptive parents, and newly emergent genetic kin relations. By examining how both mixed-race Korean adoptees and community-based organizations navigate the very same paper and biotechnological forms of knowledge production that harmed them, I want to explore how collective approaches to knowledge production and database cultivation offer new opportunities to navigate absence and loss as praxis. In so doing, these approaches shift our understandings of knowledge making as it intersects with race, DNA, and kinship.

Lastly, I am interested in expanding my existing work on state management of information and persons by drawing connections between the *counterhegemonic transnational community archive*, adoption paperwork, and the emergent state-based DNA database. While it did not make it into this iteration in full, I conducted archival research at the Social Welfare History Archives (SWHA) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In particular, I worked through early administrative records and Korea adoption program files of the International Social Service- American Branch (ISS-USA), a formative

organization that worked between and across national lines to formalize the process of transnational adoption. This allowed me to consider how institutional and epistemological pathways forged by early decision-makers may be reflected in current efforts to recover and reconcile "lost" information. This archival research has been informed by the foundational work of scholars like Arissa Oh, Eleana Kim, Kim Park Nelson, Catherine Ceniza Choy, and SooJin Pate who have all critically utilized these collections to complicate simple, celebratory narratives of transnational Korean adoption. I am interested in connecting this work to efforts by the Korean government to create its own DNA database of "missing persons," which may include Korean adoptees and/or birth families who have no access to records of each other. Incorporating the figure of the Korean adoptee as "missing person" is part of a larger state-sponsored globalization project to promote return and recuperation to the nation.[6] I want to analyze how community-led efforts to gain recognition and resources are not only crucially linked to this state-based admission of absence and loss but also now act in a response to the state's ongoing failure.

Molecular Longing ultimately hinges around conflicting projects of knowledge production, kinship, and scientific discourse as they are produced and necessitated by the systemic origins of Korean adoption. By exploring the connections between bureaucracy, biotechnological, and the scientific, this dissertation considers how absence and the unknown can only be navigated through complex and conflicting means. However, as

[6] Kim, Eleana. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham, Duke UP, 2010. 178.

existent and emergent forms of knowledge production merge, there is the potential for individual Korean adoptees to forge new relationships and, in the process, alter both the everyday and the affective experiences of their multiple, ongoing post-adoption narrative.

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